

"Everyone Cries: The Power of Community in Troubled Times"  
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
 All Souls / New London, CT - March 20, 2022

Although this service has been billed as one about crying together and how to deal with the general and pervasive feeling of the downward spiraling, never-ending persistence of things that bum us out, let's start with a laugh because of course, there must be joy in the morning. *This is church!* Specifically, this is All Souls.

So here you go. A comic:



*"The pit of despair. That's new, isn't it?"*

*Home décor in 2022. "The Pit of Despair. That's new, isn't it?"*  
 The New Yorker, March 2022

The thing is, despair is always with us. Throughout human history, despair *has* always been with us. There's nothing new about that. But our global interconnectedness has been on full display through Covid-19's rapid spread and tenacity and the despair that came with it. And now, just as we are feeling some pandemic relief (however fleeting though it may be) the global community once again mourns together in the face of the deadly tenacity of war. So, the texture of despair feels rougher now. And honestly, of late we're feeling kinda bludgeoned by that rough pass.

As many of you know, I had some time off recently. With time and quiet came an epiphany. In considering the past two years and specifically, the last two years here at All Souls and the pivoting that came with it, I realized that the pivoting hadn't been so much exhausting as it was simply the work that we necessarily had to do. I have the good fortune of working with highly skilled, flexible and dedicated colleagues. Collectively, we had distinct advantages when the world shut down. We'd been using Zoom for years. We'd already been projecting lyrics and images to enhance worship. We had a long-established staff position to handle sound and projection on Sunday morning. As All Souls' needs expanded in these areas, so did Tammy and Jesse's skills. Ditto Perry's, Caitlin's, Bil's, Gery's, Ann's (our intern through it all) and my own skills in crafting online worship – and all other features of congregational life – in the fearful new world in which we found ourselves. We pivoted. And then we pivoted again. And again. And it was hard work but ... it was fine.

But was *I* fine? Were we all fine? “*Just fine.*” Then what of this low-level exhaustion that was dogging me – and I bet you, too? Every time someone asked, “How are you?” And I'd respond, as one does, “I'm fine.” I'd feel this internal twitch. And with time and quiet I realized the source of that twitch: sadness. *I am fine* – you know, whatever – *and I'm sad.* I realized that I've been sad – really sad – for two damn years. That realization was powerful. A relief, even. That nagging twitch comes from a place I could name and now rest in.

*How am I? Fine and sad.*

So, I was feeling pretty self-aware in the wake of this epiphany until the day before I returned from my break. I decided to read my journal beginning from March 2020 to the present. On May 27, 2020 this is what I wrote,

*“I said to Caitlin, Ann, and Perry today, ‘It's beginning to sink in. There's going to be a pall of sadness over everything for a year.’”*

First of all, “*For a year*”.

Second, although I anticipated this inevitable truth, apparently, it never really did sink in. I forgot my own insight. I wish I'd remembered. When upon my return I told Caitlin this story we agreed that the lead may've been buried by all that there was to do. Isn't that so often the way when things get rough? We forget at least some of the things that we know. The things that would actually help us move through hard times.

That's where church comes in. Here in community we are reminded of what we know – what we know about humanity's essential goodness, what we know

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

about the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part, and, yes, what we know about the paralyzing effects of despair. And we are also reminded that it's okay to cry. It's okay to cry when your world is falling apart. It's okay to cry when our world is falling apart. It's more than okay: it's essential and inevitable. That said, we're not all of us crybabies, after all. We have a Crybaby Club at my house and we take turns being the president. But maybe you're not part of that club. That's okay. But we all do have big feelings even if you're not much of a cry-er. At church we are reminded that big feelings that may result in crying, are the human way of moving through our days.

We try to make this sanctuary, especially, a place where all the ways you're feeling are welcome and not just by placing tissue boxes underneath the seats. It starts with a warm greeting in the lobby and continues with a welcome at Unity Hall's threshold and onto the passing of the peace. Those in the online pews receive a similar greeting in the YouTube chat. A personal hello from Souls who serve as online greeters. A shout out to Kyle especially and also to Peter, Carol, & Lynn.

And sure enough, big feelings emerge upon arrival. Even with masks, smiles are evident (as Tony pointed out recently) and so are tears. Even among those in the online pews, through the chat we witness the expression of a wide range of human emotion. All are welcome here.

And yet and inevitably a good deal of surprise is expressed in the self-observations of crying especially. There may be no crying in baseball but there's plenty of crying at church. "I started crying when I walked in the door!" "The opening hymn made me cry! It's not even a sad hymn!" "I don't know why I'm crying." "I was happy when I got here! Why am I crying?"

Here's why. Because this hour is one of renewal. Because it's the quiet hour. It is time to be reminded of who we are as our best selves within and beyond these walls. It's where we try to exhume the buried lead that says, "There's going to a pall of sadness over everything ..." but remember that there is joy in the morning. It's where we keep kindled the ember of power deep in our hearts and feel the power of joining that ember with other Souls'.

That's why we're crying. As a form of release. As a way to acknowledge all that is worthy of our care and concern. As an expression of Love. Like Little Rabbit's mother, sometimes we're crying because we're happy or moved. Sometimes we're even crying at the party!

And you carve out this hour on Sunday morning to claim a life of joy knowing, I hope, that Unity Hall is or the online pews are a good place to shed those tears.

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

My wise colleague, Reverend Gretchen Haley, got it down in these poetic lines:

Though you have been warned  
 and given plenty of explanations  
 reasons to do otherwise  
 you have persisted  
 to claim a life of joy, and justice, and to carve out  
 this time for renewal  
 of your own heart  
 despite the din  
 demanding your attention  
 luring you towards fear  
 and cynicism  
 you persist  
 with gratitude  
 for this day, this life  
 that has been given  
 this chance to begin again  
 despite all the forces of fragmentation  
 the disappointing ways we fail each other,  
 fail ourselves  
 we must refuse  
 to let grief undo us, or  
 to let our dreams get lost along the way -  
 in spite of all of the evidence  
 we keep showing up at the edge  
 of our own longing -  
 and then,  
 we keep going  
 remembering this duty we have to life,  
 in a greater sense,  
 this duty we have to each other,  
 our children, and their children -  
 this hope that is also a choice we make  
 this promise we fight for:  
 to persist in kindness,  
 persevere in compassion  
 and prevail in a life that is bound  
 entirely to love

We come to church to remind ourselves of who we want to be – as you've heard from this pulpit a thousand times if you've heard it once. And as a people we try to create a time and space where we "persist in kindness,

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

persevere in compassion and prevail in a life that is bound entirely to Love" as the poet says, to keep grief from undoing us, to keep cynicism and despair at bay. We persist in our commitment to Love and in part, that means that we will embrace all the ways humans respond emotionally to life and in all the ways we express those emotions. And then when the church leaves the building and the YouTube chat closes, then we each bring to the grieving world the same openness and care we experience here together.

That's how it works. That's the power of community in troubled times. As All Souls makes each of us better; each of us may make the world better: kinder, more compassionate, more fertile ground where justice may bloom for all.

So, dear Souls, be joyful and know that the world – just like you and me - needs joy in order to heal. And so does healing need tears. So cry, cry, cry. Know you're not alone in your sorrow.

Amen.

### **For your reading pleasure:**

I thought I'd share the following but alas, there was no place to put it in the sermon. Enjoy!

"Mandy Patinkin Finds Healing in Refugee Work and Praying With His Dog" New York Times, March 15, 2022 (excerpt)

With the pandemic and all the healing that needs to be done, I thought, "I've got to feed this dog twice a day. I'll say the healing prayer for the whole world." So I do three Jewish prayers: the Shema first; then the "Mi Shebeirach," which my dear friend [Debbie Friedman](#) made the popular version of for the Reform Jewish community; then the blessing over breaking bread. And she knows to sit there. She knows each melody, and she knows when it's getting close. Then I say, "OK," and she goes to her bowl.

[International Rescue Committee\\*](#) They are trying to take myself and my wife and my son Gideon to the Ukraine-Polish border as ambassadors to bring attention where attention must be paid. Our initial question was, "What is the Covid situation in Poland?" And then you think of the optics. We've been vaccinated and boosted. ... [We're] well-protected and won't die from it. And I thought, "I'm going to wear a mask next to these women and children who have been fleeing for their lives? I'm going to keep a distance from these people when they need to be held and near humanity who cares?" ... No. I'll

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.

take my chances because they need people that pay attention. I'm finished being afraid.

\*The International Rescue Committee was the March Good Neighbor Offering recipient.