



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Welcoming the Ancestors”

Delivered 30 October 2022

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.”

I stopped wearing contact lenses in the summer of 2009, when I was 37 years old and my father was dying. My relationship with contacts had grown contentious, I felt increasingly cranky with them, how dry my eyes felt by the end of the day, and suddenly, every day, I was crying. It was the last straw. Back to glasses for me.

Sometimes I tell that story and people ask me, "So no desire to go back to contacts? You know, by the time you were crying less?"

No, and no.

Tears are not the way everyone responds to loss and to grief. But they are the way I respond, the way many of us respond. And tears are strange things, avoided by some, embraced by some, misunderstood in many instances - why are you crying when you're happy? You might as well ask why I'm laughing when I'm sad. Because the ordering of our emotions, the attempts to make them do what we want them to do, especially in times of grief - to do such a thing is to deny their necessity. Grief is messy. It needs to be messy, because life is messy. Because humanity and love and caring and consideration and growing in depth and understanding of the complexity of those we know and love and care for - those are messy. They are too big to contain.

But they are never too big to honor. To laugh for, to cry for. To cry tears of gratitude that the grief has shown up again, reminding us how well we have loved and have been loved and are loved. To cry out with the pain of loss, to feel its ache, and to come to live within our bodies, our complicated, messy bodies once again...until it is our time, at last, to depart. To leave the mess and move into the mystery. To that black river of loss, "Whose other side is salvation, / whose meaning none of us will ever know."

We have lit so many candles. We have honored our dead well, we have called out to our ancestors, especially the very newest, with all the tears catching within our hearts and all the laughter we still feel weighing within our chests, ready to burst forth. We have built a mighty light out of the reflected tears of

our sorrow. It will warm us with the truth of our loss and of our love, until we turn our attention again to how it is we are to live.

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Blessed be.