

OPENING WORDS:

When Death Comes by Mary Oliver

When death comes/ like the hungry bear in autumn,/ when death
comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse/ to buy me, and
snaps the purse shut,/ when death comes/ like the measles pox,/ I
when death comes/ like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,/ I
want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:/ what is it
going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything/ as a brotherhood and a
sisterhood,/ and I look upon time as no more than an idea,/ and I
consider eternity as another possibility,/ and I think of each life as a
flower, as common/ as a field daisy, and as singular,/ and each
name a comfortable music in the mouth,/ tending, as all music does,
toward silence, and each body a lion of courage, and something/
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life/ I was a bride married to
amazement./ I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms./
When it's over, I don't want to wonder/ if I made of my life something
particular, and real./ I don't want to find myself sighing and
frightened,/ or full of argument./ I don't want to end up simply
having visited this world.

CONNECTION & DISCONNECTION or

Love & Loneliness

Rev. Linda Goonewardene

Margaret Atwood once said that the Inuit have 52 words for snow, and there needs to be at least that many words for love. [Recently, we have probably added a few new words for snow in Ottawa.] Artists have given us words for love, such as river and flower, as you'll hear in today's postlude, "The Rose" Another word for love is connection, as in loving someone or something forges a connection between two entities. Brene Brown puts it this way: "Love is not something we give or get [here she is contradicting the Barenaked Ladies, who want to buy our love] She continues that "love is something we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when [love] exists within each one of them." We may not get to 52 words for love today, yet we will try.

In my ministry of supporting family members who love someone with a problematic behavioural or substance addiction, I see a lot of love and loneliness in action. Parents, partners, adult children, and siblings come to Rideauwood, where I work as a Family Counsellor, because someone they love has become unloving with them. Brene defines love as happening when we let our most vulnerable selves be deeply seen and known; she adds that we honour that connection when our love offering is met with respect, kindness, and trust. Unfortunately with addiction comes an enormous drop in trust levels, kindness can turn into cruelty and, respect can be diminished by lies and betrayal. Brene proposes that practicing love is more valuable

than declaring love. Back in New Jersey, we would talk about the difference between talking the talk and walking the walk. At Rideauwood we support people in redefining and expressing love as they cope with their loved ones who are in active addiction and/or in early recovery.

Mary Oliver, who died last week, wrote a poem that speaks to loneliness as a sense of not belonging: In *Wild Geese*, she says:

You do not have to be good. /You do not have to walk on your knees/
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. /You only have to
let the soft animal of your body love what it loves./ Tell me about
despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Her imagery of having to be good, or repenting alludes to the shame that comes with loneliness. The stigma that accompanies loneliness can prevent us from seeking help. Loneliness is the experience of sadness and anxiety due to the absence of sufficient relational contact. The artist Vincent Van Gogh wrote, "A great fire burns within me, but no one stops to warm themselves at it, and passers-by only see a wisp of smoke." The musician, Fiona Apple, said, "When [I'm] surrounded by all these people, it can be lonelier than when [I'm] by [myself]. [I] can be in a huge crowd, but if [I] don't feel like [I] can trust anyone or talk to anybody, [I] feel like [I'm] really alone." So loneliness can happen when we are isolated and when we are surrounded by people.

Ami Rokach, a psychologist @ York University in Toronto, has studied loneliness for over 30 years; she says that loneliness, not only affects quality of life but the length of it" as well. In addition to mental health problems, loneliness is associated with physical issues

such as hypertension, heart disease, and disordered eating. Some experts equate that being lonely for prolonged time periods is more harmful to someone's health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In Canada, studies have found that one in five Canadians identify as lonely. In the U.K., the problem is so evident the government has appointed a loneliness minister to address the issue. So loneliness is a kind of despair, that increases when we don't talk about it.

There is a TED talk by Johann Hari called "Everything You Thought You Knew About Addiction is Wrong"; he has also written a book, "Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs". I haven't read his book yet I have watched his TED talk and highly recommend it. Johann says that the opposite of addiction is connection. When substance and behavioural dependence is criminalized, our society shames, punishes, and separates people, and this increases disconnection and addiction. Our present approach to addiction is based on out-dated views and research. The American poet and essayist Wendell Berry wrote, "It should tell us something, that in healthy societies drug use is celebratory, convivial, and occasional, whereas among us it is lonely, shameful, and addictive. We need drugs, apparently because we have lost each other."

Johann describes old research on drug addiction where rats are put into a cage with two water bottles, one is regular water and the other is laced with heroin: almost all of the rats in the experiment, discover the heroin water, and drink it until they die. A researcher in Vancouver, Bruce Alexander, re-did the research by changing the cage: he created Rat Park, filled with things that rats enjoy such as toys and food and other rats. The result was that almost none of the rats

drank the heroin water as they had happy, connected lives. Johann continues by describing a human experiment, called the Vietnam War where 20% of the soldiers were using heroin. They were followed home and 95% just stopped because they were back in the human version of Rat Park. Both these experiments show us that addiction isn't just a guaranteed response to addictive substances or behaviour. Peter Cohen, a researcher in the Netherlands, declares that people have a natural, innate need to bond with others. When bonding is impaired because of trauma, isolation, or being beaten down by life, we can bond to quick fixes like drugs, gambling, food, and/or technology.

[Suicide ROH Presentation on Men and Suicide]

Mary Oliver reminds us:

Meanwhile the world goes on./
Meanwhile the sun and the clear
pebbles of the rain/
are moving across the landscapes/
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers./
Meanwhile the wild geese,
high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again./

Home could be another word for love, when home is a place of unconditional love, of safety, of connection, and of nourishment. Love is not easy or simple. Let's go deeper into it.

Here are two definitions of love: the first one is by writer Stephen Levine, "...what is called love is not lovely at all but is a tangle of needs and desires, of momentary ecstasies and bewilderment. Moments of unity, of intense feelings of closeness, occur in a mind so fragile that the least squint or sideways glance shatters its oneness into a dozen

ghostly paranoias. When we say love, we usually mean some emotion, some deep feeling for an object or person, that momentarily allows us to open to one another....Still there is 'business' to the relationship: clouds of jealousy, possessiveness, guilt, intentional and unintentional manipulation, separateness, and the shadow of all previous 'loves' darken the light of oneness."

The second definition is by poet Adrienne Rich, "an honourable human relationship - that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word 'love' - is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining truths they can tell each other. It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation. It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity. It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us."

So in paying attention to internal thoughts, feelings, and personal histories, we can dive deeply into one another, and create a third entity, the ship of relation, the vessel of connection. The practice of loving is not an annual sugar-coated valentine with expensive gifts and impressive dining; love is deeper and more complicated than that upcoming holiday. Let's expand who and what we love beyond heterosexism to children, to significant others, to friends, to relatives, to people of all shapes, sizes, and ages, to animals, to plants, to the planet, and to the universe.

Listen to these 4- 8 year olds describe what love means to them:
"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time,

even when he got arthritis too. That's love."

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

"Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs."

"Love is when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing, you still want to be together and you talk more. My mommy and daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss."

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening the presents and listen."

"When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you're scared they won't love you anymore. But then you get surprised because not only do they still love you, they love you even more."

"Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday."

"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day."

"You shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it alot. People forget."

"Love is what makes you smile when you are tired."

Children are watching us and learning from us all the time. What are we teaching them about love? Based on this little survey, love involves values of trust, courage, safety, generosity, dependability, communication, compatibility, and forgiveness.

I'm going to tell you about this fellowship and what I have observed. Last month when I was here, my sister came along. She has never been to a UU service before, never observed me in ministerial action, she is not a fan of organized religion. I introduced her to one or two people and you all just did the rest. In being your friendly, inclusive, and charming selves, my sister had a delightful time. Not just on Sunday morning, she went home to Oakville and googled UU's and now she starts her day by going to a different congregational website, reading a sermon, and feeling calm and centered. She also has a plan to introduce her best friend to UUism by visiting the Toronto congregations with him until he finds his forever home.

Mary Oliver ends "Wild Geese" this way:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,/ The world offers itself to
your imagination/ calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
--/ over and over announcing your place/ in the family of things.

Simplistically, I could say that love cures loneliness; realistically I will add that love and loneliness are profound human experiences. Mary Oliver addressed death in our opening words and reminded us of what Forrest Church said about religion, "it has two purposes: learn how to die and learn how to live". In looking at love and loneliness, connection, and disconnection today we can prioritize what is important for ourselves and for our communities. How we interact with one another is as important as what we do to save the world. May we continue to be kind and loving with each other; may we continue to expand our capacity for love; may we continue to support antidotes for loneliness; may we continue to be honest and compassionate about the pain in the world; may we know how much

we contribute to the world in big and little ways; may we know how much everything matters.

Blessed be. Amen. All our relations. Namaste.

ONE WAS JOHNNY by Maurice Sendak

One was Johnny who lived by himself.

Two was a rat who jumped on his shelf.

Three was a cat who chased the rat.

Four was a dog who came in and sat.

Five was a turtle who bit the dog's tail.

Six was a monkey who brought in the mail.

Seven a blackbird pecked poor Johnny's nose.

Eight was a tiger out selling old clothes.

Nine was a robber who took an old shoe.

Ten was a puzzle. What should Johnny do?

He stood on a chair and said, "Here's what I'll do -- I'll start to count backwards and when I am through -- if this house isn't empty I'll eat all of you!!!!"

Nine was the robber looking pale.

Eight was the tiger who chased him to jail.

Seven the blackbird flew off to Havana.

Six was the monkey who stole a banana.

Five was the turtle who crawled off to bed.

Four was the dog who slid home on a sled.

Three was the cat who pounced on the rat.

Two was the rat who left with the cat.

One was Johnny who lived by himself AND LIKED IT LIKE THAT!

CLOSING WORDS:

A Franciscan Benediction [National Council of Churches] - adapted

May we be blessed with discomfort at: Easy answers, half-truths,
and superficial relationships - so that we may live deep within our
hearts.

May we be blessed with anger at: Injustice, oppression, and
exploitation of all beings, So that we may work for justice, freedom,
and peace.

May we be blessed with tears to shed: For all who suffer from
pain, rejection, starvation, and war. So that we may reach out our
hands to connect and turn our pain into joy.

May we be blessed with enough foolishness to believe that we can
make a difference in this world; So that we can do what others claim
cannot be done.