

## **Grief on the Path to Change 2.0**

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church Unitarian Universalist, November 20, 2022

I had, of course, written a message for today. Then I woke up this morning, saw the news about the Club Q shooting [here in Colorado Springs], and tossed that message.

This is not a day for reflections on why our individual paths of growth and change might bring grief with them, however useful those reflections otherwise might be. Instead, I think it's a day to honor the power and value of grief and to remind us of those things we already know about how to take care of ourselves and each other when grief is as overwhelming and complicated as it may be for some of us today.

For context, I know two people who were at Club Q last night and left just before the shooting. One of them lost a friend in the shooting. The other one is waiting to learn whether his friend will survive the shooting or not. It is a very rough day.

So, grief. I was over at All Souls briefly at the end of their first gathering this afternoon and saw a lot of tears and heard a lot of what some people call ugly-crying. Grief sucks, and grieving is a miserable experience, made even worse when it is interspersed with fear or rage. Let's just get that out of the way.

But grief is also valuable, and powerfully important for us. I want to say a little about why, and then just encourage us to take of ourselves and each other today and over the days to come, and for as long as we need.

First, grief is a natural reaction to losing something or someone we love. The measure of our joy is the measure of our sadness. The depth of our love is the depth of our grief. And a lot of us have much to grieve today – perhaps the loss of a sense of safety, maybe the loss of a sense of ease and comfort in our chosen gathering places, or of a sense of order and predictability; for some of us, the loss of friends or, for those of us with injured friends, the loss of their well-being. That's a lot to lose, and it's coming on top of a day, Transgender Day of Remembrance, that is already about lifting up our grief at the murder of transpeople. So, we have extra, unexpected layers of grief to contend with today on top of the grief we were already prepared to face.

Grief reminds us that human beings are made for relationship and connection, that the loss of our friends or loved ones is a loss of something in ourselves as well. We may think about our intersections with others as a kind of tapestry of different lives woven together, but in fact those tapestries are woven within our own lives. We are not merely a strand of thread on the loom of society. We are the quilt, the scarf, the multicolored garment made up of different strands of fabric. That fabric is the impact of other people on our own lives. I look around the room now and see people who contributed to making me who I am. Your threads are woven in my life, in my being, and mine are woven in yours. Grief may be a hard way to remember this, but it's a crucial lesson.

Lots of people posting on Facebook today have said things like, remember to hug the people you love and tell them you love them today because you don't know whether you 're gonna get another chance to do so. Maybe that sounds morbid, but I find it a helpful reminder. Life doesn't wait for our distractions or our squabbles or our pettiness or our disagreements. It goes on and it goes by, and sometimes it goes horribly wrong. The prospect of grief is a reminder to love right now, whatever else we are or are not doing.

It's also a reminder to make peace with those with whom we struggle if we possibly can. I don't mean giving up our work for justice or against racism or for democracy. I personally, and this will reveal a little bit about me to people who don't know me, am not about to call up JD Vance and tell him I love him. But there are people close to us with whom we have complicated relationships. When I think about the death of my parents, I'm still grateful that my father died with our relationship complete and full and abundant and well-resolved. And I'm still sad that my mother died without such closure, that I was never able to have a final conversation with her to express frustrations or apologize or ask the questions I was always afraid to ask or any of that. If we have difficult relationships, the wisdom of grief invites us to see if we can make a dent, even a little dent, in resolving them while the other person is still here to be part of the conversation. And while we are.

The idea of living each day as if it were your last, which has already come up today, is one of those spiritual-sounding slogans that suddenly becomes very real when grief enters the equation. For me, this happened some years ago when I wound up with cancer and did not expect to live, and I'm still wildly grateful to be alive. But last night's shooting is a reminder of the same truth. Not only do we not know whether our friends will be here tomorrow, we don't know for sure whether we will be. Are we bringing our best selves to this day? If, at bedtime, we suddenly found out that we might not have many days left, would we be happy with the way we interacted with this day, with the choices we made, with our priorities, with our values and our actions? I don't mean that every minute has to be productive or serious or insightful or effortful. Maybe we need to play more, relax more, veg out more, pet our cats more, watch more British baking competitions. One thing I know about this morning's news: it has made today a lot more intentional for me.

Finally, grief can be a measure of our aching for justice and human well-being. We don't merely grieve the loss of our own sense of comfort or safety or even just the harm to or loss of our friends or family members. In situations like this shooting, we grieve the state of our society. We grieve the prevalence of violence, the easy access to weapons of mass destruction, the lack of a society-wide commitment to mental health and indeed to the valuing of all people on all fronts. So many mass shootings of recent years have targeted already oppressed, devalued, disenfranchised, scorned, morally rejected communities. Indeed, these shootings have often followed almost logically from the way that cultural messages about who matters and who doesn't and who's expendable and who's important have flown around social media and mainstream media and political venues. We don't know anything yet to my knowledge about this morning's shooter's motives, but if he thought the LGBTQ+ community, of which I am a member (and here's my flag), if he thought that community was "grooming" heterosexual children, we certainly know who to blame for that perception.

So, as much as grief sucks, it is meaningful and valuable, an important reminder of what we should take seriously, how to make sense of our days, and even how to commit ourselves to making a world where we might get to grieve violence like the shooting a little less because it would happen a little less. Or a lot less. Or never. That world doesn't exist, but we can all be working toward, as Captain Jean-Luc Picard said on Star Trek: The Next Generation, making it so.

Now, how shall we take care of ourselves and each other today and tomorrow? You all know everything I'm about to say, but it's never bad to remind ourselves and each other. God knows I need to hear it, which is why I'm saying it.

We need, of course, to stop, to pause, to breathe, to take time, to feel our feelings. And maybe our feelings are just shock and numbness. But whatever they are, we need to honor them. They are real, they are part of us, they make us who we are. Anything we can do to make space for them is all to the good.

We need to find safe spaces to weep, rage, ugly-cry, whatever we're gonna do. Maybe that's alone, maybe it's with other people who are safe for us. But those places need to be safe spaces where we can be vulnerable and open and fully our complicated selves.

We need to not worry quite that much about what we had planned for the day. Early this morning, I got an email from my boss. It was sent to all of us who report to her at Colorado College, basically saying, whatever you're doing, stop, take care of yourself first. If you need to take time, take time. Just let me know what's going on. And I thought that was a marvelous reminder. The universe does not often speak through my boss, but on the rare occasions when it does, I'm certainly going to be very grateful for that.

I had all sorts of things planned for today. I had kind of a nice, elegant message written, and that's in the recycling bin. Today is the day. We're here. Things are what they are. We have to be present for what is. If we're too caught up in what we thought we were going to be doing, we're not going to be here now.

In terms of all those feelings of grief, the complicated feelings, the hard, uncomfortable feelings, the stress, the tightness, the clenched throats, the tight guts, whatever it is, the tears, whatever it is, if we can, we need to let ourselves feel them, especially if they're uncomfortable. If we can, to let them flow through us so they have a chance to discharge. If we can't, we can't, but if we can, it's a good thing. And I think for many of us, it's probably helpful if we don't expect those feelings to be brief or simple or gone tomorrow. They might be all sorts of things. They might be complicated. They might linger. They might change. They might evolve. They might get better and get worse. Whatever they are, we need to be there for them and let them be as they are.

For those of us, including me, who are often tempted to respond self-destructively to discomfort, I invite us to try not to do that today. Discomfort is really hard, especially for those of us who do not have good resilience and did not have good training in how to handle it, and some of us will be tempted to do things that are not in our best interests, and I hope we will to the best of our ability resist those temptations.

Along this line, we can ask for help from our friends and our loved ones, our community, this community, our other communities. We can offer help to those around us. We can support one another.

We can proactively check in with people who might have a special investment in this situation. This is not a moment when I want to say that heterosexual cisgender people are not in pain about the shooting; of course, they – you – we are. But for those of us who are specifically part of the LGBTQ+ community, we might need a little extra love today, and if you are not specifically in our community, please support our community today. And as I say that, I'm reminded that after every single unjust shooting by a police officer or vigilante of a Black or Brown person, those of us who are white need to do exactly the same thing, so this is not special pleading for my community, it's a general principle. But today, the community in pain is mine.

Those who have heard me speak before know this is not my typical message, by a long shot. But this is not a typical day. So, I've going to close with one more, definitely not typical for me, thought.

I picked Go Lifted Up for our closing song weeks ago. It's not clear that it's the ideal closing song for today. In fact, it's pretty clear that it's not. But let's sing it anyway, and I invite you to think of it in the following way: let's go out lifting ourselves up, lifting each other up. Maybe love will not bless our way in the abstract, so let's be love for ourselves. Let's be love for one another. Let's bless our own way. Let's bless each other's way. Grief is real, and hard. In the face of grief, love is also real, and we have to trust that once grief eventually recedes, love will remain. So may it be.

Now please rise in body or spirit to sing song 1057, Go Lifted Up.

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#### Benediction

Friends, on this day of grief, may we not forget love. May we love ourselves well. May we love each other well. May we love the world well. And may our work in the world make it a place of ever less and less avoidable grief, and ever more and more abundant love. Blessed be.