

Re-membering
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Reading:

A Pilgrimage to a Person – Rumi (Coleman Barks translation)

When you are not with close friends, you are not in the presence.
It is sad to leave the people you travel with,
How much moreso those who remind you of God.
Hurry back to the ones protecting you.

On every trip, have only one objective, to meet those who are friends, inside the presence.

If you stay home, keep the same purpose, to meet the innermost presence, as it lives in people.

Be a pilgrim to the kaaba inside a human being, and Mecca will rise into view on its own.

Sermon:

Whether this time away from others has been an opportunity for introspection and solitude, catching up on TV and reading, or chaos and mayhem like nothing you have ever experienced—for all of us, it has been different than whatever our lives looked like about a month ago. For myself, I have good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours, good minutes and bad minutes. I am trying to find a balance, as I imagine many of us are, between how much news is helpful and important, and how much is paralyzing. There is a lot of suffering in our world right now. There is always suffering, but this pandemic and the attendant need to change our economy and everything about our day to day lives has amplified major problems in society, and failures in ethics and compassion. We have also seen bravery, wisdom and compassion in many people on the front lines of caring for those who are impacted in health and economic security.

In the midst of all this, I have noticed that a lot of folks are seeing this time as opportunity to go through closets and boxes and are sharing memories and old photographs online. You may have guessed that the bucktoothed blond kid at the top of this service was me. Folks have been sharing stories from their families and their cultures about how they have gotten through hard times before. I have been thinking about the dry goods shelves of the grand parents I knew growing up who were kids of the Depression and wondering what behaviors from this time will stick. I have also been thinking about history, and scripture, and what we have learned and forgotten over and over again in our human story. This may be a time to look with fresh eyes at some ancient wisdom, and consider what connects us as human beings through time, space, theology, and identity.

Rumi, the 13th century Sufi mystic and poet writes, “If you stay home, keep the same purpose, to meet the innermost presence, as it lives in people. Be a pilgrim to the kaaba [holy center] inside a human being, and Mecca will rise into view on its own.”¹ Meet the innermost

¹ A Pilgrimage to a Person – Rumi (Coleman Barks translation)

presence as it lives in people. We certainly have an opportunity to practice new ways of connecting and meeting one another, and of seeking an inward pilgrimage. Our lives may be just as, or even more busy, than they were a month ago, but with everything being different, there is an opportunity to re-member, to put things back together in a different way.

Consider the Wisdom Literature in Hebrew Scripture, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. The Psalms are all over the place emotionally. They ask for pardon, help, celebration, they try to explain experience, just like songs today. They go back and forth between rallying cries, laments, odes, and supplication—some invite to spiritual practice and connection, and some are violent and troubling. Psalms are like flipping through stations on the radio. Sometimes you hear one and can empathize with the author and hear yourself singing along. Others are music that you just can't stand or understand. They are music of the people. In Psalm 23, the writer is restored, filled, and loved by their god. "I have all I need, She makes me lie down in green meadows. Beside the still waters, She will lead." She makes me lie down. In the most well known of all the Psalms, God leads us to spiritual practice, to connection with, and appreciation for the earth. "There is nothing that can shake me, She has said She won't forsake me, I'm in her hand." The psalmist is in direct communion with their God, and feels supported by a net of relationship. Other Psalms highlight horrible choices and theology very different than our own, reminding us that human beings are messy, and often don't act with compassion and justice, which generally leads to suffering.

We all experience suffering. Sometimes it is random, like illness or a storm, and sometimes it is the result of human choices, like how we treat each other, and what we are willing to do for money and power. The Biblical character that first comes to mind when thinking of suffering is probably Job. It is thought to be the oldest book of the Bible, and is rich in unique imagery. Here is the basic story : [God and ha-satan, the adversary, talk and ha-satan suggests that if Job, a righteous man, had everything taken from him he would curse God, and would not be so righteous. They make a wager over Job. Then Job loses his family, wealth, and health. He has three friends who listen to Job's suffering and give terrible advice. Then Job offers his case to God, who answers from a whirlwind. Job does not curse God, but does ask why he suffers without cause, and God gets cranky about who is this guy to question me, Job repents, then his health, wealth, and family are restored.] Job was not only cut off from his family and friends by losing some of them to death but because of the condition of his body, he was cut off from relationship with society, which had strict rules about health and purity.² So when Job loses his health, after losing his family, he is not able to turn to his community for support. He has the three terrible friends, but all they can tell him is that he must have done something wrong to deserve all this suffering. Job calls out to God to help him not only because he believed God might answer, but because he was out of other options. Well, this story might be a little on the nose for right now, here we are.

I want to share a little bit of the text with you, from Chapter 30 as Job laments what has happened to him (NRSV):

16 'And now my soul is poured out within me;
days of affliction have taken hold of me.
17 The night racks my bones,

² Alec Basson, "Just Skin and Bones: The Longing for Wholeness of the Body in the Book of Job", *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008) p.289.

and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest. ...
 20 I cry to you and you do not answer me;
 I stand, and you merely look at me.
 21 You have turned cruel to me;
 with the might of your hand you persecute me. ...
 24 'Surely one does not turn against the needy,*
 when in disaster they cry for help.*
 25 Did I not weep for those whose day was hard?
 Was not my soul grieved for the poor?
 26 But when I looked for good, evil came;
 and when I waited for light, darkness came.
 27 My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still;
 days of affliction come to meet me.
 28 I go about in sunless gloom;
 I stand up in the assembly and cry for help. ...
 31 My lyre is tuned to mourning,
 and my pipe to the voice of those who weep.

So that's me on a bad day, except probably not that poetic. Job is sometimes held up as a story about how in suffering there is always a plan, yadda, yadda, and that is definitely how the story is usually told, and I think that is not very helpful to anyone. It is also a story where god is an imperfect character who is in the mix with the people, making wagers with colleagues, and has a major ego problem. It is a story where choices and integrity matter, and where a regular person can negotiate with their god. I have always seen the story of Job as affirming that when someone is suffering, they don't have to pretend everything is okay when it is not, and we can name, or even yell, our feelings about suffering. Job shows that the universe can hold our anger and despair. Ecclesiastes, reminds us in Chapter 1, "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full." Sometimes we need to yell into the whirlwind, the void, the ocean, or a pillow, because to hold on to grief or anger is too much. And to quote Hagrid, "better out than in." And then there is what is next. And then we take another step, or find a new path, or take a shower and change our sweatpants, and re-member, start building something again, and find our way to balance. Ecclesiastes and Pete Seeger remind us, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."³

For better and worse, we are connected through human history, in part, through suffering. As our Buddhist cousins name as the first of the Four Noble Truths, there is suffering. There is injustice. People we love get hurt, we are hurt, and we all struggle with making meaning of our stories. Something further that Job might offer us is to remember that we do not often hear what others are shouting to the universe. We do not know most people's stories. How might we hear our neighbor screaming into the whirlwind? How might we remember that each of us struggles with grief, loss, and making meaning in the midst of suffering? We are not islands, we are part of a human community stretching and struggling through time. Ecclesiastes suggests that "there is nothing new under the sun." In revisiting ancient stories we can practice listening for the voices of those who need to be seen and heard, listening for those who have been silenced,

³ Chapter 3

listening for what challenges us to see our own choices in new ways. We practice so we can be present for one another, to witness to grief for things which cannot be changed, and just as importantly to be present for one another moving forward. There is suffering. Hafiz, the 14th century Persian poet invites us:

Write all that bothers you
On a parchment.
Offer it to God.

Even from this distance of a
Millennium, I can reach out the

Flame from my heart
into your life

And turn
all that frightens
You
into
Holy Ash.

We are all in this together, this human story with love, suffering, connection – beauty and challenge. The universe can hold our despair and anger, and the flame of our hearts, our compassion and learning can reach out accross millenia, just as others have done for us.

So may it be. Amen.