

Change, Loss and Transformation

June 23, 2019 Lama Choyang (Allison Rader)

Good morning, I am going to weave my comments today about loss and change, through different dimensions of our human experience - from the intimacy of an EOL journey to the massive changes and uncertainty we all face in our world. I would like to dedicate my talk today to Maya McKenzie, a member of this community who passed away in February. I had the privilege of sitting with Maya as she went through her EOL journey, and I mentioned to her that I had been invited to speak here in June. Maya and I first met here at the Fellowship, a few years ago, when I had come to give a talk. We became friends and would visit and have tea, before I became her Hospice chaplain. I asked Maya if I could dedicate my talk to her, and she said that she would be honored. I asked if I might share some of our conversation, and she said that I was welcome to share anything she said.

I am moved to share some of what Maya expressed to me, because her courage, grace, openness and curiosity embody themes I will touch in different ways throughout my talk this morning.

Maya stayed in her own bed in her simple bedroom - white walls, cedar bureau, blue and white cotton quilt. She liked to lie there quietly and reflect. Maya told me that she wished people could approach the EOL with a sense of reverence and sacredness instead of fear. She appreciated the opportunity to have so much time for reflection. Others wondered if she would like a radio or television, thought she might be bored, but Maya liked the stillness and silence. She said, "I want to be here for every stage." She wanted to feel and experience the fullness of her human life - through to the end. I came and shared poetry, she shared about her life and reflections, we spoke about the mystery of dying and the gift of presence. She was honest about moments of confusion or disorientation and that felt scary. When they passed she accepted them as part of her journey and was grateful to have caregivers in her home, and her children present caring for her. She worked with pain. We spoke about the practice of allowing and being open to include the wholeness of her journey. She touched me deeply with her courage and her grace and I continue to reflect on the gifts I received from her.

John O'Donahue writes that, "the human journey is a continuous act of transformation. If approached in friendship, the unknown the anonymous, the negative, and the threatening gradually yield their secret affinity with us." He is describing qualities of openness and acceptance, a willingness to be with and feel the unfolding that takes place within and around us. He goes on, "when a person manages to trust experience and be open to it, the experience finds its own way to realization."

Ikkyu, a fifteenth century Zen master said, “the universe has dark and light, entrust oneself to change.” Change, grief and loss, are certainties in our world. Ideally, we can allow, or even welcome them and grant them a place in our lives. When we do so, we become larger somehow, and as Frances Weller writes, “are able to sense our intimate bond with all of creation.” Quoting Rilke, “is not impermanence the very fragrance of our days.”

When we are in relationship with this truth of change and loss it supports us in navigating their presence in our lives. Even fear and resistance can be allowed and included. If we can turn and touch and face our fears, come into conscious relationship with them, they become part of our practice, and no longer chase us from behind.

Staying present and in contact with our experience opens up different possibilities of healing and grace. One man I supported on Hospice had a wife with advanced dementia. He said to me, “we may not be able to have the conversations we used to have, but she’s still my gal.” Another family I supported were losing their baby. His mother told me that when he was diagnosed with his illness, they realized that they could hold this experience as the worst possible thing that could conceivably happen, or they could stay present and open with their experience. She said to me that she knew most people looked at her son and saw a dying child. She told me, “we look at him and see a vibrant beautiful little boy. We understand his breath, and every movement of a finger tip or change in his expression. He speaks very clearly to us!” These dear souls had the gift of seeing and relating to wholeness underneath how things might appear in an ordinary way. This connection was healing and sustaining for them.

We can also be genuinely present and open to what’s happening in our larger world, even as it gives rise to powerful feelings of grief and distress. When we hear about the glaciers disappearing in Antarctica, the grey whales dying off of our coast, that we are currently in the sixth great extinction - this information - and so much more - lands in us, in our bodies and hearts and minds. Joanna Macy writes, “the most radical thing that any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world.” She says that acceptance of that discomfort and pain actually reflect the depths of our caring and commitment to life.” David Whyte offers that, “the only choice we have is *how* we inhabit our vulnerability.” He asks us, “will you become a full citizen of loss, vulnerability and disappearance, which you have no choice about.” It’s Maya’s commitment again to show up, to feel and be present, to “be here for every stage.” This commitment honors the inseparability of ourselves and our world, the sacredness of life. When we feel overwhelmed we can ground ourselves with our breath in our bodies, in relationship and connection, in the beauty of the natural world around us, and in the

depth of our love for this world. The devastation and the wonder are true at the same time. And it's ok to not be ok, these are unbelievable times.

The Zen Peacemakers, an order established by Bernie Glassman, have three fundamental tenets: not knowing, bearing witness and loving action. "Not knowing" means giving up fixed ideas about ourselves, other people and the universe. "Bearing witness" is to open ourselves to feel the joy and suffering of the world; and then arising from these practices of not knowing and bearing witness, loving action emerges for ourselves and for others.

When we don't know, we are awake and pay attention. In the Zen tradition they say, "not knowing is most intimate." This way of being open and bearing witness, feeling the experience of other and world, affirms the truth of connection.

There is healing in this willingness to feel - even in states of suffering and challenge - even a part from attachment to a specific outcome. Our feeling is an honoring, a bearing witness, and from this sense of connection, of inseparability, loving action arises. Loving action, in whatever way we touch our world, is healing - for us and for the world we encounter. It is, most deeply, an expression of our interconnectedness and oneness.

On the note of healing and community, I would like to lift up, the beautiful ritual that is held here at the Fellowship of sharing joys and sorrows. Each time I come, I am moved by the significance of this simple practice where people have a chance to share, to be witnessed in their experience, and held with love. It is a beautiful symbolic and literal expression of the healing power of community.

The civil rights activist John Powell speaks of how we don't need to create connection, we already are connected, connection is already true and present, we just need to live as if this were so. Rebecca Solnit talks about the power of a collective narrative. She notes the dominant view that our lives are held within the frame of our capitalist society, and then points to all the dimensions of our lives - dimensions of greatest meaning - our families, community relationships, spiritual connections - that are held outside of that dominant frame, in the context of love, mutuality and respect. In the face of so much that is affrontive to us, we can reclaim the power of our direct experience, our core values and the truth of how we orient in the world. Being consciously aware of our values and aligning with them in our lives, is a source of resilience and strength.

Eve Marko, a Zen teacher, describes her experience sharing her excitement at the ceremony that was held at Standing Rock Reservation, the Ogalala Sioux Nation, where veterans of the American military asked for forgiveness from the Native American

elders. This was back in 2016 - some of you may remember the striking photograph of a retired American general kneeling on one knee before these elders with his head bowed, other veterans kneeling beside him as he read his statement of confession on behalf of the American military and his request for forgiveness. It is amazingly powerful. Eve shared her inspiration with a friend who responded, "yeah, that was a good gesture, but there should have been better publicity and more press." In commenting on that experience, she shares another story. She bumped into a friend who had just been at a conference in Jerusalem with the chief rabbi of Romania. (Romania had more than 2 million Jews before the second World War, now there are fewer than 5,000.) The rabbi said that he had been traveling and was staying in a small village in the countryside. His host told him that there was an abandoned synagogue in the village. He said that a gentile man in the community would go there every Friday night and turn on the lights and put a prayer book at each seat. On Saturday morning he would return, and place a prayer shawl at each seat. In the evening he would return, replace the prayer books and shawls, and turn off the lights. The rabbi repeated this story to Elie Wiesel who said, "you should do whatever you can to support this man." Eve goes on, "*it is precisely the small individual acts that make the difference. It's precisely those acts making no sense, that seemingly have little visible impact, in which a person full heartedly lights a candle, says a name, comes to the site of a massacre or the sale of slaves to re-member (the Zen Peacemakers hold bearing witness retreats in these places) to reconnect the dead and the living, She says, these acts participate in a moment that isn't momentary but timeless; they heal the fabric of the one life that transcends life and death...we can't know the significance of even the smallest action, But I am quite certain now that the small is never small, the past is never past. Each of us can do something. Don't let anyone tell you it doesn't matter.*"

Our consciousness has power. Our wishes and aspirations, are meaningful.

Even in the face of our unbelievable and overwhelming world, when we act with intention, aligned with our values and commitments, these actions are significant. Since we are all interdependent, nothing is small, inconsequential or trivial. As Joanna Macy says, "the issue is not to eradicate evil. The issue is to commit yourself to what is important to you." And so we grieve, we feel our distress, we rely on community - and we stay engaged, as Rachel Naomi Remen says, "we heal the world that touches us."

Whether we are experiencing the intimate loss of a loved one, facing a transition and encountering the unknown, or feeling the impact of climate change, the invitation is to stay in contact with our experience, to feel our feelings, bear witness to ourselves and others and offer authentically from a loving heart. And we need the sustenance of community to do this work. Thank you for being here.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge a major transition in this community, Brian Jessup and his wife Edie...

Also included in the service,

From, *In Praise of Mortality, the Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus*, by Rilke,(trans. Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows): Part One XIX (p93)
And Part 2 XIV. (p121)

Also read a selection from "Touch," in *Consolations*, by David Whyte, p 221 (an excellent book for IDG! Many other lovely selections there.)