

Joy and Woe Are Woven Fine
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Sometimes it seems the world asks too much of our hearts.

From Columbia to Charleston, and all along the South Carolina watersheds in between, people are putting lives back together after the terrible floods of last week—homes lost, livelihoods lost, lives lost—and our hearts ache with them.

In Ankara Friday, people gathering to demonstrate for peace in the midst of escalating violence were attacked, explosions taking the lives of at least a hundred, and our hearts ache with them.

Across Europe, many nations' compassion and their convictions are being tested by waves of refugees from conflicts that seem to grow worse with every new development, and we watch from the seemingly safe remove of an ocean away, celebrating their best responses, grieving with their worst. We know we have had a huge part in creating the situation that has driven these displaced people from their homes; our hearts ache for them, and we know that our own turn to open our doors must come.

In Oregon, in Arizona, in Texas, college students and a teacher lie dead and families who had been celebrating their progress in life are grieving, and our hearts ache with them. And there is anger in our hearts too, as once again we witness a callous calculus that weighs the value of lost lives against the value of unfettered access to guns, and concludes that we are helpless.

And at the same time, in Stockholm and in Oslo, the Nobel prizes are announced. We learn of work that has touched and will touch countless lives, that has illuminated a path toward a more peaceful future, and our hearts fill with admiration, gratitude, and hope.

So much to hold.

In our own lives, there is much to hold in our hearts as well: A child is born and we are struck by the radiant joy in their parents' faces; a grave illness threatens the well-being or the life of a loved one; new love blossoms in the life of someone whose happiness means the world to us; a mentor who guided us on our path into adulthood dies; an exciting new possibility appears in our working life; a parent who cared for us suddenly needs our care, and struggles against the change; a child leaves the safety of our home and ventures into a world where anything might be in store for them.

It is a lot to hold. And it's not the way of life to bring it on one thing at a time, oh no. It's not joy today, sorrow tomorrow, anticipation next week, fear a week from Tuesday. Wouldn't that be nice? But it's all here at once, isn't it?

Think about the times when you've had to navigate a moment of anger, impatience, or hurt in a relationship with someone who also delights you, comforts your sorrow, teaches you every day what love means.

How many times I've been part of a memorial service and suddenly felt in my heart the truth that we are "weeping for what has been our delight," as the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran so beautifully says. I've looked around to see tears streaming down the faces of people even as they are laughing at a hilarious story, and been struck by the full realization that the life we are so terribly sad to see end, this precious life, is an incredible, joyful gift that we will never lose.

And every day we engage the ongoing realities of injustice and inequality, of violence and suffering in the world—while also seeing that very same world as a beautiful place, a realm of infinite creative possibility, a source of endless diversity and richness of experiences and relationships.

How do we hold it all?

For many of us, learning to let ourselves be truly moved is the first step. The Northern European heritage which has shaped America's dominant culture, and which many of us including myself share, is mistrustful of emotion, preferring to move straight to analysis and problem-solving, relying on stoicism to escort us safely past the risk that we might compromise our self-image as a rational person who doesn't get all worked up about things. Two or three generations of psychology and self-help movements have helped to break this barrier down a bit, but I think it's safe to say that for some of us, at least, the idea of being deeply moved—especially in public!—is still a bit uncomfortable.

But truly, we were made for joy and woe, as William Blake wrote in the poem today's quote for reflection is from; our emotions are not foreign invaders storming across the calm waters of our inward sea. In fact, they are a precious gift of our nature, an incredibly complex mechanism evolved over millions of years that connects our abstract minds, our capacity to observe and describe the world, with our physical bodies. Our emotional life is essential to our identity as human beings.

Even if we've accepted that, it's still easier to embrace what we think of as the positive emotions—joy, love, gratitude, admiration. That's the impulse behind the most common version of the story of the two wolves, where the elder tells the child that the two kinds of emotions are at war and that we choose the winner by deciding which wolf to feed. I remember years ago coming across a book called *Destructive Emotions*, a dialogue with the Dalai Lama recorded by science reporter Daniel Goleman. I was thrilled, thinking that I'd found a resource that would tell me how to banish negative emotions like grief and anger from my life, clearing the way for a future of nothing but compassion and joy. What it turned out to be was a path away from the inner warfare. What makes our "negative" emotions become destructive, the Dalai Lama taught, was our own refusal to give them their proper place in our hearts.

The literature of psychology teaches us that if we refuse to allow ourselves to experience fear, or sorrow, or grief, if we refuse to accept the pain that is natural to a difficult situation, we can diminish our capacity to experience joy, peace, and love. Even more troubling, often we will externalize our rejected pain and inflict it on other people.

Like the elder of the story, we need to hold the fullness of our emotional lives and to live with a truly open heart. Buddhist teachings call us to remember the preciousness of this moment—to find in every moment, no matter what we are feeling, a chance to connect, a chance to give comfort, a chance to accept a gift of caring and compassion; a chance to act, to learn, to reflect, to celebrate; a chance to love.

Joy and woe are woven fine, Blake says. As Gibran puts it, they are inseparable. This—all of this, the joy and the sorrow, the fear and the courage, the loss and the gratitude, the celebration and the grief—this is what it means to be alive, to be whole, to be fully human.

And even so, even as we accept that our emotions are real and natural and that it's right for us to feel their full range, even as we live into the ebb and flow of each moment's emotional tides—sometimes it seems like more than we can do to hold it all in our hearts. What then?

When I'm overwhelmed with life, it can be helpful to remind myself that this moment I'm experiencing exists within the context of a larger and longer story. The fight or the fearful moment my partner, my child, or my friend and I are having right now takes place in the context of a whole relationship, a history of all our interactions. This moment is what it is, but it is not the only moment.

This time of uncertainty or of grief, this time when you feel like you can't keep up with all that life is sending your way, takes place in the context of your whole life, with all its peaks and valleys, with its past and its future. In the most overwhelming of moments, it can be powerful to pause and ask ourselves: What will this moment look like, feel like five days, or five years, or twenty years from now? How will I tell the story of this time in my life when I look back on it then? Just asking the question can help us to remember that this time will pass into memory, as everything does. The pause to imagine ourselves in another time can offer a breathing space, reminding us that no matter how powerful our feelings are, they are not our whole reality.

Sometimes, in that breathing space, we need to remind ourselves that we rest in the embrace of the largest context of all. Religious communities exist to remind us of this ultimate context. Every moment of our lives, every breath we take, every beat of our heart and flash of our thoughts takes place within the emerging reality of a living Universe, animated by an infinite creativity and defined by relationships in a constantly unfolding fabric of interconnections.

This is the audacious claim that our religious ancestors have entrusted to us: That human life—that *all* life unfolds in the context of a Power of Love, a Source of Life that moves within each of us, and among us, and beyond us all—a power larger than any single moment; a source deep and

strong enough to sustain any loss; a power constant enough to steady and ground us in any joy; a source that is always, always calling us back to love.

So when the world feels too much with us, when the finely woven joy and woe of our lives seem more than we can sustain, we can remember:

First: All of these feelings—happiness and sorrow, anger and compassion, fear and love—all of them are gifts of our human nature, inextricably woven into the fabric of who and what we are;

Next: Each of us and all of us are part of a larger and longer story unfolding in this moment, leading us from the past through the present, into the next moment and beyond;

Finally: We are all held in the embrace of an infinite source of creativity and interconnection.

And when, even in the light of all that, we find that it is all just too much for us to carry in our own heart, we need to remember one more thing:

You are not alone. That Power of Love, that abiding, sustaining Source of creativity and interconnection, is not some remote, spiritualized entity in a transcendent realm far removed from the everyday reality of our lives. It is present right here, right now, manifest in the real people who surround us in our lives. When we need it most, we encounter the Love that is the ground of our being in our circles of kinship and friendship and love; and we encounter it right here—in our spiritual community.

You are not alone. You are part of a wider circle, a longer story, a larger hope. You are held in the embrace of a Love that is greater than any single life, a Love great enough to encompass everything your heart is called to carry. You can find it, you can be reminded of it—and you can bring it to life—right here.