

**THE THOUSAND NATURAL SHOCKS THAT FLESH IS HEIR TO...**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene--Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**December 14, 2003**

**Contemplation:** "Loving the Questions," by Rainer Maria Rilke

I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

**Reading:** "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road (To Hear Us Talk)," by Robert Frost

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood  
Throws down in front of us is not to bar  
Our passage to our journey's end for good,  
But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so.  
She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,  
And make us get down in a foot of snow  
Debating what to do without an axe.

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain:  
We will not be put off the final goal  
We have it hidden in us to attain,  
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole

And, tired of aimless circling in one place,  
Steer straight off after something into space.

**Sermon**

I was doing situps in an 8:00 a.m. exercise class at the YMCA on Monday, September 22 of this year, when I felt as though something wasn't just right. I left early, went to bed, and woke a couple of hours later with a stomachache. By about 4:30, it had gotten really serious, and I drove down the hill to St. Luke's emergency room. Several hours and a CT scan later, the nurse bopped into my room and announced in a chipper tone, "Appendicitis!" The surgeon was on his way.

(A reminder of my role in the community: I muttered quite a bad word, and noticed the nurse's frown and remembered myself. I pardoned my language, then, hoping for absolution said sweetly, "But I imagine you've heard the word." She pursed her lips and replied, "Not from a minister.")

It was a serious case of appendicitis, requiring removal of part of my colon, too. But that's not the most important thing that happened. The surgeon told my husband Bob and me that there was a mass on my right kidney, and that I needed to see a urologist as soon as I got out. He informed my primary care doctor, who said the same thing. Firmly. So, I found myself in the urologist's office three days after release from the hospital. Yes, the diagnosis was kidney cancer, a diagnosis that was confirmed by a second urologist. They both had full expectations that it was found early enough, and that it was contained within the kidney. They told us that removal of the right kidney would solve the problem.

But it was scary and overwhelming, anyway. A number of church leaders met at our house that Saturday, to decide what to do, since I was going to be out of commission for at least a couple of months. There is no way I can express my love and gratitude to them—they were scared and overwhelmed, too—for just jumping in and planning. The following Sunday I announced the news to the congregation, then we sent out a letter to the whole mailing list.

Again, my gratitude and affection cannot be expressed with any adequacy. I found that I needed—desperately, deeply needed—solitude. I know how hard it was for many of you, not to call or come by. I know that some of you have had your feelings hurt, and some of you have been a little mad at me. I am very sorry, for I would never hurt or anger you unnecessarily. At the same time, something deep within me cried out for time with no one in it, except my dear and overworked husband.

[My gratitude also includes the knowledge that some people in situations like mine do not have the option of solitude, which makes it harder.]

On Oct. 29, my right kidney was removed, with the best possible prognosis, confirmed by the pathology report: not a single, solitary cancer cell escaped the fat layer surrounding my kidney (everyone has one!), and I am 100% cancer free, with every expectation that I will live to a ripe and vigorous old age.

Physical recovery is coming along, more slowly than I wish it would, and my energy takes downright alarming crashes with some regularity, as well as days where I feel sort of like my real self. But those ups and downs will all sort out satisfactorily within the next six months.

More important is the spiritual and emotional sense I feel I must try to make of it all. A narrowly-scientific point of view would say, "OK, you were lucky enough to enjoy the coincidence of an appendicitis CT scan finding kidney cancer. Great. And you're cancer free. So quit agonizing and get on with your life." But that doesn't work for me. I don't have much in the way of answers yet, but I feel deep in my soul that there is significance, and that I have a responsibility to explore it.

Early on, in the difficult five weeks between surgeries, I received a gift that illuminated my intuition. I was wandering around my house, and I thought of a book I recalled buying in 1998, when my sister Kate was dying of pancreatic cancer. It seemed like a very good book, *Close To the Bone: Life-Threatening Illness and the Search for Meaning*, by a Jungian author I respect greatly, Jean Shinoda Bolen. I recalled that I had bought it, then shelved it. I knew I hadn't read it, though, because I just couldn't bear to have anybody tell me how to make sense of my beloved sister's death. But now, when I was sick but wasn't going to die, I told myself I was ready to read it. I went to the shelf, got the book down, and opened it to the expectedly-pristine first page. Kate's

handwriting leaped out at me: “For Libsy, Thank you for your love, comfort and protection in my close to the bone times. I love you. Sissy.”

So I have read it, slowly and with loving mindfulness, underlining carefully, drawing pictures in the margins. I have paid close attention to her gentle, unrelenting assertion that life-threatening illnesses—whether they result in death or more physical years of life—are opportunities for our souls to reveal themselves, opportunities to learn about our depths in ways we do not usually practice. She says, “...for the soul to be heard, the mind must be still.” (17)

She says that life-threatening situations, one’s own and those of loved ones, always raise these questions:

What did we come to do?  
What did we come to learn?  
What did we come to heal?  
What and who did we come to love?  
What are we here for?

I have spent most of two-plus months mostly alone, drawing every day, reading, sleeping, staring into space, crying, journaling. I do not know the answers to her questions, but I will never release them now, however many years I have to go.

In the middle of knowing almost nothing I can articulate about life’s deepest soul questions, though, there are a couple of things I do know.

One is a lesson I have had brought into my heart over and over and over in my life: I’m not the one in control. Robert Frost tells us that the trees thrown into our pathway aren’t to bar our journey’s passage for good,

But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so.  
She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,  
And make us get down in a foot of snow  
Debating what to do without an axe.

There are forces, harmonies, mysteries so far beyond my comprehension that I cannot even imagine them, let alone name them and say what their “intent” is. But, if I am still enough—if I cut through my natural arrogance—if I sing, and draw, and love, and make jokes, and forgive, and hold blessed solitude in my being—I may be able to live closer to my soul’s truths, which are the compassionate and just truths of God.

Bolen speaks of the importance of old, comforting, inspirational words. A simple little child’s supplication, which would not work at all for many Unitarian Universalists, does work for me:

Ever and always  
Be at my side  
To light and guard  
To rule and guide.

In addition to the old reminder that I'm not the boss of everything, there is one other lesson I know for sure: Life is precious. I have a sacred responsibility to pay attention and to be grateful. If I am understanding this, simple but not easy to practice, I have a lot better chance of living from the light that glows within the heart of all, rather than from the chattering shadows that run their treadmills in my head. This world, and all that is in it—including every one of you, some of whom I love beyond saying—is beautiful and luminous, a place over which I have no ultimate control, but in which I must journey with as loving and grateful heart as I can.

But, apart from the chastened and grateful heart that knows these things, I don't know very much of anything. All I can do is, in Rilke's words, live the questions.

Why was I spared? I have such a strong sense that there is more for me to do (Bolen says everyone spared has that sense [180]): what is it? What gifts do I have to offer? How can I learn to live my life more in harmony with The Great Whatever? Is it possible to be faithful to T.S. Eliot's exhortation that we must live in "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action"? (p. 30, line 218)

What did I come to do?  
What did I come to learn?  
What did I come to heal?  
What and who did I come to love?  
What are I here for?

Lucky for me, I don't have to do all this question-living alone. All of us have much that is unresolved in our hearts, and part of the business of church is to love and live the questions together. You have no idea how much your cards and flowers meant—that you were generous enough to send your love, even when I had said I didn't want to see you (!)—and I hope my presence in the coming years can repay your great spirits.

If we live the questions together, perhaps we may indeed, move without noticing into answers. More importantly, if we fellow human beings—we mortals in a world we do not understand, we humble beings with hearts of beauty and confusion and grief and love—if we live together as compassionately questing souls, we may bring more light into this world, both into our religious community and into the larger world.

From my overflowing heart, I close with Rilke's words:

I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

#### **Sources consulted**

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