

"The Bell We Crawl Inside: Considering Sudden Death & Grief"
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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From *The Year of Magical Thinking* By Joan Didion

... at approximately nine o'clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death. ... This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.

.....

"Between grief and nothing, I will take grief." William Faulkner

Hold onto that, Dear Ones.

I sit at the table in my office with a cup of soup, taking a bit of time to relax before a full afternoon breaks upon the shores of the day. I begin a quick flip through Facebook and gasp. My long-time and dear friend Kevin writes,

*I will be sitting Shiva for my brother Kerry of blessed memory
 Saturday and Sunday evenings at 7:15 p.m. at our home.*

I call. "What happened?"

Kevin is in shock. His beloved, brother: Gone. Sudden. Gone.

He is numb, he says. At this point, he and his siblings cannot think about a memorial, he says.

He says, finally, not a lot. It is a stunned silence.

"I'll see you Saturday night," I say. "Love you."

I am not someone who has ever uttered the words: "There are no words." There are always words. Most times, we don't need to say nearly as many as we think.

I see you.

I love you.

These are good words for most crises. Those and, "I'm sorry."

In speaking with Kevin, these were the only words that were needed even though this is what I knew as we spoke: I know that any "fixed ideas about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about memory, about grief, may just be cut loose" (Joan Didion) for my friend, his wife, his children, his siblings. A sudden death shakes loose these fixed ideas. Seemingly shakes us loose from our very rootedness to the Earth.

Joan Didion sat down to dinner with her husband and then, he was gone. Mary Gorton left to go to church one October morning. When she came home, her husband was gone. Paul and Cathy Carolan's 15 year-old son was diagnosed with cancer and three weeks later, he was gone. Glennys Ulshak's husband set out on a run on an unusually mild February afternoon. When she came home, she learned that he was gone.

These are not the only stories. There are other Souls here in Unity Hall this morning for whom the story is the same: someone who to them was dearly beloved died a sudden death.

We only slightly accept the fact of death, period. In that slight acceptance is the unspoken assumption that the death we only slightly accept will come in time, meaning not for a long time, and, please God, after a not-too-grisly illness. That is exactly the scenario we slightly accept. For the most part, we do not reckon with the possibility that life may end on any given day because are terrified that sometimes death is sudden.

Even the most fast-moving storm on a midwestern prairie gives us warning, the sky turning a strange shade of yellow. But a sudden death is no storm that comes and then passes. A sudden death lifts us into the tornado itself and then sets us down among the devastation.

The poet describes it.

If it had been a heart attack, the newspaper
 might have used the word *massive*,
 as if a mountain range had opened
 inside of her, but instead

it used the word *suddenly*, a light coming on
 in an empty room. The telephone
 fell from my shoulder, a black parrot repeating
 something has happened, something awful
 a Sunday, dusky. If it had been

terminal, we could have cradled her
 as she grew smaller, wiped her mouth,
 said goodbye. But it was *sudden*,
 how overnight we could be orphaned
 & the world become a bell we'd crawl inside
 & the ringing all we'd eat.

"Sudden" by Nick Flynn

overnight we could be orphaned
& the world become a bell we'd crawl inside
& the ringing all we'd eat.

After the most ordinary of days "overnight we could be orphaned." The extra layer of shock that comes with a sudden death springs out of the ordinary having been true just last night.

Although this particular feature of grief casts a particular shade of blue, grief affects most of us pretty similarly. (Which is why our public libraries' shelves are heavy with volumes that seek to explain, support, and heal.)

We spin. We are by turn, numb, angry, bewildered. We get busy. We have good days and we have days when we are barely able to get out of bed. We fear who we may become when the initial shock subsides. And when the initial, *raw* grief wanes and becomes a more subtle and integrated grief, we look around, dazed, and wonder: who am I now? What will life be for me now? Will I ever feel joy again?

Grief has its way with us and we best do our best to make peace with it. To somehow hold hands with what is now our new reality. To find beauty in the sorrow.

But however united is all humanity in the grief process there is something more than that extra layer of shock that sets apart the grief that comes in the wake of a sudden death. However, through all of my wondering and contemplation on this subject, I could not put my finger on it. While listening to the stories of those who have had this experience, I waited to hear how their experience of grief was different but there was little that set it apart.

And then as is often the case, with one story a new perspective emerged. It is a story that Cathy Smith Carolan shared with me about the difficulty one of her friends had in speaking with her after Cathy's son died. She asked this friend what was the matter. The bottom line was that it was just too hard for this woman to stay in close relationship with someone who was suffering as great a loss as was Cathy's & Paul's. Cathy had intuited that as well, it was likely too scary for her friend so much so that Cathy explained that the tragedy of losing one's child dying and grief that comes with that loss is not contagious.

To repeat Cathy's statement of the obvious: it's not contagious. But still, on some grasping level we practice avoidance as some magical form of inoculation.

I invite you to consider this thought. Here's what's true. Intellectually, we all know that any day can be our last. Or worse, any day can be my spouse's last. My child's last. My mother's or father's. My sister or brother's last. My friend's. Even so, most folks are able to push that reality aside so that they can leave their homes and begin a new day. But there are those who cannot bear the reality that life is random and fragile. It is so unbearable that some people cannot walk out the door, cannot leave their homes. We understand this inability as a mental illness - the inability to balance that sober reality that life is random and fragile with the need to risk in order to fully live life.

Okay. There's that.

And again and of course, tragedy, grief – *neither are contagious*. But most people are able to distance themselves enough in order to simply go out and live their lives. At the same time, many of us take that need to

distance ourselves way far – so far that to be in close proximity to the person suffering in the wake of a loved one's sudden death serves as a too-stark reminder that just as life can be random, so can death. Most of us don't ever consider that we may someday be that person suffering that extra layer of shock, sitting in the front pew at the memorial service that followed the accident, the overdose, stroke, homicide, heart attack, suicide, the massive and so brief illness. Most people are not so much about, "There by the grace of God, go I." than they are just simply grateful to be sitting in the back pew, sympathetic, but free.

For the time being.

Too often the person whose very presence invokes the shattering reminder that life is fragile and any one of us on any day may be hit by that proverbial truck - is the person to be avoided. But here's the weird thing: we may avoid but simultaneously, we feel compelled to name the tragedy out loud every time. We do not think of the person without invoking the calamity they've suffered. We do not mention that person to others without invoking the calamity they've suffered. We don't introduce the bereaved to another person without taking them aside before or after and speaking of the tragedy as though to hold back is to somehow deny the jury crucial information.

What is that?

And by doing so, aren't we hanging a heavy identity on the bereaved long after the calamity is in the rear view mirror's far distance? How about allowing *them* to figure out who they are as they attempt to make sense of the period that follows? How about we not drape their aching spirits with our own fear, discomfort or perceptions of what their new realities may turn out to be?

To state the obvious: it's not helpful.

Here's the big learning: Those who live with, work with, worship with those who have suffered the sudden death of a loved one, we must do the interior and spiritual work that will loosen up the terror that says, "if it happened to you, it can happen to me". Of course that's true but what is also true is that *it's not contagious*. Of course it's true - and I can't think of a more helpful or pastoral way to say this: *suck it up*. Work it out so you can be a good friend. Find your way to use your words because the last thing we want is our own spiritual discord bleeding all over the very person

who should not have to tend to *our* stuff while in the midst of their own grief.

Better to say to the bereaved: I'm sorry. I see you. I love you.

Let's practice together: *I'm sorry. I see you. I love you.*

Better to bring sustenance to those for whom "*the world [became] a bell [they've crawled] inside*. Because the bell's ringing cannot be all they will eat. Bring them something to eat. Comfort in small mouthfuls neither too sweet nor too bitter. Bring them beauty. Bring flowers. Something soft to hold.

As it turns out, this reflection is not about the bereaved. It is about all of those around them – each of us at some point and time.

All of us at one time or another suffer loss and then we know grief for *all* time. It is brutal and beautiful both. But as the wise man said, "Between grief and nothing, I will take grief."

We will take grief and open our hearts to healing and offer our hearts for the same.

Blessed be all the grieving and healing Souls here gathered.

Amen.