

This week will mark the halfway point between autumn and winter. A time when the veil between the worlds grows thin. A time when vegetation dies back with killing frosts, and therefore, literally, death is in the air. A time when those that we have lost seem nearer, when sorrow and grief may rise up and gently wrap around us, reminding us of its presence.

Thank you all for offering the gift of your presence. It matters that you are here. May this be a time and a place for each one of us to experience the spirit of love and healing.

In this sacred and holy place in which we have gathered this morning, in this time when the worlds of living and dead draw near to one another, let us call to us those spirits of our honored dead and welcome them in. Let us open ourselves to their presence with these words from Birago Diop.

Those who are dead are never gone:
they are there in the thickening shadow.

The dead are not under the earth:
they are there in the tree that rustles,
they are in the wood that groans,
they are in the water that runs,
they are in the water that sleeps,
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone:
they are in the breast of the woman,
they are in the child who is wailing,
and in the firebrand that flames.

The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the fire that is dying,
they are in the grasses that weep,
they are in the whimpering rocks,
they are in the forest,
they are in the house,
the dead are not dead.

Grief comes in many forms. There is a grief that comes only from losing someone that you loved. A grief so big that at first it seems to consume you. A grief that steals your breath away and robs you of strength and reason.

But there are other forms of grief that can be just as powerful and all-consuming. What some have termed ambiguous grief, such as

The grief of losing a job, whether you chose to move on or unexpectedly found yourself without employment

The grief of the ending of a marriage

The pain that comes with the loss of a relationship, whether that person was friend, family, or lover, sometimes flaming out spectacularly with anger and strife, but more often slowly fading away, those with whom you once shared your heart becoming strangers as time, distance, intentional boundaries, or inattention make you, at best, polite acquaintances

The grief of moving to a new place, or moving back to an old one.

The death of dreams for the future, of hopes that will forever be unfulfilled

The anguish that comes from accepting that you will never be a parent

The complicated grief that sometimes occurs when the decision is made to end a pregnancy

Or the sorrow of the loss of loved ones still with you who but have been stolen away by chronic illness, such as dementia

The shared grief of watching the world change, temperatures and sea levels rising, insects dying, storms and wildfires increasing, not knowing if the very earth we live upon will be a safe harbor in the stars for the next generation.

The heartbreak of war and incomprehensible violence

The despair of addiction, whether it is losing yourself or someone that you love

The pain of separation caused by incarceration

The changes wrought by aging and the mixture of grief, joy, and acceptance that comes from living in a human body long enough to experience what it means to truly grow older

The grief of physical health lost through accident or illness

The continued mourning for a pre-COVID world, for places, and people, and our very understanding of how that world works, that has been forever shifted.

To the spirits of those losses, of that grief, we also welcome you into this space.

Perhaps you have seen or heard the analogy that grief may feel like a bouncing ball in a box with a pain button by Lauren Herschel.

She invites us to "picture our life as a closed box, our grief as a bouncing ball, and pain as a button inside the box.

When you're first faced with a loss, grief may feel heavy and large, filling every corner of your life.

Because it's so present, it's difficult to ignore or handle. Even if not on purpose, every little step you take may cause the bouncing ball to move and hit that pain button.

You may try to adjust at first. You might take some time for yourself or withdraw from people. Perhaps you try to keep busy to distract your thoughts from the loss.

But because grief is like a bouncing ball, even if you handle it with care, it may still hit the walls of your life and eventually that pain button that sounds the alarm.

How you express that pain may look differently from how someone else does. Maybe you become angry and irritable; possibly, you cry. You may even feel empty or numb, not expressing much at all.

These are all natural expressions of grief.

It may feel like your pain is never going to end and that the huge ball leaves no room for anything else in your life.

You may have a hard time picturing your future, or even finding purpose in moving on.

But that ball that currently feels so large and present has a tiny escape valve. It'll eventually start losing air.

As time goes on, you may experience grief as a smaller ball. It may no longer get in the way of every other aspect of your life.

But grief is still a bouncing ball. So, from time to time, it may bounce off the box walls and hit the pain button again.

This could take you by surprise, or you may even still move smoothly in life, anticipating the grief ball hitting the button.

There's no deadline on grieving. This may happen a few weeks after your loss, or even after years have gone by.

And even if the grief ball is smaller, that button still delivers the same amount of pain when it gets hit.

The void of your loss is still there, but the space the grief ball used to fill in the box is now occupied by the memories and lessons that person left you.

Love perseveres and serves as a cushion that, more often than not, prevents the ball from hitting the pain button.

The grief ball may still get to it sometimes, and you feel some pain return. But this may be a rare occurrence now.

This is what some people call acceptance.

You may always miss that person and what they meant in your life. Perhaps you long for their company during important or milestone moments.

This is all natural. It's also part of the acceptance process to know you still love and need them, but they're gone.

At some point, you learn to live with the reality of this.

This doesn't mean you have forgotten about your loss or that you care less about it. Instead, healing has taken place and you can acknowledge the loss — but also feel gratitude for what that person meant.

Eventually, the ball will start to lose air, and much of its power when it hits the pain button will also diminish.

And there is no shame in the lessening of grief. No guidelines or measuring stick that says you must grieve for this long and in this way. This grieving process is unique to you. There's no correct or wrong way to do it."

Author Orson Scott Card once said

"Life is full of grief, to exactly the degree we allow ourselves to love other people."

And love is the center of who we are as UUs, and to love fully means to feel the losses fully as well.

Part of the process of grief is to acknowledge and name what has been lost. And these past few years, and this year especially, has been a time full of loss.

I invite you to take a breath..... To pause and allow yourself to acknowledge the losses and grief in your life.

And now, I invite you to join me in a ritual of remembrance. There are three tables set up around the sanctuary with unlit candles. You may light your own candle, or candles, for those whom you would honor and remember, in silence, or sound, whispering or wailing as your heart needs.

There are microphones set up at the front if you would like to share a sentence or two, gifting us with words of remembrance, as we hold you in the love of sacred community.

In the rising of the sun and in its going down,
we remember them;

In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,
we remember them;

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring,
we remember them;

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn,
we remember them;

In the beginning of the year and when it ends,
we remember them;

When we are weary and in need of strength,
we remember them;

When we are lost and sick at heart,
we remember them;

When we have joys we yearn to share,
we remember them;

So as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.

Thank you to Roland Gittlesohn for these words of remembrance.

Spirits whom we have called to this place, to dwell with us in this hour, we thank you for
your presence and release you, knowing that you are still with us, now and always.