

"The Gifts of Impermanence"

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Her voice rang out from the back of the hall,
after I'd been impulsive enough to ask for requests.

"Pennies!" called out my dear friend Susan...naming a song that I no longer
played and in fact wasn't sure I still remembered.

"I'm so sorry," I said, feeling regretful and embarrassed.
"I don't remember how to play that one."

I had let "Pennies" go because, well, I had let pennies go.

The Canadian one cent penny had been retired a few years earlier, and as a
result the song was suddenly obsolete.

What was the point of playing a song about a now non-existent
one cent coin?

I might as well sing about the rotary dial phone or the handwritten
letter...both of which I was also very fond.

Wasn't the penny over and done with? Well, according to my friend, not at
all.

After she called for it, I found that I missed "Pennies."
So I went home and re-learned it.

And then, just a few years later, my friend suddenly died...
as the result of a very unexpected and fast-moving illness.

Susan had moved away to look after an aging relative and become ill herself...dying before I could travel out to see her.

I think of her often.

And I haven't forgotten how to play "Pennies."

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Now, compared to the loss of a dear friend,
the loss of that small coin is a very small thing.

Paying tribute to it in a song holds the risk of sentimentality...
and yet, like every other work of art that comes and goes,
it serves as a reminder of the losses that create meaning in our lives.

Losses we cannot prevent...losses we often lament.

Absences...that make the sheer presence
of what remains all the more vivid and meaningful.

It's been said that without death, life would hold no meaning.
As true as that may be, that doesn't make it any easier.

And even if we've come to terms
with the "big impermanence" that is dying...
it's also hard to accept the "little impermanences"
that make up our lives.

These often catch us off guard, thwarting our expectations
and giving rise to grief and resentment,
disappointment and conflict.

Here are a few I can think of, and I'm sure you can add your own.

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Well, of course, youth and health are right up there.

As time passes, these pass away,
sometimes gradually and sometimes all of the sudden.

Our bodies change, whether we want them to or not.
So do our capabilities, our skills, even our intellect.

Then there are our accomplishments and career paths.
Our various successes, large and small.

As much as we'd like them to be permanent,
and expect them to be...work hard for them to be...
they are not "steady state." They come and go.

Then there are relationships.

The fact that friendships change and often end can be a huge shock...and
of course many relationships end,
even some that we vowed would be permanent,
in marriage for example.

The people around us are always changing
and we ourselves are always changing and growing...
so the state of our relationships is always impermanent.

As someone wise once said: "No one steps in the same river twice..."
because both we, and the river, are ever-changing.

Speaking of pennies: our possessions and our money will not last.

If we're fortunate, we may pass some along to others...
and yet, there is an impermanence to all material things,
despite our attempts to think otherwise,
especially when we are wealthy and privileged.

Here's one thing we know a lot about:
physical homes and buildings.

They seem so permanent, so lasting, so *concrete*.
And yet, they too are impermanent.

Also impermanent? The nature and composition of every church and
organization we've ever known, including this one.

Certain characteristics may be lasting, perhaps for many years.

But a congregation's capacities, structures, activities and abilities are
anything but constant. They are ever-changing.

In recent years, the pandemic has shown us that our ways of doing
business and communicating with each other are not permanent, either.

The way we meet, the ways we keep in touch,
these were evidently not permanent...
even though we may have expected them to be.

Walking down any street of our city today will reveal the impermanent, as
so many stores and restaurants are gone,
so many people have moved,
and even the weather is different than it used to be.

As someone who has lived in Toronto for more than 40 years,
I can tell you that my city now seems to be haunted by ghosts on every
corner.

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Now, this talk is titled "The Gifts of Impermanence"...
but from the litany of losses I've just shared with you,

you might think it should be titled "The Curses of Impermanence"
--and you would have a point.

The losses, griefs and disappointments of life
are not what we would choose.

And yet, if there is a secret at all to peace of mind or well-being,
it is to accept life on life's terms.

To let go of what needs to be released,
turning our full attention to the present moment,
with the gifts that it continues to hold...
whatever our circumstances may be.

When we do so, we may notice that feelings of
grief, pain and suffering come and go too...

And that it is possible, also,
for times of difficulty to change for the better.

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I must make clear that I need this teaching
as much as anybody else...and I am not at all an expert.

In fact, I've heard it said that we always teach
what we most need to learn.

As I have surveyed wisdom teachings over the past several years
in my own limited way, it has seemed to me that "impermanence" is one of
the great themes of all spiritual teaching.

It is addressed by virtually every wisdom teacher in every tradition,
religious and secular...and all forms of spiritual practice teach us to attach
and detach, hold on and then let go, over and over again,
as we try to make meaning of life in the face of death.

As the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi puts it:
"Nothing is perfect, nothing is finished, and nothing lasts."

As we heard in the reflection that Catherine shared with us earlier in the service, recently the CBC Radio program "Ideas" featured an interview with astrophysicist Katie Mack.

In a new book,¹ she puts forth the possibility that the Universe itself will eventually end...perhaps in trillions of years, but end just the same.

In her research, she has found that some people take this news very stoically but other people are deeply unsettled by it.

Katie Mack, herself, was unsettled. She had to grapple with this difficult knowledge that the Universe might end.

As we heard, she arrived at a response that is well-aligned with other teachings, that is:

"You need to find some kind of meaning in the universe that doesn't rely on the future."

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Recently I attended an online talk by Cynthia Bourgeault, a wisdom teacher in the Christian tradition.

She wrote a book called "Mystical Hope"² which suggests a route toward spiritual well being that is completely in line with what Katie Mack proposed.

¹ Katie Mack, *The End of Everything: (Astrophysically Speaking)*, 2021.

² Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God*, 2001

Cynthia Bourgeault points out that in our culture, hope tends to be tied to outcome.

"I hope I get the job"..."I hope such-and-such doesn't happen."

While planning and future hopes are completely normal and often necessary, she tries to cultivate a more durable hope that does not depend on outcome...

One that allows for impermanence and finds meaning and richness in the here-and-now, exactly as it is.

When we learn to find meaning in the here-and-now, we can stay present in the impermanence of life with a sense of openness, curiosity and gratitude.

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Coming to terms with impermanence is the great task of what has been called "the second half of life."

It is not tied rigidly to chronological age... but it often comes about after the significant loss of something we hoped would be permanent...

Or something we thought we needed for our sense of self or security.

The transition from first half of life to second half of life can come about as the result of a the loss of a loved one, a serious illness, a divorce, a major job loss or personal failure, or some other radical change in one's circumstances.

When we realize, usually against our wills,
that something we believed to be permanent is not...
we can be awakened to our inner resources
and begin to make meaning of life as it is.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön puts it plainly:

"Most spiritual experiences begin with suffering.
They begin with groundlessness.
They begin when the rug has been pulled out from under us."³

The Christian teacher Richard Rohr offers similar perspective in a book
called "Falling Upward"⁴...

And a few weeks ago, Rev. Shawn shared the deep wisdom of Phillip
Simmons in the book "Learning to Fall: Blessings of an Imperfect Life,"⁵
written when he was dying of [living with] ALS.

These streams of insight will come to us from different sources,
and you will find the ones that particularly suit you.

But whichever tradition or school of thought draws you,
you may notice a focus on the here-and-now.

If we can find meaning in the present moment
we may sense a connection to a greater wholeness...
and find ourselves sustained
during challenging times of impermanence.

It doesn't mean that we will not experience pain and grief...
because of course we will.

But deep within us we may sense that our pain

³ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, 1996

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 2011

⁵ Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, 2001

is held within the beauty and mystery of a much larger picture...
and that we can trust that unfolding.

Perhaps it was that infinite and eternal dimension of life
that our Unitarian ancestor Theodore Parker
was thinking of, when he wrote:

"What is of absolute value never changes;
we may cling round it and grow to it forever.

The question puts itself to each [of us]:

'Will you cling to what is perishing, or embrace what is eternal?'"

Perhaps we embrace the eternal
when we contemplate beauty...
when we listen deeply to another...
when we gaze up at the stars.

Perhaps we sense that the eternal,
even in the presence of the passing.

Perhaps we honour and treasure it
by quieting our mind
and simply being present,
in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

As Rashani Réa wrote in the poem
"The Unbroken" we heard earlier:

"There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,

a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.

There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy

and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loos,

out of whose darkness
we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart

as we break open to the place inside
which is unbreakable and whole,

while learning to sing."

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It's worth saying, also, that even this insight...
which I try to pass along and which you will find in countless sources...

Even this insight is impermanent.

There will be days that we may feel we've "got it"...
that we understand how to stay in the present moment
and not insist that everything be exactly the way we want it.

But then, before we know it, we'll catch ourselves getting upset when a
different rug is pulled out from under us.

If you're anything like me, you might find yourself jumping from one rug to another...and falling again and again.

And perhaps that's good, because it gives me another opportunity to learn and to grow.

The great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn who himself died during the past year, said:

"Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is possible."

One thing that is possible, thanks to impermanence, is that we might grow into people of more wisdom, compassion, empathy and kindness.

That we might expand in our capacity to love the world, as imperfect as it is...

And that we need not be stuck in the old patterns of demanding things go our way or stay the way they are.

When we understand that everything comes to us as a gift, and that every gift is one of impermanence,

We can come to treasure what comes our way for the short time it does.

We can honour the worth and value of every single moment

As it arises and passes away.