

Running through the Thistles
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by PJ Waldow

My 2021 began with receiving the devastating chronic illness diagnosis that would forever alter my life. This diagnosis meant the end of my beloved massage career and performing as a tap dancer. And now I had the daunting task of grieving my job and physical ability as I had known it until then.

The first two of Dr. William Worden's Tasks of Grieving were the easiest; accept the loss and process the emotions associated with it. The next two were harder; adjust to my new world and build an enduring connection to my loss (while still embarking forward). Even though the chaos of the outside world was pulling at my attention, I needed to look inward.

That April, I noticed a lot of videos about autistic people and neurodivergence coming in on my YouTube feed. Turns out, it was Autism Awareness month. I immediately fell down a research rabbit hole, as I started noticing I had uncanny similarities with the autistic community. Even more specifically, my story was nearly identical to the late discovered, high masking adult population. For the next several months, my new special interest was neurodiversity. I studied clinical data and personal anecdotes from those with lived experience. I analyzed my own life; the ways I struggled, my unique qualities, and the ways that I masked or camouflaged to fit in.

While this discovery brought forth its own grief process, it finally explained some of my mysterious life struggles. I was considered 'bright,' hard working, and personable yet I struggled with attendance in school and later work due to frequently shutting down and burning out. This was more than just being bored with something or depressed. Overstimulation and exhaustion would push me into catatonia. Sometimes I would lose the will to live. Being autistic also explained why the massage profession was as close to a 'perfect' career for me as one could get. The environment was dark, warmer, relaxing music was playing and I was able to profoundly connect to people without speaking a lot or having to make eye contact (which feels intensely intimate to me). This profession also made use of my high sensitivity, as I could feel subtle changes in my client's tissue.

Turning inward and paying attention to myself, after years of focusing so much on trying to fit into the outside world, gave me a new roadmap to my path. This journey also unveiled other underlying genetic conditions that were elusive because I'm adopted and have no family history to draw upon. I now better understand what my limitations are and some accommodations that would allow me to participate, contribute to the community and ecosystem.

There are unexpected treasures that can be found through the transformative process of grief, one need only to pay attention in order to receive them. I certainly never expected to uncover one of the most profound gifts one could ask for; finally finding my authentic self and a community I belong to. And like a snake shedding its skin, I will continue to let the healing power of grief transform me.

Running through the Thistles© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

We often say at memorial services that grief is the price of love, and the cost of being fully human. If we didn't love, we wouldn't grieve the loss. And I'm speaking of all kinds of losses here – the loss of a marriage, the loss of a relationship, the loss of a home, or an identity, health, a profession, or the death of a loved one. Parke Street, in our reading, is referring to the loss of a relationship to a congregation as a clergy person leaves to go on to serve another congregation or, as in my case, to retire. And Roy Oswald wrote this manual, *Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish* because of the clear similarities between grief and loss upon a death of a loved one and the ending of a relationship between a congregation and its minister.

You may remember last fall when Sara Gibb Millspaugh preached – the Sunday after I announced I'd be retiring end of July. Rev. Millspaugh is our contact for the Western Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the professional who will help you through this first part of our transition. She referenced the story behind the title *Running Through the Thistles* – the fact that Roy Oswald remembers following his brothers through the shortcut home from school, that would often lead to their getting thistles in their bare feet – this was rural Saskatchewan in 1942. The point of this analogy is that we can shortcut the grief, but it will come back to bite us. Writes Oswald, "For me this story illustrates how some pastors approach their termination periods. They rightly assume that there will be pain involved, so their approach is to run through it as fast as they can. This kind of manic behavior at the closure of a ministry does have certain advantages – but there is a price to pay as well. Beyond this, it is clearly a death denying approach to closing out one's life in one place."

Grief tests our integrity, according to John Schneider, author of *Transforming Consciousness through Embracing Change and Experiencing Grief*. John was UU and held leadership positions in the congregation I served in Michigan before I served them. I met him at a clergy retreat where he taught about grief. He has since died. But he says that our temptation is to avoid the fullness of the experience.

I can attest to that. It is my temptation to avoid the fullness of the experience. It hurts. We are hardwired to try to avoid pain. And yet the only way to heal is through the pain. Through it. It's hard. If we try to sidestep it, distract ourselves from it – you've heard the advice: keep busy, go on with life, get over it, hurry up, - if we take that advice and refuse to do the grief work necessary, then it will all come back on us again and again and again. Grief, he says, lasts as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to. John Schneider names the work of grief as coming to terms with what's lost, what remains, and what's possible. I find that a helpful frame.

John Fletcher worked for the Alban Institute, a research based congregational consulting group. Fletcher studied the "termination tasks" of terminally ill patients and applied these same tasks to clergy as they resign from their parishes. I also find these helpful, and particularly useful to me as I face my final months with you; 138 days to be exact, but who's counting?

These termination tasks include (and they're framed here from the perspective a dying person):

1. They need to take control of what remains of their life (as far as possible) with some help if necessary, as opposed to passively letting others dictate how they will die.
2. They need to get their affairs in order (make a will if they haven't already done so, take care of loans, debts, etc.
3. They need to let old grudges go. This implies dealing directly and candidly with those against whom they harbour resentment, anger, disappointment, etc.
4. They need to say "thank you" to the people for whom they feel gratitude.

Let's go through them each, from the perspective of a congregation losing its minister, a minister letting go of her career, and that third loss – whatever loss you've been contemplating this morning as I preach: Like PJ's chronic illness diagnosis and the losses resulting from it.

1. They need to take control of what remains of their life (as far as possible) with some help if necessary, as opposed to passively letting others dictate how they will die.

As a congregation, you are living a dual reality – you are saying goodbye to your minister of nearly a decade while planning your future without her. Aren't we all the time living in the moment and focusing on the future? This termination task is the part about living in the moment. The congregation is to take control of what remains of our life together, our current relationship, rather than passively letting me dictate how these last few days will play out. You are to participate in these final days with me.

For me, it is the same. My termination task is to be here now and not focus on my retirement once I'm separated from you. I think that's why I have a tough time answering your questions about what I'll do next. I have some ideas, but I also want to let those answers come when they come and not go into retirement with a lot of preconceived notions about it. I'm trying really hard to stay with you now, to focus on my job and to not let the senioritis that I am seriously experiencing lead to a neglect of my current duties and relationships. I'm taking control by already having told the Board what gift I'd like from the congregation upon my departure – that way you don't have to guess and I get what I will truly treasure – spoiler alert: I want Side with Love stole that you have all signed on the back so that when I participate in public witness, which I will continue to do, I will be carrying you with me, even though I will no longer be with you.

What ending are you thinking about this morning and how can this termination task apply to the changes you are facing? How might you take control of what remains? How might you stay present in the now?

2. The second termination task is to get their affairs in order (make a will if they haven't already done so, take care of loans, debts, etc.)

For the congregation, this is things like adopting the vision statement you did last fall and making sure your committees are functioning and writing up your congregational profile as Board members Penny, Christine, and Michael are doing on your behalf. This second termination task doesn't look very different from what a congregation does on a regular basis, only there is an awareness that those things that aren't in order will become challenges for your next minister.

For me, this task is about making sure I've documented things I do so I can pass along knowledge to the next minister. Whether or not they choose to do them in a similar way, they should know how I've operated. I have completed covenants with the retired ministers and chaplains in this congregation, so that your future minister knows what my relationship with my colleagues has been and how they can potentially support the new ministry. All the books in my office are on my mind as a termination task! I'd like to gift to church what Barbara Ogden, our church librarian, thinks you could use, and also to throw an open house where you might go through my library to pick and chose books of interest. There are a lot of things I have yet to do to get my affairs in order in the next 138 days. Next week I'll be at a retirement retreat in Baltimore, and I'm sure I'll learn a few more things I need to do to get my affairs in order before leaving you.

What are the affairs you need to get in order as you face the challenge you've been thinking about this morning?

3. They need to let old grudges go. This implies dealing directly and candidly with those against whom they harbour resentment, anger, disappointment, etc.

This is a tricky one. Letting go of old grudges is not dumping a list of resentments on another on the way out the door. One of your board presidents told me this week that some of the UUA materials or your regional contact warned against going over a list of your disappointments with the departing minister. On the other hand, as I told the new members who signed the membership book a week ago Saturday, you don't really become a member of a church until after you've weathered your first disappointment in the church. We are a human institution, made of flawed humans, and so we do disappoint one another from time to time, and it is important to deal directly and candidly with one another around those disappointments. This termination task is not about laying those resentments on another, but about letting old grudges go – which sometimes involves addressing them directly, but also can be done through our own personal spiritual work. The grudges we carry against others weigh down our own shoulders – sometimes it is more about us and can have less to do with the object of our resentment or anger or disappointment.

As you think about the loss that is most present in your mind and heart this morning, what grudges are you carrying that could be set down and released before moving on? What steps do you need to take to make that happen?

4. The fourth termination task is to say “thank you” to the people for whom they feel gratitude.

For the congregation, what things have we accomplished in the last nine years together that you are grateful for? Can you identify those things and express your gratitude for them.

This one reminds me of my first Community Sunday with you all – where I learned there was this congregational tradition of naming and thanking every single volunteer in the system. It felt like a burdensome task not just because how long the ritual had to be to accomplish it, but I was just sure I would leave someone out of the long list of thank-yous. (and of course I did that very first year, much to my embarrassment.) This led to a revision of your liturgy, so now we thank volunteers each and every Sunday, a rotating list that hopefully reaches everyone in the course of a program year. *We lift up our heart in thanks this day* is an opening refrain that reminds us to be grateful and express our thanks directly and often. I love this ritual because I am not a person who expresses her gratitude often or well. I have colleagues who write thank you notes weekly to members of their congregation, and I really admire that practice. It’s just not something I’ve been able to incorporate into my ministry.

When you think about the loss most present to you this morning, who are the people for whom you feel gratitude? How and when will you thank them?

All my grandparents were dear to me. I’m fortunate to remember eight of them (Grandma and Grandpa Cunningham, Grandma Davies, Grandma Esther, Gaga and Grandpa Howlett, and Grandma and Grandpa Norrie). I had a special relationship with my Norrie Grandparents. They lived in Spokane for most of my life. When Stuart and I were first married and had a son, we lived in Chelan and then Wenatchee, and would drive over to visit my grandparents many weekends in Spokane. Both my grandparents doted on our son, Theo, and I particularly remember Grandpa well into his nineties, getting on the floor to play Legos with 4-year-old Theo. But what I remember most was saying goodbye. Grandma was like me. We’d hurry our goodbye and brush it off – rely on seeing one another again, talk about “next time.” But Grandpa would hug me longer than was comfortable – long enough for me to feel the grief of the possibility that it might be last time we said goodbye. And, of course, one time it was. By the time he died, we were living in Chicago. Theo had started elementary school and I was in seminary. I was grateful for the fullness of the experience: That he didn’t let me brush off the goodbye and pretend the moment wasn’t important. I mean, I know Grandma loved me just as much, but it was his hug that helped me savor the moment and be present to my feelings.

It is my temptation to run through the thistles and get through the pain quickly, to avoid the fullness of the experience. But Grandpa taught me another way. It’s not that I ever got good at it. I just know there is another way and I can keep trying. I’d like to try with you: Because I have been with this congregation, with all of you, or some subset of you, for nearly a decade. And I have grown to love you and will miss you very much when I am no longer the minister here. We still have 138 days together, but who’s counting?