

Service of Remembrance 10/26/14
Blue Boat Home
Rebecca M. Bryan, Ministerial Intern

Reading: *Kindness*, by Naomi Shihab Nye
Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Who have you brought with you this morning? Who, body unseen, is among us? The saints, the sinners, the young, the old. We have borne witness this morning to many names, many lives, many stories. Who have you brought with you to this Service of Remembrance?

I brought my grandmother. Her name was Virginia, my daughter Ginger is named after her. She was my rock, my fortress and my mamma. Ginny, as she was called by most people, was one strong woman. It is only as I get older that I realize just how strong she was. Perhaps too strong. Who held her when she was afraid? Who told her that everything was going to be all right? I hope that my grandfather the love of life for 67 years did those things. But I don't know, he was a pretty tough guy himself. Educated, erudite, a Boston Brahmin who happened to be born and raised in Illinois.

Lolly, as I called my grandmother, loved people. Old, young, gay and straight. There was only one person I ever knew her to dislike and that was a high school friend of hers. There must have been some things in their history, because this woman got on my grandmother's nerves. The worst was when my grandmother thought that this woman had eaten all of the cookies that she always had on hand for my grandfather. I've never seen my grandmother so mad. (As I said, there must have been issues there.) The worst thing is that the other woman didn't eat the cookies --- I did. I never told her that either.

My grandmother's tolerance for conversations about emotionally laden things was limited. She would listen to anything for about 10 minutes and then we would need to move on. Clean the house, run an errand, cook a meal. As much as I wished we could talk longer, I understood that she heard me, and that she loved me. Most of all, I knew that she *knew* me.

Lolly thrived on kindness. Being kind to others was what gave her life meaning. I was in awe of her kind and accepting way with people. Her bountiful kindness also made me jealous. How could she so nice, so much of the time?

I never fully understood how she could be this way until I was sitting with our reading for today. Naomi Shihab Nye writes, "Before you know kindness, you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment...what you counted and carefully saved, must go, so that you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. You must know sorrow...until you see the size of its cloth...then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore."

My grandmother knew sorrow. Her father died when she was 7 years old. He left his widow, my great grandmother, with four young children. My grandmother the oldest of them. Before that she witnessed her parents losing her younger brother, born a still birth. Somehow, rather than getting lost in a morass of self-pity or resentment, she discovered kindness. "The only thing that makes sense."

I think of my grandmother often, and especially so this past Tuesday. I was in Boston when I received an email telling me that I now have a date to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The people who will grant me, God willing,

fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister - big news. Years of preparation, study, chaplaincy and congregational internship.

I got into my car after reading this email and thought to myself, "Who do I really want to call? Who is it that I really want to talk to right now?" ...my grandmother. There is no one on earth who would truly understand as she would. I wanted to speak with her more at that moment than I had since her death nine years ago. It was as though I could hear the entire conversation.

"Guess what!" I would say, "What!? Oh tell me, what?!" She would have answered. "I got my date." She would have been so happy. So proud. So kind.

Instead, I didn't call anyone. In that moment it was much more important to be with her memory and to know what she would say. To hear her voice. It would have been a set up to call anyone else. No one else would have done.

Poet Emily Mathews writes, "Our memories build a special bridge when loved ones have to part. To help us feel we're with them still. And soothe a grieving heart. They span the years and warm our lives. Preserving ties that bind. Our memories build a special bridge and bring us peace of mind." Caitlin shared this poem with me. She uses this when children lose a loved one.

So I return to my original question. "Who did you bring here today?" Sisters, fathers, grandparents, friends, children, brothers, mothers, spouses and partners. Loved ones. One and all. As you think of that person, or persons, what is it that you most want to hear them say? If they were here, what would your heart just be bursting to say? "Guess what!?" "You'll never believe..." "I'm sorry." "I miss you."

Now is a time for you to make that connection. To walk across the bridge of memories in your mind.

For about three minutes, I will lead you in a meditation. Just see what happens.

1. I invite you to sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Take a deep breath and release it. With that release, notice your shoulders lower from your ears toward the ground.
3. Tighten and release the muscles in your feet. Tighten and release the muscles in your knees, your thighs, tighten and release the muscles in your abdomen.
4. Notice you are breathing easily and naturally.
5. Tighten and release the muscles in your chest and shoulders and neck.
6. And finally, tighten and release the muscles in your face.

7. Imagine that you are at the ocean. On the beach. Hear the water, the waves rolling.
8. You see in the distance your loved one walking toward you. They get closer and are now standing in front of you. See their face, their mouth, and their clothes. Reach out and touch them. Look into their eyes. Take their hand and sit down together. Take this next minute and tell them what is on your heart. Tell them what you need to say. Take this time. I will give you a minute with them to do so.
9. Looking them in the eyes, tell them that you love them and that you appreciate this bridge of memories. Begin to let go of their hand now and know that you can come back to this connection any time. It is always there.
10. Breathing deeply. Slowly, when you are ready, open your eyes to return to this space.

That is love. We've all been sailing all of our lives, though sometimes we may forget -- sailing in an invisible ocean of love, kindness. It's there. Hail the great wind leading you on. Cast your questions into the wideness, lean over the edge in wonder. Sing. Be kind. Live a life of meaning. And when your time comes to leave this life, we will be here, singing you home.