

All Saints Sunday

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

November 2, 2008; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

This untitled story was taken from a magazine called The Other Side sometime around 1990. I do not know the name of the author to give proper credit, but it remains one of the most helpful pieces I've ever read about grief. With that spirit it is shared today, on All Saints Sunday:

Shaping a new reality was painful work. It was mid-October, and he had died in March. Soon after the diagnosis that his disease was fatal, she found herself watching widows: studying their faces, how they entered rooms, who they mingled with, and how they spent their time. Most of them were her seniors, and she raged at the untimely approach of her own widowhood.

Gertrude, a woman in her church whose husband had died three months earlier, seemed already to reflect some kind of peace. One day after worship, she approached the older woman cautiously. "How is it for you, Gertrude?" she asked. "I am doing all right," Gertrude said, "but there is no joy yet." "Yet," she had said. The yet stuck. Gertrude's expectation of future joy somehow consoled the younger woman.

Now it was October. Seven months had passed since his death, and in her own life there was "no joy yet." She had learned to cope: to pass the hours at work, to serve as both father and mother, to nearly balance the checkbook. The routines were in place. But there was no joy.

Colors that once pleased her eye, sheets hung out to dry, music which nourished her spirit, birds returning to the feeder, even her own children's needs - nothing grabbed her anymore. She felt unfastened. She awaited the return of caring, of connecting. She was ready, she thought, to try to live again. But it all seemed flat and gray; the days were all the same. "You will get better," others said. She believed the ones who had been through it. But there was no quick remedy - the feeling of emptiness lingered like a virus of the spirit.

Walking the world with him had been so easy. She realized only after he was gone that she had checked her own reality through him, seeing herself the way he had seen her. They had been inseparable during those final months of his disease. Riveted to him, she was unaware of others who came to help. She ate and slept only to exist for one more day of caring. It was, she thought, like giving birth. Her body was not her own, but a vessel through which creation flung itself. Only now she was giving death - the life force in reverse - but she was just as caught and powerless and spent when it was over.

She thought that once his misery had passed, hers would lessen, too, but she was mistaken. The fear was gone, the panic of dialing 911, of waiting for doctor's calls, of

nursing him at home. But he had been consuming, calling forth a fierce, empowering strength. Now, without his deeds to magnify her, she felt flat, fragmented, distorted.

Like pieces of a puzzle, she was scattered. She often went to the mirror to check and see who was really there. How much of her was gone for good she could not tell, nor when, if ever, the pieces of herself would come together. It would have been easier, she often thought, to just go with him, to forget the struggle. One day, as he lay dying and she was filled with fear about the future, she said to him, "Why don't we change places? Let me pull the covers up over my head, and you stay here and struggle." His response both jarred and consoled her: "If I had to face the unknowns that are ahead for you, I know I'd feel the same," he said. "How do you think I'll be?" she asked. "You'll be all right. You have your head screwed on right and people will be kind to you." He was right about the people. They surrounded her with concern and caring for at least a month. But as her grief hung on, she had felt them pull away.

Again, Gertrude stopped by. As they sat peacefully drinking tea, she said to Gertrude: "I wish I could just go to sleep forever. I don't feel suicidal. It's not that. It's just that I long to stop the struggle and go with him. What's the point?" She could see her own pain reflected in her friend's eyes. "You will get better," Gertrude said, "but it takes a long, long time." Does it help to talk about him?" asked Gertrude. Her eyes lit up for just a second. "I miss his voice. He sang you know, all through this house." "I know he did," said Gertrude. "John sang, too. He sang in the operating room as children were being put to sleep for surgery." "Gertrude," she asked quietly, "would we be better off now if we had never heard their songs?" Gertrude thought a moment and drank her tea. "I don't think so," she said. "You need some time to pass. The void will begin to heal, and you'll hear the songs inside." They sat for a while in silence before Gertrude left. Those moments of pure desire to give up and go with him soon gave way to more complex realities.

One wet fall night, after raking the leaves and spreading them out on the flowerbeds, she settled down in the library. The house was still. She was thinking of the fall chores and what she had accomplished. The house, at least, was ready for winter. She put on Vivaldi's Four Seasons, listening as summer meandered into autumn and then moved relentlessly toward winter. She liked its progression, its movement through the seasons. It felt good to sit listening, surrounded by books. She scanned their covers. The titles had reflected how their interests had mingled. She liked the way their books fit together - his favorite poets and hers, fiction beside professional texts.

But now, as the music built and drove along toward "Winter," she stood up. Without really thinking about it, she pulled several of his books down, replacing them with her own. As the music quickened she worked faster, stacking his books on the floor and pulling her own down from high and scattered places, rearranging them more prominently around her desk. She chose a few of his to reshelve among her own, boxed the rest, and took them to the attic. A hard day's work she thought, untangling "his" from "hers." Harder really than the clothes. It had been much easier to fill the space in his closet with her clothes than to fill the void his mind left throughout the house. She

put an icon, some dried flowers, and a candle on the bare spots on the shelves and went to bed.

As autumn moved toward winter, weekends were the worst. In the mornings when she awoke the bed felt especially huge, and even the down was not very comforting. "Can you snuggle by yourself?" she wondered? But she got up quickly, ground fresh beans, and lingered over the good coffee. Often she sat in the library, watching for chickadees at the feeder and studying the new arrangement of her books. One Sunday morning it hit her that she felt less restless, less like she must keep pedaling just to endure the days. If there was no joy yet, at least there was less pain.

In late October she stopped one day for groceries. November like drizzle had already intruded upon crisp, clear autumn days, and her work had been quite ordinary. Now she stared at chicken breasts and turkey wings and tried to think - what? Pasta? Rice? How to fill them up? She pushed the cart along, hurrying past the produce, when something caught her eye. She stopped. There amid the onions, potatoes, and squash, sat a large and perfect pumpkin. It was fat and round, and she picked it up and put it in the child seat of the grocery cart. She ran her hand around it, marveling at its girth and its bubbly stem. It was a perfect pumpkin. "Gertrude would like this," she thought. "I'll buy it for her and take it over there tonight." She pushed through the aisles. But halfway through the frozen foods she stopped again, this time more abruptly. Others steered around her. "This pumpkin's not for Gertrude," she said aloud. "This pumpkin's for me. I want it, and I have not wanted anything for months." She saw it in her mind, orange and centered on her hearth. Two people stared, some hurried by in embarrassment, and others never noticed as she stood there amid the frozen foods, holding a pumpkin to her breast and weeping tears of joy.

Amen.