



TOUCHSTONES

A monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

January 2021

Consolation & Desolation

Wisdom Story



(5:22-23). The following table compares characteristics of consolation with those of desolation.

Consolation	Desolation
Love	Hate
Joy	Sorrow
Peace	Anxiety
Patience	Impatience
Kindness	Rudeness
Goodness	Evil
Faithfulness	Unfaithful
Gentleness	Harshness
Self-Control	Undisciplined

Bamboo Amazing, inspired by a tale of desolation & consolation

The farmer's plot of land ran along the bank of a river. Years ago, he planted a bamboo plant, which grew straight and tall and beautiful. He called the plant, Esay. In turn, Esay started other bamboo plants. The farmer would cut these down. While he sold some of the bamboo in the market, he used other pieces to make bamboo flutes. His favorite flute was called "dizi," but he also made other flutes like the "xiao" and "koudi." No one knows who "invented" bamboo flutes, but legend suggests that the *dizi* was made by order of the Yellow Emperor, who wanted a musical instrument made out of bamboo.

In the early evening of each day, the farmer would take his son out to the bamboo grove. The farmer would play a flute as Esay swayed in the gentle breeze and his son danced to the beautiful, soothing music. Esay looked down, grateful for the farmer's compassion. After a while, the little boy would lie down and fall asleep. The farmer stopped playing, picked up his son, said good night to Esay, and carried his son back to their simple home, and put him to bed.

This evening ritual began to change as the boy grew older. He would no longer dance to the music, but he listened attentively to his father's music. He no longer fell asleep and had to be carried, but before they both left to go back home, the son, whose name was Wu, would go to Esay and lovingly rub his hand up and down along her green stem. It was his



Introduction to the Theme

Desolate: "Bereft of friends or hope: sad and forlorn." Desolation: "The state of being ...forsaken; loneliness." Console: "To allay sorrow or grief." Consolation: "The state of being consoled."

One way to describe consolation and desolation is to compare the characteristics of each. Paul, in his *Epistle to the Galatians*, spoke of the 9 fruits of the spirit



The differences between consolation and desolation are dramatic, as is their impact on how we live our lives. Consolation, among other things, is empowering, while desolation is a state of powerlessness not unlike that experienced when someone is depressed.

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Consolation, Desolation & Deepening Connections

It is not clear if life is joy punctuated by tragedy, or tragedy punctuated by joy, but both come to us in the course of our lives. For too many, too much of the equation is on the side of desolation. In reaching out to them to offer consolation and forge a connection, we need empathy. In her poem, *Kindness*, Naomi Shihab Nye reminds us that kindness can only be known "as the deepest thing inside" when sorrow is also known as "the other deepest thing." In our own or another's sorrow, we confront the reality of desolation, and the desire for consolation, for the elusive balm in Gilead. The work of consolation is the work of mending as the Rev. Nancy Shaffer wrote on page 7 of this journal. The work of consolation is the work of mending the soul, of yours and mine. This is holy, wholly work.

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Deepening Connections

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way of saying good-night.



Wu decided that he wanted to make flutes like his father. He assumed the responsibility of selling bamboo at the market. He was quite good at bartering with customers, and often got a very good price for the bamboo. His father put aside the extra money. Eventually, there was enough money to buy the empty plot of land to the east. This was to become Wu's farm. The only problem was a big problem. There was no source of water that Wu could use to grow bamboo.

The farmer knew what had to be done. He went to Esay and said, "Esay, I am sorry, but I have a problem. I can only solve it if I cut you down." Esay began to weep, as did Wu, but eventually she agreed. There was heartache all around for Esay had towered over the bamboo grove for more than 20 years. After cutting her down, the farmer then said, "Esay, while I hate to do it, I must remove your branches and leaves." Esay, was even more distraught for she had always thought that her leaves were quite beautiful. Nonetheless, she agreed. Finally, the farmer said, "Esay, I must now split you in two and hollow you out." Since there was no turning back, Esay again agreed, although she had no idea why any of this was necessary.

When all of this was done, the farmer instructed Wu to help him carry the two long pieces of bamboo. One end was placed at the riverbank. The second piece was connected to the first. The two pieces were so long that they reached all the way to Wu's farm. That night, the farmer and Wu went to the river bank. As the farmer played a flute, Wu scooped up water using a bamboo bucket and poured it into the bamboo trough. It was then that Esay realized why she would always be loved. It was her job to carry the water to Wu's farm so that he could start and grow a bamboo grove. Knowing she would bring life to a whole new field, she smiled as she listened to the beautiful music.

Source: Touchstones

Solace

David Whyte

Solace is the art of asking the beautiful question, of ourselves, of our world, or of one another, in fiercely difficult and un-beautiful moments. Solace is what we must look for when the mind cannot bear the pain, the loss, or the suffering...; when longing does not come to fruition in a form we can recognize, when people we know and love disappear, when hope must take a different form than the one we have shaped for it.

To be consoled is to be invited onto



the terrible ground of beauty upon which our inevitable disappearance stands, to a voice that does not soothe falsely, but touches the epicenter of our pain or articulates the essence of our loss, and then emancipates us into both life and death as an equal birthright.

...Solace is not meant to be an answer, but an invitation, through the door of pain and difficulty, to the depth of suffering and simultaneous beauty in the world that the strategic mind by itself cannot grasp, nor make sense of.

...Solace also asks us very direct and forceful questions. Firstly, how will you bear the inevitable that is coming to you? And how will you endure it through the years? And above all, how will you shape a life equal to and as beautiful and as astonishing as a world that can birth you, bring you into the light, and then just as you are beginning to understand it, take you away?

Source: Whyte, David. *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA, 2015.

Being Present to Suffering

Parker Palmer writes, "To suffer with another person does not mean to drown oneself in the other's suffering.... To suffer with another person means to be there in whatever way possible, to share the circumstances of the other's life as much as one can—not to add to the world's pool of suffering, but to gain intimate understanding of what the other requires." Often the person who is suffering does not know what he or she requires. We can only learn by staying as close as we can, attentive to the suffering. Such attentiveness may help us discern what is required. Our own commitment should be to maintain contact with the one who is suffering, to reach out, trusting that our faithfulness to this relationship will bear its own fruit. By doing this we will learn, as Palmer suggests, that "there is no arm's-length 'solution' for suffering...." The only solution is being there, returning again and again to be present with the person who suffers.

This approach to suffering may seem ineffective because we are not really doing anything to alleviate the suffering. Perhaps we could make some suggestions, offer some advice on how to reduce the suffering. This might work if there was some "fix" for suffering, but there is not. There is only the suffering, which contains the seeds of its own healing.

If we are to be worthy companions, we must be willing to be



touched by the pain. Too often we become confused by pain. We forget whose pain it is. We thought it was the other's pain and yet it feels like our own. We thought it was their suffering, but it feels like our suffering. In these moments, may we realize that we might have our own suffering to do. Let us attend to the suffering of the other through our presence. Let us then take time to touch our own suffering, trusting that it, too, contains the seeds of healing.

Source: Touchstones

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "To look for solace is to learn to ask fiercer and more exquisitely pointed questions, questions that reshape our identities and our bodies and our relation to others." David Whyte



Day 2: "She wondered whether there was a limit to desolation or whether it grew endlessly, infinitely. Desolation with a hundred faces and more, desolation of a hundred different kinds and more, like the color blue." Antonia Michaelis

Day 3: "You don't have to put your hand on [Mother] Mary's heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and the other things we need to get through life," she said. "You can place it right here on your own heart. Your own heart." Sue Monk Kidd

Day 4: "How desolate the landscape can be / between the regions of kindness." Naomi Shihab Nye

Day 5: "The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate...." David Whyte

Day 6: "We need to be angels for each other, to give ...strength and consolation. When we ...realize that the cup of life is not only a cup of sorrow but also a cup of joy will we be able to drink." Henri Nouwen

Day 7: "People who are less happy, I find, are always consoling those who are more [happy]." Renata Adler

Day 8: "Thus even tragedy can be accompanied by a trace of relief. The discovery that heartbreak is indeed heartbreaking consoles us about our humanity." Lionel Shriver

Day 9: "This overwhelming need for help never really changes in a human life from the first day we are brought from the womb...." David Whyte

Day 10: "Memory, which so confounds our waking life with anticipation and regret, may well be our one earthly consolation when time slips out of joint." Keith Donohue

Day 11: "The heart can get really cold if all

you've known is winter."
Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Day 12: "Circumstances in life often take us places that we never intended to go. We visit some places of beauty, others of pain and desolation." Kristin Armstrong

Day 13: "The measure of our courage is the measure of our willingness to embrace disappointment...." David Whyte

Day 14: "There is nothing so cruel in this world as the desolation of having nothing to hope for." Haruki Murakami

Day 15: "When desolation surrounded you, blessed be those who looked for you and found you, their kind hands urgent to open a blue window in the gray wall formed around you." John O'Donohue

Day 16: "To regret fully is to appreciate how high the stakes are in even the average human life." David Whyte

Day 17: "Nobody can have the consolations of religion or philosophy unless ... [they have] first experienced their desolations." Aldous Huxley

Day 18: "Heartbreak is how we mature." David Whyte

Day 19: "Simple kindness can go a long way toward encouraging someone who is stuck in a desolate place." Mike Yankoski

Day 20: "The self-esteem one acquires and a well-earned feeling of one's strength are the only consolation in this world." Paul Gauguin

Day 21: "Even among familiar faces, people often feel invisible and desolate, like an island in cold waters or a shadow apart from the crowd. Be the reason another never feels alone." Richelle E. Goodrich

Day 22: "Despair is a difficult, beautiful necessary, a binding understanding between human beings caught in a fierce and difficult world where half of our experience is mediated by loss...." David Whyte

Day 23: "Hence we must support one another, console one another, mutually help, counsel, and advise, for the measure of every ...[one's] virtue is best revealed in time of adversity—adversity that does not weaken ...but rather shows ...[who one] is." Thomas à Kempis

Day 24: "There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined." Michael Cunningham

Day 25: "It is normal and wise for us to rely at moments upon the insights, the courage, and the consolation which our ... brothers [and sisters] can give us, knowing full well that they in turn will rely upon our gifts and strength on other critical occasions." Joshua Loth Liebman

Day 26: "There are those who are awkward in the face of sorrow, fearing to say the wrong thing; to them, I say, there is no wrong in comfort, ever. A kind word, a consoling arm ... these things are ever welcome." Jacqueline Carey

Day 27: "We may be powerless to alter certain events, but we remain free to choose our attitude towards them, and it is in our spontaneous acceptance of necessity that we find our distinctive freedom." Alain de Botton

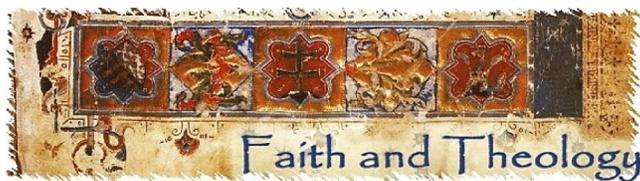
Day 28: "Memory is of no use to the remembered, only to those who remember. We build ourselves with memory and console ourselves with memory." Laurent Binet

Day 29: "No lies are more seductive than the ones we use to console ourselves." Laila Lalami

Day 30: "Pain is the first proper step to real compassion; it can be a foundation for understanding all those who struggle with their existence." David Whyte

Day 31: May dawn find you awake and alert, approaching your new day with dreams, possibilities and promises; May evening find you gracious and fulfilled; May you go into the night blessed, sheltered, and protected; May your soul calm, console, and renew you." John O'Donohue





Faith and Theology

From Desolation to Consolation

Sometimes the movement is like a pendulum, back and forth, back and forth, from consolation to desolation. It does raise the question, "Which comes first?" The answer is, "It depends!" We are indeed fortunate if our first acquaintance was with consolation for then we know what we are trying to get back to when we find ourselves mired in desolation. How sad to be born into desolation as has been the case for too many children in war torn countries, born into abject poverty, born with profound health issues, children who have never known the blessings of consolation. May the power of their innocence allow them to experience consolation in ways that would be invisible to anyone else.

There are other rhythms. We may enjoy long stretches of consolation, interspersed by momentary desolations. Or it may be that the despair of desolation is the constant, only occasionally disrupted by the joy of consolation. It may even be that while largely being content there is this unacknowledged substrate of desolation of which we are only vaguely aware. Something is wrong, but it is not wrong enough to address in any meaningful way. It may even be that we have no awareness that anything is wrong. The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard called this "unconscious despair."

This polarity of desolation and consolation is largely confined to the soul and the emotions, although it clearly can have intellectual and physical implications.

Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum wrote in a chapter in the book, *Handbook for the Soul*, "...I must begin by confessing that 'soul' is a word I rarely use." He continues, "'Soul' is found in the quality of what I am doing. If my activities have a sense of truth and integrity, if they are deep in meaning, then they are rich in soul, and so am I. Thus, for me, 'nourishing the soul' means making sure I attend to those things that give my life richness and depth of meaning."

While the 16th century founder of the Society of Jesuits, St. Ignatius, created his Spiritual Exercises, to lead people to God and a

state of consolation, Fulghum offers us a meaningful goal for discernment. When we are in a state of desolation, Fulghum would likely agree that the result is that our life is impoverished; that we exist on the surface of life, devoid of purpose, direction, or meaning.

Fulghum concludes, "I guess the key questions to ask are, 'What do you expect out of life?' and 'What will you settle for?' ...I...expect that life will go well if I simply pay attention to the positives, as well as to the negatives, of the mixture that is in me and is in the rest of the world. And if I focus on my soul, if I



allow it to speak to me and if I listen to it carefully, then it is I who am nourished at the center of my being."

Listening to the soul is one way of defining discernment. Margaret Silf suggests that St. Ignatius discovered within himself, when he paid attention, an "inner compass." The inner compass, she writes, "was able to reveal to him which movements within him were capable of engaging his deepest vital energy, and which were leading him only to fleeting satisfactions that left him unchanged and unfulfilled."

Listening!? Socrates said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." We can call it reflection, contemplation, meditation, prayer; it does not matter which. All of these can be about the same thing: listening to our life. Parker Palmer famously said, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before

you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

Dante wrote of the dark wood in mid-life in which he found himself lost. The 16th century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, wrote of the "dark night of the soul," which he described as a long period of unknowing, loss, and despair.

Analogies for desolation include desert and darkness. Unitarian Universalist minister Stephen Shick writes, "Spirit of the coming darkness. Forgive me for not welcoming your return. I have learned to fear you, remembering how once you pushed joy out of my soul, and how once you blinded me as I traveled a winding road. The truth is, I don't trust or understand you, and I quickly curse you." Unfortunately, there is no way around the darkness. Take courage, and proceed with the sure confidence that consolation is within reach.

There are different ways of listening to the soul. Parker Palmer has developed a process called *Circles of Trust* (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/>). These circles are led by trained facilitators. Another is simply talking with a spiritual friend, someone who you trust that has the ability to listen without judgement, ask questions for clarification, allows for silence as appropriate, and who has no need to fix you. Since such people are rare, you may want to seek out a spiritual director who can facilitate an ongoing guided conversation. (Some spiritual directors provide direction for a group.) Finally, you may want to consider listening to your soul through the practice of a daily examen, as follows.

Examen of Consciousness

The Examen of Consciousness is a practice that encourages you to bring the character of your day into greater awareness. It involves both re-membering and reflection. It has several parts:

1. How has that which is most precious and profound been active in our life during the day? We may call this God, our ultimate concern, our values, love, or whatever else conveys for us a sense of ultimacy. Call to mind the thoughts,

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Children's Books About Consolation

The children's book, *Davey McGravy* (2015), by poet David Mason consists of a series of poems and beautiful etchings

by artist Grant Silverstein. It is about a little boy nicknamed Davey McGravy, his father, and his brothers. Davey is swept up by

his grief for his mother who has died. Mason, who was the Poet Laureate of Colorado from 2010 to 2014, treats the death and the grief with profound compassion. The review by Maria Popova notes, "With great gentleness, he reminds us that whenever we grieve for someone we love, we grieve for our entire world, for the entire world; that whenever one grieves, the whole world grieves." The following poem, *The Kitchen*, captures the spirit of the book.

*He walked to where his father stood
and hugged him by a leg
and wept like the babe he used to be
in the green house by the lake*

*He wept for the giants in the woods
for the otter that swam in the waves.
He wept for his mother in the fog
so far away.*

*And then he felt a hand,
a big hand in his hair.
"It's Davey McGravy," his father said.
"I'm glad you're here."
"Davey McGravy," he said again,
"How's that for a brand new name?
Davey McGravy. Not so bad.
I like a name that rhymes."*

*And there was his father on his knees
holding our boy in his arms.
And Davey McGravy felt the scratch
of whiskers and felt warm.*

*"Nobody else has a name like that.
It's all your own.
Davey McGravy. Davey McGravy.
You could sing it in a song.*

*And then his father kissed him,
ruffled his hair and said,
"Supper time, Davey McGravy.
Then it's time for bed."*

Another remarkable book is *My Father's Arms Are a Boat* (2013). Written by Stein Erik Lunde and beautifully illustrated by Øyvind Torseter, it was originally published in Norway in 2009. This translation is done by Kari Dickson. A little boy and his father have a conversation on a cold winter's night when the little boy can't sleep in the aftermath of his mother's death. Eventually, they go outside to continue their conversation. Maria Popova writes,

"With his warm and comforting answers, the father watches his

son make sense of this strange world of ours, where love and loss go hand

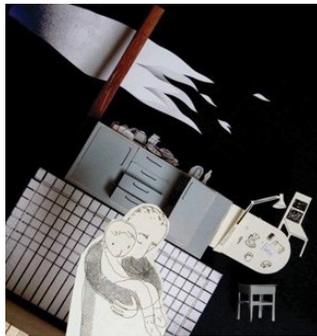
in hand. Above all, it is story about the quiet way in which boundless love and unconditional assurance

can embolden even the heaviest of spirits to rise from the sinkhole of anxiety and anguish."

(A reading of the story is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCCLziQC8HE>)

Several other children books are reviewed by Maria Popova at BrainPickings at <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/23/best-childrens-books-death-grief-mourning/>.

Source: Touchstones



We'll Build a Land

The hymn, *We'll Build a Land* (#121 in *Singing the Living Tradition*), has lyrics adapted from a paper, *Militarism and violence: A feminist perspective*, that Barbara Davis Zanotti delivered at the Riverside Church Disarmament Conference in October 1979 in New York City. Her speech included words from the Hebrew prophets, Isaiah and Amos. Songwriter Carolyn McDade took those words by Zanotti and adapted them to her tune, *Creation of Peace*, which was McDade's title for the song. McDade has always been careful to credit Zanotti for the lyrics.

In her paper, Zanotti, a radical feminist and peace activist, wrote, "Patriarchy is a system of dualisms: mind over body, thinking over feeling, heaven over earth, spirit over flesh—dualisms in which women are identified with the negative side." Zanotti was attending Harvard Divinity School at the time. In 1982, she published, *Patriarchy: A State of War*.

The four verses of the hymn artfully rework words found in the Book of Isaiah (61:1-4). Consider the first verse: "We'll build a land where we bind up the broken. / We'll build a land where the captives go free, / Where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning. / Oh, we'll build a promised land that can be." The refrain concludes with lyrics drawn from the Book of Amos (5.24):

"Where justice shall roll down like waters, / And peace like an ever flowing stream."

It acknowledges the desolation that emerges when too many people are

broken, captive, or mourning. It sings of consolation in the face of desolation. Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu's commentary on the lyrics of this hymn moves it beyond "we-they" to "us," noting that brokenness, captivity, grief, and other experiences of desolation are true for everyone. Given the current landscape of the world, the desolation applies to us. We owe each other a fierce loyalty as we work to console by building "a land of people so bold."

Source: Touchstones



Consolation and Desolation

(Continued from page 1) Introduction

The polarities of desolation and consolation in terms of our emotional and spiritual well-being were explored in depth by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who made them a centerpiece of his *Spiritual Exercises*. For Ignatius, they described the relationship one had with God. Closeness to God resulted in feelings of consolation, while distance from God led to feelings of desolation. Consolation and desolation comprise a spiritual compass in terms of choices made and the direction one is traveling in life. For those who do not find God-language useful, consolation can be

- ◆ that used to be important to us
- ◆ takes over our whole consciousness and crowds out our distant vision
- ◆ covers up all our landmarks
- ◆ drains us of energy

Consolation

- ◆ directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves
- ◆ lifts our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people
- ◆ bonds us more closely to our human community
- ◆ generates new inspiration and ideas
- ◆ restores balance and refreshes our inner vision...

- ◆ releases new energy in us."

While the words desolation and consolation may be unfamiliar, the experiences are not. Consider the following.

The 13th century Italian poet, Dante, in his epic work, *The Divine Comedy*, wrote in the first section, *Inferno*, "In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark

wood ("selva osura") where the straight way was lost." He also wrote, "There is no greater sorrow then to recall our times of joy in wretchedness."

The feelings of desolation can wound. Mary Oliver observes in her poem, *Landscape*, "Every morning I walk like this around / the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart / ever close, I am as good as dead." How can we keep the doors of our heart open? Often, it is easier said than done.

Consolation is possible when we find an oasis in the desert, a lighthouse in the storm, a place of respite away from the distressing turbulence of the world, or a friend, an ally, or someone else who will simply listen.

The focus thus far has been on the individual. That is where the spiritual practice of seeking consolation begins. But what happens when desolation moves beyond the individual to a wider commu-

nity?

There is, for many, the experience of desolation, a sense that world has lost its way. This is driven by the pandemic, the recession, political instability, etc. This sense of desolation evokes strong, negative emotions: fear, hopelessness, despair, misery, grief, etc. The list goes on and on. T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* was influenced, in part, by Dante's *Inferno* and by Eliot's concern with the aftermath of World War I. It concludes with these oft-quoted lines, "This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper." Trapped in this pessimism, it is difficult to either imagine or seek consolation as an individual, but as part of a community, like a Unitarian Universalist congregation, other possibilities exist.

A fragment from a poem by South African poet Rushdy Siers offers a path to consolation for a community. He wrote, "For us the world happened / Between a mountain and a sea / Somehow we were dislodged / Then we began to set ourselves free." This dislodging happened in 1968 when the apartheid South Africa government declared District 6 a "whites only" area. This area was located between the Table Mountain and the shore where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet. The dislodging was accomplished by bulldozing all of the homes and moving these "colored" residents to a bleak area 15



understood as all that is life affirming, while desolation refers to that which is life denying.

Ignatius wanted people to focus on interior movements, which he called "motions of the soul." These movements include thoughts, imaginings, emotions, inclinations, desires, feelings, repulsions, attractions, and more. A tool for focus was what Ignatius called the *Daily Examen*. (See page 4 for information about the *Examen of Consciousness*.)

Margaret Silf, in her book *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*, offers a thoughtful description of these two states. She writes, "Here are some of the main symptoms of desolation and the most commonly experienced blessings of consolation.

Desolation

- ◆ turns us in on ourselves
- ◆ drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings
- ◆ cuts us off from community
- ◆ makes us want to give up on things



miles away that was called Cape Flats.

The result of responding to such dislocation and desolation was this: "Then we began to set ourselves free." In freedom, they found consolation. Source: Touchstones

Beyond Desolation

(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology** feelings, and actions that seem to stand out the most. How did you attend to Life during the day and how did you respond? The examen also asks us to consider the nature of our relationship during this day with ourselves and with others. We are invited without apology or defense to see what is truly in us. The point of this is neither to justify nor excuse our actions on the one hand, nor to beat ourselves up for what we have done or failed to do, on the other. It is an exercise in self-knowledge. St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "This path of self knowledge must never be abandoned, nor is there on this journey a soul so much a giant that it has no need to return to the stage of an infant..."

2. The second part is a meditation (or prayer) of aspiration. In light of what the day has been what do we aspire to for tomorrow? What in us or in our relationships with others needs attention or healing? Hold these things in your heart for a few minutes.

3. Capture the most striking points of your daily examen in your journal. This can be just simple notations or a more extended dialogue with yourself, with others, and/or with the precious and profound. It is a way of turning inward. Virginia Stem Owens wrote, "Like a lathe, a journal forces us inward to the heart of the wood." As we write, our thoughts and reflections take a more concrete form. They also form a trail of bread crumbs that we can trace backward to see themes emerging on our reflections, concerns that persist, or the process by which some important issues were resolved over time. If it makes sense, end the writing with an aspiration that has arisen out of your reflection on the day.

Tips for the Examen

Do it daily at the same time

Spend at least 20 minutes; 1/2 on steps 1& 2 and 1/2 on step 3, journaling. (All three steps can involve writing if you wish)

Use free association & suspend judgment

Note the significant events of the day

Ask questions of life

Reflect on relationships with self/others/
divine

Was there a theme to the day?

At least once a week go back and read through what you have written to make you

(Continued on page 8)

The Awakened Heart

A Better World

Gerald G. May. M.D.

The deep, awakened heart within... offers no defense or justification of itself. It only desires and loves. It desires ...a



better world....
...Look at the most loving acts that have been done for you ... and your own most loving acts for others. Where did they come from? Could they have been predicted? How would they have looked if they had come from somewhere outside a loving heart? Would they ever even have happened at all?

Much of our heartlessness is reactive; we do it because the world expects [it].

...Some of our heartlessness comes from ... [being] stuck in our ways.

...Most of our heartlessness... comes from fear. ...We are afraid of what love is likely to call for. It might involve something beyond our control. It might mean getting hurt.

But the choice is ours. ... The only real hope for creation is for each of us ...to attend to the yearnings of our hearts so that we can move forward in love instead of re-treating or lashing out in fear.

I ask ...you to reflect upon discerning action.... Here we are looking at action in response to people and the world. ...The discernment question ...is, "What really happens in the consecrated space between feeling and response?"

...Seek the presence of love everywhere.

...There is much evil in the world, much confusion.... Indeed, ...[we] are capable of being mean. But there is no meanness in ...consecration; there is no vengeance in ...[the] true heart. Seek that heart.

Source: May, Gerald. *The Awakened Heart*. HarperCollins Paperback, 1993.

Sweet Soul

Mending

Rev. Nancy Shaffer

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul? What shall we use, and how is it in the first place you've come to be torn?

Come sit. Come tell me.

We will find a way to mend you.

I would offer you so much, sweet Soul: this banana, sliced in rounds of palest / yellow atop hot cereal, or these raisins scattered through it, if you'd rather. Would offer cellos in the background singing

melodies Vivaldi heard and wrote for us to keep. Would hold out to you everything colored blue or lavender or light green. All of this I would offer you, sweet Soul. All of it, or any piece of it, might mend you.

I would offer you, sweet Soul, this chair by the window,



this sunlight on the floor and the cat asleep in it. I would offer you my silence, my presence, all

this love I have, and my sorrow you've become torn.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul? With these, I think, gently we can begin: we will mend you with a rocking chair, some raisins; a cat, a field of lavender beginning now to bloom. We will mend you with songs remembered entirely the first time ever they are heard.

We will mend you with pieces of your own sweet self, sweet Soul—with what you've taught from the very beginning.

Source: Shaffer, Nancy. *Instructions in Joy*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002.

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion

Consolation and Desolation

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "If everywhere you look these days, it's wintery, desolate, lonely, practice believing in springtime. It always, always comes, even though on days like today it's nearly impossible to imagine, ground frozen, trees bare and spiky. New life will spring from this same ground. This season will end, and something entirely new will follow it." *Shauna Niequist*

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page one.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "The good life is not found in dreams of progress, but in coping with tragic contingencies. We have been reared on religions and philosophies that deny the experience of tragedy. Can we imagine a life that is not founded on the

consolations of action? Or are we too lax and coarse even to dream of living without them?" *John Gray*

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. What have you known of desolation in your life? Where these momentary or prolonged? What was the cause of the desolation? What helped you move from desolation to consolation?
2. Who or what has consoled you? How?
3. As you reflect on your life, when and where have you felt most alive? What were the conditions that led to those feelings?
4. What have you been able to do to console others? In the process, what did you learn?
5. As we move from the individual to the community, do you think that some communities are more vulnerable to desolation? Why? What can be done to address their desolation?
6. What is the role of your congregation in bringing "the oil of gladness" that "dissolves all mourning" as included in the hymn, *We'll Build a Land*.
7. As you reflect on the "soul" of the world, are you more disposed to consolation or desolation? Why? What might you/must you do in response?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words:

Rev. Philip R. Giles
(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*



How will I act tomorrow?

(Continued from page 7) **Examen**

more aware of the shape of your journey.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rob Hardies offers the following questions for consideration.

- ◆ What were the first things I thought/felt when I woke up? What were my first actions? Did I begin the day centered or not?
- ◆ What work did I do this day? Was it fulfilling? Did it contribute to the purpose that I have identified for my life?
- ◆ With whom did I interact: spouse, partner, children, family, friends, co-workers, and strangers? Did I greet them as a child of God? Did I treat them as possessing inherent worth and dignity, or did I see them as a means to an end?
- ◆ Where did I encounter the Holy today? What made me feel cutoff from the Holy?
- ◆ Where did I feel most alive, most myself? Where did I lack integrity?
- ◆ How do I feel now the day is over? What lessons did I learn from the day and what might I do differently tomorrow?

Source: Touchstones

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