

Unitarian Society of Hartford  
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## **Omaha or Ithaca**

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### **Time for All Ages**

#### **A Most Important Thing**

Did you every lose something you really liked?  
Did you ever lose a person you really liked...like they moved away or died?  
When you lose something or someone very important, how do you feel?

My family lost a person we loved last week. My brother's grandson, whose name was Robbie, was sick, and he died, and we all feel very sad.  
That sad feeling is sometimes called grief. We grieve losses.  
Sometimes we say our heart is broken.

Now a broken heart is like a very big and bad cut on your knee.  
There is no medicine you can take that makes it go away fast,  
like cough medicine stops a cough.

Time going by is the only medicine that heals bad cuts and broken hearts.

But there are some things we can do to help time as it heals our hearts.

The first thing is to talk about how you feel,  
especially with other people who share your grief.  
You can tell stories about the thing or person you lost,  
like my brother and I talked on the phone about Robbie who died  
and my brother said,  
"Do you remember how Robbie loved to ride on the motorcycle behind you  
when he was little?"  
And I said, "Yes." And then we laughed, and then we cried.

I believe that every loss comes with a certain number of tears,  
and our hearts heal only when we've cried all the tears  
that come with that particular loss.

And, if it was a person or pet or thing we loved a whole lot,  
there will probably be a whole lot of tears over a long time.  
So we can talk about how we feel, and the thing we lost, and we can cry.

And there's one more thing.

We can also do rituals to share our grief, and to comfort each other.

For example, when somebody in our congregation dies we light this black memorial candle to remember them.

Some people say black candles are morbid or icky.

But..grief **IS** icky. It is as dark and black a feeling as we can have.

If we pretend like we aren't sad then all those tears just stay piled up in there and make it take longer for the cut to get well.

So the black candle ritual gives us a little moment to remember people we miss and to grieve their leave taking.

Today we have another ritual called, an All Souls Day celebration, in which we remember not just one person, but every single person in the world who ever died...all the souls.

Some adults are going to bring photographs of people they love who died, and put them on this table so we can all know about their loss and their love.

I'm going to put this picture of Robbie on the table.

Now I wonder, as we've been talking about grief and losing things and people, Do any of you feel sadness or grief about something you lost or something that died?

If you do, take one of these leaves and put it on the table as you go out, and know that your church family cares that you feel sad and wants to be with you as you grieve. If you don't feel a loss right now, please take a leaf and put it on the altar table anyhow, because you WILL have a loss sometime, and we want you to know that as your family at church, we care and will be there with you.

**Reading: "Ithaca" --C.F. Cavafy**

When you start on your journey to Ithaca, then pray that the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge. Do not fear the Lestrygonians and the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon. You will never meet such as these on your path, if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine emotion touches your body and your spirit. You will never meet the Lestrygonians, the Cyclopes and the fierce Poseidon, if you do not carry them within your soul, if your soul does not raise them up before you. Then pray that the road is long, that the summer mornings are many, that you will enter ports seen for the first time with such pleasure, with such joy! Stop at Phoenician markets, and purchase fine merchandise, mother of pearl and corals, amber and ebony, and pleasurable perfumes of all kinds, buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can; visit hosts of Egyptian cities to learn and learn from those who have knowledge. Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind. To arrive there is your ultimate goal. But do not hurry the voyage at all. It is better to let it last for long years; and, even to anchor at the isle when you are old, rich with all that you have gained on your way, not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches. Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage. Without her

you would never have taken the road. But she has nothing more to give you. And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you. With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience, you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

**Reading: "Limited" Carl Sandburg**

I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains of the nation.  
Hurling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air go fifteen all-steel coaches holding a thousand people.

(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women laughing in the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.)

I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."

**Pastoral Reflection: "Omaha or Ithaca"**

Imagine a straight line curving to make a circle.  
Now imagine that circle line becoming wavy, bumpy,  
And bulging into....a tree sticking out here on the circle,  
then a church forming here on the circle, then a person, a dog,  
a school, a bank, a mountain; until  
eventually, linked all around the outside of the circle is  
every single thing that exists, every imaginable form representing  
every cultural entity, natural entity, idea entity--  
everything you would label as existing, in existence!

Notice, that since each entity is drawn by bulges from that one  
single line, each object is open at its base to the inside of the circle  
and, inside the circle, imagine the words "**Essence: Ground of Being.**"

That is my illustration for Paul Tillich's systematic theology of correlation,  
where existence (the outside stuff) is the form of essence  
(the insides) and essence (the insides) is the substance, the filling of, existence.

All those structures that exist  
are full of rich warm substance flowing up from the core, the essence,  
the ground of being,  
so that essence gives substance to all existence  
and existence gives a shape or form to essence...

As you and I board the Limited and begin hurtling through blue mist,  
laughing in the diner,  
all we can see out the window are the structures of existence—  
culture, creatures, ideas, words, feelings.

Some of us never see deeper than that—enamored by consuming,  
ordering up more objects or relationships to wrap ourselves in,  
More brilliant ideological systems to lose ourselves in,  
more things we simply must do or experience or create,  
more fear of the unknown,  
we stay on the surface, superficial....  
in the smoking car with our limited consciousness,  
not noticing that we are on a limited access train,  
not noticing that life itself is limited, finite, that  
we are scrap and rust turning to ashes while hurtling across the prairie.

You could actually write the word Omaha on the outside of the circle...  
Omaha, most desolate and empty of destinations.  
the end of the limited journey.

**Some of us stay on the Limited, in first grade as far as  
consciousness goes, for our whole lives.**

We avoid contemplation and awareness of things below the surface,  
And especially of that which is perhaps the most important thing  
to know in order to move to a higher grade-  
that, there is a deadline....We do not have all the time in the world.  
the train will reach its destination.

Thankfully, Some of us do take note, do ask, is that all there is?  
And we begin to dig for gold, into the essence, the ground of being  
which lies at the heart of all things that exist.

I find that I begin to dig beneath the surface structures,  
when I've been hiking for four or five days  
with just what I can carry on my back;  
or when I've been traveling away from familiar faces and places  
for a few weeks, or years...  
or on meditation retreats of a week or more—when  
the stuff in existence loses its grip on my consciousness,

When the narcissistic accoutrements of self and reputation and identity  
begin to fall away a bit,  
and there is just the briefest glimpse of essence,  
that ground or substance of being which flows into us all,  
and **joins** us all as one at the core.

Further, I can find an opening to essence when I am confronted by loss,  
when I grieve,  
and allow myself to truly experience the frailty and vulnerability of life along the outside of the  
circle,

where trusted institutions fail us,

where friends betray us,  
where death denies us.

A Buddhist chant says it like this:

“I am of the nature to have ill health.  
I am of the nature to grow old.  
I am of the nature to die.  
I am of the nature to lose all that I love.  
I cannot escape my nature.”

Now, we could say that its morbid to think like that,  
to light our rooms with black candles.

But the point is not that we should assume gothic attire and gloomy aspect, brooding about death and loss in some chanel house which exists, as one of those structures along the surface of the circle, cloaking ourselves in tragedy and pathos as we know it in existence, on the surface of loss.

The point of such teachings, and of this sermon, which call us to contemplate loss as mysterious lover, who draws us deep beneath the covers, is that we can penetrate beneath the surface of loss to the essential heart of the matter.

It's hard to talk about loss as a gift, or an invitation, or a grace or a shove to the ultimate without sounding greeting card trite, because there are no words once we hit essence, no form we can capture adequately.

But it is my confidence, from my experience, that when I stay in the crucible of grief and tears, when I refuse to cheerfully 'snap out of it' on someone else's time table, when I gaze steadily at the hearts winter of discontent, when I share the loss in stories and tears, when I do my rituals, I find an invincible spring begin to bubble up, a fountain of life. where they are still in some way present, 'presente.'

There is a way in which our grief for them is transformed, into a determination to once again savor each morsel of **this** life, to gaze deeply into the eyes of our children, to stand amazed when we find ourselves loved or trusted or cared for again.

There is a way to experience the full meaning of life  
By grappling with the full mystery of death.

This being human can be a laughing diner car or stolid smoker car journey to rust and ash  
ending in Omaha.

**Or it can be a journey to Ithaca.**

The difference is in determining that... there is more than what we can see on the surface,  
more meaning, more connection, more possibility,  
and to go looking for it.

Though we are held within the limits of finitude,  
we can go deep such that life holds  
adventure in the unknown, pleasure, joy, lofty thoughts, fine emotions--

From the deck of the boat bound for Ithaca,  
The structures in existence, the ports and markets and cities of learning are still shaped the  
same,  
but viewed from this deeper perspective,  
every single object in existence is translucent, glowing with the essence  
at the core of all existing things, the essence in which we are one,  
and never alone.

And until we join this innumerable caravan of all souls,  
it is our role to notice that there are little altars everywhere,  
that the numinous, the holy, shines through,

and to stand in witness to the unspeakable truth,  
that there is more, more than the things existing along the circle of life,  
and ....that we who are along that circle are one,  
share one substance at our core,

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is our role to  
Recall and remind others that we are free-- to choose Omaha...  
most empty of destinations,

or to end our journey in Ithaca, laden with the richness of essence  
discovered at the heart of all we've experienced  
in our journey round the circle.

I am honored in this season of my life, to know you as my church family  
with whom I share in word and ritual my life's necessary losses,  
my tears, and my hope of glory.

A good All Souls Day to each of you, my precious family of faith.