

**June 9, 2019**

*The Fruitful Darkness*

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”If we don’t find a way to transform our pain, we will always transmit it to those around us or turn it against ourselves... If your religion is not teaching you how to recognize, hold, and transform suffering, it is junk religion.”

—Fr. Richard Rohr

As I shaped this service and sermon in my mind over the past few months, I contemplated my own experiences with darkness, as well as the experiences of others, trying to capture this common human thread. I recalled an early experience, age 11, feeling an intensity of emotional pain so great that I felt I wanted to escape all of life. Writing notes to my parents and best friend, reassuring them that it was not their fault, and holding a kitchen knife against my neck until I pressed so hard that I choked. Or after moving back to Michigan, I was living with my parents and looking for work (both what I thought were clear signs of my ultimate failure as an adult). I would get up to get the kids ready and off to school, but then go back to bed until just before they were due to arrive home, so I could go through the motions of living.

I want to start this morning, from a very earth-based perspective...literally. How many of you garden? So when we think about the lessons learned from nature’s way of bringing new plant life into existence (with or without our help) we notice that it most often begins in the darkness. Seeds buried deep under the earth, surrounded by nutritive soil, have their beginnings in the darkness. As a midwife I can’t help but think of how human beings form within their mother, exist in relative darkness. It is also the anecdotal experience of many, that a “dark time” in their life, led to growth.

On one of the podcasts I listen to regularly, the host asks one last question of her guests every episode. “What one thing, that seemed terrible at the time, later turned out to be the catalyst for something wonderful?”. These highly successful people, experts in their field, most of them published authors ALL have examples of such as experience, and most of them had a hard time narrowing it down. (The podcast is called “Adventures in Happiness” with Jessica Ortman.) I imagine that most of us in this room could also think of such an instance where our ability to find our way through a difficult situation led to transformation we had not anticipated. Don’t get me wrong most of these situations one would not wish upon their worst enemy, let alone choose to take on themselves.

However, looking into our past to recall times of darkness is very different than the experience of actually going through the darkness. Or as a wise counselor once told me, “Hindsight is Bullshit”. So I want to acknowledge this reality: Knowing that good will likely come from your pain, does not necessarily make it any less painful at the time. I suppose I needed to be reminded of this. So last week, when the vertebrae in my neck went out of place pinching a nerve, I tried to pay attention. It occurred on the day that I had set aside to really sit down and gather all of my thoughts into a concise and eloquent sermon. Not only was I not feeling particularly inspired, it was downright

painful to hold my head up. Spending the majority of the day in bed was reminiscent of other times I had dealt with this recurrent injury from childhood. Even after my physical pain had dissipated, for the days following, I found it challenging to motivate myself to do anything. I found myself wanting to sleep, even after a full night's rest. This brought back a very visceral memory of one of my worst bouts of depression, which I mentioned earlier.

Even though I had recalled it several times as I thought about this upcoming service, I had forgotten how it FELT. If not for that reminder, I truly believe that I would not have had the same message to deliver today. It might have instead been somewhere between a hallmark card and a self-help book. The “feeling” part – that messy, sometimes snotty, part that won't fit neatly into all of our boxes, IS the human experience. If we are committed to living fully, we must FEEL FULLY. This is not the message that many receive early in life (“whatcha cryin bout, suck it up, what are ya a sissy, etc”). And it becomes apparent that these are also parts of ourselves that are not welcome in most settings as an adult. We put on our most acceptable & together appearance at work, with friends, and even in our spiritual communities. Believing that this will make us more acceptable and therefore accepted. Believing that we are somehow less worthy of love if we don't meet whatever expectations we have for ourselves or perceive that others may have for us. But the truth is, FULLY FEELING makes us fully human and more connected to this collective human experience or which we are all part. YOU ARE LOVED! YOU ARE NOT ALONE! And YOU ARE RESILIENT! As nature demonstrates, year after year, those tiny buds poke up from that dense dark earth, after surviving the harsh cold winter months. Life wants to Live!

I'd like to end this sharing with Companioned Inside Your Grief  
By [Megan Devine](#) from It's OK That You're Not OK

[S]piritual and meditative practices are not meant to erase pain. That's a symptom of our pain-avoidant culture, and not an accurate portrayal of the practices themselves. It's a misuse of so many beautiful teachings to force them into roles they were never meant to play.

Spiritual practices in any tradition, including mindfulness in its many forms, are meant to help you live what is yours to live, not make you rise above it. These tools are meant to help you feel companioned inside your grief. They're meant to give you a tiny bit of breathing room inside what is wholly unbearable. That's not at all the same thing as making your pain go away.

Rather than help us rise above being human, teachings in any true tradition help us become *more* human: more connected, not less attached.