

I am humbled to be asked to speak today about how I move forward in the face of suffering. Our circles are my attempt to emphasize our shared journey in this endeavor and the humility with which we must approach our shared journey.

I would wish this were an actual conversation; Over coffee and Jeanette Carter's pie. And so, I have chosen to sit among you.

I would hope to listen carefully. I would wish to better understand you and your situation. I would of course share my experience , but I would hope to gauge what I say. I would want to be respectful of the spirituality by which you live your lives.

Breath

Throughout our lives - We will know the beauty of spring flowers and the bitter winds of winter. We will know the joy of children's laughter and their anguished cries.

Who among us, after all, has not smiled at the dew on a spider web in morning light? And Who has not cursed the cobwebs of a pathway at night.

I know some of the suffering in this room. A knee that will not be quiet. . A child who is in and out of the hospital. The struggles after prostrate

cancer. The pain of arthritis. The disfigurement of breast cancer. The death of a family member. The diminishment of ability.

The abyss yawns. Standing at its edge can be devastating.

However, and this is important, I believe, as long as we are alive, there is the possibility of passage; of delight and compassion. There are diamonds to be found in the rough.

How do we collect the diamonds? How do we live vital and meaningful lives in a world of impermanence and decay? How do we move forward in hope when standing at the edge of the abyss?

My limited experience suggests there are destructive elements of our thinking and spirituality; **and** there are elements of our spirituality that can allow us to thrive.

I want to begin by dispensing with the question of Why?

I seek to dispel the why of "why me?"; the why of "why do the gods allow the innocent to suffer?" or in non-theistic language "why has fate dealt me this hand?"

Emotionally and spiritually, why is a dead end. It turns us in on ourself.
“Why me” ultimately leads to a diminished life.

Orthodoxy teaches that suffering is an instrument of god:

- ◆ Suffering **test** us.
- ◆ **punishes** us.
- ◆ **purifies** us.
- ◆ **teaches** us:
- ◆ Suffering **drives** us to the gods.

We have so in-cultured this thinking, it is fundamental to our understanding of how we achieve success: Witness the phrase: **No pain, no gain.**

Dorothee Soelle, in her dissuasions of suffering dismisses this kind of thinking as theistic masochism; meaning It depresses the value of life. I am say Suffering has no agency. Suffering is not a tool of the gods or of fate.

More importantly, Suffering does not define life. There is joy and delight despite the suffering. Our task is to find the joy and delight. We are the makers of meaning.

Breath

I unabashedly claim this life. I celebrate this life. We are biological wonders, one with a living world defined by transition and evolution. Ours is a world of cycles - of wholeness, of our oneness with the cosmos and specifically this earth. It is the nature of life to be in transition. If we are living we will experience both delight and change. We will know both the grandeur and the impermanence of life. I find that both empowering and thrilling.

Breath

“What then of hope?” When standing at the edge of the abyss, “How do we move forward?”

The edge of the abyss, for the mindful, is a moment of clarity. Standing at the abyss, there is clarity about both our situation and our task. As long as we are alive **we** get to choose what we will make of the moments to come.

I most often frame my spiritual life in terms of activities. Spirituality need not be ethereal.

When a child cries, it is reflexive to gather her up. If we are walking with a friend and the lights suddenly go out, we reflexively reach out to one another. I have spoken before about the essential act of reaching out to one another. I have argued that in touching and being touched by one another's hearts we find shared strength and joy. It is an opportunity to

share our struggles and laugh at our follies. By reaching out, we begin to find a way through the abyss without falling into despair.

We forge a community of compassion.

Look around. Before you, beside you - sits someone who is Suffering.

Do you know their story? Do they know yours?

We are sitting in something of a circle to emphasis our community of compassion. You have the compassion and the experience to be with them. And they have the compassion and the experience to be with you.

I have shared before that when I was first coming to consciousness after >> my little walk with death, I distinctly remember thinking of Michael and Katharine. In my love for them, I found the strength and courage to move across the abyss.

I knew that I wanted to live as an example for them. I deliberately set a positive culture in my room. I sought out the best in every person who entered my room. I expressed gratitude for their work and tried to leave them with a joke or a laugh.

We are dissuaded from despair by engagement, whether it is the love of others for us or our love for others; our interactions, our

engagement with others brings relief from both the emotional and the physical elements of suffering.

Bring on the laughter of friends, the banter of camaraderie and we are lifted out of our suffering. Love can swell our heart. Love can carry us across the abyss.

((pause))

I have also come to understand that we thrive best in a culture of gratitude. I grew up in a family consumed by negativity. Someone was always offended. Something or someone was always wrong. Confrontation paraded around as honesty. Negativity begets suffering.

For the last 30 years, I have been nurtured by a family that generously expresses gratitude. I have learned from Lynette and her parents, Rodger and Janet, that there are diamonds everywhere. I have learned that Gratitude opens our hearts and minds to the delight and joy that is always present.

((pause))

As a young man, I was driven to perfection, of course as a good methodist I never achieved perfection. But I worked it. I worked constantly and relentlessly. Needless to say; I was perpetually stressed. I regularly experienced related illnesses and injuries.

Breath

One does not progress through grief and a long illness like septic shock by relentless sprinting. And who knows, You might not even end up with legs to sprint on!

Rehabilitation and yoga taught me the importance of pacing one's self and of mindfulness. The two practices have become inseparable for me. To pace myself, I must be mindful of my body - its strengths and its protest. To be mindful, I must attend to my spirit and my body's need for both rest and movement. Healing takes time and space. Grief takes time and space.

Of course Pacing is also about knowing when to move.

If I sit, I hurt. If I hurt, I brood. If I brood, I not only suffer, I become insufferable.

A great deal of spiritual health involves movement and sensual experience. We are meant to experience the cold and the heat and the color of the sunset. We are meant to hear the frogs and see the flowers. We are meant to move. **Movement puts us in joy's path.** When I put myself in joy's path - I literally experience less pain.

What brings you joy, and when did you last put yourself in joy's path?

((pause))

Unfortunately, There are many things we do not have the time to talk about today. We have not talked about the role of humor. We have not talked about perspective - specifically the humility to recognize our own suffering is not unique. We have not talked about having people in our lives who are capable of giving us a good kick in the butt. (By the way if you are looking for me to play that role in your life - don't — I will always come up a foot short)

No one can say you will not suffer. But I have been able to live a life that is not consumed by suffering. Despite having two feet in the ground, I experience a meaningful life, a life filled with joy and love.

Thanks for the coffee ...and let's make time for another.