

“The Sacred Okay”
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Rev. Caitlin O’Brien
May 3, 2020

Story For All Ages: “Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You,” by Nancy Tillman

Reading: “Here If You Need Me,” Kate Braestrup

Our reading is an adapted excerpt from Rev. Kate Braestrup’s memoir, Here if You Need Me. Braestrup is a chaplain for search and rescue missions in the woods of Maine. Here, she describes a photograph shared in a forensics class she attended:

[A woman died alone, years before, in the Maine woods]. Her body lay where it fell, on the bare surface of an exposed bit of granite ledge. Near the body, perhaps eight inches away, a maple seed had taken root in an unpromising cleft that held a mere handful of soil...The tree extended its root system, *reached out* really... [and in time, the tree wrapped around the woman’s remains and grew]

“I would love to be buried that way,” [Braestrup says], “surrounded by a womb of roots, my matter broken down and taken up into a living trunk and living leaves, my grief-stricken relatives invited to hear my voice whisper in the wind through new young branches”
Here ends the reading.

Reflection: “The Sacred Okay” Rev. Caitlin O’Brien

I read this book years ago, and the image of this woman’s remains -intertwined with a tree - stayed with me as both gruesome and beautiful. Beautiful because it makes it *inaccurate* to say that the woman in the photo had died *alone* in the woods. I mean, is there such a thing as *alone* in our interdependent web of existence? Ten minutes listening and observing outdoors will remind you that you are not alone, that you live within a humming ecosystem. *You live* within what is called by some *a great embrace*.

And if you have children, I recommend remembering that *they* live within the great embrace, too, regardless of how entirely responsible you may feel for them. (I’ve thought of this when so many of you have told me recently, “I’m fine, but I’m worried about my son whose job is at risk, or I’m worried about my daughter who works in healthcare) A parent never stops worrying...and *this* parent finds some healthy perspective in the poet’s words, “your children are not *your* children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself.”¹ I try to remember my kids belong to the *great embrace*.

¹ Gibran, Kahlil. “On Children”

When asked to define God, Rev. Braestrup echoes a spirit of Universalism saying that God is love. She sees God as the love of people who are there for one another. Where *I* go with that in my *own* meaning making is...that love is a pervasive force that may or may not also be divinity. I know so many people who have leaned into this force in a frightening time and have felt - to the point of physical sensation - *a love that won't let them go*.

I had a really intense year, in 2006, that put me in a position to lean into that force. Among other things, it was a year of lots of medical attention. I went through three big surgeries in about 3 months: One was a planned jaw surgery to correct my bite, where the recovery involved weeks with my jaw wired closed - I became a very creative smoothie maker, the chocolate peanut butter one being my favorite! ...

In a completely different part of my body, I started to have abdominal pain, and ultrasounds showed a suspicious cyst. I had a surgery to remove the cyst, which was found to be on the cancer spectrum. So I then had to go through a 3rd surgery to remove the ovary that the tumor was attached to.

Nobody wants to ***belong*** in an oncology waiting room, and at age 31, but I knew I was lucky for the outcome I had. The surgeries were all that was needed, and annual checks ever since have been fine. Nevertheless, 2006 was a frightening time, with lots of tests and procedures - I couldn't count the number of hospital gowns or those blue socks with the sticky bottoms I had worn in those months.

I became very devoted to a nightly meditation and journaling ritual, and I listened for meaning and for the great embrace.

Nathan and I were to be married that summer. We saw it as a party to celebrate a painful season past. But the week or so before the wedding, my *father* was hospitalized. It turned out 2006 had more to throw at me. I was scared and angry. It was a nail biter whether or not he would be able to travel and sing the song he'd prepared for the rehearsal dinner, and walk his youngest daughter down the aisle with my mother. A deep sorrow I'll always carry is that my dad's doctors decided his body couldn't do it. He couldn't come, and he insisted that we go on. I tried to arrange for relatives to sit with him on the day of the wedding, but he wouldn't have it. "I want everyone to be there for *you*, Cait," he said.

At our wedding reception, my Uncle Jay, with his pink Irish face and white hair - just like my dad - came and swung me around the dance floor. We laughed and hugged and boogied. And as the song finished, he said in my ear, "that was for your dad."

A day or so after the wedding, Nathan and I came to CT to visit my father in the hospital in our tuxedo and gown. From his bed, he sang us the song he had planned, and he said to me, "Caitlin, I thought of you at 4:00, at the start of the service...and it was wonderful." My cynical mind thought, "Yeah, whatever! Don't try to sugar coat this -

there was nothing wonderful about you being stuck here.” But...if we *are* aware of the *great embrace*, the love that won’t let us go, maybe he sincerely felt it across the distance, and maybe it was...if momentarily...wonderful.

For each of my surgeries, I followed advice and asked loved ones to imagine me at the time of the surgery, wrapped in a down comforter and at peace. Friends and family did, and I distinctly remember *feeling it* on my way into the second abdominal surgery, the one that would tell us if problematic cells were elsewhere. In an overwhelming instant, I viscerally felt the *great embrace* of those who were with me in spirit. Tears of gratitude just flowed down my face. Come what may, I was at ease, you might say a little radiant. *For those who are wondering*, the anesthesia cocktail had not yet been administered, but the love force was just as overwhelming. And it was pretty wonderful.

My mother believes in the deep power of the phrase, “You’re okay.” She drove up to Boston with a tiny overnight bag for each of my surgeries and stayed by my side, and boy, did she project for me “you’re okay.” The morning after my jaw surgery, my face was bloated and stretched to two or three times its normal size. A loved one who visited burst out into tears at the sight of me. That was not helpful, but I understood. My *mother*, upon first seeing me in the recovery room, stroked my gruesome large cheek and said, “you remind me of when you were three.” Ya see, my toddler cheeks were *kind of* legendary. And that’s what she saw or pretended to see. She was projecting “you’re okay” - offering me *her* piece of the great embrace.

The encircling of those tree roots in the woods...the web of creation that holds us...the love that travels to a hospital bed and pierces through the dread or solitude...they all make up what I’ve been *starting* to call the “sacred okay.” One that we might lean into during this Covid-19 crisis. The “sacred okay” is not the okay you planned on or wanted. It’s an okay that holds really hard truths, such as the truth that my father died months after our wedding. The “*sacred* okay” presumes a cycle of life and death, and blesses both. The “sacred okay” also presumes the power and reach of love. It brings with it an experience of serenity.

To connect with the “sacred okay” is a psychological and spiritual exercise. Whichever way we get there, “the sacred okay” can bring us into a harmony with what is, not a simple harmony, but a complex and deep one. I feel that my task is to be open to it, and to get acquainted with it through my own personal access points...and to rest in it, especially at a time like this, when we hear of so many broken hearted family members not able to be with their loved ones as they are ill and dying. I hope that you will consider with me the possibility that we are actually never alone. Not ever.

I didn’t know that in the “Beatles” song, “Let It Be,” “Mother Mary” actually refers to Paul McCartney’s own mother, named Mary, who had died when he was 14. He once dreamt of her reassuring him, saying “it’s gonna be okay. Let it be.” And he woke up and wrote the song that has helped so many of us to feel our way to the “sacred okay.” Such is the interdependent web we weave, the great embrace that won’t let us go. May you find your ways to rest in this...now, and always.