



Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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Conspiracies

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THE STORY OF VENUS

SUZANNAH OMONUK
MDIV '23



Venus was a young African woman who was enslaved by Harvard University's 8th President, Benjamin Wadsworth during the 1700s. Suzannah wrote this poem in her honor and read it at the first gathering of HDS's 2022-2023 Common Read program on October 18, 2022, considering the 2022 report of [Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery](#). You can listen to the recording of that reading [here](#).

I don't know why they named me Venus
Maybe it is because my skin is a midnight sky,
Or perhaps it is because the night I was taken from the village, stars fell from the heavens and shattered like glass beneath me.
Piercing through the soles of my feet, and swimming into my veins, the galaxy forced her way into my body and sat in my belly, singing a lullaby and slitting her wrists.

Ghost-men of skin as pale as dry bones put a price on my head and sold me to a man who swallows god whole and vomits him out at the pulpit.
He tells me I belong to him now, and smiling I say;
"Oh, you're in luck! Every last piece of me is a gift I want to give away. Come closer, take a good look and let me know if you see anything you like."

Fingers- Great condition, minimal wear and tear, perfect for domestic labor
Nose- Wide, flat, but handle with care; Could never forget the metallic smell of rusty chains cutting into the decaying flesh of sister from months on a slave ship that gently journeyed towards hell.
Thighs- Mmm, good choice. Smooth and strong but bloody from the day four different traders rammed their way through the door in between and broke the locks. Only one of them returned after that.

I watch them, you know.
The Ghosts, hiding themselves away in the dark corridors of their lofty dwellings of brick.
Weaving nothingness out of paper and ink. Learning, they call it.
I see knowledge chuckle to herself as she peers at them through an open window.
They are searching for her inside their tall gates, except that is not really where she is, is it?
Knowledge is free and unbound, running wild over swaying trees, through caves, down waterfalls and even out of the lips of a girl with skin the color of a midnight sky.
Yes, even out of the lips of a girl with skin the color of a midnight sky.
Weep for me

Oh, daughters of the great green savannah,
I have been uprooted from among you where I grew and have been carried into a diabolic land where ashes fall from a raging heaven
Bitter. Cold. Beautiful.
Weep for me, for I will never again dance on dewy grass on a moonlit night, surrounded by the song of a tribe.

THE STORY OF VENUS

SUZANNAH OMONUK
MDIV '23

No more shall I be burnt by the black desire of a warrior's lust, and in a wild daze wonder to myself how a man whose very hands had torn apart bears and lions could yet hold me softer than an early morning rain.

Weep for me

For the way I shall slowly be forgotten, because little slave girls with sad eyes do not get invited into history

How shall you remember me?

By the men that made me an orphan

How shall you remember me?

By a tablet of stone that bears the name that I received in a baptism of chains.

How shall you remember me?

Shall you remember me?



Photo: Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

YOU ARE SACRED

HDS QUEER RITES

Members of the HDS Queer Rites student group hosted the Wednesday Noon Service on September 28, 2022. Charlotte McAdams (MDiv '24), C.J. Fowler (MDiv '24), Francesca Rubinson (MDiv '24), and Mauricio Bruce (MDiv '24) shared these words.

Charlotte McAdams:

Hello everyone, and welcome to this year's Queer Rites Noon Service. Queer Rites is a group of students who have come together to foster dialogue and to explore ritual around what it means to be queer, what it means to be spiritual, and where those two intersect and interact. We are so glad that you are able to join us today as we exercise our right to have sacred rites.

The basis of this service arose from desire. Deep within my own queer experience has been a desire to believe in my own sacredness; to know well the queer parts of myself in which the Divine resides; to share and seek and feel in abundance.

My queer desire comes from my acquaintance with the periphery. It's the people, institutions, and whisper in my own mind that there cannot be beauty in an inextricably queer self. I know that this experience is not solely my own.

Yet, not just today or in recent years, but in every generation since the dawn of history we have created worlds within ourselves and our queer communities from that sweet, biting desire to live in fullness.

In the words of trans writer and activist Andrea Long Chu, "The deposits of our desire run as deep and fine as any. The richness of our want is staggering."

Today I invite us all to sit with that hungry, desiring voice that cries out "This is not enough", "This life is not yet queer", "God, where are you?", "God why am I?"

Today I cannot provide an answer to that call, but an invitation. In a world that constantly demands that you come out, today we say, "Come in, you are welcome here." Come into yourself and this space



and the people you are sharing it with. Through ritual, through these queerest of rites, we welcome you and your fully sacred, wanting self, just as you are.

C. J. Fowler:

In those first

moments of awareness about who we are and who we love, many of us are taught to fear ourselves and reject that which we most are. We exist in worlds, communities, and families that do not recognize the beauty and uniqueness of our inner design. But even in rejection, our light survives. We make our collectives and draw upon our light's sacred power to find ways to connect and feel the warm glow of welcome.

We light this candle in the spirit of that welcome, that it may extend an unconditional sense of love over this gathering.

As we attune ourselves to the longings of our hearts and bask in the sacred glow of this gathered community, we are also joined in spirit by a host of queer saints, mystics, seekers, and ancestors. Wherever in time people have gathered, they have loved and where there has been love, there have also unfortunately been those who because of misunderstanding or fear or hatred have shunned that which they think is different. Our presence here today is a witness to their lives and loves and strivings. The solidarities we are building and flourishing lives we are pursuing are done in their honor and with the spiritual nourishment of their example.

We light this candle for them, that we may never forget the sacrifices of proceeding generations and forever live in their queer light.

In honoring our past and coming together today, we

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see that we are not alone. We are joined in our chorus of spiritual affirmation by a long lineage of queer ancestors and we find joyful solidarity in this beloved community. And yet we recognize that this practice is all too unique. We see that this is a message only proclaimed by a precious few. Today, in every community, queer and trans people are subject to physical, spiritual, and emotional violence. That any of our siblings should have to suffer this way weighs on the hearts of us all. As seekers, lovers, and mystics ourselves, we pray for an end to hatred and all its attendant miseries. This is a rite is for all those who have borne its burden and carry its scars on their hearts.

We light this candle alongside any queer person whose soul is hurting, that they may soon find the warmth of peace in their own blessedness.

Poem II, Twenty-One Love Poems By Adrienne Rich

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming. Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other, you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
our friend the poet comes into my room where I've been writing for days, drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere, and I want to show her one poem which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate, and wake. You've kissed my hair to wake me. I dreamed you were a poem, I say, a poem I wanted to show someone . . . and I laugh and fall dreaming again of the desire to show you to everyone I love, to move openly together in the pull of gravity, which is not simple, which carries the feathered grass a long way down[□] the upbreathing air.

The Queer Rite of Coming In, Mauricio Bruce:

As queer people, we are often invited (sometimes asked, or forced) to come out. As I sat and thought about what this means, coming

out, I realized that there's the obvious meaning of "coming out with who we really are,"[□] but there's a more sinister idea that could mean "coming out of ourselves".

In other words, in order to exist, we have to come out. We have to stop being who we are. We have to leave our selves, and become some other self. Who? Maybe who the great hegemonic imagination, as Emily Townes would call it, sees us as being.

Sure, sometimes, coming out allows us to explore our identity better. To explore the worlds we've locked ourselves from because we didn't think we were good enough, or loved enough, or worthy enough.

But sometimes, coming out forces us to become someone whom we might not really be. To participate in a reality that we don't believe in or feel a part of.

Today, the invitation is not to come out, but really, to come back in. I want to invite everyone present to finally allow yourself, give permission to yourself, to come in to who you've always been. Whoever you are and however you are, come fully into that. Enter that body-however it looks and feels. Enter that form of being. Enter that sacred and divine self.

However you are-we are saying in today's rite-is sacred, holy, and completely acceptable. It is more than acceptable. It is divine.

We don't invite you to show that to us, but to see it for yourself. This is not an outward performance.[□] It is an inward settling. A celebration and a recognition.

We have put a mirror at the front, near the altar. We invite anyone and everyone to come up-if they feel the call-and while they look at themselves in the mirror, to anoint themselves.

"This is an invitation to give to yourself and to receive the first of many Queer Rites that we will continue to offer up to you. This is an invitation to recognize your divinity and your holiness, not in

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relationship to the wider world, to society, to your family or even to God-but to yourself. Your existence is a holy one-no matter where you come from, how you come, or where you are planning on going.▫ We welcome you to this holy family, to this community and to this existence-as you welcome and recognize yourself and the power that you embody.”

We invite you, as you come up and see yourself, to touch your head: so that everything you think be marked as sacred. We invite you to touch your hands: so that everything you hold and that you do be sacred. And that you touch your heart: so that wherever your love goes, your sacredness follows.

Francesca Rubinson:

Wild Geese
by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you
mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue
air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Charlotte McAdams:

It isn't often that we are able to gather in queer
sacred reflection. Queerness is again and again

outwardly sequestered into rainbow glitter and parties. Yet when we scrub away the layers of celebration, we may be left with selves that still doubt, still desire, and still feel fractured into pieces that despite our days at Pride, we do not feel proud of.

In many religious traditions, to mark someone with oil is to name them as sacred. Some institutions of religion have said “you, chosen one, are worthy” or “you are not”. Yet through these moments of inclusion, exclusion, and often violence, our sacredness persists. Today, through the Queer Rite of Coming In, we have invited you to initiate yourselves into your own sacredness. To come into the knowledge that Pride is something within us: abundant and life-giving.

As we just heard in the Mary Oliver poem, ‘Wild Geese,’ “You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.” You are worthy. You are good. You are sacred. We have exercised this rite together today as a means of invitation for you to ask, “What can I give myself?” “What other ways can I come into myself?” “How can I fill each day with the queerest of rites?”



Photo: Auds Jenkins

DAILY RITUALS

EMMA THOMAS

MDIV '24, CHAPLAIN INTERN



“How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour or that one is what we are doing.” - Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

These past few weeks, as the semester gathers steam, I've been having trouble staying in my body. My life feels beholden to my Google calendar, the spaces between commitments crowded with juggled attempts to walk the dog and feed myself and send that email I've been needing to send. I can get to the end of the day and realize that for most of it, my breathing has been shallow, my mind busy and split. I've lost track of myself. Maybe you know the feeling?

On those days, Annie Dillard's words call me back to myself. They remind me that I am living my life, right now, and that I am always making choices about what matters by how I choose to be with time. If how we spend our days is how we spend our lives, how am I committed to spending this day? If the spaciousness of my breathing is non-negotiable, if my capacity to nourish my relationships is the bedrock of my wellbeing, what do I allow to fall away in order to make space for breath, for relationship, for embodiment?

Little rituals have been helping. Pulling the dog into bed for morning snuggles, breathing the first fresh fall air when I step out the door, lighting a candle when I sit down to write something. Pausing, in the midst of climbing out of email backlog, to take three deep breaths. Making coffee, the same steps every morning, the thickness of the water as it settles into the pourover. A cup of tea before sleep. Washing my face. Pouring water on the maple tree outside my door, greeting it as I leave. Wiping the counter after dishes. Even in the stress and busyness of adjusting back to school life, these little rituals remind me that I can choose to infuse my days with the qualities I long for my life to have: presence, breath, relationship, embodiment, peace.

QUEERING THE GOSPEL: ANCESTORS, MONEY, AND CHOSEN FAMILY

THE REVEREND SUSIE HAYWARD
RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE



The Reverend Susie Hayward, MDiv '07, Associate Director, Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative, Religion and Public Life, offered this homily at the weekly Tuesday Morning Eucharist at Harvard Divinity School on Sept 13, 2022.

Luke 15: 1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

With whom does one spend their time? A common gospel question - asked especially by the Pharisees, like at the top of this passage.

And for good reason, because of course we are affected by those with whom we surround ourselves, in ways both good and bad. What better concept to capture the importance of surrounding yourself with the right people than the queer concept of chosen family. As the queers have taught us, thanks be to God, it is good and holy to find those who affirm your dignity, who have your back. Especially - critically -- if you are one of those whom the world looks down on because of who you are, or who you love.

The gospel, and Jesus, are constantly reminding us that which groups the world, or ourselves, consider righteous does not always comport with the way God sees it. Even here, it would be tempting to say Jesus's dinner companions - the so-called sinners -- are the righteous, and the Pharisees are the unrighteous. But no, it's not that easy. There are righteous among the rule followers and the rule breakers. God is in all of it, because God is in all of us. And so Jesus here, he chooses them all. He dines with the Pharisees - as in the chapter just before this one we read - and he dines with the tax collectors alike. What does that mean for us?

This semester, I'm taking a class on Ancestors and Money. Weekly, a small group of white folks - students (including Harriet here), faculty, staff - will gather to think together about our ancestry and our inherited material wealth and social power. More specifically, we'll grapple with the wealth our families accumulated as a result of land theft, enslavement, or the unearned benefits of white supremacy. Through this gathering, I hope to reckon further with the family I didn't choose but am inextricably connected to, and my relationship to all I've received from them - all of it, the good and the bad.

And Lord if our families, our ancestral lines, don't highlight for us in striking reality the fact that no group of folks can be generalized as purely or simply righteous or unrighteous. I offer just one example from my own family line, of two brothers in the same Southern, elite family - one who perpetuated the enslavement of people he inherited from his father, and another who liberated them, no doubt to the consternation of his family. I scratch the surface of a family history that on first glance seems simply rendered - this line here contains the Quaker abolitionists living in the north, and this line here contains the enslavers and land thieves of the south - and I find it's far messier than that. My God who breaks bread with them all forces me to look closer, with humility and curiosity, reminding me never to

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assume I know already where to find the righteous or the unrighteous.

And God also, through this passage, forces me to think about sheep. I can imagine how many of us feel about the Biblical analogy of sheep and shepherds. Speaking for myself, well, I'm obviously not a sheep. I'm queer, after all. In my sexuality, but also in the many ways in which I seek to move in the world - trying (though often failing) to swim against the dominant American cultural currents of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism. Maybe some of you feel likewise: you identify with the independent spirit of that wandering sheep, not the others who stay contained in familiar pastures.

But, to wander is not to be lost. Y'all, have you ever been lost? Like, turned so far upside down by unfamiliar, serpentine Boston streets that you literally have no idea whether to turn left or right to get back to the T. Or, been turned so upside down by grief that you have no idea where to turn to move forward. That feeling of lostness, there is such loneliness in it, such isolation.

As I begin to look again at my family line, I will have to grapple more deeply this semester about what to do with the ancestors whom I wouldn't have chosen to be my family. I wonder if maybe, maybe, these ones I wouldn't have chosen - the enslavers and land stealers—are the lost sheep of this parable. In my reading of the gospel, it seems pretty clear to me that they sinned against a God who supps with the abused and downtrodden. Assuming those ancestors are the lost sheep, can I do as that shepherd does - go searching for and collect them? Bring them home rather than leave them for the wolves (as frankly, I'm inclined to do)? Can I even begin to understand them, with compassion, as lost - rendered lonely, isolated, disconnected, soul-depleted by their ideas and participation in white supremacy? I don't know.

And what about for all of us here? Do we have what it takes to leave our comfortable flocks behind to go search for and gather up those whom it appears to us

may be lost? Whoever they may be: the insurrectionists and QAnoners, the mass shooters, the bigoted aunts? To my white siblings here especially: will you go out to gather our people? Doing so with courage but also with humility, for we can never know for certain whether and when we ourselves are lost - so powerful are the world's systems and drives that constantly call us back to the comfortable barn of dominant culture ... so easy it is to become certain we are the righteous ones, and so become self-righteous.

May we try. And in so doing, in our trying, may we find strength and courage from God, from our flock, from our chosen families. May we rejoice when those who are lost - including ourselves -- return. And may we remain humble and vulnerable in the midst of all of this hard work, knowing that we cannot do it without the help of one another, and the Great Other who guides and sustains us. Amen.



Photo: Diana Marin

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

HDS COMUNIDAD



On October 5, 2022, HDS Comunidad hosted one of the School's weekly Wednesday Noon Services in anticipation of the observance of Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead for which members of the campus create a community ofrenda.

Holding the Past: An Ofrenda for Community chanti (Chantal Sanchez), MDiv '23

I mentioned in our opening welcome today that this service has been some time in the making. Indeed, we were set to host Noon Service last year but canceled at the last minute, with good reason; we wanted to stand in solidarity with our fellow graduate student workers as they walked out on strike. □

Now, this year, presented with the opportunity to realize an HDS Comunidad service again, I wondered to myself whether I wanted to speak to anything I prepared to share last year, or if I wanted to do something new this time around.

Some of our Comunidad friends have now graduated, and this program has been reshaped. I thought it might be better to move forward and scratch the old reflection altogether; however, as I continued to reflect, I realized that what was then is also now. I decided to interweave intentions from last year, into our hopes for today. In this way, the past and the present intermingle. This point is especially salient considering the spirit of Día de los Muertos. □

Still, I was hesitant in accepting this thought and I still am to some degree. I'm a little afraid even. Because being vulnerable is hard. You see, last year, our reflections spoke about ancestors and family, a topic exceptionally difficult for me. However, *Comunidad* means "community," and to create it, I must go deep. I have to bare my soul. For a strong community, I need my people to know me. As I share this aspect of myself, I share too the fabric of meaning within the tradition of Day of the Dead.

In all transparency, this is actually a Mexican cultural tradition that I hadn't really engaged with much as I was growing up, save for an occasional visit to a local park for free *pan de muerto*, mariachi bands, and women dancing in vibrant, flowing dresses. Last year was the first time I made an altar to celebrate with the HDS ofrenda,.

Part of the reason for my low engagement with this holiday stems from the fact that my mom emphasized being "American," even though she herself was born here. I was not taught Spanish and most of my knowledge of my Mexican heritage came through our food and the ever-present culture that is baked into Southern California life.

Día de los Muertos is rooted in remembering the dead. Remembering family members, ancestors long passed. Both to keep their memories alive but also to pay them their due respects for their part in our being in the present.

Family and ancestry are especially hard topics for me because growing up with a teenage, single mother who was kicked out when she got pregnant with me, I have had a very different relationship to these words than most. Family in my mind was always just the immediate—my momma, my two younger sisters, and me. The thought of ancestry was nonexistent; it was just us. □

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Family and ancestry are especially hard topics for me because five years ago, my mom stopped speaking to me, which not only shattered my only conception of what family was, but also cut off my ability to have a relationship with my littlest sister, Evie. My baby Evie.

Yet, this is precisely why I happily celebrate Día de los Muertos now. In this celebration of the dead, I get to reconnect with the ancestors I never got to know and feel a little less alone. Because I know, they are with me and that they always have been. We mark this fact concretely in the form of the altar, the ofrenda. ▢

I learned this detail, from Ofelia Esparza, a 6th generation Mexican altar maker who grew up and still lives in East LA. She was invited by the Peabody Museum in 2021, to share the art of altar making. At the core of her work, is something her mother passed onto her and that I wish to pass onto you all - a concept of three deaths:

A person's first death is the moment they take their last breath.

Their second death is when they are buried.

The third death, and the most lamentable of all, is when they are forgotten.

As we add to our own HDS ofrenda, let's keep this concept in mind. It is a reminder to remember always. To remember all our families, our lineages, our ancestors. It's also a reminder to grieve whenever the emotion and feeling naturally come up. And most importantly, it is a reminder to celebrate the life lived of those who have passed and their continued, long life that lives on in memory.

Día de los Muertos

john gehman, MDiv '25



The great writer, poet, and healer Maya Angelou told us she knew why the caged bird sings: because it *must*.

So, what is it that drives us to this *must*? For me, I am driven to this *must* because of what I hold in my memory and what parts of me those memories hold.

The ofrenda is central to the tradition of Día de Muertos. It is a site of worship and return for the ancestors, known and unknown, and the memories they have left us, which have been shared, transferred, and preserved throughout the generations. The beauty of memory is that our own individuality—our “I-ness”—collapses with those of our ancestors on the ofrenda. They do not dissipate nor dissolve; nor are they consumed into a monolithic oneness with no difference or distinction. Instead, they exist in one another... and because of one another. I exist here today because of my elders and ancestors, known and unknown. I exist because of those who have guided me to this very space carried part of me within them—in body, in wisdom, and in spirit.

And though my life did not follow the traditional imposition of the term *Latinx*, being born to a young, unexpected mother in México and being adopted into a transracial adoptive family in rural Pennsylvania, I have known the depths of life, love, and encounter in such a blessed way. And for that, I am forever grateful. This gift was given to me; it is one for which I neither asked nor which I deserve. However, I accept this gift, to engage with the beauty of life, encounter, and remembrance, through which I honor the

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ancestors who brought me here, to honor the elders who continue to guide me, and even to honor myself because I carry all within me.

Día de Muertos is a beautiful day, traditionally celebrated over a series of days, that honors and contemplates the gift of life and encounter—being enflashed in this mysterious world with other interesting types of people and we awaken to and re-learn the way back to being. The Mayan greeting “In Lak-ech” means “*tú eres otro yo*”—“You are another me.” And to that, one can respond in Spanish: “*Soy yo*,” where you do not begin with yourself as the subject. Instead, being—indicated by the word “*soy*” or literally “I am”—is the beginning and the end. I not only see you as another enflashed variation of me; I see you as part of me and within me, and, hopefully, you see me as part and within you.

The *ofrenda* is a site of collapse—of time, space, and spirit—between the ancestors, ourselves, and those enflashed with us now. It is because of the ancestors that I am here and it is for the ancestors that I continue to be. It is because of you that I am here and it is for you that I continue to be.

Verbs in Spanish are exceptionally beautiful because, when they are conjugated, the subject is implied. There is no need to state my I-ness, my John-ness, with the word *yo*. Instead, the word *soy* says it all: my I-ness and being are one. Not only because I am in relation to and because of my ancestors; and just as well, they are with and part of me. There is a common spirit that courses through our veins and in all beings—sentient ones, including animals and Earth, and even materials, including the salt, soil, and water that we also place on the *ofrenda*.

The *ofrenda* is a window into a new way of being: into encounter, collapse, and bearing witness to that new being. It is because of the memory laid in front of us physically and spiritually that we create this portal into deep connection and allow the sacred—that which *is* us, *within* us, and still *beyond* us—to come and know itself. And when we stand in this simmering afterglow, we come no longer to seek the encounter of the sacred and instead, simply to *be* because of the sacred—because of the ancestors, because of one another, because of ourselves.

For me, the *ofrenda* as a gesture, a reminder, to create and preserve that space within me to remain in connection to all beings and even my own. We are encouraged to make space within ourselves for the ancestors, others, and ourselves. We retain humility in this spiritual hardship—of oppression, resistance, and aliveness. We create this space and spaciousness within our bodies and being for the ancestors to reside, for ourselves to find flourishing, and to touch the spirits of those we encounter now. This world is much bigger than the scope of our I-ness or even those of the ancestors; we must trust that our inheritance of intergenerational hope will coincide and conspire for us to return into being one day with our ancestors and, our reminder of that day, sits in front of us, enflashed as “Other.”

I want to impart a final wisdom offering, this one from Gabriel García Márquez in his 1982 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech: “... [T]he immeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness, and not a conspiracy plotted three thousand leagues from our home.... This, my friends, is the very scale of our solitude. In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life.” My friends, we do so because we *must*. I do so because you are.



MUSTARD SEEDS AND ORDINARY FAITH

JUDY BEALS

MDIV '23, RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE



Judy Beals offered this homily at HDS's Tuesday Morning Eucharist on October 4, 2022.

A Reading from the Gospel According to Luke, 17: 5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Today's reading from Lamentations and the Psalms speak to where my heart is so often these days - crying out from captivity in the 21st century and its escalating, seemingly irreversible crises, crying out at all the suffering, all the injustice, the despair and hopelessness that can so easily set in, crying out at my own complicity in the mess we find ourselves in. We are in the Babylon of late-stage capitalism, abandoned by its cultural lies and deceptions. "The visions of your prophets were false and worthless" writes the authors of Lamentations. Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?

Against this, Jesus offers lessons that, while difficult, lift my spirits, providing a path forward.

There are many ways to read the passage, including reading it as exceedingly harsh. Jesus essentially accuses the apostles of having no faith -not even a mustard seed - and then makes clear his expectation

of unceasing obedience, without thanks or reward.

I understand this. But here in Babylon, I'm looking for glimmers, for signs. And I find them.

Faith. What is faith? I'm still trying to puzzle this out but think it has something to do with choosing to place our trust in something, without knowing. Faith is what keeps us moving forward when the facts indicate otherwise. It is linked to hope - a hope that, as Baldwin puts it, "has to be reinvented every day" within an "unflinching recognition of a still unfolding history in which progress is inevitably met with the devastating re-emergence of the forces of oppression."

Let's face it - times like this call for faith.

And what does Jesus say about this faith? What he says is that we don't need a mighty faith to brandish about like a magic wand or a weapon. All we need is faith as a tiny mustard seed. It's the kind of faith without knowing that keeps someone in the depths of depression moving forward, the faith that kept Baldwin writing after seeing so many setbacks in the civil rights movement, the faith that had each of us choosing to be here at HDS . . . Mustard seed faith, faith that must be reinvented every day. We just need a little, as long as it is genuine. That's enough. Because as the mustard seeds teaches us, great things come from the smallest of beginnings. Seeds have the power to remake the worlds around them. And that's what faith does for us—beginning with the world within.

The other thing Jesus calls for here is what I would call ordinary discipleship. It's a discipleship that doesn't expect reward or accolade. It's the letting go of entitlement, expectation, of rightful resentment. It's the embrace of humility in service. It's the getting out of our own way.

I am in my last year of the MDiv program. Already, I am experiencing anticipatory grief in the knowledge that I will graduate. It was an undefinable yearning

MUSTARD SEEDS AND ORDINARY FAITH

JUDY BEALS

MDIV '23, RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

that had me leave other lives behind to come here in my 60's. I wasn't at all sure of it. I chose HDS in a leap of, yes, faith, to hand myself over to whatever these years might bring. I decided to let it work on me rather than me working on it. I chose, simply to submit to and embrace it all— the required stuff, the uncomfortable stuff, the tedious stuff. It is only now that I am beginning to glimpse the layers of transformation this time has provided. My own particular experience of mustard seed faith and ordinary discipleship. I am so grateful for it.

Babylon is real, my friends. Whatever your own heart cries out from this day and it this time, what would it mean to choose mustard faith and ordinary discipleship? This, I believe, is the gift of this parable, the Gospel of the Lord.



Photo: Auds Jenkins

COMING TO TERMS WITH GRIEF

MINAHIL MEHDI
MDIV '22



Minahil wrote this meditation following her father's death in the Spring of 2022. This essay originally appeared in Dawn Newspaper EOS on September 18, 2022. It has been edited here for length and clarity.

When I was much younger, my father would place the palms of my hands over his eyes, and a little magic would unfold. His face turned into joy. I was too young to know that we were cultivating a relationship of peace and happiness. Today, I am too fragile to hold this memory and recall how the two of us watched tranquility flow slowly from my tiny hands to his aged eyes. Baba was 43 years old when I was born. Very often, in times good and bad, we held hands. Today, I miss him very much.

Grief is a feeling. It is having your life become eternally attached to a void. It is finding yourself in a paradoxical finality of loss. You are inside it, and you're outside it.

Grief is place-making. It is like coming upon a dimly lit room and finding an elderly person sitting there alone, a faint winter sunlight barely touching their toes.

Grief is knowledge and it is action. Grief is death and love sitting side by side.

Grief comes in waves, and it arrives without notice. How does one deal with the loss of a dearly loved one and the finality of that absence?

Grief is a cosmic intervention. Like getting on a bus and freezing at the sight of a hand wearing an agate ring similar to Baba's. The finality of death hits. The probability of seeing him again in this life, after all, is zero. His face will never again appear in a crowd at the airport looking for me. Only a cosmological intervention, a dream perhaps, is where we reunite and hold hands, if ever.

I see my father's smiling face appear in front of me as I write this, and all I have written dissolves. Grief is also a dissolving, an un-becoming. It is completely shattering. My father, Jafar Mehdi, died on April 20, 2022. He passed away peacefully, showing us through his life how to open one's heart to the world like a spring of water. To give. To not worry too much. Not to speak ill of others. Baba loved to laugh loudly, especially when he met his cousins and his friends. Laughing loudly. What a concept!

Grief is memory. It is childhood. Waking up very early on a summer day, expecting no one in the living room and finding freshly plucked jasmines on the table. Baba had picked the jasmines and is now making tea in the kitchen – both of us find the other in the early morning breeze. Grief is almost love, only it seems to be love's diametric opposite.

Grief is firm, and it is permeable. It finds you anywhere, amid an argument, at the grocery store, at the sea, in a half-cut mango in the fridge. It is confusing. There are times when I go about my day in a way that Baba would have: laughing loudly.

Yet, I cannot go about my day listening to his favourite ghazal collection: Jagjit Singh's Sydney concert. The heart, I suppose, agrees to mimic what it loves. Being a bit like him as a way of feeling that he is alive. And yet, I am opposed to listening to his favourite music because I can no longer see him next to me, on his red chair, smiling, his eyebrow lifting in joy.

I left for my master's program at Harvard Divinity School shortly after my father's cancer diagnosis. What that meant for us, I am not sure. He was happy. I was not sure if I was or could ever again be, in a pre-cancer diagnosis way. I thought about my sadness often and that was that, for most of my master's studies. Baba, meanwhile, told me over and over and over again that he was proud of me. Grief is often an ambiguity, the breaking of a promise and that breaking, breaking your back.

COMING TO TERMS WITH GRIEF

MINAHIL MEHDI
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At times he'd break into tears, assuring me of his happiness. I brought a Harvard hoodie home for him but Baba being Baba, asked me to keep it. I had seen people die in hospital emergency wards, I remember speaking about grief, about targeted killings, about death, and caring for the grieving families many times.

I remember planning to go home right after my graduation in May, but Baba went, right before that happened. Just like that, without crying with me in my graduation robe, without holding the degree that he was so proud of. Changing everything, making me look up, up in the sky, as I sat listening to people express their joy. Grief truly is nothing and everything all at once.

It is sanity and madness hanging by a thread. At times, it means escaping, living in a place of memories, wishing people asked more often, "How are you doing?" Grief is a piece of paper turning into a beating heart as you write on it everything about which you would have spoken to your father.

It is remembering up in absurd detail who said what to you when the world slipped from under your feet. Like being in another country with a plate of iftar in your hand and reading a WhatsApp message pop up saying Inna lillahe wa inna alehe raji'un. It may have been for anyone, that message, but you know immediately that this is an announcement of your orphanhood.

Grief is silence. Resting. Disconnecting. Finding that a river has flown from your eyes as you were lost in thought. Will I ever hear stories of his school days from his friends again? The punishments, the college elections, those walks down Mall Road? Will his friends come over as frequently as they did before? Will he not see where I go from the place he left me in my life?

After a while, you begin to understand that the only way to survive is to accept grief as love and completely submit to it. To make a place for it in the fragile centre of your heart and let it sing its sad song. Mapping it in yourself, even though the map-

ping reminds you of Baba, driving you everywhere in Lahore, from hospitals to fundraisers to protests, and telling you the history of the city that he so dearly loved.

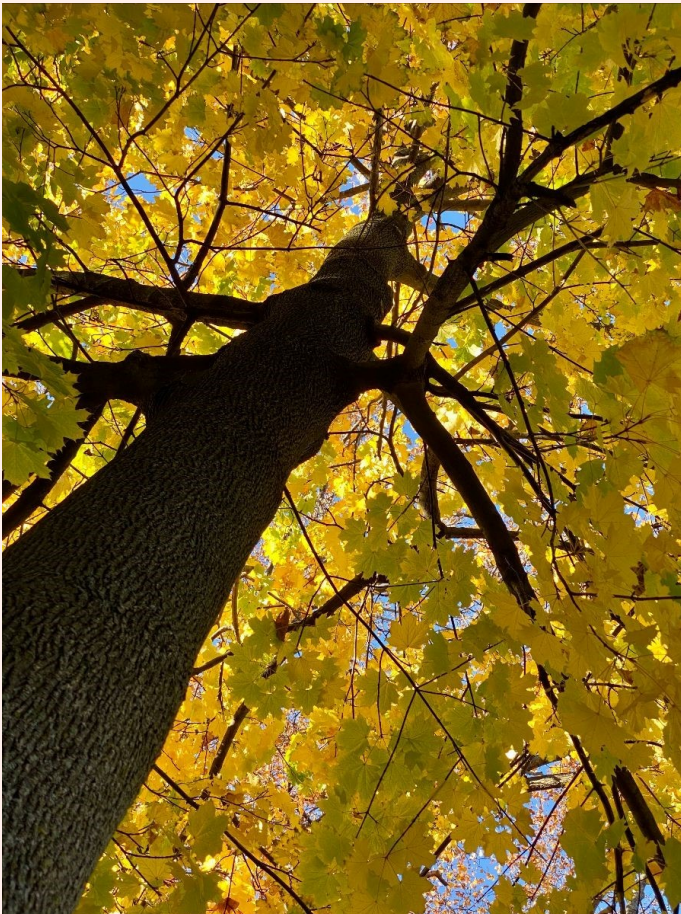
Grief is holding a map of certainties and ambiguities and marching on. It is a loving, a longing, and a dreaming. A remembering the tranquility of holding hands and smiling. A ritualistic rewriting of life with loss as the language of love.



Photo: Diana Marin

A MANIFESTO FOR FALL

HILARY LAKE
MDIV '11



Hilary Lake offered this benediction at a Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students (HUUMS) service n October 2010.

Be open to change, as the wind shifts direction.

Embrace the possibilities for whatever might fly by.

Be the fruit offered as nourishment for all who arrive.

Be the tree that grows up only about as much as it grown down.

Be the leaves sharing their true colors as their green life drains away.

Be the moss that spreads new grown in the dark bare patches.

Be the seeds covered by the earth.

Maybe part of you will sprout. and offer your losses as enrichment for the next layer underfoot.

Remember, you might need to use it later, or at least something will.

Nothing is wasted.

All is noticed.

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