

Equinox: Finding New Ways To Celebrate Ancient Things

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Yesterday was a very long day, involving four trains, much walking, and far too much coffee to be healthy.

After hearing the news Friday night of the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, I decided to travel to Washington on Saturday to be there. I had no plans about what I might do, save to witness what people were saying and doing, and to be there in whatever shared experience might present itself.

Yesterday, in the area in front of the building that houses the United States Supreme Court, the experience was powerful and sad and weird.

I am used to being in Washington with a group, attending an event, usually involving some kind of march or parade. I am used to chanting and shouting and flags waving and glitter and beads.

Saturday, it was quiet. people walked to the Supreme Court building mostly silently, some carrying flowers, some leading/pushing/carrying children. Nobody was laughing or flirting or chanting clever things. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced before.

It was not organized.

There were no leaders.

There were no instructions.

There were no Key Points To Emphasize When Talking To The Media. The media people were pretty low-key, all said.

There were no set hours.

There was no agenda.

There were barricades and a couple of bored looking security cops, but they weren't on high alert because the mood was just sad. Terribly, terribly sad.

It was simply a spontaneous public expression of grief -- shared grief, experienced by a nation of people concerned for justice and for the future of our republic. We needed to be together in that moment. I didn't see a lot of people hugging and crying on one another. People tried to maintain social distance as much as they could. Nearly all of them wore masks; and wore them correctly.

People tended to stay with the groups they came with, and would stand quietly in what looked like contemplation or prayer, and then place their flowers, or balloon, or whatever on the ever-expanding pile, and then stand back, looking at their expression of pain in the collective body that had emerged from so many other singular expressions of that same pain.

I have preached before from the Gospel of John, but its not a thing I do often. There is that one piece in chapter 11 that tends to be my go-to passage in times of grief: the story of Jesus and Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

Christian ministers will focus on the part of that story in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead after Martha reads him the riot act for showing up late.

I tend to stop before Lazarus arises, focusing instead on the moment when Jesus arrives on the scene and learns that his friend has died. In his pain and grief, he cries. In a time when the affluent would hire mourners to wail at their funerals, for a man to weep without being paid was proof of deep love indeed, and the crowd commented “look at him weeping. How he must have loved him.”

That is the part that is universal. Not the resurrection, not the miracles or the faith or anything else – it is the pain of loss, the grief we feel when someone we care about dies.

Grief is the price we pay for caring.

Grief is the price we pay for allowing ourselves to love.

It is as though no thing, no feeling, can exist without something to act against it. Sir Isaac Newton told us that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, and we understand that when it comes to physics (or we at least trust that it works, even if we don't entirely understand the physics part of it.)

We can understand that we must swelter through the summer to appreciate the cool fall air, just as we must shiver through the winter in order to appreciate the first magnificently warm days of spring.

But what does it mean for us to need love in order to feel the pain of loss?

Is it some kind of cruel joke of the universe that our pain is in direct proportion to our love? That the intensity of our joy is in direct inverse relationship to that of our sadness?

Is this the essence of the human condition? That we must feel everything in equal measure? That, for every bit of hope and exhilaration that we felt during the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, that we must now feel similar measures of fear and despair for there to be some kind of cosmic balance?

Are we fated to be at the mercy of this perverse dichotomy?

And to be honest, I don't have an answer to that question. There are psychologists and philosophers and theologians who have wrestled with just those questions for hundreds of years. I am a simple preacher who

likes to bang on metal for fun. That level of discussion is far above my pay grade.

While I cannot explain the great mysteries of the universe, nor the reasons behind the way humans feel and experience our lives in this realm, I can speak about what I am able to observe and deduce in my own simple way.

The dawn requires the night for it to exist.

Dusk requires the sun for it to happen.

There is a sacred kind of mathematics that causes the planets and stars to all spin and rotate and do their things, each in their own place all around the galaxy. There is some natural science at work there. When a body reaches the apex of its cycle, it must again return to its nadir. That means that the earth must tilt as far as it can in one direction and then return and tilt as far as it can the other way. It means that the moon affects the tides and the energy levels of preschoolers as well as adults.

It means that, in order for us to see the stars, the sky must be dark. If we are to truly treasure something, it must be vulnerable, and so must we.

Sometimes it is the pain that reminds us that we have a heart left at all.

The past four years have been brutal for a lot of people. Some of us – myself included – can begin to feel numb, beyond emotion. Beyond outrage. Beyond grief, or pain, or fear, or outrage. We are overwhelmed.

And then something will happen. Even something we really had every reason to expect to happen sooner rather than later, and we will again feel the sharp stab of pain when someone who is important to us – someone we care about – is gone.

As the Tin Man said to Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, “Now I know I have a heart because it is breaking.”

It is in this losing that we are reminded that we are not deadened souls.

It is in our ability to notice the loss of the summer that fades away with falling leaves, and brings in the crisp, cooler air of autumn.

The fall equinox is that moment between the extremes – the time when the earth is balanced between its longest day and its longest night.

It is the time when the teeter-totter of our seasonal cycle is balanced perfectly. This is a time when it makes sense to consider the two extremes that our human instincts seem to crave – a dual nature that is simple. Up or down, hot or cold, right or left, heads or tails, zero or one.

We are in this liminal space, between the high days of summer and the dark nights of winter; and in this ultimate of midpoints, we are reminded again of how the extremes define the center. The joy is countered by the

grief. The hope is countered by the disappointment. The amount of love we feel is reflected in the amount of grief we experience.

And I am here to tell you to embrace it.

Embrace that grief. Feel it. Express it, with guttural screams or silent tears, or whatever it is that you do to express pain and grief. Do that.

Do not be ashamed. Do not be embarrassed. Engage in those collective expressions of shared grief. Acknowledge that you feel as deeply as others and that they understand how much you're hurting, too.

Because it is only through caring deeply that we are able to feel that exquisite pain at the end of a joyful thing.

How great it's been!

Look at him weep. How he must have loved him.

May we always strive to feel deeply all that life offers us.

Blessed be and amen.