

Books, Bricks, Grief

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First Unitarian Universalist Church
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Meditation Reading

These words of meditation come from Barbara Crooker

When the evening newscast leads to despair,
when my Facebook feed raises my blood pressure,
when I can't listen to NPR anymore,
I turn to the sky, blooming like chicory,
its dearth of clouds, its vast blue endlessness.

When the trees are turning copper, gold, bronze,
fired by the sun,
the bees are going for broke on fermenting apples.
I turn to my skillet, cast iron
you can count on, glug some olive oil,
sizzle some onions, adding garlic at the end
to prevent bitterness.

The water is boiling, so I throw in some peppers,
halved, cored, and seeded, let them bob
in the salty water until they're soft.

To the *soffrito*, I add ground beef, chili powder, cumin, dried oregano,
tomato sauce, mashed cannellinis; simmer for a while.

Then I stir in more white beans, stuff the hearts of the peppers,
drape them with cheese and tuck the pan in the oven's mouth.

Let the terrible politicians practice / their terrible politics.

At my kitchen table, all will be fed.

All we have are these moments:
the golden trees,
the industrious bees,
the falling light.
Darkness will not overtake us.

Readings

Heavy, by Mary Oliver

That time
I thought I could not go any closer to grief without dying
I went closer,
and I did not die.

Surely God had his hand in this,
as well as friends.

Still, I was bent,
and my laughter, as the poet said,
was nowhere to be found.

Then said my friend Daniel,
(brave even among lions),

“It’s not the weight you carry
but how you carry it –
books, bricks, grief –
it’s all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not, put it down.”

So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
Have you heard the laughter that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe also troubled –
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love to which there is no reply?

Won't You Celebrate With Me by Lucille Clifton

Won't you celebrate with me -
what I have shaped into a kind of life?

I had no model.
Born in Babylon,
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?

I made it up here on this bridge
between starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight my other hand;

come celebrate with me
that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

Sermon

Books, Bricks, Grief

The wheelbarrow had seen better days –
but the old red paint still came through,
chipped here and there,
rusted more and more,

but a new wheel
and a few tightened bolts,
and it would still hold –
hold together, hold what it needed to.

The bricks, too, had seen better days –
chipped and cracked,
worn by years of soil and water,
of layers of landscaping covering them over the years.

Who knows what these bricks had once been –
really, nobody knew
why every time a small hole was dug for a plant,
or as a child dug just for fun,
or replacing a fencepost –
or sometimes just popping up through the ground like field rocks in the yard,
everywhere, just random bricks in this yard -
a few or several inches under the grass,
bricks would just appear.

So, eventually, the bricks were gathered –
and this day, they were gathered into the old wheelbarrow,
to be carted around the other side of the yard,
to make a simple garden path –

lovingly called a “rustic path” –
just a little sand for leveling, a little sand for gaps,
following the lay of the land and not worrying too much about a pristine path –
or it being straight –

because, let's face it, it would look weird if bricks like these were level.
And as carefully as the bricks were placed and stacked with care in the wheelbarrow,
and as seemingly balanced it seemed to be,
the lay of the land was just as rickety as the items in transport,

that gravity seemed to catch the corner of that wheelbarrow,
and the bricks seemed to easily give up their resolve
and began to tumble out –
and there in the middle of the yard,
after the scraped hands and blisters,
after the careful stacking and pathfinding,
was a pile of bricks,
and a tipped over wheelbarrow –
a lot of work for very little gain,
and an obvious invitation
to take a break.

*It's not the weight you carry
but how you carry it –*

writes Mary Oliver,

*books, bricks, grief –
it's all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not, put it down.*

Often, when I think of resilience – our theme for February -
it comes with ideas that it's a constant –
a consistent way of being, way of acting,
that either you are, or are not, resilient – all the time.

Maybe it's about your health, or your soul,
maybe it's about your spirit –
how you come back after being down,
how you keep showing up, getting up, rallying,
persevering.

Sometimes, I wonder,
if resilience is much less about constant vigilance
and much more about the long game.

Because sometimes all those things you're holding,
all those things your balancing, or trying to,
embracing, or trying to,
sometimes the lay of the land,
the terrain of the heart, or the soul, or our life
is just as rickety as these lives were living,
just as chipped or rusted, ragged or worn,
as our own uncertainty, our own fear, or our despair,
that the weight of the world,
the gravity of it all –
catches just the right thing at just the right moment,
and the container of a life we've created
tips –
and there, just a little ways from where it once was,
but not quite where it should be,

our bricks, our grief, our worry, our worn-ness
is laying on the ground,
a little defeated, a little tired,
and all you can do is take a breath,
or offer a few choice words,
and you have to take a break from it all.

Sometimes it's the hardest when you're playing the long game,
and perhaps especially when you know, deep down,
how this or that is going to end up,
no matter how hard you try.

No matter how hard you try, or how much you will and hope and pray it to be –
sometimes you just know –

you're not going to convince this person,
or you're not going to mend this wound,
they're not going to call any witnesses,
this thing, this moment, can't be fixed –
it's just going to tip over or fall out across the landscape of life.

But then that's the question –
and perhaps the question resilience asks –
even after that,
even after you might know that something will fail, or fall apart,
or something surprises you by cracking, dropping, falling flat –
perhaps resilience is simply saying –
yep – stuff happens –
what now?

What now?
What happens now,
when, whatever that you loved, that you labored for,
that you had planned on and planned out
and set carefully, balancing piece by piece,
just fell on the ground,
what happens when, as the poet says,
it's something that you can't just put down, let go, forget –

because it is too important, too meaningful, too much to let go -
much more important than a rustic path
but about your own path,
about what world and life you are creating, building, forming
with your own hands, heart, and grief and love –
what happens now?

Or as one colleague wrote on Friday,
when, for some reason, they were feeling frustration in the world,
they said,
tell me, how will you channel your rage today to serve the common good?

And the responses filled the newsfeed –
making art, writing –
donating time, donating money, donating clothing –
playing and dancing with kindergartners,
letting them teach me there is still joy to dance to -
teaching children to read,
spending time with close friends who can't manage this life along right now
people were committing to what they do all the time –
building a world of beauty, of justice, of kindness, of love.

What can you just not put down,
not set aside, ignore, let go –
some commitment, some value,
some relationship or hope or dream –
some belief
that even amidst the struggle,
or the difficulty or the pain or the uncertainty,
there is something about it –
something strong enough,
loving enough, hopeful enough,
that hard as it is to keep on,
you keep on,
you find some way
to embrace it, balance it, carry it,
because somehow, some way,
it's worth it –
you're worth it –
this life, this world, is worth the struggle,
worth the love.

*I made it up here on this bridge
between starshine and clay,*

writes Lucille Clifton,

every day, something has tried to kill me,

and has failed.

Right here,
between starshine and clay,
this place where we keep on trying to find and keep some semblance of balance,
of heart and mind –
there are things, every day – literal or otherwise,
that have enough uncertainty and enough power to kills us –
in body or spirit.

Like in the way Rev. Dr Martin Luther King said,
my life beings to end the day I become silent about things that matter.

There are things in this world that are trying to end lives all the time –
there are things in this world
that are constantly attacking
our sense of power, our sense of worth, our sense of belonging,
our sense of hope, of love, of life, of spirit, of soul –
and so what are the things
that help us pick up the pieces,
as long as that might take –

not some quick fix –
but the long haul of healing and transformation and strength –
what are the things, the moments, places or people –
that help laughter come again, as the poet says,
out of our startled mouths – have you heard it?
or to say, as another poet,
something has tried to kill me, every day, and has failed.

No one is alone – the song and singer remind us;
yes, sometimes people leave you,
sometimes, you're on your own -
but still, you're not alone.

There's a difference between being on your own,
having to do some things, commit to some things, on your own -
and being alone.

None of us are created, cared for, taught, nurtured, on our own –
as if we're self-made, entirely.

Ancestors live within us –
those by blood, those by choice, those by example.

Within us all, there is some thread of connection,
be it obvious or not –
whether you call that love of spirit or God –
that part of us that feels awe and wonder
and connection to something beyond just our own self-interest –

within us all
there are soul-skills we've learned –
passed down from generations of family or friends or who knows where
of how we learned to carry things, balance things, embrace things,
how we learned, or how we had to re-learn from someone or something else,
how to care for ourselves or others,
how to get up again,
how to defy assumptions or burdensome expectations –
we have within us
strands of resilience
woven like a nest on a branch to hold us -
whether we realize it or not,
whether we've had to use those skills often or seldom,
but somewhere in our DNA
someone, something, some moment, some experience
has showed us how to survive, the best way we know how,
how to keep going, keep trying, keep moving
toward right now.

How to not let go, and set this life down.

That's what life is – it's made of those things we're committed to
that we just can't, and won't, set down -

Trying to make the path that day,
perhaps it's not too surprising,
that the older one,
pushing the wheelbarrow full of bricks and watching them fall,
gave into frustration quite quick.

But a younger one, nearby,
simply said – *oh no! Here, I'll help.*

And there, in the afternoon sun,
among the scattered bricks of hopes and dreams and hard work,
little arms reach down, trying to pick them up,
struggling, saying –

this is heavy – I don't think I can lift it – but I'll try.

And that's all I needed to remember –

resilience isn't always just powering through
and sucking it up and soldiering on
walking it off or whatever else you were told –

it isn't that you can pick it all up on your own,
as if it just takes determination -
and it certainly isn't that someone else can just pick it all up for you –

but resilience is what happens
when someone's else's' soul strength is strong enough
and reaches out to you
like spiritual jumper cables –
to remind you –
that your own song is strong enough
and when you sing it,
others will join you.