

**LEANING IN... TO SUFFERING**  
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH  
REV. JULIE STONEBERG  
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**OPENING WORDS**     *Motherless Child* ~ Amy Bowden Freedman<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...

Here may you find  
a warm greeting  
a kind word  
a gentle touch

Sometimes I feel like I have no friend...

Here may you find  
a community of support  
a pulse of liberation  
a vision of hope

Sometimes I feel I am almost gone...

Here may you find  
a song to sing  
a moment of silence  
a hand to hold

Even when you are a long way from home...

may these walls give you shelter  
may this community break through your loneliness  
And may you feel the embrace of a larger Spirit of Life and Love.

Come, let us worship together.

**STORY FOR ALL**     *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* ~ Philip Stead

*(Amos McGee is a zookeeper who regularly takes time to spend with the animals. One day when he stays home, the animals all go to take care of him.)*

**MEDITATION ON BROKEN HEARTS**     ~ Thomas Rhodes<sup>2</sup>

Let us enter into a time of meditation, contemplation, and prayer.

Feel the earth beneath your feet as it supports you.

Feel the love of this community as it surrounds and enfolds you.

Feel your breath as it flows in and out of your body.

Listen to your heartbeat.

Listen to your heart . . .

And how is it with your heart?

Does your heart feel whole, shielded by intellect, cocooned by reason, closed to feeling?

Or is it broken, fragile to the touch, brimming with the pain of loss? Or has your heart been broken and healed so many times

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/26977.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/meditation-broken-hearts>

that it now lies open to the world,  
knowing that true growth comes not without pain,  
that tears may wear down barriers,  
that we may carry the hearts of others  
even when our own is too heavy for us to bear.

None of us has an unblemished heart, not one.  
For such perfection can be found only in death,  
and we who are alive still have much to heal.

So let us give thanks for the broken places in our hearts,  
and in our lives.

For it is only through such brokenness that we may truly touch one another  
and only through touching one another that the world may be healed.

Let us give then thanks for the brokenness that we share.

**READING** *Prayer for When Words Fail* ~ Leslie Takahashi<sup>3</sup>

This is a prayer for when words fail, for when they are not big enough or small enough  
to slip into the little cracks left in our hearts by life's unbearable pressures.

This is a prayer for when the biggest noun cannot know the enormity of joy, or when  
the most active verb is paralyzed in the face of grief unuttered, horror undescribed, or  
loss beyond accounting.

This is a prayer for when words, precious emblems though they are, cannot take into  
their embrace the hugeness of experience or the expanse of indebtedness or the many  
tangles of complexity and confusion.

This is a prayer for when we must sit with our breath, kneading the small truths we can  
touch as if they were therapy for our restless hands. This is a prayer for all who have  
known the large void of hope which is trauma.

This is a prayer for wounded hearts and bodies, for those whom we ought to always  
remember and sometimes choose to forget.

This is a prayer that begins with gratitude for what we can understand and know, and  
ends with humility which reminds us that not all is ours to do.

This is a prayer for those times when words fail and all that is left is the "yes" and the  
"no" of it all, and our ability to let the cord of the breath lead us from this moment to  
the next.

This is a prayer for all who have been lost, that in our memory, they might be found.

May we be the ones to make it so.

**MESSAGE** *Leaning In... to Suffering* ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/prayer-when-words-fail>

I begin with three short vignettes.

A story is told about a young boy who goes on a field trip to a long-term care facility. He and a few classmates are settled into a circle with a group of residents, and they begin to read stories and tell jokes, as they had prepared to do. After a bit, one of the women begins to cry, softly at first, and then more loudly. All fall silent. It seems that everyone is embarrassed, and no one knows what to do.

The boy gets up, walks around to the back of this woman's wheelchair, puts his hand gently on her back, and asks her if she was ok. She explains that while she is grateful for their visit and happy that they are reading to her, it also makes her sad, because she remembers how much she loved to read, and how, because of progressive blindness, she no longer can. So, the boy stands there for a minute or two, rubbing her back and telling her it's ok. Soon she seems a bit better, and the students continue their reading to the group.<sup>4</sup>

Another story tells of a student minister in chaplaincy training at a hospital. There he encounters for the first time in his life someone whose illness is so severe that there is slim chance of survival.

The woman asks the young man to pray for her, but the student minister is so overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy and despair that he turns away from the bedside and buries his face in his hands. He fights back the tears and sits there for an uncomfortably long time, trying to regain control of his emotions. Finally, he gets himself together, takes the woman's hand, and offers a simple blessing before fleeing the room.

As it turns out, the woman has an unexpectedly positive response to the surgery, and when asked how she was able to rally so well, she replies "I think it all began with that young theological student who was so intense in his prayers for me."<sup>5</sup>

A young girl is dying of brain cancer. Her doctor arrives to find her vomiting violently, and unable to tolerate it, he turns to go in search of anti-nausea pills, but the girl holds up a finger, urging him to stay, so instead of drugs, he reaches for a vomit bag and sits with her, holding the bag and her hand until the vomiting subsides. As he washes her face, she tells the doctor that the effects of the anti-nausea drug make it impossible for her to be fully present for the precious moments and people that matter to her, and thanks him for staying with her.<sup>6</sup>

Leaning into the suffering of another...that's what we're exploring today...and I'm going to lean heavily into wisdom found in Buddhism; Buddhists have studied suffering for centuries, so I'd like to share some of those teachings with you. If you want to read more about this, I cite my sources in my written text which you'll find on our website.

A well-known teaching from Buddhism says that all of life is dukkha, or all of life is suffering.<sup>7</sup> The Buddha recognized that every human being suffers...from physical pain and discomfort, and from unhappy or unhealthy emotions and states of mind. Our suffering can show up as sorrow, fear, anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, unhappiness, stress, misunderstandings, fear,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-leaning-into-suffering/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/183463.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QufJhk2Km88>

<sup>7</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-leaning-into-suffering/>

confusion, anxiety, neuroses, disappointment, fear, shame, and guilt...did I say fear?...which manifest not only in ourselves, but also in our relationships and in the world, leading to all types of interpersonal and communal suffering. All of life is suffering. Or maybe better, all of life suffers.

I suffer. You suffer. We suffer. And we suffer when someone or some being or our earth suffers. So how can we best be present to the suffering of one another and to all of life?

Psychologist Lisa Schlesinger speaks of two common, though unhealthy, ways we react to suffering.<sup>8</sup> She's says that there are gravitators and there are flee-ers. Gravitators lean in but they do so in order to fix it. They identify with someone else's suffering, imagining that in so doing, they can recover from their own pain. In the process, they don't really confront their suffering, nor are they present to the other.

The flee-er has an allergic-type reaction to discomfort and avoids it at all cost. Flee-ers squirm when others cry, skip their own health care for fear of being diagnosed with something, and sometimes even numb themselves with alcohol and other drugs to soothe their unacknowledged pain.

Schlesinger says that both the gravitator and the flee-er are running from their own pain, and believes that facing our own suffering will lead to better understanding and to an ability to tolerate that pain...and in the process, building strength, as well as the resilience to see that suffering is, like all things, temporary.

Which is another Buddhist teaching. All things rise and all things pass away. And sometimes there is suffering in this too.

Leaning in to suffering could be seen as synonymous with compassion, which literally means, to suffer with...to meet the pain or suffering of another with love. The Buddhist, or Pali, word for compassion is *karuna*, which means "the trembling or quivering of the heart in response to a being's pain."<sup>9</sup> (and I think we can apply 'being' broadly - to mean any part of creation, every 'earthing' whether that be human, animal or tree.<sup>10</sup>) Writing for *Tricycle* magazine, Beth Roth says that for her, "trembling or quivering of the heart" beautifully describes how compassion guides us to recognize our commonality as beings. When feeling compassion, our hearts quiver in response to the pain and the pulsing of life, resonating on a similar vibration running through flesh and blood and matter. So when we are open to leaning in, open to feeling, we quite literally feel our inalienable and beautiful interconnectedness and interdependence.

So how do we do this without gravitating or fleeing? From what I read in several sources, the advice is simple...at least on the surface.

First, we must pause. Sit down and be present for that grieving person, for that hurt animal, for the dying ocean. Stop running. Put aside whatever else might be calling for your attention.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pain-do-you-lean-into-it-or-away-from-it\\_us\\_59e5405fe4b0a741e4b35392](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pain-do-you-lean-into-it-or-away-from-it_us_59e5405fe4b0a741e4b35392)

<sup>9</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-leaning-into-suffering/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://vimeo.com/143740212>

Sit.

Next, open your heart. Practice being curious about what's happening so that you can listen. Use your heart of courage, your bodhichitta, to open to reality just as it is, no matter how painful. Lean in, knowing that if you shut down, you will also be shutting down the flow of compassion to yourself. The channel has to be open for connections to be made, open in both directions. Open in all directions.

Then, remain. Did you know that the word palliative, which we use to describe care at the end of life, comes from the Greek, meaning to cloak or cover?<sup>11</sup> So to offer this care almost literally refers to the ability to surround someone with love and care. Stay with it, or as Joanna Macy says, sustain the gaze, which is the capacity to face suffering, with empathy, for a prolonged period of time.<sup>12</sup> It's the willingness to hold the vomit bag, to rub someone's back, to listen to the lament. Instead of turning away, stay put and investigate the situation, and ask questions about your reactions in order to more fully understand. Discomfort and suffering have the ability, says Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, to get us to perk up and see where we are stuck.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, all of this takes practice. We have to sit, and open, and stay, over and over. Few, if any, of us have mastered these skills. So, in the course of leaning into suffering, we need to cut ourselves some slack, and show compassion for ourselves too. In fact, the ability to offer compassion to oneself is a pre-requisite to being able to truly offer compassion to others.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it is that these two things, compassion for others and compassion for self, are best understood as developing at a pace. It's just that it takes some awareness to remember, when feeling empathy for someone else, to also direct that toward oneself. Our suffering is their suffering, and theirs is ours. The suffering of the planet belongs to, and is felt by, and held by, all of us.

I think that sometimes when we are suffering, we turn that back on ourselves, berating ourselves for feeling pain and not being able to handle it. But I like what Cheryl Strayed says about this: "Suffering doesn't always mean something's gone wrong; it just means you're living a life."<sup>15</sup> Wouldn't it be great if we could accept suffering as a normal part of life, and not something that we have to avoid or escape or hide? To see it as a teachable moment that deepens our connections?

Pema Chödrön explains that our own painful experiences are our greatest resource for compassion practice. "If you can know it in yourself, you can know it in everyone. This practice cuts through culture, economic status, intelligence, race, religion. People everywhere feel pain – jealousy, anger, being left out, feeling lonely. Everybody feels that exactly the way you feel it. The story lines vary, but the underlying feeling is the same for us all." So, if you can feel compassion for others, you can also feel it for yourself, and vice versa, because it's the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QufJhk2Km88>

<sup>12</sup> <https://medium.com/@maenkacerny/sustaining-the-gaze-towards-interdependence-part-4-9a401a2350e3>

<sup>13</sup> <https://arrow-journal.org/open-up-lean-in-stay-with/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-leaning-into-suffering/>

<sup>15</sup> from the Dear Sugars podcast, Sept. 2, 2017

same thing. Our hearts quiver together.

Pause. Lean in. Remain with it. Sit. Open. Stay. And practice, including the practice of showing compassion to yourself. And one more thing: be in community. We need others around us...surrounding us with compassion, teaching us how to be accountable to one another, joining us in the practice of sustaining the gaze and taking action together in response to what we learn together. It is in community that we learn compassion and are shown compassion.

I want to leave you with some things to try. As we know, Buddhists practice compassion through meditation. One useful meditative practice is that of Loving Kindness, where you repeat a mantra in six concentric circles, beginning with a particular person who is experiencing significant suffering, then moving to self, to a dear friend, to a neutral person, to a difficult person, and finally, to all beings everywhere. The mantra is some version of: "May I be held in compassion. May my pain and sorrow be eased. May I be at peace."<sup>16</sup> Repeat after me. May I be held in compassion. May my pain and sorrow be eased. May I be at peace.

And another practice is that of tonglen meditation, which refers to the ability to compassionately stay with ourselves, or someone, or something that is experiencing pain, without needing to run away, to become numb, or to try to fix it.<sup>17</sup> And what I love about tonglen meditation is the instruction to breathe in the pain, and breathe out the compassion. So rather than trying to block out or overcome suffering, we take it in, sit with it, hold it, and in that process, are able to transform it.

Let's try it together. Close your eyes if you will. I'd like to you to picture a specific suffering. It could be that of a particular person or family or community. It could be a world issue, like climate change, or racial injustice, or a war zone. It can be something very close to you, or something far away. Choose one thing.

Do you have it? Now, breathe in that pain. And as you breathe out, send that person or situation a blessing. Breathe in the suffering. Hold it. Breathe out compassion. Breathe in. Breathe out.

You can open your eyes.

Shortly after 9-11, Judyth Hill wrote an incredibly beautiful poem called *Wage Peace*.<sup>18</sup> I think of it as a tonglen poem, and I offer it to you in closing.

Wage peace with your breath.

Breathe in firemen and rubble, breathe out whole buildings and flocks of red wing blackbirds.

Breathe in terrorists

and breathe out sleeping children and freshly mown fields.

Breathe in confusion and breathe out maple trees.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-leaning-into-suffering/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-practice-tonglen/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.judythill.com/>

Breathe in the fallen and breathe out lifelong friendships intact.

Wage peace with your listening: hearing sirens, pray loud.

Remember your tools: flower seeds, clothes pins, clean rivers.

Make soup.

Play music; memorize the words for thank you in three languages.

Learn to knit, and make a hat.

Think of chaos as dancing raspberries,

imagine grief

as the out breath of beauty

or the gesture of fish.

Swim for the other side.

Wage peace.

Never has the world seemed so fresh and precious:

Have a cup of tea and rejoice.

Act as if armistice has already arrived.

Celebrate today.

Celebrate today. Celebrate our ability to be together and to hold one another in compassion, leaning in...that we earthlings may be present to all that is.

So be it.

**READING**     *Litany of Compassion*     ~ Dennis McCarty<sup>19</sup>

[In the] spirit of love, harmony, and remembrance, we stand too often divided, too often set apart from one another in heedless ways. We seek to be compassionate but our vision may be clouded or distracted. We too often go forward, day by day, and look without seeing.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

May we work to heal the divisions which separate earth's children, one from another. May we peer through the mists of deception which hide and deny violence, mists enclosing those who suffer. May we not allow the misuse of our fellow souls to hide in broad daylight.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

When we see the afflicted--however they may be afflicted--may we not shrink away. May we not blame suffering on the one who suffers. May we be courageous enough to perceive suffering and compassionate enough to attend to the voices of those who suffer.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

When we see prejudice, when we hear evil speaking, when we witness the rough hand or the scathing word laid upon the helpless or innocent, may we resolve to work toward unity and justice.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/litany/litany-compassion>

May we not turn away from the wounded head of the abused. May we not accept the twisted reasoning by which the oppressor declares himself the victim.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

Let our gratitude for good fortune in our lives lead us not to complacency but to awareness, awareness of those whose lives are shadowed by abuse or neglect, May we not ignore signs of deceit or denial that hide brutality.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE

In all things, may those who suffer ever be able to approach us: find a kindly ear and supporting hand. May we witness for love and justice at every level of relationship. May we nurture a keen eye and a strong and loving heart for any who fear the hurtful rod, the cutting voice, the uneven hand, the chain of oppression, great or small.

MAY WE REACH OUT IN HONESTY AND LOVE.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

My dear earthlings, one in mind, body and heart,

Suffering is ours, and compassion is ours.

Pain is ours, and healing is ours.

We are in this together, and well-equipped to sit with suffering, to lean in, and to wrap one another in compassion.

May we go from here feeling the joy of red-winged blackbirds, the beauty of maple trees, and the sweet companionship of friends.

Go in love and in peace. Amen.

### **EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**