

Surprising Gifts From Loss

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Text: *From Blossoms*, by Li-Young Lee. Poem excerpt:

*O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.
There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.*

Thank you so much for your invitation to be here. Friday was my first full day in San Miguel, and it felt great to be back. I settled in nicely to my accommodations, and took walks to see the sights. It was, as Lee says, a day of “joy to joy to joy” and death was “nowhere near the background.” Then a surprising phone call came from my spouse Regina in D.C. She was at the animal hospital with our beloved 15-yr-old dog, Squeege, after finding her in distress at home. Squeege was in acute trauma in the ICU, and we had to make the hard decision to let her go. I said goodbye to my adorable dog over the phone, while standing in tears on a rooftop gazing at an impossibly beautiful sunset in San Miguel.

It was not my plan to be actively grieving this morning, and yet death came in, unexpectedly. This is how loss can be—sudden, searing, intense pain that occupies center, even when we do have some idea it’s on the way. Stories of loss are part of our personal ongoing histories, and our collective

narrative, so I know each of you has yours. I often ponder the roads we journey in this life, accumulating stories, making meaning of our travels. The overlapping waves of history and memory are all evoked around this season at Memorial Day, the U.S. holiday of this weekend.

The poem we heard by Li-Young Lee contains these layers for me, the complications of living and dying: *O to take what we love inside us, to carry within us an orchard. There are days we live as if death were nowhere in the background, from joy to joy to joy.*

Li-Young Lee and I were born in the same month, same year, August 1957. I was in my father's birthplace of El Paso, Texas. He was in Jakarta, Indonesia, son of Chinese refugees from very public families. His great-grandfather had been the first president of the Republic of China, and Lee's father was the personal physician to Mao Tse Tung. After two years as a child in Indonesia, one with his father imprisoned, his family fled the country to escape anti-Chinese sentiment. After five years of migration, they eventually landed in the U.S. in 1964. I was surprised to learn that Dr. Lee, his father, then went on to seminary, and became a Presbyterian minister in a small community of Pennsylvania.

By 1964, the year Li-Young came to the States, I was back in El Paso after some of American domestic migration. I sojourned with my parents for four years, to Manhattan for a year of seminary for my father, and then to Austin for his law school. We then returned to El Paso, where the people and images of Mexico infused our border city. My maternal grandparents and Li-Young Lee's could have conceivably overlapped in vast China, because my mother's father grew up near Shanghai. He was the son of two American Presbyterian missionaries in that area, one who ran a hospital, and one who helped administer a school. My El Paso family is still active in the Presbyterian church where our three generations worshipped together.

Lee and I share strands of shared experience and much that is different. Li-Young Lee's father perhaps had Presbyterian roots as a doctor in China, maybe influenced by the missionary tradition about which I have mixed feelings. Personal and public history is complex. Who knows how this aligned with political life in China, or Indonesia, or in Rev. Dr. Lee's small Pennsylvania congregation? How did it impact his son, Li-Young, a poet who came to writing later in life as a way to make meaning?

We hold the good and difficult together, and try to make a path. Birth and death, travel and migration, ancestors and histories, are all constantly fluid. Both the people we remember and the stories we tell shift over time. We dig deeper, or choose not to. Our description may change dramatically as we uncover different truths, adapt our understanding of human limitations, seek healing and forgiveness.

On this Memorial Day, I am remembering another complex history, that of the Hiroshima Children's Drawings. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, All Souls Unitarian, DC sent two thousand pounds of school supplies to Hiroshima. A beautiful set of forty-eight crayon drawings by children at the Honkawa School was sent back as a thank you.

This is a tale in which I lived some chapters as Minister of Social Justice at All Souls UU DC. There is a beautiful documentary of this story, *Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard*, with trailer and the film itself available at www.hiroshimaschoolyard.com. It tells the story of Hiroshima and All Souls DC, a key piece of Unitarian Universalist history. The central voices are the artists who made the drawings as children, now either seniors or passed away, along with some of us at All Souls. Seventeen of them were interviewed for the movie, about their memories of that hard time.

Some of the most poignant moments at All Souls were meeting the survivors of Hiroshima on pilgrimage to see the children's drawings every August. They came to commemorate the Hiroshima dead, and for the ancestor veneration of the Japanese summer festival of Obon. To witness them experience these talismans with such devotion, improbably rendered by children in beautiful colors and joyful hope, was a moving view of the sacred. We eventually took the restored drawings to the UU General Assembly, with our Japanese Buddhist partner denomination, *Risho Koshi Ki*, and ultimately to the first Hiroshima museum exhibit of this work in 2010.

Children created pictures of what they dreamed about, and sent them to an American congregation in the country of the former enemy. They made beautiful art in a schoolhouse heavily damaged by war. This humbling realization brought me to tears, as I stood before a group of Japanese at GA, and explained how we wanted to take the drawings back to Japan for the people of Hiroshima to see. The impact of the atomic bomb suffering hit me when I looked directly in to the eyes of survivors and their fellow Japanese. I knew that one of my ancestors, my great uncle, had worked on the creation of the bomb at Los Alamos as a physicist. My family was full of WWII veterans who lived. The layers of history seemed almost impossible to feel and bear in that moment.

I believe Li-Young Lee would understand the complex power of this UU peace story, despite the centuries-old conflict between China and Japan, despite the fact that neither he nor I were born when it occurred. In an interview about his belief in the oneness of all things, Lee said this: *If you rigorously dissect it, you realize that everything is a shape of the totality of causes. The Cosmos. So everything is a shape of Cosmos or God. It feels like something bigger than me—that I can't possibly fathom but am embedded in.*

I feel Lee in the interdependent web that connects us: the strands with our families in China, similar Presbyterian roots, and shared experience of a summer peach that can hold a universe. In the poignancy of life and death.

In Japan, the annual August festival of Obon honors the dead with lanterns at the door and on the water, guiding souls back home, and forward again. These flames are lit in remembrance, marking the divine light of the Spirit. UUs hold fire in tribute also, in memory and hard knowledge of loss, as the primal element in our flaming chalice. After all, this powerful symbol arose from the *UU Service Committee* rescue of Jewish families during WWII in Europe. We note the terrible ways lives are taken in conflict and the great emotional and spiritual costs to generations. We remember our ancestors and friends with memory, grief, and love.

We may aspire to the generosity of children in Hiroshima the year after a war ended--attending school in a bombed out building, still sending us crayon love letters across the miles. Their surprising gift out of profound loss echoes to this day.

May we each learn traveling forward, holding a lantern to illuminate our path, perhaps placing it on the water to float away, as the Japanese do.

We might ponder letting go of old pain, and embrace new gifts of forgiveness and healing.

May we find the unexpected gifts that await us through loss.

Blessed Be.