

## **Mourning without End?**

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
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### **Reading** – “All Souls” by May Sarton

Did someone say that there would be an end,  
An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning?  
Such voices speak when sleep and waking blend,  
The cold bleak voices of the early morning  
When all the birds are dumb in dark November—  
Remember and forget, forget, remember.

After the false night, warm true voices, wake!  
Voice of the dead that touches the cold living,  
Through the pale sunlight once more gravely speak.  
Tell me again, while the last leaves are falling:  
“Dear child, what has been once so interwoven  
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.”

Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,  
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,  
Are wound and bound together and enflowing.  
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited—  
Only the strands grow richer with each loss  
And memory makes kings and queens of us.

Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.  
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,  
We who find shelter in the warmth within,  
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven,  
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend  
Our complex love, our mourning without end.

### **Sermon**

There is a story told of a great king who owned a stunningly beautiful diamond, yet one with a small flaw at its very heart. The flaw was visible only when the light caught the diamond just the right way, yet even so it was deeply distressing to the king. In the end, the solution offered by a humble jeweler was to engrave a tiny rosebud on the diamond, using the flaw as the stem. All agreed that the diamond had become in some ways more beautiful than before.

This story comes from the introduction to a book on grief (*Living Through Mourning*, by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff). The story is meant to suggest that even our most searing pain, the pain we feel upon the loss of someone we have loved, a pain that we may think is a symptom of a deep flaw in the very scheme of things – even in the shadow of such pain our lives, the story suggests, with work, patience, and time, can become something beautiful again... in fact never stopped being beautiful.

Now, it is beauty that does not and cannot justify the loss, and it's a beauty we may not be able to envision within the first throes of grief – but, given the irretrievable fact of the loss, it is a beauty that may eventually have redeeming power for us in the midst of our mourning.

But no one ought to say that it's an easy journey to this redemptive beauty. Hardly. It can be searingly hard – perhaps impossible to begin with to imagine it could ever be otherwise.

We all – here in the Meeting House and at whatever distance on Zoom – have grieved, do grieve, or will grieve. We have grieved, mourned, for dear friends of all ages, for parents, siblings, spouses, children (oh my, the hardest loss of all – as some of you know only too well). And collectively these days we share the grief for all the losses from COVID, losses which continue to accumulate in our communities and around the planet.

Yet, though we share the experience of grief in general, each of us experiences grief uniquely – grief with its panoply of feelings: sadness no words can express, regrets, anger, numbness. This said, this very experience of grief as unique is itself close to universal. So, as Helen Keller expressed it:

We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in the world – the company of those who have known suffering... the great family of the heavy-hearted into which our grief has given us entrance...

Then she goes on to suggest that simply remembering this can help us to feel the compassionate arms around us of others who have known their own suffering.

All this said, as our inevitable losses accumulate with the years, we might well ask: are we doomed to ever deeper and more painful grief and mourning without end?

No.

We may think the answer is “yes” since as we grow older, unless we isolate ourselves entirely from human relationships, we can hardly avoid experiencing accumulating losses of those we love. In other words we will likely grieve, again and again know that first stab of pain, perhaps in some sense the “mourning without end” of my sermon title (taken of course from May Sarton's poem “All Souls”).

But the answer actually is “no” because I don't believe we will inevitably become mired in ever darkening corners of grief, stuck forever in the despair that we may quite naturally sometimes feel in our grieving.

I say this partly based on my own experience, yet even more based on the example of others I see who have experienced far more loss than I and yet who seem not beaten by their losses somehow deepened – nothing mystical here, instead something quite human if also something sometimes, to say the least, really hard.

How do we avoid being beaten and instead arrive at some deepening of our soul through mourning?

In a way it's pretty straightforward by which I do not at all mean easy: Allow ourselves to grieve fully, to feel all the feelings as we journey the twists and turns, ups and downs, of grief. As the old saying goes, the only way through is through. To closure? No such thing, for we never stop missing someone we've loved, nor should we. Acceptance, that fabled nirvana of the so-called final stage of grieving? If acceptance means anything, it surely does not mean accepting that some difficult loss was actually okay, particularly a loss that included great suffering or that was out of the usual order of things; and just as surely acceptance is not about no longer missing someone.

Rather, it *is* about coming... eventually, might take a long time... to accept that what has happened indeed has happened, that the clock cannot be turned back, that life as we knew it has changed.

And... that life goes on... with the those we loved and walked beside still living in our hearts, their lives still interwoven, to use May Sarton's word, with ours.

My father gone almost thirty-five years, my mother almost ten years? Their lives still woven into my life and into the life of everyone in our family, even indirectly woven into the lives of the great-grandchildren they never knew. My parents' lives and legacies sharing in the redemptive beauty, rosebuds without end, of the generations.

So... most often nothing grand here, most often nothing that ends up in the history books in our mourning without end. Most often simply – simply! – the heritage of the light and love passing from hand to hand, heart to heart, generation to generation. Not all sweetness of course... also the heritage of struggle, of mistakes, of hurt and regret, and suffering... all of which includes love. Blossoming rosebuds, beginning as living through grief we learn to live with our dear ones in our hearts and memories, inner companions now, though not any longer by our sides.

Of course our so-called new life may *always* be etched with a sadness somewhere in the heart, often quite deeply etched, yet quite likely also etched with gratitude, a rosebud of gratitude for having had this person and their gifts in our lives.

One more dimension of continued living after loss, is this – and I've alluded to it already with those lines from Helen Keller. We may discover anew or for the first time just how intimately interwoven *all* our lives are.

We have each other, not only our dearest ones and our friends, but... everyone.

So whether we are Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Unitarian Universalist, whether believer, atheist, or agnostic – in the midst of the journey of grief we may experience that more fundamental than any creed or belief in heaven is community... our connectedness not only with the one we loved and with our families, but with the entirety of the human family – all of us living with the heart's vulnerability, a vulnerability that gifts us with greater compassion for and therefore sense of connection with others.

Our illusion of separateness maybe forever shattered by the experience of grief, even though at first we may feel utterly alone in our grief. But we are not, as Helen Keller reminded us. We live in web of compassion and love transcending our apparent separateness, we live in

the grace of this love – free gift of what actually we always have: each other in the oneness of life.

Yes, the gift of grace enfolded in our mourning, the spiritual grace of opening to our human vulnerability, the openness of our heart to the hearts and sufferings of others, the realization that in the end we are all part of one sacred web of life.

So our “mourning without end” is not, thankfully, living with that intensity of initial grief we’ve known or will know only too well. That does fade, with time and attention. That mourning does come to an end.

But there is also a “mourning without end” in this deepened way of living in which we feel a oneness with all souls, living and dead, our own dear ones and all souls, a way of living that can make life all the more precious and poignantly beautiful. As we heard in May Sarton’s poem “All Souls”:

...what has been once so interwoven  
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.

...Only the strands grow richer with each loss...

Listen, and feel new-cherished, new forgiven,  
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend  
Our complex love, our mourning without end.

So what shall it be: Denial without end, denial of the human condition as it is, denial of our heart’s vulnerability... a denial within which we might forever take life and our loved ones for granted – pretending there will be always another day, always another opportunity to say what we meant to say, do what we meant to do?

Or, knowing that life is filled with both beginnings as well as endings, knowing that we all share the reality of loss and grief, will we become ever more open to surprising if sometimes pain-filled grace, as deep apparent flaws are transformed into rosebuds.

So may it be.

## **Benediction**

Let the horizon of our minds include all people:  
The great family here on earth with us;  
Those who have gone before and left to us the heritage  
of their memory and of their work;  
And those whose lives will be shaped by what we do or leave undone.

*--by Rev. Samuel Crothers*