

“Holding Sorrow, Holding Beauty”

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 25, 2026

My family gathered on the sand alongside the ocean shore, blanketed beneath a velvety night sky. The waves crashed and the ocean sprayed our bare skin. In this space, made sacred by all we carried with us, we wrote notes to my beloved Aunt Nancy on the tenth anniversary of her death. Intimate, heartfelt notes. We chose this New Jersey beach because of the memories we had made there, returning each summer as a family. On this night, we sat with notes in hand, sad yet held by deep gratitude for having known and loved Nancy. “I love you.” “I miss you.” “Thank you.” “You never left me.” “Please forgive me.” We tied our notes to paper lanterns. We lit the flames, and one by one, the lanterns rose into the night sky, carrying our words of love and hope ever higher and higher until they mingled with the stars. A beautiful tribute to a beautiful life.

May we pause with the words of poet Mary Oliver:

You must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.¹

To love what is mortal is to embrace a sense of vulnerability, for we cannot love without opening ourselves to the promise of loss. And yet, to live fully is to love: to turn strangers into friends and friends into family. Nancy embodied such abundant laughter and joy, such beauty in body and spirit, and such a wonderful sense of humor. As we released the lanterns into the

¹ “In Blackwater Woods” by Mary Oliver

night sky, we let her know what she may not have fully realized in life: just how deeply we loved her. Each of us has the opportunity to do this in our own way—to release our unspoken words into the sky, to express the love we carry. There is no end to the ways we can express our love and nurture these enduring relationships. In doing so, we remain connected to one another and to the beauty that love brings into our lives.

Author and psychotherapist Frances Weller offers us this: “The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them both.”²

Grief can deepen our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to all that is finite, while gratitude invites us to recognize the blessings that remain from those who we have loved and lost. We learn to make room for both, allowing each to expand our capacity for compassion, wonder, mystery, and awe, just as we did under that starry night sky.

We are in a hallowed time of year, a time where the veil between the living and the dead is said to grow more permeable, when we pause with intention to welcome the ancestors into our lives. In the season of changing autumn leaves, myriad cultures honor the enduring connection of the living to the dead, celebrated through observances such as Halloween, Día de los Muertos, Samhain, All Souls’ Day. In this sacred time where the mortal and the immortal meet, we pause to reflect on grief, remembrance, and the enduring bonds of love.

As we reflect on grief, it is worth remembering that loss is deeply personal. Each of us carries grief in our own way. The reflections I offer today cannot speak to every circumstance, but I hope they may offer moments of connection and comfort as we consider this part of our shared human experience.

In bearing witness to loss, there is consolation—a consolation we can each embody: the recognition that our experiences, however deeply personal, are part of our shared human experience since the beginning of recorded time. We will each know the depths of mourning just as we will each know gentle reminders of how our ancestors are with us still – a favorite

² “Francis Weller on Grief” by Francis Weller

song, a treasured pocket watch. We live in a network of mutuality – an interdependent web. We share this experience with every person who has ever been and who ever will be — including the person sitting next to you in these pews.

As we reflect on loss, let us also hold space for the possibility of healing. Healing asks us to remain with what we feel, to acknowledge our emotions in their fullness, rather than turn away from them. Grief. Relief. Gratitude. Loss. There are no universal answers, no single way to grieve. Even within a single family, experiences of the same death may differ. I invite you to find comfort in your own way. Perhaps it is sitting with a sibling, sharing memories. Perhaps it is a walk beneath the sunlight pouring through colorful autumnal leaves. Perhaps it is the ritual of lighting a candle or the quiet comfort of prayer. Perhaps it is simply allowing one day to follow the next. The paths toward healing are as varied as we are. What matters is that we find, in our own time and in our own way, what helps us reconnect with life.

And may we offer ourselves gentleness and compassion as we find our way along what may be a long and winding journey. Each bend in the road reveals something entirely new; each crest of a mountain opens onto another valley stretching before us. No true journey follows a straight line to a clearly defined endpoint, and neither does grief. Some days bring unexpected sorrow; others reveal moments of joy, gratitude, or beauty. Months after losing a cousin you find yourself laughing at the abundant jokes you shared. Years after losing a friend, you come across an old photograph and are back in the grip of grief. May we make room for all of these emotions, whenever they come and however they arrive.

And as we learn to make room for our own grief, we may become more adept at making room for the grief of others. Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer is simply our presence. Listen with ears, heart, mind, and spirit. Listen to a poignant silence. Receive story. Receive tears. Receive anger with an open and compassionate heart. There is a solace and a wisdom in not offering assurance or asking questions, of not offering platitudes or advice. Know, too, that though we mean well and offer our presence with compassion and love, it is not our job to fix a person. The grieving one knows what they need to heal.

I would like to share a few lines of poetry by Mark Nepo,

Everything is beautiful and I am so sad.

This is how the heart makes a duet of
wonder and grief The light spraying
through the lace of the fern is as delicate
as the fibers of memory forming their web
around the knot in my throat.

...

It is there that I'm adrift, feeling punctured
by a holiness that exists inside everything.³

I have found caring for people at the end of life to be among the most spiritual aspects of my ministry. It was a central part of my work as a hospital chaplain: to pray with families during that final farewell, to hold space for profound mystery and an unending love. Each experience is different, shaped by its own circumstances, and I have witnessed the many ways these experiences can unfold. And yet, in those final moments, I sometimes witnessed the tenderness Nepo so eloquently describes—the delicate fibers of memory beginning to form a fragile web around the ache of loss. What stays with me most is that even in these moments of sadness, there was also beauty. There was love. There was the quiet wonder of life. I think of a young man simply holding his elderly mother's hand. It was, in its own way, a harmony of wonder and grief. And perhaps, when we feel adrift, we may find ourselves unexpectedly punctured by that holiness Nepo mentions—in a memory, a minute of connection, or a glimpse of beauty that reminds us we are part of something far larger than ourselves.

My stepfather was a professor, a deeply spiritual man, and an avid pipe smoker. In the corner of his living room, he constructed a shrine. On the walls he hammered icons of Jesus, Mary, and the disciples. The desk in front of him played host to his bible, as well two or three of his many pipes. We would often find him there, taking a break from academia, poised in meditation –

³ "Adrift" by Mark Nepo

keeping stillness and silence even amidst a busy household with two small dogs. Later, when my stepfather passed away, we kept the shrine. Where the tobacco smoke may have at one point been an annoyance, it was now a piece of his treasured memory. We still tried to tip toe around the space, as if he were asking for silence. The shrine connected us to Al, and through those simple objects, we felt close to him even in his absence. The pipe eliciting gratitude, the bible consolation. It was the icons that stayed with me most: the understanding that Al believed he had returned to God. That belief was a true comfort to my broken heart.

Author Martin Pretchel writes that, quote, “If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love.”⁴ To grieve is to bear witness to the blessed relationship shared for months, years, decades. And let us remember that those we have lost were not perfect, for none of us is. They may have carried deep flaws, and yet there may be pieces of them we wish to carry with us—memories to cherish, qualities to celebrate, and lessons to hold close. We lift up memories of birthday cakes, of awkward yet memorable first dates, of vacations shared—and we miss them. We remember the significant fights, the annoying mannerisms, the little things that once frustrated us—and we miss them, too. This reflection brings to mind a treasured sentiment – love does not end, it simply transforms – it takes on different forms. We no longer whisper words of love into someone’s ear, but we can whisper them to the wind. We have lost the comfort of touch, but we dream of them still. We can no longer converse, but we can pray. We can no longer create new moments together, but the memories we made remain. Their wisdom, their humor, their insights – these last for generations. We see them in how we care for the broken, in how we celebrate ordinary blessings, in how we meet life with humor.

We mourn what has ended, yet we find ways to carry that love forward. Whether in the scent of Al’s pipes or the ocean spray surrounding Nancy’s lantern ritual, our beloveds remain with us. To heal is not to put an end to grief. Instead, we make room for it. We carry it alongside us for the rest of our lives – and we try to do so with gratitude, love, and compassion. We can imagine their breath in the wind, their laughter in a rainstorm. We can hear their wisdom, humor, and compassion ringing in our ears, and allow them to live through us as we bring these

⁴ *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise* by Martin Pretchel

gifts to the world. And in the ways we make sense of that mystery, we come to understand, in our own hearts, where our beloveds reside. We grieve all the more deeply because we love. And yet, we cannot make our way through this finite life without loving what is mortal. For me, it is the cross hanging on my wall and the funeral flowers resting in a vase that remind me of the blessings of those who passed too soon. May we each imagine ourselves on that chilly New Jersey beach beneath a dark summer sky. May we imagine the note we long to send to the one we have lost, holding everything we still wish to say in just a few words. Tied to a lantern, our words rise into the night, mingling with the stars and drifting toward eternity. May your words be blessed. Complete. Beautiful.

May it be so, and Amen