

Consolation Dancing with Desolation

Cal Furnish

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When I first saw “Consolation/Desolation” as our theme for this month, I felt uncomfortable, and wasn’t really sure why. For me, that feeling of unidentified discomfort is usually a pretty good sign that there’s something going on here (head) or here (heart) that’s worth exploring. So, I asked Janet if there was an open Sunday presentation slot, and here we are!

For me, desolation is an intensely powerful reality—not just a concept, or an abstraction. Combining the prefix “de,” meaning “absent, taken from, or lost”; with “solace,” meaning “comfort, nurturance, or reassurance” provides a reasonable definition of “desolation” as “emptiness, aloneness, ruination, being without comfort or hope.” But a definition can’t convey the impact of desolation in the real world, on real people. If desolation were an elevator, every button would take you right down through the basement floor into the impenetrable darkness under the building.

Engulfed in desolation, a person can feel, “I don’t know if I’m going to make it through this,” or even “I don’t know if I WANT to make it through this.”

So, that’s just a hint of desolation, and I know that’s part of my discomfort with the topic. I can’t speak honestly about desolation without feeling some of that bottomless engulfment, especially during a time in our society when feelings of desolation are so pervasive.

The other part of my initial discomfort had to do with the word “consolation.” Compared with the overwhelming power of desolation, at first glance, “consolation” seems inadequate. Come on! How can a pat on the shoulder, and a “hang in there,” stand in

the face of desolation? Isn't that like a consolation prize, or hauling a garden hose to a three-alarm fire?

Isn't the tool we need more like TRANSFORMATION!? Now that's a strong word—fully as powerful as desolation. Maybe this month's theme should be, "Desolation and Transformation"! Hold that thought. We'll get back to it.

Right before Christmas, I talked on the phone with a friend of mine, who lives on the east coast. Really good guy—gentle, smart, hard worker, fun. Around 20 years ago, when he was a young husband and dad, he travelled for work. His two sons were 5 and 8, and he and his wife had them playing hockey, skiing, playing music...great family!

A couple of days before Christmas back then, he had flown back into their hometown from a job, and was waiting for them to pick him up at the airport. They were late, and when he saw his brother walking up to the gate, he knew it was bad. His wife and sons died in a car wreck on their way to the airport that night.

How does a dad get through that? I've experienced tragedies, and am pretty familiar with death and dying situations, but if I ever said to my friend, "I know how you feel," or "I understand," that would be the most awful blasphemy. I have no idea how I would deal with his desolation, if it were mine.

All these years later, of course he's not "through it." Every December and January isn't just hard, it's desolation. He drinks and sleeps a lot, often loses his job that time of year, and just "functions"—marginally. I've thought a lot about consolation and desolation since he and I talked together.

Desolation has two realms: what happens out there in the world: the car wrecks, bombings, wars...and what happens inside: our thoughts and feelings. Desolation's a personal, unique combination of the two realms, and for those who survive the outer desolation, we know that the inner desolation often persists. For those of us who,

well-intentioned or not, want to “transform” our friends who are desolated, it may make sense to pause. Sometimes, we want it to “be better,” and we want it now! Sometimes, I think I know what another person “needs to do.” Often, not bad ideas—but often so much about my pain, my heart ACHE, at witnessing my friend’s heart BREAK.

Last time my friend and I talked, I really tried to present my good ideas so respectfully and honestly—“try some counseling, go to some meetings”—and, it just wasn’t a fit for him, not now. I knew on some level that I was trying to “transform” him, and that just felt too close to saying, “I know how you feel.” So, thankfully, we just sat. As we sat silently, what came to my mind were my imaginings of his beautiful family, playing and being together, all of them, back then. And I felt moved to ask him a question. Not a “loaded question” or a counselor question—just my wondering and wanting to ask.

I said, “I really want to ask you something, and you don’t have to answer.”

“OK, sure.”

“I was just wondering—what would your wife and sons want for you, now?”

Almost immediately, with a smile, he said, “They want me to go back to school, and to help kids! I really should think about that.”

Not “They WOULD want me to...,” but “They want me to...”

No flashy transformation for him, no earthshaking revelations, just two people being together.

“Consolation”: “to join, to be with, to share solace or comfort.”

For a few moments, he said, the desolation lifted, and he turned a bit more toward life. And I gained some clarity about the potential of consolation without expectation, and some rethinking about always

“going for the transformation.” In the presence of life-affirming consolation, transformation may occur, or not. It’s OK, either way. Several years ago, I was in Atlanta for an American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Leadership Conference. Almost every one of the four hundred people in attendance shared three characteristics: we were unpaid volunteers, most had lost someone to suicide, and we coordinated initiatives across the country that reach thousands of people, and raise millions of dollars, for suicide prevention research and education. It’s a very strong culture of mission, caring and support. Early on the second day, each volunteer was asked to introduce themselves, and speak briefly about what moved them to become involved with the Foundation.

About halfway through the introductions, which had been quite moving, a volunteer stood, and spoke softly. “I’m honored to be part of our group, and I thank you all for accepting me, and for working so hard to find ways that other families might be spared the tragedy that so many of us have endured. I became a volunteer with AFSP because my son killed himself several years ago, right after he murdered several fellow students at his high school.” And she sat down, and it was the next person’s turn.

Transformative, for many of us there—for her, to make that courageous statement to 400 people, most of whom she didn’t know; for others to hear it; for her to be valued, accepted, and consoled as a member of this hard-working group. Dancing with her desolation was no fairy tale with a happy ending. Just hard work, and worth the work.

I’m thinking now about interpersonal, social, and political desolation, and about toxic transformations that grow from fear, hatred, greed, and viewing “the other” as our common enemy. There’s such a strong pull toward more accounts of desolation flooding the media. From all political camps, the tendency is to view others through a lens of, “they’re leading us to desolation.” Seems that threat of desolation is becoming a motivation of choice. I don’t think that’s always accidental, and I’m sure it’s contagious.

Powerful forces with powerful voices can manipulate a person, or a people, to perceive the world in terms of desolation — “ruined, dangerous, not enough to go around,” and to engage with the world from that base of desolation. Political differences become immediate survival issues. “Who is our enemy? Who might be our enemy? How do we defend against them, keep them away from us, intimidate and contain them, or perhaps get rid of them altogether?”

In the name of consolation, those in positions of power and influence may direct that toxic manipulation toward people who are already experiencing desolation. It's an ancient "old brain" bid for control: "I will save you from desolation, if you join me in battle against ..."them." In today's terms, I see that manipulation as "fake consolation." Sorry—that one was too good to pass up.

So, what's a UU to do? It's not our role, or within our power, to presume to directly transform others. But we can and do console, and support what's life-affirming, and resist or withdraw support from what's life-destroying. The intent and spirit of our consolation powerfully affects the quality of transformations that may happen, related to our actions.

Transformation, while it often happens in response to desolation, is not something to be “done to” others. Obviously, transformation can affirm life...or poison life.

I have one more story about consolation. Sometimes, the most life-affirming consolation happens—just happens—without even thinking, “How can I console this person?”

In my early twenties, I bought my first house. I could just barely afford the payments, earning a few hundred dollars a month as a paraprofessional counselor. My house was considerably below the “fixer-upper” category. By that, I mean that my girlfriend and I had to gut the house and totally replace the wiring, plumbing, heating, roof, windows, and appliances before it was even habitable. No money to hire professionals; just did it ourselves, piece-by-piece.

Then, we began to make the house, a home. Put in a wood stove, tore out the dining room ceiling, built a spiral stairway up to a two-bedroom attic loft. I LOVED THAT LITTLE HOUSE! Wish we still had it, here in Sheridan. Really.

In Jackson for a counselor's conference, I got a call from my housemate. She was sobbing.

"Come home quick. We've had three inches of rain, the house is flooded."

"Well, we'll just dry it out, and..."

"No. You don't get it. The basement is caved in and full of mud and water, and the house is about ready to collapse, too."

"Oh."

Got home late at night, pulled into the muddy yard, and in the dark, the house, still standing, looked pretty normal. I waded over to the side of the house, to look at the basement wall, and when I shone my flashlight where the wall should have been, I could see right under the house to the neighbor's house next door. Both long basement walls were folded into the mud in the basement. The whole house was being held up by a short wall in the front, and an 8" x 8" piece of broken cinderblock on each corner in the back. The house was sagging, and making funny noises. Our beautiful house was about one more "creak" away from desolation.

I called people, but no one knew what to do. Set up a meeting with my insurance agent. That's when I learned that flood insurance requires a whole separate policy. Oops.

Someone said, "Call Sid. He might help you..."

Long story short, I grew up on the south side of Cheyenne, kind of the wrong side of town. (There is no wrong side of town in Cheyenne, but I didn't know that then.) Sid and his family lived on the wrong side, of the wrong side of town, right next to the junkyard that he owned. I had no idea why I should call him, but I did.

Sid said, “Only two blocks holding it up in back?”

“Yep.”

“You still in it? If you are, get out. It’s gonna fall in the hole real soon. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Turned out, Sid had been a Sergeant with the Army Corps of Engineers during WWII in some scary places. He had built bridges and runways, and moved buildings in desolate situations.

He didn’t come to console or transform me. He looked at the house, said, “holy shit!” and started measuring and writing while he talked.

“If we don’t get it braced temporarily underneath today, it’ll be gone. I’ll get a couple guys to bring some stuff, but I can’t let them go under your house until it’s braced, and I can’t do the bracing myself. Can you work with me under the house today? I’ll tell you what to listen for, and where to run if something happens. After that, you’ll have some time to figure out what you want to do from there. Can you work right now?”

So, we worked. For about six months. I could afford to pay Sid a little bit, because I was pretty much his "crew" And it’s fun for me now, to realize that what Sid was doing was consolation at its finest. Because of his natural “coming alongside,” and our collaboration, he had paid work for a while, and I not only saved my house, but learned about house moving, block laying, and what the bad, “run-away-fast” noises are, if you’re under a precariously balanced house. Got lots of new skills, and confidence and competence. Never even occurred to me that I could be dealing with desolation, or that it was a transformative time for me. Wish Sid was still around—I’d give him a call, and thank him again, and we’d tell some stories.

So, Sid probably didn’t ever think in terms of consolation, or desolation. He just showed up, and joined with me to do what was needed. Sid and I had radically different politics, religion, and

lifestyles. Most days, that just didn't matter. Some days, we had very lively conversations about life, that always ended with both of us feeling like the other was a pretty good person. We were too busy, and too invested in doing a good job together, to get high-centered on those incidental differences. More specifically, Sergeant Republican Sid wanted to get the damn commie hippie's house fixed before it fell on his head, and draft resister tree hugger Cal wanted to learn enough, and work hard and fast enough, to help Sid to save my house.

Remember the comparison between consolation and a garden hose to deal with a three-alarm fire? Do you know (of course you do) that right this minute, somewhere in the world, people are pulling victims out of mudslide-ravaged or bombed buildings with just their bare hands, and that they would probably love to have a working garden hose to help with their life saving work and consolation?

So, what do we do, as UU's? We internalize our highest beliefs and principles, as best we can. We SHOW UP. We dance with desolation, internal or external, through consolation characterized by respect, honesty, vulnerability. When we screw up, because you know we will—it's damn hard work—when we screw up, we help each other, and console each other, and show up again.

Thank you so much. I'll close with excerpts from "Dive", poet Andrea Gibson's poem that powerfully depicts the dance between consolation and desolation.

Closing Words

...

see, life...doesn't rhyme
 it's bullets...and wind chimes
 it's lynchings and birthday parties
 it's the rope that ties the noose
 and the rope that hangs the backyard swing

...

it's wanting to speak
 the most honest poem I've ever spoken in my life

not knowing if that poem should bring you closer

to living or dying
drowning or flying
cause life doesn't rhyme

last night I prayed myself to sleep
woke this morning
to find god's obituary scrolled in tears on my sheets
then walked outside to hear my neighbor
erase ten thousand years of hard labor
with a single note of his violin

...
life doesn't rhyme

....
it's you never feeling so greedy
as when you're handing out dollars to the needy
it's my not eating meat for the last seven years
then seeing the kindest eyes I've ever seen in my life
on the face of a man with a branding iron in his hand
and a beat down baby calf wailing at his feet

it's choking on your beliefs
it's your worst sin saving your...life
it's the devil's knife carving holes into your soul
so angels will have a place to make their way inside

life doesn't rhyme

still life is poetry—not math
all the world's a stage
but the stage is a meditation mat

you tilt your head back

you breathe
when your heart is broken you plant seeds in the cracks
and you pray for rain

you teach your sons and daughters
that there are sharks in the water

but the only way to survive
is to breathe deep

and dive

**Moment of Silence: excerpt from Andrea Gibson's poem
"enough"**

"I want to write poems in the tone of your mother's eyes when she
whispered your name for the very first time."