

Spirituality of Perseverance
Rev. Hannah Petrie
Text: "Option B" by Sheryl Sandberg

CALL TO WORSHIP

Albert Camus said, "In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

READING "Option B" by Sheryl Sandberg, pp 51

I often like to spend time with a particular text when I preach, using it as a tool of reflection for what I know about my own life, the spiritual theme that day, and what liberal religion has to say. People talk about how there's too much good TV to watch, but for me there are too many good books to read, so I'm often inspired to use them for worship. However, I love to receive sermon topic requests, so please do feel free to mention in passing or in an email what you'd like to hear about through all the lenses I bring to bear on our worship. I like a challenge – one suggestion I heard a few months ago was looking at the new era of Me Too, which would have been appropriate for today, especially after the 2nd Annual Women's march yesterday. However, I've got feminism of a different sort to highlight today.

Now, most of us know who Sheryl Sandberg is and her landmark work, "Lean In," a book encouraging women to go after the promotion, to live in to our rightful seat at the tables of power. I believe she's not much older than me, and when this book came out, and she became Facebook's top manager, it would seem she had the perfect life. In a lot of ways she did, and so it makes it all the more poignant to read her account of carrying on after the sudden death of her husband utterly devastated her, a few years ago.

This is a book about how to carry on after tragedy, and perhaps even more importantly, a book about how to support our friends and family who are going through tragedy and grief. Here she talks about the challenge of how there is no one way to do it right on either side, and the "Platinum Rule of Friendship . . ."

PRAYER From "Tear Soup" by Chuck Deklyen and Pat Schwiebert

READING Rachel Remen: "Holding On to the Heart."

SERMON

Why *do* I sometimes pick these depressing topics of grief, death, and tragedy?

Believe me, I want nothing more than to send you soaring out of the sanctuary each and every Sunday with uplifted spirits, but soma* is not what we sell here.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we are in the business of honoring the truth, as best we can, as much as we can stand, and this requires us to not shy away from the less pleasant topics. In the world as we know it, we can't deny that horrible things happen to people and their loved ones. There are degrees of horrible, but tell that to the person recovering through devastating loss - sometimes it's an untimely death. Sometimes it's worse than death.

We examine grief because it's universal – no one escapes grieving as part of a full life, and reflecting on grief and perseverance through a spiritual lens provides a reminder to us all that it doesn't matter how successful you are; how perfect your life appears; how much this or that you have accomplished or own – every human alive is bonded in that inescapable network of mutuality that Dr. King spoke of – no matter our station, we can all suffer unspeakable loss. The material world and its many illusions of comfort and security will never be able to change that.

We religious liberals believe that it's the strength of our hearts and the treasures we keep safe in our souls that help us through adversity, and so it's worthwhile looking at these treasures, at these instruments. Like everything we are gifted with in life, they are only as powerful as much as we care for them, and keep them alive, keep them sacred and fresh – in other words, known to ourselves, a touchstone of intimacy with our being.

Sheryl Sandberg did a heck of a job in this book, helping us to look at these sacred parts of ourselves and the lives we build around us, the community we nurture for one another. It turns out one of the treasures of our souls, is our own heart, and like the soft, velveteen feely hearts that the Bridges bereavement center in Tacoma, Washington gives to children who lose a parent or a sibling, we come into a fuller humanity, when we understand that we too have to treat the treasure of our souls in the same way – actively holding our own hearts and the hearts of our loved ones tenderly, with courage that it is deserved and necessary, and needed.

Rachel Remen mentions how medical professionals are trained to be ashamed of their feelings of sadness when a patient is dying or dies, and unfortunately, the Stoic and shaming nature of our culture permeates well beyond doctors – I think all of us are socialized to some degree to feel ashamed of tears, grief, and painful sadness.

I blame the damned Puritans and the Protestant work ethic and the Stoics and every other patriarchal, cultural influence that ever said being vulnerable is weak and wrong and deserving of ridicule. It's actually the opposite.

* Soma is a reference to "Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley. Soma is the drug that makes everyone feel marvelous all the time.

Many a woman has been brought down because she was too honest and emotional at times, and it makes folks uncomfortable - but the discomfort is in being frightened of her raw power. The truth is that in our most vulnerable states, we are committing an act of courage, of surrender, and this is actually a character trait of strength and humility, not weakness. It's a character trait of honesty and integrity.

There's no question that, man or woman, reading "Option B" will help you to become more resilient and capable of compassion. It's a book about actions rather than words, which is an evolutionary concept. I worry that our culture relies on words too much these days, let alone images, and not enough face to face acts of kindness and support, not enough hand-holding. We humans are in trouble if we don't learn the nuts and bolts of active compassion for one another.

Now, this is hard, and dark, but part of living in this new era of climate change, uncertainty, and fear, is that we do and we will have to bear witness – as we are able – to the horrible things happening to our fellow human beings as a result of climate chaos and all the attendant stresses this brings. If we haven't already, we *will* be called upon to comfort the friend whose house has burned down, or destroyed by flood.

There is a great deal of loss *now*, in our vicinity, and there's a great deal more coming, I'm afraid. I had dinner last night with a friend who lives half-time in Santa Barbara and she says grief and loss are just permeating the area these days, from the fires and mudslides. She says everyone knows someone who lost something in these natural disasters – for example, my friend's previous landlord died in the Montecito mudslide. Remember the Kevin Bacon thing about 6 degrees of separation? Whatever illusions of separateness we've had, we are now in an era where such illusions will fall away if we are going to truly help and support one another through the many unknowns. As it turns out, my friends, there are no degrees of separation, and the sooner we understand this, the more wisely we can proceed.

We need practical guides for dealing with loss and grief, that we may persevere, not just as individuals, but as a people, as part of the many communities of hope such as this one whose purpose is to help humanity survive *and* thrive.

Here's my point: I've been reflecting, as I read this book – I'm $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through and I plan to finish it – that there is little hope of humanity responding with wisdom and compassion to the tragic events of people we imagine far removed from us, people such as, a trans woman of color being murdered, which happens twice monthly in our country, or the three women who die every day in our country via domestic violence, or the black and brown men suffering in the criminal justice system, the undocumented, and so on.

There is little hope of humanity caring for the desperately dispossessed, if we don't even know how to respond to the tragedies in the lives of the people we know and love and care deeply about.

This book has been hard to read on a number of levels, however, it's like tough love that's good for you. I experienced moments of shame as I read "Option B" because I realized there have been many times when my response to the loss of another was inadequate, or probably not helpful. Especially since I'm a minister, and should know better, I wish I had had this book to read back in Seminary.

But now, when I become aware of an area of needed improvement in my life, rather than beat myself up about it as I may have in the past – I actually get excited and feel very happy that I've received important knowledge that will help me to be a better person, better at helping others. Rather than dwell on my ignorance, I try to embrace and celebrate the new way of being.

There are people in my life for whom I'd like to follow through on some extremely practical suggestions Sandberg makes in this book. For example, she talks about how a lot of people's responses to grief in their friends' lives, is to disappear. The rationale goes something like this, "she probably wants to be left alone. If I say the wrong thing, I will upset her and make it worse. She probably doesn't want to talk about it, and probably not with me." But what's more honestly going on here is the fear that they will get brought down to that horrible place of grief, with their friend, and they won't know how to handle it.

It's a human response of self-preservation, but what I want us to think about today, is that we need to challenge ourselves to examine this, and *act* as stronger people for our loved ones when they desperately *need* our strength. Again, this is a matter of evolution of our humanity. Our grieving friends and loved ones need *our* strength to show them *their* strength.

What I love about Sandberg's book is that it's a feminist statement and action in itself, for her to have bravely spelled out what she needed and what she *didn't* need as a grieving woman, as a grieving human being. To every man (or woman) who's told a woman to "buck up," they can think better of it. The castigations of hysteria are over, and Sandberg's book signals a turning point.

What a fresh beam of hope to have this guide that so succinctly shows us how we might treat ourselves and others more effectively in times of crisis, loss, and tragedy. Holy are the actions she suggests, because they have entirely to do with right relationship, with ourselves and others. These are holy matters because it's the relationships with one's self and one another that matter the most as part of living – relationships really are all that we take with us when we die, we don't get to take anything else – this is precisely what the beautiful story of CoCo is about, the Disney Pixar film that should win Best Picture, forget about the animated category!

As the director has said himself, this is not a children's movie, it's a movie for *all* ages that teaches what really matters.

What matters is what people remember you did for them, and them for you, that it's the love of family that lives on forever, and I would add our *found* family is very much the same thing, the same concept. I hold my blood kin dear, but several friends just as dearly, as I'm sure many of us do.

So, obviously you should read this book, but let me emphasize the take-home messages today. The first is that I encourage us all to learn how to respond to others' grief more actively. But second is to recognize our own needs around grief.

Because of the nature of our culture, and our separateness, and our worries of burdening others, many of us live in isolation with our grief. Or, similarly, we isolate our grief from ourselves. "Oh, I shouldn't cry about that anymore." We push that grief out of our minds, but guess what's carrying it while we're trying so hard not to experience it – our hearts, the treasure of our souls!

That heart needs love, because it's heavy; it needs surrender sometimes – not all the time, but sometimes. It's our tear soup, it's nobody else's – we made it with love and it belongs to us. We shouldn't ignore when we want our treasure to be treated like a feely heart, tenderly, the same way we would comfort a child.

When I was growing up in a UU church, I recall the big thing I kept hearing the minister talk about was "the child within." I think it's a lovely spiritual concept that I wish I would turn to more often. *The child within* is another treasure-image of our souls. Vulnerable and open and loving, imagine yourself as a child right now. Close your eyes, and see him or her. Now, imagine this confident child is there, in your times of need, to comfort you, to remind you of your best self, your strength, your goodness. And failing this, is merely there to comfort you, to be with you.

Some of the best parts of Sandberg's book are when she recognizes she needs to let people help her. She needs to need, and make her needs known so she can survive.

Now some of you may be thinking – this sermon sucks, why is she telling me to experience the miserable state of grief? I only suggest this insofar as it sounds like a good idea to you. If it sounds like a terrible idea, don't worry about it, treasure your grief-free state, by all means. I suggest it at all because I believe our culture and especially women in our culture are often told to ignore our needs, and so, we aren't good at helping ourselves. And if we don't know how to help ourselves, we can't help those closest to us in their times of need, and we if can't help them, we can't help the people we don't know, who suffer unspeakable tragedy due to injustice, due to society's failure at decency, caring, and humanity.

Do you see what I'm pointing out here? Our hope for a more just and peaceful society begins with learning how to have compassion for ourselves. It's learning to

let go of traditional gender roles that prescribe which emotions are acceptable and which are not. But beyond gender, it's about challenging our culture of Stoicism and indifference. To care, to mourn, to weep – these are not acts of weakness, they are holy acts of strength as we encourage ourselves and one another.

It's how we get through, it's how we get to experience moments of joy and laughter again. I love the Kahlil Gibran wisdom from his work "The Prophet", of your cup of joy only being as full as once was your cup of sorrow. There's a beautiful symmetry here, a sad one, but a real one – difficulty is not something we pretend not to see or talk about or mention, it's actually the driving force of balance and experience that drives the evolution of our souls, that unites us as humans. We are not meant to survive alone - we can only survive and thrive together, seeing our own humanity in the souls of others, when we are thoughtful and caring enough to deign to look, to really see the struggles of our fellow human beings, our loved ones.

So there you have it, a one-two punch take-home. If this stuff is difficult for you or just plain un-pleasant, for whatever it's worth, it's hard for me too, to acknowledge all the pain in the world there is to deal with. But I feel that's my job, to help us think through these spiritual challenges of our hearts and souls. It's hard, but it's *good* news – that we are unlimited, that we can help ourselves and others, come what may.

We truly are in this together, "this thing called life," and so let us not only be grateful, but faithful. And vulnerable. And brave.

AMEN.