



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A year and a day

Rachel Mackintosh © 3 November 2024

Barbara Kingsolver, in her novel *Demon Copperhead*, has Demon say this:

“... she looked at me in the eyes, and we were sad together for a while. I’ll never forget how that felt. Like not being hungry.”

Like not being hungry.

She looked at me in the eyes, and we were sad together for a while.

I’ll never forget how that felt.

Like not being hungry.

Have you ever been seen like that by another person? Have you ever shared such a deep understanding, be it of sadness or of some other emotion? Do you know that feeling, of not being hungry?

Will you ever forget how that felt?

I will never forget how that felt.

A year and a day ago was All Souls’ Day. Yesterday was All Souls’ Day again.

All Souls' Day, which follows All Saints' Day, is the day for remembering all those souls in purgatory, All Saints' Day being the day for all souls in heaven.

Heaven and purgatory don't resonate much with Unitarians, but the inclusive feeling of all souls and all saints may speak to us nevertheless, as we live our Unitarian values of interdependence, pluralism, generosity, transformation and love.

In Mexican tradition, El día de los muertos, the Day of the Dead falls on 1 and 2 November. That tradition predates colonisation and is a time when the living are reunited briefly with the dead.

A year and a day ago, was All Souls' Day 2023, el día de los muertos. Clay Nelson, my love, died that day.

My heart broke that day. I couldn't understand how to be in the world. How could I go among the living with such a gaping wound in my being? How could I be? It was all just pieces, shattered. Not just pieces shattered, but also pieces missing. These pieces missing: The ritual of candlelight at dinner. The weekly journey to church on a Sunday with Clay in his pre-game zone. The daily telling of our days — not just the headlines, but the feelings, the mistakes, the triumphs, the mundane, the embarrassments, the transformations. The delight at seeing the world anew through another person's eyes. The reaching out to touch fingertips. The being seen. The not being hungry.

The day for all souls 2023 was the day my heart broke in a particular, personal, individual way.

On the day for all souls ... all the souls, all the dead and every one of us left behind have a particular, personal, individual story.

Today I will focus not so much on all the souls in purgatory, but on us, who are left behind. Left behind to live.

How can we do that?

How can we make sense of the pieces?

Broken pieces that may be like an ice floe, broken off the ice shelf, floating, diminishing as it melts away, carrying its doomed and lonely polar bear.

Broken pieces that may be like fallen dying leaves on a river, jostling against each other as they are swept downstream.

Broken pieces may be boulders and pumice and obsidian and lava exploding, thundering, flowing, burying the green land of our formerly stable lives.

Broken pieces may be raw and gaping wounds where a life has been ripped away.

Broken pieces may be shells, shards of glass, shards of concrete ... shards of life.

Life.

Death.

We, humans, who look for patterns, who crave certainty and understanding, who like to make sense of everything, how can we make sense of our broken hearts?

How can we make sense of the fact that that feeling of not being hungry is consigned and confined to our memories?

Here I am, after a year and a day.

Is this where the Bong Tree grows?

The Owl and the Pussycat is a nonsense poem.

How can I make sense of it?

The Owl and the Pussycat is the first but by no means the last place that the word “runcible” appears. Someone tried to tell me once that a runcible spoon is a spoon with a bowl at both

ends (and you may well have seen that illustration). This is really convenient for those of us who like a clear meaning. Who like to make sense of things.

Edward Lear wrote *The Owl and the Pussycat* in 1870, and over the next 25 years he gave us a runcible cat, a runcible hat, a runcible goose and a runcible wall. I don't think they all had a bowl at each end.

Thus, our conveniently clear meaning melts away. Where is the sense?

But *The Owl and the Pussycat* is a nonsense poem.

What do those things mean, sense and nonsense?

What are they to a Unitarian in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning?

How to make sense?

What does that even mean, to make sense?

Merriam Webster helpfully tells us that to make sense is to have a clear meaning.

By this notion of sense, runcible, like much else, can safely be said not to make sense.

My favourite dictionary is a 1959-edition *Shorter Oxford* that was always to hand as I was growing up and that still sits on my shelf for when I really need it.

Between sense as a verb and sense as a noun, this edition has almost three columns of very small print definitions of the word sense.

Some highlights: Sense is “[t]he meaning ... of anything cryptic or symbolical.”

Sense is also, “[a] general term for the faculties of Perception (including the five senses) ...”

And perhaps my favourite: sense is the “[c]apacity for perception and appreciation.”

The capacity for perception and appreciation.

And so back to The Owl and the Pussycat.

Like our shards, ice floes and boulders, the elements of the Owl and the Pussycat may appear as broken images that don't fit together: they took some honey and plenty of money wrapped up in a five-pound note.

They dined on mince and slices of quince ...

They may not make sense in the Merriam Webster sense of having a clear meaning.

But perhaps they make sense in that they stimulate our capacity for perception and appreciation.

What might we perceive in this poem?

Is its lack of a clear meaning a place for us, like good Unitarians, to live the questions?

The gap between sense and non-sense,

The space where we simply perceive. ...

We perceive these images.

We sense the feelings.

Too long we have tarried ...

What a beautiful pussy you are you are you are

And hand in hand on the edge of the sand

They danced by the light of the moon

The moon

The moon

They danced by the light of the moon

Oh how uncomfortable, for an empirical Unitarian!

The gap between sense and non-sense.

This perception and appreciation is all very well but I am still broken!

My heart is still broken.

How can I be?

How can I heal?

Kintsugi might help.

Kintsugi, which means “join with gold”, is the Japanese art of repairing broken objects, often ceramic pottery or glass. Traditionally, gold lacquer is used to piece shards together again, creating a more beautiful object through the acts of breaking and repair.

This may help us to progress from the paralysis of being shattered, heartbroken, unable to understand how to be in the world.

We come to this church for community, we come for meaning, we come for love, we come to serve humankind in fellowship.

Can we be the kintsugi gold for one another? Can we be the gold for others outside these walls? Can we, through this community, repair each other’s brokenness, each other’s broken hearts? Not repairing each other to a state as good as new. Not a repair that disguises the pain. A repair that takes the brokenness and honours it.

A repair that integrates our memories.

Our memories of the souls departed.

Our memories of love.

Can we walk with each other’s grief, can we appreciate the polar bear on the ice floe and give her another place to stand, can we marvel at the majesty of the erupting volcano, can we see the shine in the shards of broken glass?

Can we be here for each other, painting in gold lacquer with the gifts we bring into this community. Can we be the gold for one broken heart, for many ...?

Can we allow for a healing after which we might again feel this:

“... she looked at me in the eyes, and we were sad together for a while. I’ll never forget how that felt. Like not being hungry.”

Amen

Meditation / Conversation starter

- How do you remember the dead?