

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**

**“Our Cup of Tears”**

**The Rev. Dr. Morris Hudgins**

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**Introduction**

If you come to my office in my home or at the church you will see little trinkets, memories from those 38 years that I carry with me wherever I go. Usually when I leave someone in the church gives me a photograph or painting of the church I am leaving. I treasure those photographs. I have one of TJMC, UU in my car.

One of my favorite gifts comes from a member of the UU Fellowship of Raleigh, NC, Nancy Kevin, a professional potter. Nancy came into my office and presented me with a small pottery cup that she wanted me to keep. She said she remembered a story I told that stayed with her. The story was about the Jewish tradition of the Cup of Tears. I think Nancy knew I was going to need this tear cup, leaving a church that I had served for eleven years.

Today's sermon is based on that same story. It was inspired by a story told by Forester Church, now deceased minister of All Souls Church in New York City. Forest writes:

I was visiting the museum in Jerusalem. In one display case there is a collection of tiny cups. "What were they for?" I asked. Our guide explained it to me. These little cups, tiny ceramic versions of egg cups or goblets, were sacramental vessels. Not in the way that we have come to think of them—baptismal vessels or cups which contain the blood of Christ but sacramental vessels in an intimate, personal sense. People cried into them.

Forest then reflects on this experience:

Just think about it. Your mother has just died. You have learned that someone you love has cancer. Your wife has left you. You have failed in your job. A long time friend has rejected you. Or more likely you have simply broken down. No one can understand it, especially your spouse or children or co-workers or friends, but something stupid happens—goodness knows you are not proud of your response—but something stupid happens and you simply break down. It hits and you cry. You cannot help crying. You are furious with yourself for breaking down, and even more furious with your loved ones for not understanding, but there you are.

And what do you do? You go to your mantle and pick up your tear cup. You put it under your eye. You cry into it. And when you are done crying you cap it and put it back on your mantle. It is a way to save your tears.

There are times when we all need that tear cup:

- For me it is when I watch the Olympic Games. Those athletes have given up the last ten years of their life for this goal and they have reached the top, and they stand there and their nation's flag is raised and their tears begin to come. And so do mine.
- Or there I sit in the theatre watching a movie, and the credits are rolling by and I sit there crying my eyes out. I need a big tear cup.
- Or I get ready to give my last sermon in a church and someone says “thank you for all you did this year.” Or I watch the Coming of Age class talk about their experience, or sing “Halleluiah”. Or I see the parents when their daughter or son is graduating from high school. Like them, I am a mess. How am I going to get up there and give my sermon this morning? I need that tear cup. I need to go through the process: lift that vessel up to my eye, empty myself of all of those tears, and then do what I need to do.

All of this reminds me when I visited Canterbury Cathedral in England. Generally, I felt the Cathedral was just too big. I was not moved as I thought I would. But then I walked into the last small chapel at the very back of the Cathedral. It was for the Saints and Martyrs. Again, I was not moved, until I saw a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. I lit a candle for Martin and cried my eyes out.

Forest Church had a similar experience in that Jerusalem Museum. He writes:

And so there I was, in Israel in this museum I wanted to cry. I wanted to pick up one of those little cups and cry my tears into it, to save them, to remember them. And I thought how wonderful it must have been for some woman who simply couldn't cope any longer—the pressures, the pain—and she went to her mantle and picked up her cup of tears and cried. She cried and cried and finally her cup ran over.

And the next day, not only does she have something to remind her of the depths of her feeling, but she has something to be proud of — her cup of tears. She has felt deeply, she has suffered, and she has survived. There she is entertaining friends and she knows and they know that she has felt deeply, suffered and survived. It is cathartic really. Life is not easy, it is difficult. The problem is that people pretend that they are doing well because they fear the stigma that is attached to struggle. In ancient Israel struggle was valued. Tears are valued. The man or woman whose cup was running over was honored for her courage and her pain.

We are also told that the people of ancient Israel kept two kinds of tear cups—those for tears of joy and those for tears of sorrow. These ancient Israelites were not afraid to cry. They considered the act of crying a sacrament of love. They were evidence that you are alive and care—you care deeply, deeply enough to cry. The fuller your cup the more others respect you. It means that you are a great-hearted person. "Life touched you far more deeply—the pain of it and the joy."

The Old Testament is full of affirmation of tears of sorrow. Knowing this the 23rd Psalm becomes more meaningful: "My cup overflows." The 126th Psalm says, "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." In Isaiah to give God tears is to give him a prayer (Is. 38). In Lamentations we are advised to let tears run down like a river (2: 11).

### **Psychology**

Contemporary psychology would give us similar advice. Both tears and laughter are viewed as forms of expression of our inner selves. They bring out the whole person and not what is expected of us. We should not be embarrassed by our tears. Crying is part of that which makes us human. It tells us something about our relationship between our body and our mind. In crying, we complete our self-verification. To cry is to surrender to something inside us. Schopenhauer said that "weeping springs from a sympathy with oneself." When we cry we are saddened for what has happened to us—the loss of a relative, the acknowledgment of our own finitude, and our own failure."

All of these seem to fit our emotion when a loved one has died. But tears can be more than this. Tears can be joy as well as sorrow. Tears can be pain and misery as well as grief. Tears are not only inner revelation. They are also compassion for another. The Jews also called the Tear Cup the Cup of Consolation. One psychologist expresses it this way:

In weeping, we do not think only about ourselves, or feel only ourselves  
. . . To be moved ourselves, we live in the other, and from others; and  
from this experience we have a "reunion with ourself, our own pain as our  
own suffering." (Plesser, p. II 9)

### **Conclusions**

From time to time I turn to poetry for explanations of theological questions. I have a collection of poems by Elise Maclay titled, *Green Winter, Celebrations of Old Age*. One of her poems is titled, "For My Mother-in-Law in Heaven":

I think of her often,  
My mother-in-law, long dead now.

I wish I'd had time to get to know her better.  
She could have taught me a lot  
About animals and birds,  
About the sea,  
About how to bring up boys,  
Because, of course, what she was and did  
Had a lot to do with how my husband turned out.  
I wish I would thank her  
For teaching him to be truthful and kind,  
Courageous and just.  
I wonder if she and I will meet in the hereafter.  
Will there be a hereafter?  
Nowadays in church they don't talk much about heaven  
they don't argue about whether or not  
We'll recognize our loved ones,  
They don't talk about death as a door  
With everyone who has died before us on the other side.  
My husband, who has a lot more education  
Than I have, said that the plan (if there is one and he thinks no)  
Is not likely to be that simple.  
He chooses his words carefully,  
Doesn't say "impossible" or "silly,"  
Though knowing him as well as I do,  
I'm inclined to think those were the words that came first to his mind.  
Now that death is such an imminent possibility  
For both of us  
I find myself longing  
For survival of personality,  
Wishing we could spend eternity with those we've loved,  
With those who have loved us,  
With those we've never had a chance to love,  
Some people say that if You are,  
as I believe You are,  
The God of all universes,  
You must have some more sweeping plan,  
Yet I keep hoping survival of the self we most deeply are  
Is part of it.  
My husband says, what will be will be.  
He's more accepting,  
In reality, more religious,  
Though only You and I would say so.  
I'll certainly be careful not to breath the word.  
Agnostics hate to be called religious,  
Especially when they're praying.  
His mother was the same way. I think of her often.

Maclay reminds us that our tears tells us about what we could and should have done with those we loved. She reminds us:

- that it is not too late
- that our tears are about what could have been
- that tears are normal—we want to be with our loved ones forever.

I once preached a sermon on the after-life. I shared my philosophy that we need to be concerned about this life, not the next. Someone in the sanctuary challenged my conclusion. She had recently lost her father, and said she "needed the possibility of a heaven, so I will be with my father again." I could not and did not want to differ with her. Yes, we want to be with people forever. But we do not know that this can be so. We do know that we can live today. We can be with others today. We can love today. That is what we know. Our tears are an expression of what we do not do but we know we can. We are bound together by our tears and our laughter. I conclude that in crying we bind ourselves to others, but also to the values, thoughts and events of our past, and we make ourselves whole again. Crying is a healing process—nothing to be embarrassed about.

There is a negative side to tears. Tears can represent the guilt coming from our failures and our wrongdoings. This explains our tears regarding Martin Luther King, Jr. We probably have not done all we could have to eliminate racism. Maybe we didn't listen to his message when he was alive. So we cry in his death. Tears can also be tears of frustration. We don't know what to do. Life presents situations that are beyond our capability to handle at this moment. Our tears tell us that we need to give some attention to a problem again. Let us turn to a classic poem by W. H. Auden, called "For the Time Being." There is one small portion of this long poem that goes like this:

This is why we despair; that is why we would welcome  
The nursery bogey or the wine-cellar ghost, why even  
The violent howling of winter and war has become  
Like a Jukebox tune that we dare not stop.  
We are afraid of pain but more afraid of silence;  
For no nightmare of hostile objects could be as terrible as this void.  
This is the Abomination.  
This is the wrath of God.

Auden wrote this poem during World War II. The war had entered another phase. He stood in the void of war away from the front lines and talked of the howling of winter and war. He compared it to a "Jukebox tune we dare not stop." Life is like that at times. It is out of control. It becomes an abomination. Auden calls it the "wrath of God."

Yes, I have been in that place—in the 1960's when my high school friends, and my brother were off fighting in the Viet Nam War and I was home reading books. I could not watch the daily barrage of gunfire on the television, so what can I do but cry? My tears are tears of frustration for a world that is deeply divided, where evil abounds, and I cannot do anything about it. So I cry. But then one day Eugene McCarthy came to speak in Chapel Hill, NC. He told me there was something I could do about this war. I could protest. I could support a candidate who opposed the war. So I did. Then Bobby Kennedy told us that we can oppose this war. Then he was killed. And we cried again.

Our tears are a message to us that something needs to be done. Our inactivity is our silence that Auden refers to in this poem. Our tears represent our conscience as well as the frustration. When I counsel someone and tears begin to flow, I ask what do the tears represent. Are you saddened by something? Are you frustrated by life? Separation, estrangement, acts done in anger toward another, all cause tears to well up within us. But finally, we must ask: What can we do? What risk can we take? What act of love or forgiveness can we take? Our tears give us a message. What can we do?

Out of tears can come hope and promise. We can join together with others to share our pain, our frustration, our grief, our tears of sadness, our guilt over inactivity. We can do something. We can confront the powers of evil. We can write letters. We can talk to our friends. We can build coalitions. We can create peace. May it be so. Blessed be and Amen.