

Sermon 6/1/2014 Transcendence and then the Laundry

My life is full of shoulds. Is yours? I should do the laundry, I should send hand-written thank you notes. I should eat leafy greens every day, I should quit eating sugar. What are your should?

Brenda was struggling with her shoulds when her husband was dying. He was at home, lying in the bed they shared for forty-eight years, under the quilt she made with her daughter back when her daughter wore pigtails. Sunlight washed the wooden floor with golden light as Hospice nurses bustled in and out, keeping his pain in check. There was nothing to do but wait. But what should she be doing? Surely there was some task, some chore she should be attending to. But no, the neighbors were bringing more casseroles than she could ever eat, so no cooking was needed. Her beloved Larry was under professional nursing care, so there was no need for her to fuss with his drinking glass and blankets anymore. He wasn't eating, no need for her to spoon creamy soup up to his dry, cracked lips.

Getting to this point she had been so busy! Appointments with the neurologist, the primary care doc, then the oncologists. Researching the best foods to eat during chemotherapy, even though Larry didn't want to eat anything. Keeping the kids up to date on the diagnosis, fielding visits from well-meaning neighbors who tired her out. Going to the support group that the hospice folks kept insisting would be helpful. Responding to all the notes and cards. On the rare occasions when Larry was awake she couldn't help but pester him- what can I get you? What should I do? But he just smiled and said "Be with me. I love you. Be with me."

Brenda practices Buddhism, but years of seated meditation and Dharma talks, learning to release the fear and sit in the moment didn't help as much as she'd hoped, now that she was in

this moment. It seemed so important to do everything right, to grieve correctly, to be with Larry correctly. The should's were abundant and so very loud.

One morning Brenda was making pancakes for the assorted children and in-laws that filled the house to spend time with Larry, to support her. She reached into the cupboard for the maple syrup- 100% Pure Maple Syrup- and her mind flashed to a retreat she and Larry attended years before, before the cancer even began. The Three Pure Precepts. The Three Pure Precepts are situated in the Zen school of Buddhism, although precepts are a common thread in all schools. The Three Pure Precepts weave a lot of Buddhist wisdom into an easy-to understand form- although easier to understand than to live by, like so many things. The Precepts are: Do no evil. Do good. Help other people to do good.

The first one sounds the easiest- don't' do evil. When did you actually ever do anything evil? As far as I know Lex Luther isn't a part of this congregation. But by evil the Buddhists mean something more like 'stop thinking you are the center of the universe.' Ekk. Easier said than done.

The Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism is that we try to honor the web of life of which we are a part. Not the web of life of which we are the whole thing, or which we are the center and most important part- but the web of life of which we are a teensy tiny strand. This is what the first Pure Precept is all about- realizing our interdependence. Remembering that every other person you meet, and a few billion you never will meet, all have desires and heartbreaks and joys just as real and significant as your own.

This first Pure Precept is really tough stuff, but as Brenda sat by Larry's bed she started to get hold of an edge of it- this wasn't about her. Sure, she was his wife, she had a big role- but so did their kids, and Larry's work friends, and their neighbors. So did Larry, after all- he was the one dying. It wasn't about her.

This wasn't a depressing thought for Brenda- it was immensely freeing, because it disabled the shoulds. The shoulds were about Brenda, the shoulds put her in the center. She should sweep the floor, because otherwise the neighbors would think she was a bad house keeper. But the neighbors weren't thinking about her floor- they had their own problems. They weren't obsessing about her cleanliness- and even if they were, that was their prerogative. Brenda realized she wasn't the star of the show and it was such a relief- all the shoulds faded away.

After a few days at Larry's side, eyes slowly opening to the interconnectedness of all life, Brenda started to intuitively grasp how she could help Larry and his visitors. She let Larry rest more, stopped pestering him for ways to help. She sat by the bed holding his hand, singing with him the comforting old hymns from his Presbyterian childhood. Sure, the theology was no longer in line with what they believed, but boy it felt good to revisit those old songs- *How Great Thou Art*, which he sang standing next to his grandmother on Sunday mornings. *Old Rugged Cross*, sung at his baptism. Larry said that he could practically hear the organ and smell the wood polish on the pews.

Brenda told Larry everything she remembered about the time when they first met- how she tried to dry the flowers he gave her between the pages of a heavy book, but then she kept opening the book to look at them, so the flowers crumbled. How after their dates she would

run to the window to watch his car pull away, just for a final, fleeting glance at the back of his head. How happy she is now because their son looks just like him, so she will get to see his cleft chin and sandy-colored eyes even after he is gone.

Brenda got it- that clichéd but so true statement that the best present she could give Larry was her presence. And she gave that gift to the other souls orbiting the sick bed as well. She listened deeply to her children, she accepted sympathy and casseroles graciously from guests, even that 100th tuna noodle casserole that she knew would never be eaten.

Brenda had embodied the first two Pure Precepts: She did no evil- she realized that she was just a tiny strand in the web of all existence. She empathized with Larry and his guests so that she could treat them how they needed to be treated at this difficult time. She freed all the shoulds from her mind.

She did good- she did just what Larry had requested- Be with me. I love you. Be with me. But what about that third Pure Precept? How could Brenda help other people to do good?

This third precept has a lot of delightful room for interpretation. How can you help others to be able to do good? Some Buddhist practitioners help impoverished people in their community to meet their basic need for food, water, and shelter, so that they can stop scrambling for survival and find their life's purpose, so that they too can do good. Some utilize micro-lending organizations to lend funds to people in developing countries so those people can develop a clean water source. People in this congregation practice this precept when they volunteer at the Food Lifeline food bank, making it possible for parents to feed their children. We help them to do good.

I love this third Pure Precept because it is a fun combination of the first two. It is a reminder: it isn't about you- you are enabling other people to do good. This isn't about doing good so that you look generous, so that your neighbors will think you are a charitable person. This is about getting out of the way and helping other people to do good. This is about subtlety.

But Brenda felt stuck. How could she help others to do good? Her entire world was this room, this bedside, being with Larry during his transition out of this life. Who could she help from here? From the old wicker rocker by his bed?

As she pondered, Larry entered the last week of his life. The Hospice nurse said it would be any time, and Larry decided to only see Brenda and their kids, it was just too tiring to have other guests tramping in and out. Brenda thought about all the calls she was getting from folks who wished they could say goodbye but lived out of town, or were less mobile than they used to be. Brenda realized she could help others to do good by e-mailing them, requesting brief messages for Larry. She wrote: "Larry is making his final transition and I am here holding him. If you have love you wish to convey, please send it to me and I will read it with love from your heart, through mine, to Larry's."

Every person she e-mailed responded within a day, and Brenda showered Larry in their loving words for hours and hours. Tears ran down his cheeks as he processed the impact he made on decades of co-workers, bowling league buddies, kids he coached in T-ball, and fellow Buddhists from their sangha. The stories that these diverse souls told, stories he had forgotten, a lifetime of hijinks and laughter. Larry told Brenda it was the best gift he had ever received, the gift of pure love, the reminder of souls he had touched on his passage through life. Nearly a hundred

well-wishes, nearly a hundred fond goodbyes. Now, Larry said, now I am ready. And a few hours later, just after the sun set outside his uncurtained window, lying in the bed they shared for forty-eight years, under the quilt she made with her daughter back when her daughter wore pigtails, he closed his eyes for the last time and died, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

How can the Three Pure Precepts add grace to your life? Cease from doing evil- alternately titled- it's not just about me. Forget the shoulds- since you are not the center of the universe, you can let them go.

Do good- listen. Put yourself in their shoes. Give your presence, it is the best present.

And finally, my favorite: help others to do good. Give souls in need a subtle assist so they can do good in the world.

It matters what we do in this life, because our seventh principle, our interdependent web of which we are a part, needs healing. Remember your small strand of the web. Do good. And help others to do good, too. Blessed Be.