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“Heartbreak to Gratitude”

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I served my internship in 2011-12 in Ogden, Utah, a congregation that had a longstanding relationship with a few local LGBTQ focused organizations. As you can imagine, in that part of the world, a welcoming religious home for LGBTQ folks was necessary and often life saving. Those relationships called us into responsibility. Our love called us to act.

You see, in that part of the world, it was legal to be fired or evicted for being anything other than straight and cis gendered. Quick definition if you need it: you're cisgendered if you identify *with* and *as* your anatomical birthsex. So we were called into action when an advocacy group sought to get legal protections at the municipal level so that no more could a person be fired or evicted for their identity.

The night of the vote saw a couple handfuls of UU's down at City Hall, offering testimony and registering our support. The council seemed amenable. But then some representatives from a conservative Christian group spoke to their rights, as they termed it, to discriminate. To our dismay, this was compelling to the council, burdened as they were by the religious predilections dominating that part of the world.

Let's face it, the church of Later Day Saints, despite some really cool characteristics, is also steeped in a patriarchy that very much privileges hetero straight cisgendered men and puts everyone else in the passenger seat, backseat, or, sometimes, far worse. Of course part of the reason that persists is because the dominant culture there did not often find itself in proximity to the peoples it othered, excluded, and oppressed.

Out of proximity, and so out of touch with the stakes, the council thought maybe a little more deliberation was needed. They tabled the resolution for a month or a week. I can't recall the duration.

I do recall the next meeting. About 15% of the congregation showed up. About an equal number of Baptists and an equal number of other interested parties were also there. It was like “Gangs of New York,” except it was “Churches of Ogden.” Oddly, pretty much the only LDS folks there were on the council.

Our side cried human rights. The other side cried religious freedom. Our side was more appealing, more consequential, less conceptual. Real people, real costs. I could see the council's hearts opening. I could see us prevailing, preserving human sanctity, livelihood, and life. It was a rush. Our faith at work in the world. For a young minister it was a real confirmation of the power our tradition.

And then someone from the opposing point of view brought up freedom of speech, that old neocon red herring masquerading as a sacred cow, upon whose misappropriated alter democracy has been subverted, corruption supported, and aggression green lighted. They fell for it.

Perhaps it was because none of the council people were proximate with Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer folks. Perhaps it was because they did not identify as or with the people about whom they were about to make a decision that allowed them to rely on a gross, nightmare malfunction of a sacred principle. Perhaps they didn't really want to pass the protections and were just looking for an excuse.

But... they looked miserable. I believe they did want to pass the protections. But the principle of

free speech elicited a pavlovian response. And look, freedom of expression is essential, right up until it is used to accomplish the annihilation of the very rights it strives to protect, which, ultimately, is the right to life. It is a frequent drug of bamboozlement in my homeland and blinded the council to the real human cost of not passing the law. And so they did not.

We went from almost certain victory to utter defeat. More painful yet, along the way we had learned how meaningful this law would be to those who needed it most. And now they were doubly defeated. For the *failure to make positive change* felt like an affirmation of a status quo where they had forever felt less-than. They were anguished, defestated. We all were devastated. Hopeless. Heartbroken.

I remember the following Sunday at church. Turns out an active 15% ripples out to where, emotionally, the whole congregation had felt invested by their social justice warriors. When the warriors came back to the village defeated, the whole village felt the loss, for the whole village or, as the case may be, congregation supported them. It was a tearful, heart wrenching service. We sang our grief. We held each other. We came together in such a deep, heartbroken way... there was almost a kind of beauty to it. More than almost. It was profound.

We were all in deep lament. But through our grief, we were also moving into a deeper love. Everyone felt it. Everyone felt it. There was something creative, on an essential, heart first, level. Something creative and binding, formative and embracing emerged. It was... a religious experience.

And then time gets fuzzy. My supervisor took some time away to recuperate. While she was gone, a

local lawyer stopped by. Said he had read about us in the paper as a group in the fore of this fight. Said he had some legalese that could satisfy those who'd made idols out of their principles while also affording us the protections we'd been seeking. We, in turn, plugged him into the community activists who'd led the effort.

As far as I know, ever since then it has been illegal to fire or evict people based on their sexual or gender identity in Ogden. We won. And whereas when we had lost, we'd lost doubly, when we prevailed, we won even more than we'd intended.

For we'd not only secured life saving protections, we'd tapped into a deep vein of community spirit because we'd been in deep mourning together. It was almost as if our grief called our hope into being and bonded our community together in the process.

I think about that episode a lot, that dynamic - through grief to gratitude. There was a magic in our heartbreak, a manifesting in our mourning, some creation in our shared lamentations. Even before our prayers of loss and fear tugged that lawyer out of the interconnected web, our mutual ache created a new, reborn community.

I don't imagine it is exactly a recipe. But that doesn't mean it didn't happen, doesn't happen, or won't happen... again and again. It did, does, and will.

Heartbreak is somehow connective. Connection elicits appreciation, cultivates gratitude. And so there is an alchemy here, from heartbreak to gratitude.

Given the global and local pain of the last year, with all its isolation and loss and fear, given our global, national, and local strife, my mind comes

back to this idea. There is something about heartbreak that, if one survives it, recreates the world.

When I have lost love, personally, there has also always been, through that seemingly isolated ache, a reconnecting with the most essential and a recreation of the world or, more precisely, my relationship with the world. And I am fortified again. This is true for communities and for individuals.

Grief is an expression of love. And love is creative. And we all have grief. Our first breath signals a loss. Suddenly severed from the rhythm, warmth, and nourishment of the womb, our first utterance is a lament. I suppose this foundational loss may account for our religious need as we now are responsible for re-awakening that feeling of deep connection.

But we humans have a mixed record of re-awakening connection. When it has failed or been corrupted in the particular, we have rejected it categorically, leading to an exponential increase in perceived disconnection and a subsequent objectification that leads, among other tragedies, to environmental and social violence. And if we are lucky and alive, we will feel that as heartbreak.

Heartbreak may well be our path back into connection. Heartbreak is creative for it calls us into the total vulnerability of our interdependent state, and there - re-recognizing that state, that grace, that mercy - we are re-born. Grief, in essence, is an act of creative gratitude, expressing our connection.

When I am made aware of the persistence of environmental degradation and the deep othering of racism, I am ushered into a state of outrage and dismay. But it may well be that, until we are no

longer dismayed, but rather sufficiently heartbroken, we will not have connected thoroughly enough to truly do anything about either.

And this carries us to the issue of the day as we will be moving soon into a Town Hall offering feedback on the proposed 8th Principle. That principle concerns 'Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and other oppressions in ourselves and in our institutions.'

When the principle was proposed, I was not a fan, as it did not seem to me to be a principle, but more of a mission or strategy. But when the principle passed out of the blue at last year's AGM, I then witnessed the utter sense of relief, the joy, of many black UU's on both sides of the border.

And then, when it was announced that the motion had been carried out of order and did not count, I witnessed their heartbreak. I heard their grief and fear. Now if you did not see that, you may wonder if you have been, like the Ogden board was, like I was, diverted by a lack of proximity into prioritizing principles that have mistaken their ultimate concern; the service of life.

I continue to have what I think are legitimate qualms with the proposed 8th Principle. Legitimate. But not important. People are important. Principles over people is a form of idolatry.

And... I mean, what would it look like if, just for a minute we accepted the experience of those who say they feel othered in our midst, if we let that into our hearts and understood how much hangs on this moment for them?

What would happen if we found an invitation to love in their grief and an opportunity to share in it,

to move with them from centuries of heartbreak into a state of creative gratitude? For it is in that heartbreak where we will re-awaken our fundamental interdependence and learn once more that our liberation is inextricably bound together.

And if we do not listen, if we do not respond to the voices who are the most impacted, the most at risk, and the most at need within our own faith when we *absolutely* have the power and capacity to do so... well then, I really do not know what we are doing.