

Peter Jabin
March 24, 2024, Sermon & Readings
UU Congregation of Olympia
March 24, 2024

Sermon title: *Orthopathy: Right Suffering in The Great Unravelling*

Description – If we are to know anything of resilience or hope as humanity collectively collides with the climate crisis, it is essential that we remember the central importance of grief for the human soul and recover the lost art of grieving. Moreover, we need to expand the embrace of our compassion such that the more-than-human becomes fully grieve-able. This service will be a meditation, in poetry and reflection, on these ideas, and will provide a global context for the afternoon's grief workshop.

Bio

Peter Jabin, M.Div., LMHC is a pastoral psychotherapist and spiritual director in private practice in Seattle, where he lives in the Eastlake neighborhood with his canine companion, Thatcher. He received his M.Div. from University of Chicago, after which he studied at The Center for Religion and Psychotherapy of Chicago. Peter is a Diaconal Minister in the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church and is appointed to First UMC Seattle. Peter has trained in the facilitation of grief rituals with Francis Weller, Therese Charvet, Laurence Cole, and others. He is committed to nurturing the communal work of grief as a means of freeing us to live more deeply and joyfully.

Opening Words / Call to Worship

We are here / **here we are**
On this planet / **at this moment**
Praying together / **breathing together, here**
And God says this is good / **this is supremely good**

We are here / **here we are**
We humans, not just on earth / **but of earth, of earth, of earth**
Made from dust / **born of soil**
Shaped of mud / **children of earth**
Siblings of soil / **together, here**
And God says this is good / **this is supremely good**

Here, together / **however we can be**
Hands & hearts & heads / **humans of *humus***
Formed from living, breathing *soil*
We are living, breathing *souls*
On and of the earth
And God says this is good / this is supremely good

First Reading:

Job 12:7-10

Ask the animals, and they will teach you.
Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you.
Speak to the earth, and it will instruct you.
Let the fish in the sea speak to you...
For the life of every living thing is in God's hand,
and the breath of every human being.

From *The Dream of The Earth* (1988), by "Geologist" Thomas Berry

What do you see when you look up at the sky at night at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens?
What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts ... in the
autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away ... [or] when you look out over the ocean in
the evening? What do you see?

Many earlier peoples saw in these natural phenomena a world beyond ephemeral appearance, an
abiding world, a world imaged forth in the wonders of the sun and clouds by day and the stars and
planets by night, a world that enfolded the human in some profound manner. This other world was
guardian, teacher, healer—the source from which humans were born, nourished, protected, guided, and
the destiny to which we returned....

We have lost our connection to this other deeper reality of things. Consequently, we now find ourselves
on a devastated continent where nothing is holy, nothing is sacred. We no longer have a world of
inherent value, no world of wonder, no untouched, unspoiled, unused world. We think we have
understood everything. But we have not. We have *used* everything. By "developing" the planet, we have
been reducing Earth to a new type of barrenness. Scientists are telling us that we are in the midst of the
sixth extinction period in Earth's history. No such extinction of living forms has occurred since the
extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago.

The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the
universe. There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun, and all heavenly
bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions
of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. **To wantonly destroy a living
species is to silence forever a divine voice.**

Second Reading:

Bearing Witness ~Laura Weaver~

Sometimes we are asked to stop and bear witness:

*this, the elephants say to me in dreams
as they thunder through the passageways
of my heart, disappearing
into a blaze of stars. On the edge
of the 6th mass extinction, with species
vanishing before our eyes, we'd be a people
gone mad, if we did not grieve.*

*This unmet grief,
an elder tells me, is the root
of the root of the collective illness
that got us here. His people
stay current with their grief—
they see their tears as medicine—
and grief a kind of generous willingness
to simply see, to look loss in the eye,
to hold tenderly what is precious,
to let the rains of the heart fall.*

*In this way, they do not pass this weight on
in invisible mailbags for the next generation
to carry. In this way, the grief doesn't build
and build like sets of waves, until,
at some point down the line—
it simply becomes an unbearable ocean.*

*We are so hungry when we are fleeing
our grief, when we are doing all
we can to distract ourselves
from the crushing heft of the unread
letters of our ancestors.
Hear us, they call. Hear us.*

*In my dreams, the elephants stampede
in herds, trumpeting, shaking the earth.
It is a kind of grand finale, a last parade
of their exquisite beauty. See us, they say.
We may not pass this way again.*

*What if our grief, given as a sacred offering,
is a blessing not a curse?
What if our grief, not hidden away in corners,
becomes a kind of communion where we shine?
What if our grief becomes a liberation song
that returns us to our innocence?
What if our fierce hearts
could simply bear witness?*

Message – *Orthopathy: Right Suffering in The Great Unravelling*

Greetings of peace and solidarity from First UMC Seattle and the circle of grief mentors & grief tenders who are doing juicy, subversive work throughout the Puget Sound. It is a joy to be here with you this morning. I am so grateful for the invitation. I want to take the opportunity to remember and acknowledge the Rev. Duncan Littlefair, a remarkable UU minister in Grand Rapids, MI who, quite unbeknownst to my 10-year-old self, first awoke my passion for the spiritual journey and a religious vocation. I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude for what he awoke in me, and I dedicate my reflection this morning to his memory.

Let me begin with this odd word in my sermon title: *orthopathy*. We are all familiar with orthodoxy, prescribed or right thinking. And I trust there is a very healthy skepticism for this concept in this congregation. You may even be familiar with *orthopraxy*, right practice or right action. But this word might be new to you, as it was new to me last year, *orthopathy*. Ortho (right, correct) + pathos (suffering, emotion) = “right suffering.” I want to offer this idea to you this morning for your consideration.

Earthrise: “You may remember this image when it first appeared” - image on screen

- ☞ First time in 4.5 billion years of evolution that Earth beheld her own image, that earth saw herself – through our eyes; what an incredible, miraculous, awesome moment!
- ☞ Q: what did/does she see? = what do/can we see? (The same geologic moment)
- ☞ Unspeakable beauty - and world out of balance:
 - Earth’s human population has increased from 4 -> 8 billion since 1960.
 - During this same period, the body count for Earth’s 6th mass extinction has grown to include something on the order of 70% of all wildlife, 80% of big fish in the sea, and upwards of 75% of all insects.
 - The majority (70–90%) of warm water (tropical) coral reefs that exist today will disappear even if global warming is constrained to 1.5°C.
 - But, in 2023, global temperatures breached 1.5°C for a record 12-month period. February 2024 was the hottest month in human history – a full 1.77°C above pre-industrial temperatures. And annual emissions of GHG continue to increase year over year.
 - Simply consider this sobering statement from NASA: “The effects of human-caused global warming are happening now, are irreversible on the timescale of people alive today, and will worsen in the decades to come.”
 - And I won’t even begin on the parallel socio-economic-political manifestations of the climate crisis that constitute – another new word – the poly-crisis. For all we are experiencing these days is of a piece, it is all inextricably interconnected.

I almost want to apologize for speaking these facts, for putting some flesh on what Joanna Macy has dubbed *The Great Unraveling*. But as the poet William Stafford says, “it is important that awake people be awake.” You know this; of course, we know this; it’s increasingly difficult to avoid knowing all of this. **And** it’s important to speak it, out loud, to each other – again and again.

Because these realities call us to right suffering. It is absolutely crucial – for our personal well-being, for our collective well-being, for the well-being of the utterly interconnected and profoundly sentient organism we call Gaia/Earth – that we encounter the reality of what is unfolding in our world, that we feel the feelings that are appropriate and reasonable responses to these realities, and that we grieve. This is not all that is required of us, but it is an essential first step in order to remain fully human in the midst of all that is unfolding. Heck, forget “fully human” for a moment...simply to remain standing.

Therapist and author Aundi Kolber puts it this way,

The death, the loss of freedom, the fear, the sickness, the anger, the polarization, the scarcity, the pain. It feels hard because it is hard and has been hard.... Certainly, we do not want to make our home inside grief, but let us be clear: Unless we make room for the reality of our entire human experience, grief will insist on taking over the whole house.

So what is the appropriate work of grief? Why is it so important? What does grieving accomplish? To answer that, I hope you will forgive me for a rather dense, academic citation (and my apologies if I am over-citing, but there is so much good work happening in this area, it’s very hard not to). This is from Ashlee Cunsolo Willox who is with the Climate Change Adaptation Research Group at McGill University. The paper is *Climate Change as the Work of Mourning (Grieving)*.”

In mourning, we not only lose something that was loved, but we also lose our former selves, the way we used to be before the loss. We are changed internally and externally by the loss in ways that we cannot predict or control, and in ways that may be disorienting, surprising, or completely unexpected. Through this mourning-as-transformation we are open to others—human, animal, vegetal, and mineral—and continually exposed and vulnerable to these bodies through the potential for loss, and our subsequent grieving...These responses to human and other-than-human loss can leave us changed in ways we cannot previously have imagined, and hold the possibility of leaving us more open to other bodies, to grief, and to our transcorporeal connections with all bodies, species, and life forms.

Simply put, the work of grieving connects us and transforms us in ways we cannot fully predict or understand. Further, grieving gives us access to a power and vitality that is not of us, that is from beyond us.

By way of illustration, I would note the present liturgical context for my tradition, the Christian tradition. As Rev. Mary noted earlier, today is Palm Sunday. We stand on the verge of Holy Week, the commemoration of the Passion of Christ. I dare say that many, if not most, Christians move, liturgically, from the (supposed) triumphal entry of Palm Sunday to the triumph of Easter Sunday's resurrection. Such practice completely guts the myth and misses the point of orthopathy, of right suffering that is encountered and rehearsed in Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion and death - a suffering that, as expressed in this myth, we understand God to share in, to enter into, to unfold through.

Here is my take on the Easter miracle that gave rise to the Christian tradition: Jesus' friends and followers shared their traumatic experience of Jesus' death and fully grieved their loss. In their grieving, they were restored to life, to hope, to faith. For grief is the alchemy that transmutes the experience of trauma and loss into eternal life. What we have in the gospels is not Jesus' experience, but the experience of Jesus' friends and followers. They encountered their grief and moved through it – in bodies and in community. They told their stories of what happened – in their life with Jesus, in their loss of Jesus – over and over, to each other, to anyone who would listen - and they came to experience Jesus as Risen, as still living among them and within them. This experience – *experience*, not idea - gave them the power to resist and overcome the domination, oppression, and trauma of empire.

This suggests why grief is so important for us today. For we have forgotten grief. We have all but lost our capacity for grieving. Grief is a lost art, and this loss is a crisis of our collective soul life. Our forgetting of the critical importance of grief as the shared work of community - and ***not*** a privatized experience - has everything to do with the cultural, political, and ecological crises - the poly-crisis - in which we find ourselves. Occurring beyond and outside of therapy - beyond and outside of language - communal grieving begins to reweave our profoundly frayed social fabric. I have recently adopted the descriptor ***grief mender*** to honor this sense of stitching the wound and reweaving the fabric. At the same time, grief as communal practice opens a threshold across which we can move from psychic collapse into a (re)vitalizing responsiveness. The point is to move out of our heads, out of the analytic and into our bodies, our hearts, our souls – to experience, once again, connection to the village, to the earth, to our ancestors. All with grief *in our hands*, as the solvent to erode what immobilizes us and to liberate us into action that flows from love.

Second Reading: *Bearing Witness*

*It is a kind of grand finale, a last parade of their exquisite beauty.
See us, they say. We may not pass this way again.*

What if our fierce hearts could simply bear witness?

Weaver's poem is such an achingly beautiful expression of what really drew me to Willox's piece about climate change and mourning, for she is ultimately making a case for the griev-ability of the non-human, the more-than-human. She notes that we have a long history of bodies that have been deemed unmourn-able in the polis, including the AIDS body, the homosexual body, the Indigenous body, the Trans body, the poor body, the Black body, and on and on. But she also considers a long list of disavowed, ignored and unacknowledged deaths and losses among non-human bodies that include: the degradation of forests and farmlands, the scarring of lands from tar sands projects, the levelling of mountain tops for mining, the pollution of rivers and lakes; the loss of forests to clear-cutting, the melting of ice caps, the permanent loss of biodiversity through human-induced extinction, and the changes in lands all over the world because of climatic shifts and variability. And she argues that, "We can, and should, extend (our) mourning to the non-human (as a way to recognize) non-humans as fellow vulnerable entities and mournable subjects...capable of suffering."

Why? Well, firstly because, as my teacher Francis Weller is fond of saying, it is only good manners to extend this courtesy and compassion to our more-than-human siblings. Which is to say that this move is important in order to heal our egregious arrogance and soul sickness that finds expression in the assumption that grief is reserved for, or somehow only truly applicable to the human, as we care to define human. This cultural norm is a consequence of the errors in our thinking that find expression in the ideas of human exceptionalism as well as the separate, siloed individual. There is so much that could be said here; but let it suffice for now to say that making the more-than-human fully griev-able is, in part, about healing us. But further (and this is Willox again),

The ability of mourning to return (us) to vulnerability and collective responsibility through recognition of the other is the very essence of the power of mourning...From this perspective, grief and mourning have the ability to mobilize, to galvanize, and to cause conscious action through the recognition of others as fellow vulnerable beings...Through mourning, then, and as we encounter the suffering and vulnerability of others, we come to recognize the (non-human) other as vulnerable, as grievable, wholly deserving of the work and labours of mourning.

The labours of mourning or, to translate that into proper English, the work of grieving. What are these labours? What is this work? I would offer that the work of grieving is two-fold. First, grieving proper, grieving itself. And here I want to acknowledge my teacher, Francis Weller, and commend his work to you. As you may have sensed by now, I do not understand grieving as merely a feeling or an emotional state. In its fullest expression, grieving is communal, ritual action. Ritual being any communal gesture, done with emotion and intention, that attempts to connect transpersonal energies for healing or transformation. Its purpose is to help us become “transparent to the transcendent,” and to suture the tears in the experience of belonging resulting from the daily and cumulative injuries of being human – injuries to ourselves, to each other, and to the more-than-human world. We engage this communal work through what Francis calls “practices of coherence” – singing, poetry, dancing, sharing meals, sharing dreams, small group interactions, and large group ceremonies. These are the technologies, if you will, of communal grieving which create a container in which we enter into the shared experience of our grieving – not talking about it or doing group therapy, but rather entering into and actively sharing our grieving with each other in real time. Such work helps us to cross thresholds – from isolation into community, from numbness into orthopathy, from dysregulated overwhelm and despondent collapse into a grounded, connected, embodied presence capable of witnessing, feeling and responding.

...Responding. This brings us to the second aspect of the communal work of grieving which liberates us into the work of repentance, repair and reconciliation – among the human family, yes (and so desperately needed) – but also and perhaps even more importantly at this time among, as Mary Oliver puts it, “the family of things.”

It grows increasingly evident to me that the communal work of grief opens a portal into the potential experience of what I want to call the (small “i”) indigenous self, an *experience* of self that is in keeping with a core truth found across faith traditions: We are One; All is One. Francis speaks of grief ritual as “dropping us into...an encompassing surround of darkness and mystery...a sacred terrain...deep within the earth.” He is pointing toward an ancient, primordial territory - one that we carry deep within our very genes, a territory that we have largely forgotten in our domestication. With practice and willingness, grief ritual has the power to derange us, to re-establish the connection with and deliver us into this territory. In this landscape, it is possible to experience a sacred, spiritual encounter - beyond sectarian belief systems or even the absence thereof – with others, with the Other, with our own enduring indigenous souls, ever and still native to this earth. And from this place, to act, to respond, to

give ourselves to and for the life of the world – whatever that may mean, individually and collectively. This, I would offer, is what it means to be fully human in this utterly unprecedented moment in the history of our species.

In conclusion...

To encounter all the death and loss and violence and tragedy that is evident in the world today, and to collapse under its weight, to collapse into the demand for certainty, or into the desire for our own death...is doomism. This is not right suffering. Rather, this is despair.

But to encounter all the death and loss and violence and tragedy that is evident in the world today - and remain firmly rooted in and devoted to the miraculous goodness of life, to fall to the ground and weep out of love and compassion, this is orthopathy, this is right suffering. Such suffering has the potential to empower us to do what is right, not because we are confident of a good outcome but simply because (in keeping with Vaclav Havel's idea of hope) it is the right thing to do. And also, as Francis reminds us, because it is simply good manners.

Benediction

Receive these words of St. Basil the Great (4th century BCE):

O God, enlarge within us the sense of
fellowship with all living things,
brother beasts, sister trees, father rock and mother seas,
to whom thou gavest the earth as their home
In common with us.

We remember with shame that in the past
we have exercised high dominion
over them with ruthless cruelty
so that the voice of the earth,
which should have gone up to thee
in song, has been a groan of travail.

May we realize that all creatures live not for us alone
but for themselves and for thee,
and that they love the sweetness of life.