

The Strength of a Loser

a sermon preached by Rev. Khleber M. Van Zandt V at UUI Fellowship, San Miguel de Allende, July 8th, 2018 after a reading from Pat Conroy's "My Losing Season: A Memoir":

Loss invites reflection and reformulating and a change of strategies. Loss hurts and bleeds and aches. Loss is always ready to call out your name in the night. Loss follows you home and taunts you at the breakfast table, follows you to work in the morning. You have to make accommodations and broker deals to soften the rabbit punches that loss brings to your daily life. You have to take the word 'loser' and add it to your resume and walk around with it on your name tag as it hand-feeds you your own (feces) in dosages too large for even great beasts to swallow. The word 'loser' follows you, bird-dogs you, sniffs you out of whatever fields you hide in because you have to face things clearly and you cannot turn away from what is true. -- Pat Conroy

Our caps were navy blue. So were the stripes on our real uniforms with the name "Yankees" spelled out in that iconic cursive across the chest. 'Yankees' may have been a strange name to sew on a team of wild-eyed, lily-white eleven-year-olds in the Jim Crow South of late-20th-century Estados Unidos. I, for one, had grown up with the knowledge that my family had deep roots back through the Confederacy. So, Yankees? Paradox was not my strong point back then and, well, the Yankees were the only team that chose me in the draft.

There was little to distinguish that little league team that year; none of us were, or are now, exceptional in any category that matters much to many people. We had one 'star' pitcher – we called him that because no one could ever get a hit off him. He was just too dangerous – he started the year wearing a pair of those old coke-bottle eyeglasses and switched midway through the season to some kind of prehistoric contacts that made him squint like a grade-school Mr. Magoo. He could throw hard, but he couldn't see. And that's an awesome combination for any pitcher, but especially a little league one – this kid scared the daylights out of opposing batters. If he didn't hit them or strike them out, he would just walk them, and walk them, and walk them, again, and again, and again.

No one ever bothered to calculate his ERA; we just knew he never won.

The one thing that in my mind sets this team apart from any of the other teams I have played on down through the years is that - we lost. That spring, all those years ago, we lost not just every month or every week, but most of the time we lost twice a week, sometimes three times. Of the sixteen games we played together that season, we lost every game but one. I had to get to be an adult before I realized how unusual an accomplishment this is. The major league baseball teams that stink win at least a third of their games. American football teams that are terrible win three or four of their sixteen games. No, we were losers of more immense proportion than my mind then or now could assimilate. Time and time and time again, we snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. We lost. A lot.

I was the first-string catcher – meaning I was the only catcher. The catcher on a baseball team is supposed to be the leader. The catcher is the one player who is uniquely positioned to see all the field of play laid out before her eyes. The catcher is the one who's supposed to remember the other batters and what pitches they like or don't like and where they're likely to hit if they do hit. She reads the plays as they develop and tells

others where to throw and what to cover and who to back up. The catcher is important to a team's success. And I did my best. And I urged my teammates on. And I lifted their spirits after bad plays and good. And we lost.

These were not give-up-and-roll-over kinda kids, either. One case in point: Jimmy I., the Yankees' wisp of a second baseman, got run over on a play by a big kid named Hal. Big Hal poked a hard line-drive into the left field corner and didn't even notice little Jimmy there in the base path. Hal just trampled Jimmy into the ground on his way around second and kept going on his way to a stand-up triple. Jimmy lay there for a long minute, and then dragged himself up out of the mud and the blood and the tears and started limping toward the dugout. About two-thirds of the way there, he stopped, turned back towards Hal over on third base and yelled, "You're not gettin' rid of me that easy!" And he squared his little shoulders and strode defiantly back to second and played the rest of the game and the rest of the season.

When one loses nearly every time one steps onto a field of play, one is not threatened by throngs of adoring fans nor is one overly burdened by daydreams of stardom. One's mind is left to be starkly open, shall we say, to new ways of understanding. I wish I could say that I learned to look cool as I swung at a pitch in the dirt or as I took a called third strike. No. I'm sure I always looked just as pitiful losing as the next loser.

If I didn't learn how to look cool while losing, I think I learned at least one thing that summer: I learned how to lose.

I've visited in a number of Unitarian Universalist churches around the EE.UU., and I don't know about you here in Guanajuato, but in an awful lot of those congregations in the north, it has seemed hard to talk about losing. Most of us UUs think of ourselves as winners, not losers. In fact, as a rule, we tend to think of all people as winners. Maybe it's because we say we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person that we have such a hard time thinking about anybody being any less than perfect. Maybe that's why we're shocked by bad behavior, thrown for a loop by random acts of violence. We don't like to think about those times when life is out of control, when things don't go as we plan, when we or our families or our neighbors screw up, fall off the path, commit a sin, or whatever you choose to call it.

We like to think that everything goes well for those that think right and act right, live well and go to the right church – this one. But if this church is anything at all like the other UU churches I've been in, there is no special insulation here in this beautiful room where you meet. Inside here as well as outside and all around, bad things happen, scary things, annoying things, awful things sometimes. Because bad things do happen to good people, no matter where they go to church or synagogue or mosque - or don't go.

We don't like to think about bad stuff happening in our congregations, but I've been in and know of churches where children have suffered fatal diseases, where accidents have claimed the lives of youth and young people, where members have committed suicide, where members have committed murder, where staff or volunteers have embezzled money, where ministers have abused their power and their authority as well as physically and emotionally abusing the vulnerable people they are called to care for.

Bad stuff does happen near and far, we know it does, and we ignore it at our peril.

And in our own personal lives? I have lost many things in my life. My grandparents have all died. My mother died some twenty years ago. My father and brother both died

last year. I have lost jobs, a marriage, relationships of all kinds. I've had to put beloved pets down. My children are all doing well enough today, but some of them live with incurable physical illness, some with life-long mental illness; they have suffered divorce and breakdown and job losses galore. Among those I love most, there have been and will be more times when hopes have crumbled and expectations have collapsed.

Think about what you've lost. If you've lost parents or family, if you've lost a job, if you've lost a home, if you've lost a marriage or a friend or a partner or a spouse, if you've lost a child or the ability to have children, these losses never leave you. Oh, we grieve and hopefully go on, but these losses that we suffer, we carry with us always. They become part of us, part of our everyday lives, part of who we are.

If you've been thrown out of your house this month or you are dealing with a scary diagnosis this year or you've been picked up by ICE and separated from your child or family at the border recently, talking about losing a child's baseball game might seem supremely pointless and crass right about now.

But this, I want to suggest to you, is what the religious enterprise is all about – searching for metaphors and ways to talk about meaning and being. As we join together to make up this congregation this morning, we are searching together for ways to share our experiences both good and bad so that we understand each other and ourselves better and so that we can make the hard things that happen to us and around us that much easier to bear and - often, then - address them in a meaningful and effective fashion. Losing a baseball game, losing any game, doesn't hold a candle to the kinds of losses we and so many others have experienced in our lives. But the things we learn in one part of our lives sometimes help to give us languages to use in other parts of our lives.

I said I learned at least one thing that losing season of mine and that was how to lose. But on reflection, I think I learned another thing that has held me in equally good stead. I learned that, no matter the score at the end of the game, no matter whether we'd won or lost the night or the week before, no matter what else was going on, I loved playing the game. I loved playing each point for everything it was worth. I loved the challenge and I loved the camaraderie, and I didn't really care that much about the overall outcome or the final score. I just loved being there; I loved playing.

You might liken this to learning to live in the moment. In the Buddhist sense, maybe you'd call it 'paying attention' – if you're washing the dishes, they say, wash the dishes; if you're playing ball, play ball. Or in a Christian sense, you might say, don't let yourself get crucified between two thieves – the past and the future: live today, live now.

I had no idea at eleven years of age that I was learning lifelong spiritual principles. If someone had told me I was, I would have shrugged them off because I wouldn't have known what they were talking about. And yet, there was the Truth – 'Truth' with a capital 'T' - right there on the little league ball field, free for the taking.

As Pat Conroy said in our reading this morning, "There is no teacher more discriminating or transforming than loss."

As we in the north and you in the south and many other people around the world face a political upheaval fueled by fear and focused on a most peculiar and bizarre idea of *winning*, I find myself, instead, thinking of loss. I'm reminded that I have lost much more than baseball games; I'm reminded of the many people I have sat with during their

own moments of deep personal despair and loss; I'm reminded of the messes we too often find ourselves in when things turn sour and life goes belly up.

But I am thinking of love, too. And I am reminded of that spiritual lesson that was offered so freely so long ago on – of all places - a little league baseball diamond. That message was this: Even when you lose, you are offered the great gift of a chance to love life, to love playing the game, and to I love playing each point for everything it's worth, no matter the final score.

And it occurs to me that recognizing this great gift may be the only way to gather the energy and the courage and the strength to continue to do the work the world so desperately needs us to do right now.

May we continue to be the people who have loved and lost and learned from both, and lived to love and learn again another day.

So may it be.