

Title: Holding Out Hope

Blurb: Grieving has been turned into coping and getting back to “normal,” and this is where John Schneider says we have it wrong. John was a psychologist and a member of our UU congregation in Traverse City, Michigan. He specialized in grief and grieving. For him, this emphasis on coping is all about getting back to where we were, rather than the more appropriate task of finding a way to reach beyond, to move into something different, and to find transformation through the process. For John, grief was not only about coping, but also about hope, and the power of hope to transform our grief and loss and love into something that can help us move into a future made different by that loss.

Speaker: Rev. Dr Lisa Presley

Bio: The Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley is a Congregational Life Consultant with the MidAmerica Regional Staff.

Lisa Presley is a life-long Unitarian Universalist who was an active lay leader before entering our ministry in 1991. As a lay leader she was board president, board member, worship associate, stewardship campaign chair, religious education teacher, bookkeeper, secretary, and shoveled the snow as well as many other "duties as assigned". She has served congregations as interim minister (Calgary AB, Rochester MI, Naperville IL, San Rafael CA), and as settled minister (Southfield MI). Her work for first the Heartland District and now the MidAmerica Region includes mentoring, teaching, and working with congregations in all aspects of congregational life. For MidAmerica she is a "deep generalist" working across the spectrum of congregational issues, while taking as her "deep" areas include areas of safe congregations, the UUA Disaster Relief Fund, and working toward greater intercultural competency in our congregations. She lives in Kalamazoo, MI, with her partner and their dog Teddy.



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Suggestions for

Opening Words:

Singing the Living Tradition - #447, #448, #449

Reading: (in the attached script, from CS Lewis)

Other reading options: *Singing the Living Tradition:*

718 – All Souls, by May Sarton

721 – They are With Us Still – Kathleen McTigue

Closing Words: SLT - #688, #698, #700

Hymns: *Singing the Living Tradition:*

6 – Just as Long as I Have Breath

17 – Every Night and Every Morn (quoted in the sermon)

83 – Winds Be Still

90 – From All the Fred and Fever of the Day

95 – There Is More Love Somewhere

101 – Abide with Me

123 – Spirit of Life

Reading: *From A Grief Observed, by C.S. Lewis*

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.

There are moments, most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all. Love is not the whole of a man's life. I was happy before I ever met H. I've plenty of what are called "resources." People get over these things. Come, I shan't do so badly. One is ashamed to listen to this voice but it seems for a little to be making out a good case. Then comes a sudden jab

of red-hot memory and all this “common-sense” vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.

On the rebound one passes into tears and pathos. Maudlin tears. I almost prefer the moments of agony. These are at least clean and honest. But the bath of self-pity, the wallow, the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of indulging it—that disgusts me. And even while I’m doing it I know it leads me to misrepresent H. herself. Give that mood its head and in a few minutes I shall have substituted for the real woman a mere doll to be blubbered over. Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it.

Sermon:

I knew I was in trouble when I lost my wallet for the third time in six weeks. The first two times, it wasn’t so bad. The first time, I left it on a shelf at my local bookstore, and of course one of the patrons turned it in. The second time, I left it at a donut shop frequented by the local police, when I was one of the police chaplains. Again, no problem. The owner found it, held it for me, and I had it back within hours.

The third time, though, it was at a Wendy’s on the northern border of Detroit. This time, when I called them an hour later, no one had turned it in. They hadn’t seen it. So I cancelled all the cards, replaced the driver’s license, and did all that lousy stuff we have to do when we lose all our important documents. Then, about a week later, Wendy’s called, and told me they had my wallet. The money, of course, was gone, but the cards were all there. I was both relieved and frustrated—I had gone through all of that nonsense for nothing.

But the trouble I was in wasn’t about having to replace all those documents, or losing my money, or fearing for my credit cards. That was ordinary stuff of life. The trouble I knew I was in was that I had not spent any time mourning my father’s death. The trouble I was in was that I was living in the midst of unacknowledged and unresolved grief.

My father died the third or fourth week of my brand-new ministry in Southfield, Michigan, in the early 1990s. My first settlement. And my Dad’s

death was unexpected. Several years before, we thought he was going to die after his stroke, but he came through that, as well as the bi-femoral bypass a year after that. But this time, this time he simply died without any warning.

It was a Friday night, and my Mom was visiting from Seattle. She had left Detroit shortly after my parents had divorced twenty years before, and that Friday night we were hosting a party for her with many old friends who knew my family from when I was a child. There was no way to stop the party, so we greeted everyone with the news of my father's death as they arrived, and lifted a cold one in Dad's memory as we renewed old friendships.

Two days later I did my usual Sunday worship service, announcing somewhere within it that my father had died. My mom went home a day or so later, and I flew out to Connecticut to attend to the details that always arise when dealing with death. I was gone a week or so, then came back. Three months later, in December, we held my Dad's memorial service, once again back in Connecticut. It was a wonderful service, and I deeply appreciated my colleague's work.

But other than that short time away, it was work as usual. Trying to understand the new congregation, learning more and more about ministry, getting ready for the craziness of the holidays while trying to learn everyone's name, and the names of everyone's children. Cooking Thanksgiving dinner, figuring out what to do for Christmas and the like. It was a crazy time, and there wasn't room for anything more, like dealing with grief.

So in a bizarre way, I was relieved that when I started losing my wallet, it wasn't until the midst of the New Year and winter's cold. Once we got into February, I could eke out time for a few things other than a new ministry, and one of the things was losing my wallet. I hadn't lost a wallet for over 20 years, and then three times in six weeks. And, let me add, never since. I took pride that it only took three times before I realized something must be going on. In all the hustle and bustle of being new, in starting this new ministry, I realized I had never spent any time mourning my father. So I got up from my desk, looked at the bulletin board on the church wall outside of my office, and copied down the number for the

Hospice support group. I punched in the number and I made the decision to go to the once-a-week group. It was one of the best decisions I made that year.

It was one of the best decisions, and yet, it took so much—losing my wallet three times in six weeks—for me to make that decision. For you see, I was dealing with grief and loss the way that we're all expected to do so, by ignoring it and hoping it would go away, or that somehow I'd be all better just with the passage of time.

And yet, in real life, it's not like that, even when we think it should be. Losing takes the stuffing out of us. We're always, always losing people and things. Not the kind of losing like losing my wallet, but the kind of losing as in death, divorce, moving away, being fired, retiring, losing money, losing friends over silly arguments and through big important decisions. Losing dreams and ideas about how life will be, or should be, and losing the way we're going. Losing possibilities, pets, friends, positions, relationships, you name it. We lose all sorts of things, all the time. Some are willing losses, and others are hard losses where we might have had some degree of choice, but nothing that felt like real choice. Some are temporary losses, and others are permanent. The words we use, even, are such strange words, too—"lose" and "loss"—as if we have somehow misplaced something and we will be able to find it, pick it up, get it back somehow. The language itself lacks the finality we feel and need.

Over the centuries, death and loss have moved from conscious view to hidden away in antiseptic institutions. Grief is not "appropriate" for the public eye. Corporate policy often grants you three days off for the death of a parent, maybe a little bit more for a spouse, and sometimes more for a child, but generally not much more. We're expected to deal with death quickly, or around the edges, and then get back to our old ways and our old sense of being.

Grieving has been turned into coping and getting back to "normal," and this is where John Schneider says we have it wrong. John was a psychologist and a member of our UU congregation in Traverse City, Michigan. He specialized in grief and grieving. For him, this emphasis on coping is all about getting back to where we were, rather than the more appropriate task of finding a way to reach beyond, to move into something

different, and to find transformation through the process. For John, grief was not only about coping, but also about hope, and the power of hope to transform our grief and loss and love into something that can help us move into a future made different by that loss.

There are three tasks, said John. The first task is to discover what is lost. We have to live into the grief, to know what it feels like, to taste it, see it, color it, be moved and touched by it. We have to know what it is that is gone, that is missing, that is no longer the same. This is hard work and hard to do well, especially because “lingering” in our grief (as it is often called) makes others uncomfortable. We’re not our usual happy-go-lucky selves, and instead we represent loss and death in its fullness and possibility. As C.S. Lewis wrote about grief it’s that “sudden jab of red-hot memory” when all return to normal vaporizes.

But we need to know what it is that’s gone. So to be able to do this, we need safe places, sanctuaries. The pressures of everyday can get in the way. But grief doesn’t just go away. I needed the space of the grief group to see not only how I missed my dad, but also how all the dreams I had about what could be or would be or might be were also torn asunder with his death. There was no longer the possibility for us to turn into best friends, or for him to be the “Father Knows Best” kind of dad a part of me always wanted. I needed to experience what it was I truly lost.

This is often where we get stuck. As I said, we’re not given the time and space to really sort this out, to know it, to understand with the depth of our being what it is we have lost. Those three days off from the work place don’t even begin to touch the time and space we need to feel all that we need to feel. Understanding what we’ve lost takes a long time, and when we don’t have that space, or can’t find that space, or can’t use that space, then sometimes the grief turns into depression. Undealt with, we slide into denial, losing our wallets, and land in the never-never-land of not knowing our grief. But more often grief is simply misdiagnosed as depression. It’s often easier—for others and ourselves—to be supported because we’re depressed. There are meds for that, and today it’s almost a status symbol to compare anti-depressants. But there are no meds for grief. We’re neither culturally attuned to nor culturally comfortable with grief. For that we need to take the time and space, to find, create, seek out, be supported by safety

and sanctuary so we can complete this task of knowing what's lost. That's the first task, knowing the fullness of what is lost.

And then, after we know what's lost, we need to find and discover what we have left, or what it is we can restore. This is a time when we need to use our whole selves in the process. This step is not just an intellectual process, or just an emotional process, or just a behavioural process, or just a values process, but a time and place where we have to bring our minds, hearts, actions and values to the table and see what is left. Discover what is possible. When we grieve, we're dealing with the loss and destruction of attachments—to persons, beings, things, visions, ideas, and imaginings. We need to shift the focus to what attachments are still there, or can be put back together again. It is a sifting through the ruins, a kind of archeological study of the self to see what is there, layer after layer, and what can be patched together, what can be created anew from that which has been lost. And as is true with shattered pots, some times the pieces come back together easily, and other times, jagged edges and whole sections are missing, but there is still something there. We discover what's left, and then we can begin to move on.

This is the third task: to learn what is possible because of the loss. It is, in effect, a way of reframing, but not just as a psychological trick of words. It is not a letting go or forgetting or transcending the loss—getting better than it—but instead a transformation of the loss. It is making something different or new out of the old. Something that might be more resilient, might be stronger, might be better than ever, or maybe just might be different. It is a way that we can find self-empowerment, not through diminishment of the loss, but rather through changes in us and how we see and view the loss, how we decide to move on from here. We no longer have to hold on to the assumption that life is immutable, but instead realize that anything and everything will change.

And here's where hope comes in. When we begin the task of grieving, the whole world seems bleak. We're in the midst of discovering what has been lost, and in the midst of discovering what is left, and sometimes we can't ever believe that things will be different, that they can be different, that we would even want them different. Hope is the furthest thing from our minds and hearts. It is at this point when we can easily be misdiagnosed as depressed. Grief and depression are very similar, except

in this one respect. If we have hope, we know we're not depressed. Or, even if we don't have hope, if we can conceive that someone could hold our hope until we can reclaim it, then we are most likely grieving. This is the difference, for in depression there is no inkling that hope exists anywhere in the world.

The process sounds easy, but you all know that that's not the case. Grieving is hard, reclaiming hope is hard, some of the hardest work we do, and too often we find ourselves trying to take a shortcut, aided and abetted by our grieve-avoiding culture. Yet we cannot shortcut the process. We cannot deny grief its due, or we'll find ourselves losing wallets, or worse, misplacing our sense of selves.

And we are never truly done with grieving. Each loss we have brings back the ones that have come before. We touch again those earlier losses, and also the future losses we fear, as we experience our losses today. And when we learn something new about ourselves, or about that which was lost, or about our relationship to that which is lost, we go back again, and reevaluate everything in the light of that new information. We revisit the old hurts, the old haunts, looking again for the ways in which we can transform, not transcend, grief. We must, always, be able to know what is lost before we can truly see what is left, and how that might be transformed.

I wish I could tell you that there's a magic formula for getting through grief. There aren't any magic words, no magic wand to wave above our heads. It could be that by helping others, we can shift our internal focus. Being with family, sitting with others, countless things can remind us that even though we grieve as individuals, we don't have to be alone.

I can't promise when you'll bring back your hope or befriend your grief. But I can promise you that more often than not, others will help you hold that hope, journey with you on the road. Grief counselors, hospice, dear friends, your congregation—they can all hold your hope for you.

But most of all, when you're in grief, be gentle with yourselves, and with each other. Remember that not only you, but those around you may be living in their own grief. Remember that tears are not signs of weakness, that being lonely and lost in grief and loss are not unique to you alone, but something that we all share. Remember you can find the possibility, of hope.

Because most of all, religious community is a place of hope. We are about hope. About holding out the hope, and holding onto the hope, and being the hope, with and for each other, in the presence of all that is holy, when we need each other and that other the most. As the words of one of our hymns puts it so well: "Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine." And, as the hymn continues, when this we rightly know, then safely, safely through the world we'll go.

Safely, safely, through the world we'll go. Go with love, my friends, with faith, and, most of all, with hope. May it always be so. Amen.