

September 15, 2019
The Rev. Heather Janules

Reading – “The Gold Stars and the Bittersweet” by Victoria Safford

One afternoon someone left a strange and beautiful message scotch-taped to the office door. The author didn't even leave a name, though I knew who it was; her message simply said “I forgot to tell you when we met this morning, there are little gold stars all amongst the bittersweet. It's all there, mixed together.”

I had just met with this person, who was not quite in crisis but dancing on the edge talking and weeping and raging through one of those hard, hard moments that can last for weeks or months or years. It was painful stuff, faced with courage. Here, hours later, was this slightly mysterious, elegant message, and I thought how amazing it is that some people can render even the most desperate experience poetically, and what a gift this is, this making of art out of ashes, and how rare. I was very moved.

The next day, there came a second message from the person [this time] on the answering machine, slightly altering my view of things. “It's me again, calling back about the stars and bittersweet. I forgot to tell you, I stuffed it all in garbage bags, and they're in the closet in the Social Hall. Those berries make an awful mess.”

Well, there's not much poetry in that. As it turns out, there were no metaphors at work at all. Before our appointment that morning, this person had been cleaning up after a church party for which the decorations had included branches of cut bittersweet from members' autumn gardens and long lengths of gold tinsel wire to which tiny metal stars were fixed. So it really was all garbage.

But I'm intrigued by conversations and by language that can speak of trash bags, closets, golden stars and bittersweet, and refer with equal accuracy to the very depths of human hope and suffering or to the details of committee cleanup. And I know that I am called – as I suspect we all are called – to places where the sacred and the ordinary are all mixed up together, where work is prayer and prayer is song and songs are sacraments and sacraments are silent or spoken brokenly in messages we sometimes barely comprehend, in words we speak in love to one another and to the golden stars.

“Grace Does Not Agree to Your Terms and Conditions’ – Spirituality”

Last month, I had the joy of co-leading nine hours of training with our new Pastoral Care Associates. During the third training session, we listened to part of a program, “Walking Through the Storm.” This audio documentary explores the many ways people in cancer treatment navigate coping with serious illness and living – and sometimes dying – with dignity and good humor. One segment, “The Power of Belief,” focuses on the spiritual dimension of this odyssey.

In this segment, we meet Patrick Doherty. His doctors have diagnosed him with an incurable brain tumor. The best he and his loved ones can hope for is treating the cancer into remission. Doherty, a practicing Catholic, speaks about the relationship between his illness and his faith.

Referring to his doctor, Patrick Doherty recalls a past conversation: “She says she can’t cure me using her tools.”

“So you don’t take that as a red light?” the interviewer asks.

“I took that as a green light, to go look for other solutions. They would have to be spiritual solutions,” Patrick Doherty replies.

Doherty’s words move me every time I hear them. I have never had to face anything as frightening as a diagnosis of brain cancer but can imagine such an experience would inspire me to lose trust in everything I once believed. For Patrick Doherty – or anyone for that matter – to find something empowering, permission-giving or remotely hopeful through “spiritual solutions” makes me want to know more about spirituality. It makes me want to get some of what he’s got.

Having heard this interview many times, I harbor a morbid curiosity about Patrick Doherty and his fate. This interview was conducted more than ten years ago. Is Patrick Doherty still alive? Did he find the tools he needed to bring “spiritual solutions” to his medical crisis?

But I've had the privilege of spending time with people struggling with serious illness. Through the lessons they have taught through their example, when I wonder what "spiritual solutions" can do, I remember that physical survival is not really the point. I am reminded that a person may not be cured of their illness but they may be healed. Through grappling with a mortality that is no longer abstract, their innermost selves may evolve in such a way that they are able to make peace with who they are. They may arrive at a newfound resolution in their relationships, content with the capricious nature of life itself.

Patrick Doherty speaks to this phenomenon, affirming that his illness became a catalyst, motivating him to "get honest about reality." And this honesty moved him to further change the kind of person he was, inspiring him simply to "put more love out there."¹

Cancer changed Patrick Doherty as crises change most of us. And we are changed when we actively seek "spiritual solutions" to our own suffering, one way or another.

One does not need to face as serious a challenge as cancer to become driven to seek "spiritual solutions." I imagine I am not alone when I say that the times we are living through right now may inspire us to look beyond our regular resources. For if human reason cannot keep us safe from firearms and common decency does not stop us from tearing families apart at the border and the findings of climate science do not compel us to change our ways, like people who lived in biblical times and suffered through their own seasons of lamentation, perhaps an important way we will endure will be through "spiritual solutions."

As many of us have a need to look beyond the daily news feed to understand the world, this morning I invite us to pause and consider the role spirituality plays in our lives. I invite us to engage in some gentle self-inquiry about the state of our inner selves. And I offer my own understanding of what we mean when we talk about "spirituality" in hopes that these ideas will inspire you to form your own understanding or to revisit what it means to "be spiritual."

Sometimes part of naming what something is means naming what it is not. It is easy to confuse "spirituality" with "theology," how we comprehend the sacred or,

¹ <https://www.humanmedia.org/product/walking-through-storm/>

more simply, how we understand the nature of life itself. Theology is how some people have responded to life's biggest questions: Is there a God? Or many Gods? Is this deity or are these deities merciful or vengeful? Omnipresent or distant? Or are humans and animals alone in this sphere of existence? How was the earth created? What happens when we die? Scholars, scientists, philosophers and religious traditions have wildly different answers to these questions, each creating a "big picture" framework through which we are invited to interpret our individual life experiences.

But spirituality is something different. Time and again, I return to the most helpful definition of spirituality I have heard. I once attended a workshop by Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer. While he shared so much wisdom and offered many fascinating ideas, what I remember most about this workshop was his presence. Some people have a way of teaching by just being in the room. Perhaps it is from his many decades of quiet, reflective Quaker practice but Palmer is such a teacher.

In this workshop and in some of his writing, Parker Palmer defines "spirituality" as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos."²

I put this in even simpler, more sarcastic terms, I say that "spirituality is the lived recognition that if there is a God, we are not it." Illustrating this understanding, I remember an acquaintance, Walter, who posted a note on his refrigerator as a reminder. It read: "Walter, the job is taken. [Signed] God." Even simpler still, I would say that "spirituality is surrender."

In Patrick Doherty's story, he does not passively surrender to his illness. But in actively pursuing "spiritual solutions" to confront the personal chaos brought on by his illness, time and again he opens up to life. He makes himself vulnerable, acknowledging the truth of his life-and-death struggle. Doherty becomes more honest with the facts of his life before him. As described in another part of the interview, along with practicing his Catholic faith, Doherty attends a healing service in another congregation, participates in rituals led by First Nation people in Canada and regularly sits on the meditation cushion. Doherty becomes more loving towards others perhaps, in part, because he has received so much love

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/heart-and-soul/>

through the hymns, the prayers, the rituals of others. Perhaps because he has been changed by his regular communion with silence and the ever-evolving contents of his own mind. In Patrick Doherty's story, I hear echoes of the wisdom of Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron: "Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible in us be found." Spirituality is surrender.

The second principle I have learned about spirituality is best expressed through a friend's Facebook post: "grace does not agree to your terms and conditions."

My friend and colleague Barbara recently began a spiritual odyssey, her testimony updated periodically through Facebook. Barbara was diagnosed with a lung condition, a condition that meant she would eventually need a lung transplant.

I have long admired Barbara's energy and active lifestyle. As the primary spiritual community beyond her congregation has been her Zumba class, I couldn't imagine Barbara struggling for breath. And, yet, seeing her at General Assembly one year made it clear that while her spirit was always willing, her flesh was challenged to live as it always did. Walking up a slight incline or climbing the stairs suddenly became difficult.

This past year, her doctors told her it was time for a double lung transplant. Through this radical procedure she had a chance to reclaim and continue a life that was changing in ways she did not welcome. If she were to live, there was no other choice.

So we, her friends far and wide, heard the story of preparing for this major surgery through Facebook. Through posts and emojis, we companioned her as she anticipated the emergency call, letting her know that a suitable donation was ready and she was expected at the hospital. One day, the call came and, having said yes and surrendering to whatever would come next, Barbara moved forward with the transplant. A post from her husband shared the good news that the surgery went well. In time, we heard from her directly, celebrating the small but critical accomplishments – walking down the hospital corridor, removing the respirator tube. Then came the news that she was well enough to go home. Another joyous day.

But then there was Barbara's post. As it spoke of her spiritual path, it was a bit like a Zen koan. And, in the context of a Facebook post without further explanation, it fell in the category of "Vaguebooking." It read "grace does not agree to your terms and conditions."

In time, the full story emerged. Yes, through a lung transplant Barbara literally had a new lease on life. As an unexpected gift, the transplant was a physical manifestation of grace. And, as she eventually learned, the blessings of this gift came with unexpected challenges and pain. Barbara does not know the name of the person whose life ended so hers could continue but she did learn that the donor was a thirteen-year-old boy. And then there were the medical setbacks, requiring on-going procedures that were uncomfortable, time-consuming and disruptive. And her confidence that she could return to full-time ministry was challenged by her first week back when humility, born of physical exhaustion, moved her to surrender to the truth that, at least for the time being, she could not return to "normal life."

The short-term future of Barbara's ministry is unclear but one certain truth emerges: Spirituality is living in the reality that we will receive blessings we cannot conceive and will endure suffering we also did not expect; the limitations of both our imagination and our will are infinite. Spirituality is recognizing we are often caught in experiences best "holy surprise."

In this month when we are invited to explore "expectation" together, we are reminded that having expectations and living a spiritual life often do not work hand-in-hand. In the midst of the infinite possibilities of incredible blessings and heartbreaking losses, the "gold stars and the bittersweet," we can only really place our faith in the moment before us. Perhaps Barbara said it best in a letter printed in her congregation's newsletter: "I don't know yet what this new body can do and what this new life will bring. But I celebrate it now." And I celebrate that Barbara's lively sense of humor has endured. For if I visit her Facebook page today, her profile photo reveals a healthy-looking, smiling Barbara, wearing a t-shirt bearing the "recycle" logo and the words in big letters "Contains Recycled Parts."

And the third way I understand spirituality considers its source. This morning, we are gathered in consecrated space, reconsecrated each time good people come

together to turn hearts and minds to ultimate truth and collective responsibility. But I know that while we regularly come together to participate in the spiritual practice that is community worship, our spirituality is too elusive, too mysterious, too expansive to fit into one hour a week on a plot of land at the corner of Main Street and Mystic Valley Parkway.

Perhaps this is why I keep returning to Victoria Safford's words, her funny and wise story about how we can reflect on life's most profound moments through the same words we use to notify someone about taking out the trash. Like Safford, I am "drawn to places where the sacred and the ordinary are all mixed up together." For who has not found meaning in the most mundane of things - the nick knacks from your Grandmother's china cabinet that have become powerful childhood talismans; the overheard coffeeshop conversation offering a life-changing lesson; blocks on our calendars reminding us of invisible anniversaries: the day we decided to take a new path, the day we got that telephone call, the day we heard the terrible news. Spirituality is present in Patrick Doherty's Catholic cathedral and in Barbara's ICU room. And, I suppose, by extension, in the algorithms of Facebook itself. Like the gold stars and the bittersweet wound together, within the fabric of the ordinary often shines threads of the extraordinary. We just need the awareness to behold its presence. Our very lives can be scripture, brought into perpetual conversation with the stories passed down from the ancients.

To open ourselves to all of life, to remember the limitations of what we can imagine and what we can change on our own and to celebrate that all around us, in every moment, the possibilities of growth and wisdom and peace exist – spirituality is forever at our grasp. This is true even in our hardest times and perhaps especially when the worlds we once thought we knew are turning upside down.

I am grateful to John Buehrens who reminds us that so much of our faith experiences are not grounded in the comfortable and predictable but rooted in the heart of cataclysm itself. He observes that "[religious] holidays do not simply celebrate the cycles of time. Instead, they tell stories about unexpected turns in human history. They express a form of faith that dares to reflect on human expectations being upset...The Jewish and Christian [stories] remind us to find the

mark of God less in the regularities of nature than in the unexpected turns that life can take.”³

Each of us has a spiritual story to tell if we pay attention to the chronicles of our inner lives. And, in response to whatever comes our way, either on our individual path or through the daily breaking news, we are forever free to seek “spiritual solutions” to our suffering. It is my prayer that we each find our own way to discovering “that which is indestructible within us.” It is my prayer that we each find the words for our testimonies, whether whispered in prayer or posted on social media, “words we speak in love to one another and to the golden stars.”