

Kate Amoss: Good Grief

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

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Good Grief

We are in the midst of a season of loss at Seekers. Vernabelle and Miller left in April. Anne and Guy left in May. Sonya left the leadership team in June. Ron Arms left in July. Jane Leiper leaves for California in August. Sonya and Manning will be leaving the D.C. area this fall. Moreover, we are waiting to see who among us will find the distance to Takoma Park too far to travel on a regular basis. I know that I am not having an easy time of it right now. I am caught in a swirl of sadness and irritation. Too much seems to be changing right now. I am filled with fears for the future and a profound sense of loss. I am grieving. I had thought that I was alone in my feelings until I started attending the Spiritual Grounding task force meetings. Listening to others, I felt inspired to see if I could try to understand for myself and for others what good grief looks like.

Good grief sounds like a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, truly I tell you such a thing exists. Some pundit once said that the only thing that is constant is change. Grief enables us to respond to change in a way that affirms life. Grief is a natural process that restores our joy and energy in the face of loss. This is what we profess to believe when we claim ourselves to be people of the resurrection. Going into the darkness of the crucifixion is the only path to Easter. We know this so well in abstraction but living it is incredibly hard. Nature can help us. The pattern of our breath is a teacher. We breathe out in order to breathe in. We fall asleep in order to wake up. Trees lose their leaves in order to grow

tender new ones. Every spring is as glorious as the last. Azaleas always bloom just as brightly. The cycles of loss in the natural world do not leave nature diminished. Loss need not rob us of our vitality either.

Yet, too often, I know that I expect to be diminished when I lose something precious. I wanted to do this sermon in part because the first week in August is a time of many losses for me. I noticed that I was approaching it with dread. August 5 and August 7 are particularly charged dates for me. Twenty-five years ago on August 5, a dear friend was violently killed while coming to the aid of a hitchhiker who had taken a bad combination of drugs. My friend was buried on August 7. Nine years ago, again on August 5, as many of you know already, I learned of my brother, Carrick's, accidental death. He had fallen, perhaps jumped from a roof. He, too, was buried on August 7. Three years ago, a car, hit my cat again on August 5, just two days before my mother's death from cancer on August 7. As this week approaches this year, I am aware that I have grieved some of my losses well but not all of them. When I think of my brother, I have many happy, silly, touching and annoying memories of him. There is sadness. I do not understand why he is not still alive but I do not feel devastated by the loss either. The same with my mother; she had her strengths and her weaknesses. We understood each other in some ways and did not in others. I will always be grateful to her and honor her memory but I can go on. The death that is really haunting me this year is the death of my friend, Bruce, back when I was twenty-two.

His impact on my life was much smaller than that of either my mother or my brother yet he is the one about whom I am thinking as the first week in August approaches. I am realizing as I remember Bruce that I grieved his death badly. He is still perfect in my memory. Bruce was a friend who worked in a summer tutoring program with me. We were part of a community that lived on the University of Connecticut Campus

for six weeks and helped inner city high school students prepare for college. He was a special friend. We spent many wonderful hours disagreeing about everything imaginable. Bruce was studying Zen Buddhism. He had a deep appreciation for the mysteries of life. I, on the other hand, remember passionately defending the attitudes of Western civilization. Only the information that we gained from our five senses has any value, I argued. How dare we trust our intuition when it is so dangerous and unreliable? I am here to testify that there is something quite remarkable about being loved even when you are flat out wrong. Bruce was kind, perhaps to a fault. If he had not been, he might not have picked up the hitchhiker who killed him. I heard the news when I was watching the evening report on television.

I remember feeling as if an explosion had been set off in my head. I had this image of fabric being ripped, unraveled, shredded. I had no idea how to cope with something so huge. The tutoring community had already disbanded for the summer. I went to the funeral alone. I slept with the light on. I took alcohol from my parent's liquor cabinet. When a close friend returned to town, I felt really proud of myself for not burdening her with my terrible shock and loss. After a month, I knit myself back together and returned to the busyness of college. But for years, I would think of Bruce every time something good happened. I became accustomed to my joy being mixed with sorrow. I felt guilty for being alive when he wasn't. I also dealt superficially with men who seemed to be offering me friendship. Bruce could not be replaced. No one could accept me as he had. Furthermore, I was secretly pleased by my sacrifices. I had inadvertently devised a way of hanging on to Bruce. Don't feel. Don't talk about it. Stay busy. The cost of this strategy was high. For years August was a torment and I did not even know why.

I think that I kept my feelings to myself because I was afraid of scaring my other friends away. The feelings felt so awful.

They made me feel unlikable. At the root of my inability to grieve was a fear of scarcity. There was not enough: not enough friends, not enough care, not enough understanding and not enough food. This was a tough sermon to prepare for because I was struggling with whether to talk about Bruce or not. The fear of scaring everyone away felt very real.

There was not enough to begin with and now with Bruce's death there was even less. Like the disciples in the scripture reading this morning, I could not imagine two fish and five barley loaves feeding five thousand people. Like Philip, I was also tempted to call out to Jesus, "But six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Deep inside of myself, I secretly believed that I did not deserve more than the minimum of anything. I imagined that I was only allotted a very few special people in my life and that if I lost one of them that I will never find another. Said aloud, this fear sounds silly but I know at some level that I give it credence. Eliot Cowan in his book on Native American wisdom told a story of being invited to listen to the cycle of sacred songs of a tribe in the New Mexico desert. The songs were about the origin of the great waters, the loss of the great waters, and the restoration of the great waters. Cowan asked the tribal leader, "But why are all your songs about water?" "Because water is so scarce," the leader replied and then asked, "Have you never wondered why all the songs of your people are about love?" As long as we believe in scarcity, we are bound to grieve badly.

We fear that sharing our uncomfortable feelings will leave us even more alone than we already are. Moreover, grief is messy and unpredictable. No two people grieve in the same way. Some people cry, some do not. Some people rage, some do not. Some people tell the same stories repeatedly and some do not. Some people act out and others do not. They are all grieving. Hurt, anger, fear and guilt are all common reactions to loss. However, good grieving demands that whatever the feelings are

they must be witnessed by at least one other person. We can cry and cry alone in our room and nothing will ever change. As a therapist, I know that the loss or the serious illness of a child is one of the most common reasons for divorce. The husband and wife grieve differently. They become hopelessly alienated from one another.

I believe that if we as a community can grieve our collective losses well, then we will become even stronger and more vital than we have been in the past. If we do not grieve well, we will become listless and discouraged. I have faith in us. What I know about grieving, I have learned from you. I am largely at peace with the deaths of my mother and my brother because I had you when I lost them. Sonya in particular has been a model for us all of what it means to live out of abundance even as she faces into her own losses.

We must remember that, at the feast of the five thousand, twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered. We have the chance of gaining much more than we risk when we share authentically with one another. Nevertheless, this coming transition is the biggest one that we have yet faced as a community. Ultimately, grief is a process of knowing the truth. It cannot be hurried. It does not look productive. It can seem annoying and inconvenient. However, it does offer new life. So the question for us now is how can we be caring enough, loving enough, patient enough with one another to be people of the resurrection in this place and this time?

I want to end with this poem by Rumi. Jackie McMakin gave it to me when I started my new practice in psychotherapy:

The Guest House by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes

as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

The Essential Rumi, Translation by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, Harper San
Francisco, 1994, pg. 109