

Good Mourning
(An All Saints Day Reflection)

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, my husband and I decided to re-watch the popular Netflix series, “The Crown.” While I’m neither fan nor follower of the British royal family, or any other royal family for that matter, I very much enjoy “The Crown” as it has often inspired in me reflections on history, leadership, relationships, and in one particular episode, grieving.

That episode chronicled the Aberfan disaster of October 21, 1966 when a hill of coal mining waste collapsed sending 144 people in its path, 116 of them children, to their deaths. Throughout the entire episode the weight of unimaginable grief is palpable while at the same time an unrelenting, looming tension gradually builds over the course of the episode as those of us unfamiliar with the event are left to wonder if the Queen will go to Wales and meet with the people effected by this tragedy.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 days pass and still she remains in London, almost stereotypically stoic, if not actually unmoved. Day 6 arrives, then 7...Finally after 8 days, she goes to Aberfan to meet with survivors.

She is advised ahead of time by her handlers to offer a modest demonstration of emotion and, upon leaving the home of a mine worker who lost his child in the tragedy, the Queen is photographed wiping a tear from her eye. A few scenes later we learn that she faked the tear as she confesses to Prime Minister Harold Wilson she’s long feared something is wrong with her, as she’s never been able to cry like others. It is only upon hearing a recording of the hymn sung by the families at the mass funeral in Aberfan that she is shown shedding a genuine tear in private.

Some watching the episode no doubt experienced disbelief, perhaps even disgust or anger at what they perceived as a lack of emotion from the queen, something by the way, we rarely question from men.

Indeed, at the end of the episode on the Aberfan disaster, the series creators make of point of telling viewers the Queen considers her delayed response to the tragedy the greatest regret in her life and that she returned to Aberfan throughout her reign. Suggesting perhaps, an attempt to atone for what many at the time saw as an unconscionable lack of care and sympathy.

Still other viewers, particularly those who grew up being taught to hold it all together at all costs, may have discovered an unexpected resonance with this now departed historic and mythic figure who was also, as the series regularly reminds us, very much human.

Admittedly, aside from some aristocratic lineage far back in my family tree, the details of my life have little in common with Britain's longest reigning monarch. But I confess I felt a great deal of empathy for her as this episode unfolded. You see, leaders of all stripes, ministers especially, are charged with developing and maintaining a "non-anxious presence". Many take this to mean, among other things, exhibiting restrained emotion and, with rare exception, no tears in public be it at a podium, pulpit, bedside, or graveside. There are perfectly sound reasons for this although in practice it requires far more subtlety of thought and action than one might expect or observe to maintain. And it most definitely requires a healthy outlet behind the scenes be it a good cry at home, a weekend away, or something similarly restorative.

Nonetheless, the episode's treatment of grief and grieving as a struggle reminded me of how uncomfortable, even afraid, a lot of us are of grief and grieving and the judgement it seems to invite from others and ourselves regardless of our profession or position.

Indeed, when I was a chaplain and co-lead a grief support group I was amazed at how many people, from all walks of life, seemed to subscribe to or berated themselves for being unable to follow in times of loss the "harsh wisdom" of keeping a "stiff upper lip" as Seneca alludes to and then refutes in our reading this morning. Even the ancients, it seems, much to Seneca's dismay, denied the necessity of grief in the face of loss and cast judgement on those who grieved.

"Nature requires of us some sorrow...", Seneca argues. And with words that echo the spirit of many offered in empathetic counsel to the grieving today, he wrote, "Let your tears flow, but let them also cease, let deepest sighs be drawn from your breast, but let them also find an end." Indeed, Seneca counsels what I call good mourning.

Good mourning is nothing more than holding life and death as one reality rather than two distinct alternatives. This does not mean it is simple nor should it be understood to imply a moral judgement held in opposition to "bad mourning". Rather, it suggests, in the Buddhist vein, something that works with, rather than against, observable reality. Indeed, good mourning is rooted in the truth of nature and the revelations of reason. Nature teaches us we are mortal, vulnerable to loss, and thus to sorrow. Reason shows us that the dead can and do live on... in our memories, conversations, and through their influence.

As Seneca advises, “Make yourself willing to encounter oft the memory of your dead, both to speak of them frequently in your conversation, and to picture them to yourself by constant remembrance, all of which you will be able to accomplish only if you make the thought of them more pleasant than tearful.” Advice we saw put into practice in our touching story for all ages, The 10th Good Thing About Barney, in which a child grieves the death of a beloved pet by celebrating its life.

Good mourning honors both the living and the dead. It draws us beyond denial of loss and into the emotions associated with loss, but eschews clinging to them. It invites self-reflection to create and shape our remembrance of the deceased, but declines self-judgement for the emotions that ebb and flow or what we choose to emphasize or minimize in our remembrances. It retains its authenticity whether practiced publicly or in private regardless of what casual observers may say. It is a way through, not around grief. It does not make grieving easy, but it is what allows the poet Sarah Churchill to write,

*Forgive me if I do not cry
The day you die.
The simplest reason that I know
You said you'd rather have it so...
Forgive me if I do not cry
The day you die.
Forgive me
If I do...*

For if nature requires of us some sorrow, it is not for anyone, writes Seneca, “to hope or to desire that reason should suffer us to feel no sorrow at all.”

Let us wish then to everyone and to all, good mourning.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be