

“Words of Loss and Hope”
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Living in the Present

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| “Postscript” | (Seamus Heaney) |
| “I Take Mastercard” | (Nikki Giovanni) |
| “When Death Comes” | (Mary Oliver) |

“To catch the heart of guard and blow it open.” It is our singular mistake to think that we are in control of this life or any life. Our continual denial of human fragility comes from a need to feel secure in an evolving world. It is human, and at times necessary. But as a form of living, useless. As the commercial tells us “Life comes at you.” It’s useless to think you will park and capture it. To live in the present is a joy that catches the heart on a regular, spontaneous basis, and blows it open which is why modern women and men need to take Mastercard.

Life requires trust and vulnerability. Trust, most of all that you are resilient, not that you can control anything or everything, because you can’t. But trust that you will make your way, you’ll figure it out, get help when you need it, care for yourself and others, trust that you and you alone are the essential, vital self regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, children, parents, job, financial security. That’s a lot of trust, which is why life also requires vulnerability. There is no way; there is no way, no way, to shelter yourself from all that the present brings. No way to save enough, plan enough, hide enough, prepare enough, guard enough. No way. Life is precious, beautiful, rare, hard, mysterious, and finite. It’s all these things all day every day. There is no guarding, only the illusion of guarding, against any eventuality. So go take some calculated risks, charge up some love, and let the wind catch your heart off guard and blow it open. It’s going to happen whether you plan for it or not. Be a bride married to amazement, and a bridegroom who takes the world into his arms.

For the Unexpected

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| “Notice” | (Steve Kowit) |
| “Oddjob, A Bull Terrier” | (Derek Walcott) |

While at General Assembly in Portland, Oregon last June I went to one art exhibit and stumbled upon another, like you do when you live in the present. Crossing to an

exhibit of the Rijksmuseum, I walked through a gallery of Northern American Northwest Coastal Indian art and stood and stared at transformation masks, namely the mask of Bakbakwalanuxsiwe, the cannibal at the north end of the world. The masks are large, with hinges that open outside beaks to reveal other riveting masks inside the outer one. They were worn during secret dance ceremonies meant to integrate primitive inner nature (represented by the cannibal at the north end of the world) with social, community nature. I stared at the masks and wondered if the cannibal were not just inside me, but outside me as well.

The week before I left Charley Harper, who I just loved to visit, died. When I arrived at Portland, former member Peggy Snyder met me at baggage, and before I could turn on my cell phone, she told me that Betty Brothers had died. In the previous few weeks I had seen Sue Koehler, Susanne Herz, and Grace Epstein in the hospital multiple times, and visited Tom Kahle at home. This is not the normal course of health at First Church. Last June it was clear to me we were in one of those pastoral grey zones, which has continued through July and August. In my ten years of ministry I have seen them come. They just happen and it is like there is a cannibal in your midst and you are living at the north end of the world.

If you have ever been in one of these zones, or are in one now, you know what I mean. Your good Levis rip for no apparent reason, and a young friend dies. Your best friend (who is younger than you) is diagnosed with cancer. You lose your job and your sanity, and your dog dies. These things happen and we walk around like ghosts, trying to get food and sleep and care for ourselves and others, and try not to descend too far into PTSD.

This weekend I was in New Orleans visiting a dear, old friend and her family. Together we drove past the Superdome, through formerly flooded causeways that humans waited on for days, through the historic black Ninth ward (home to the Marsalis brothers and other jazz legends), and farther south into St. Bernard, the working class white neighborhood, both the Ninth Ward and St. Bernard blown away by Hurricane Rita. Two years later I saw FEMA trailers, and empty lots, and the paint used by the National Guard and others on every house they searched (date they arrived up top – 9/16, unit number, number of human dead, if there were any pets inside – two dogs and one bird, dates of food drops for animals). “You prepare for one sorrow and another comes.” “We look seaward and muse it will rain.”

And there is traffic in New Orleans, and people. The restaurants that are open are full. And there are still folks rebuilding. Every Home Depot in any neighborhood had a full parking lot. It’s not the same city. In some places it is absolutely desolate. But it stands, this city of funk and junk, with love, it stands. They are about to start recycling again. Word on the street is that streetcars may run on St. Charles Avenue again in the near future.

In this crazy world, love matters. Its loss makes us fall, but its existence makes us stand. Love will not save you, but it will name you and mark you and make you human. Its loss might split you in two, but without its existence you would never have known the fullness of life. “Whether we bear it for beast, for child, for woman, or friend, it is the one love, it is the same, and it is blest deepest by loss it is blest, it is blest.”

For the Caretakers

“The Art of Disappearing”
Sweet Darkness”

(Naomi Shihab Nye)
(David Whyte)

Into most lives caretaking will fall. Adulthood rarely goes by without demanding our engagement; either as parents, or guardians, when a loved one is ill, perhaps in a job, or as caretakers for aging parents, we take time away from self-engagement to care for another. This also makes us more deeply and broadly human. We know and are known, are stretched and grow in community and relationship. Some caretaking is burdensome, the quarrelsome, angry parent, and some is a given; we can't stopped caring for a sick child or beloved spouse or friend. We feel we would give our lives for the well-being of this loved one. How amazing, how blest, that love can lead to such devotion.

Yet caretaking has its limits. As Naomi Shihab Nye writes, everyone deserves to “disappear.” You can only care well for another if you know and care for yourself first. As a friend likes to remind me, when flying, always put the oxygen mask on yourself before you help the child next to you. You might also need a time of darkness, of sadness, and grief. This is human and it is good to know and name this place. We tend to run through our grief instead of standing and looking around, learning the lessons it has to offer. Who are you, what do you see? Far too many people give bad advice about running through the hard times. They just can't sit with sadness. But you can. Perhaps a very good friend will join you. Sit with your sadness. Take the time to look, find, and name what you want and need in your own words.

For Living with Loss

“Will I See You in Heaven?”
Excerpts from “Friendship”

(Dot Christenson)
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)