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Living Legacy

“...[Y]ou begin to realize that you’re always standing in the middle of a sacred circle, and that’s your whole life...” American Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön is speaking. “Wherever you do for the rest of your life, ... the circle is always around you. Everyone who walks up to you has entered that sacred space and it’s not an accident. Whatever comes into the space is there to teach you.”¹

My grandmother’s favorite biblical text is from Luke: *Of the one to whom much is given, much is expected.*² Having lived through the Great Depression, she wrote it on little torn-edged scraps of paper, some of which she pressed into my hand, and some of which I found in my coat pockets or books I was reading. In this way, I was impressed with the full knowledge that I enjoyed many blessings that were not of my making, which called me to gratefulness and service.

El Día de los Muertos invites us to honor our dead, and to remember the ways in which they touched our lives and changed us. It comes as an opportunity to be grateful to them, and as a reminder to be grateful for those who are walking with us still.

A lot of people have taught me – and continue to teach me – about the priceless gift of this very moment; to pay attention, and to drink deeply from the well of the present. I learned it in the crucible of the AIDS crisis, in the virulent ravaging of beautiful young men I loved, their swift or slow deaths, and standing at gravesides or in the dunes or at the edge of the bay, casting their ashes onto the water. They taught me to say, “I love you,” because there might not be another chance to get it right.

¹ Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, p. 28

² Luke 12:48

Within weeks of my Provincetown parishioners Bill and John having completed building their dream house and moving in, Bill was diagnosed with AIDS. Within months, he was dead. Devastated, John sold the house, and moved away. Within a year, it was almost as if none of it had happened; I remember driving past that dream one evening at dusk, and seeing people I didn't know framed by the dining room windows.

But it *had* happened. I had visited them there, and as we stood in Bill's new studio – he was a fashion designer – he said, “Let's make you a dress.” It was so much fun, spinning around as he took my measurements.

When Bill got sick, he was determined to finish that dress, and, in fact, he made me two. In the full knowledge of his impending death, the second one, he said, was for when the first one wore out. And after all, what remained of our visit on that lovely afternoon was the memory of the extravagant generosity of his final days, and the preciousness of our time together.

After Bill's memorial service, John told me what he'd learned. He said,
 Love breaks our hearts.
 All of us love with a broken heart.
True love comes from a heart broken open.

Some of you have done a lot of work on breaking the silence of secrets and healing the shame that binds us to our past. You have inspired me – awed me, actually – and given me the authority to promise others that they, too, can be free. Dana Greeley was the former senior minister here at Arlington Street and my mentor in the ministry. Of all the things he said to me, among the most important was, “Never mind.” He was talking about something that had happened in the long ago past, something I dragged behind me like a broken wing. Of all the things he could have said, he said, “Never mind.” With that, I was free.

We can say that to one another: In one shining moment, Dana taught me that you are not what happened to you; you are what you do with what happened to you.

In the late fall of 1999, Swanee Hunt, ambassador to Austria under President Clinton, invited me to be part of a remarkable women's peacemaking initiative. The first of my two most powerful memories of the

inaugural gathering is from the time before the opening plenary session. I was sitting in the center of an empty lecture hall at the Kennedy School, just about to swallow a sandwich, when a side door opened.

Ten South African women, looking like royalty in full traditional dress, entered the hall. And of all the places they could have sat, they came to sit with me. I was completely overcome. Nearly twenty years earlier, I had organized against apartheid. Here, at long last, were the people whose freedom I had dreamed ... free!

And because the moment was so impossibly huge, I just did what my grandmother had taught me to do, and offered them the only food I had: my sandwich. To my surprise and delight, down the row it went, first one way, and then the other, each woman taking a bite, until it was returned to me with one perfect bite remaining. I can say with absolute surety that that sandwich was the most nourishing and delicious I have ever eaten.

Shortly after that gathering, because of the privations she had experienced in prison, Nozipho, my closest friend from that cohort, died. But I remember holding her hand, and understanding, deeply, that dreams are nourishing, and freedom is delicious.

Five years earlier, in a one hundred day period, as many as a million Rwandans died at each other's hands – as much as twenty percent of the total population. The second of my two most powerful memories of the inaugural peacemaking initiative begins and ends with Aloisea Inyumba. Post-genocide, it was Aloisea who oversaw the burial of the dead and the resettlement of refugees, and organized the adoption of the children who had been orphaned by the genocide.³ Aloisea had grown up in refugee camps, herself, but went on to become the governor of Kigali-Ngali Province in Rwanda, having served as the executive secretary of Rwanda's post-genocide Unity and Reconciliation Commission, based on the South African post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

There were many sessions of storytelling by both Hutu and Tutsi survivors. Their stories were violent and terrifying, but they knew not to free-fall into the morass of those memories of humanity's inhumanity. When

³ Aloisea Inyumba's work reduced the number of genocide orphans in Rwanda from 500,000 to 4,000.

the horror and despair threatened to sink us all, a ripple would go through them, and someone would call for a dance. Standing in place, then circling the room, they accompanied themselves with tunes that began gently and grew louder, now clapping and stomping, alone and then arm in arm. I sat in my seat, my eyes smarting with tears of deep sorrow and sheer awe at their determination and resilience. But no one stayed seated for long. “Up! Up!” they called. And so we danced. We danced, and then we sat again, strengthened for more remembering, more telling.

On the final day of the conference, the Rwandan women brought me the gift of a long, wide swath of brightly batiked cloth, and wrapped it around and around my waist. “Remember to dance,” they said.

In 2012, at the age of 50, Aloisea died. I will never forget her. Remember, tell, dance. Remember, tell, and always end with a dance.

The first and last of my dead that I remember is my grandfather. He was patient and kind and he loved each of us – his children, his grandchildren – without condition. But I think he actually loved the world that way, too. After he retired from teaching English at East Boston High School, he would walk from his home in Arlington across the Pleasant Street Bridge, and get on a city bus, delighting in the senior rate, as he said it, of one thin dime. He wasn’t going anywhere; the ride was never about the destination. He’d just get on and visit – the bus driver, people headed to work or shop or to doctors’ appointments. They were all his friends, and strangers were just friends he hadn’t yet met.

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On the Day of the Dead, my Latin American friends tell me, the veil between the worlds is thin. I like to think that there is next to nothing that ever separates us from our dead. *El Día* reminds us that our dead are always as close as the ways they live on in us ... and that’s up to us.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Nana is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers that “Of the one to whom much is given, much is expected.” We can remember the blessings not of our making, give thanks, and serve.

Bill is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers extravagant generosity, and the preciousness of time together.

Dana is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers the power of breaking the silence of secrets and healing the shame. You are not what happened to you; you are what you do with what happened to you.

Nozipho is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers to hold hands, remembers that dreams are nourishing and freedom is delicious.

Aloisea is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers the children; remembers the power of the truth; remembers, tells, and always ends with a dance.

And Papa is not gone – not as long as any of us remembers to be patient, and kind, and to love boundlessly: strangers as friends.

We are always standing in the middle of a sacred circle, and whatever comes into the circle comes to teach us. I'll finish, now, and it's your turn to speak of your dead. May they bear us the lesson of the priceless gift of the present: this very moment. Let's pay attention.

Yes, Love breaks our hearts, and all of us love with a broken heart.

True love comes from a heart broken open.

Let's get this right:

I love you.