

WHAT BECOMES OF THE BROKEN HEARTED?

“Young people are cocky. They have an optimism which is charming but shallow, since it has never been tested. They are inclined to think that they are invincible. Eventually though, all people must learn that not everything works out in this life. The mid-thirties seem to be a time that this happens. The trigger can be anything. Perhaps a baby is stillborn. Or your partner stops loving you. A once strong father shrivels and dies before your eyes. A lump becomes cancerous. A car accident smashes up your body. Or your carefully built career tumbles like a pack of cards. Suddenly there is shame, error and grief all around you---welcome to the ashes.”

“The Ashes of Midlife”, adapted, from words by Australian psychologist and writer, Steve Biddulph.

Hello everyone, I am the Rev. Jo Lane, the minister of the Unitarian Church of South Australia. I would like to extend a very warm welcome to you all today for our session on **“Midlife and the liberal religious space.”**

The inspiration for today’s session came to me 12 years ago, on the 9th December 1998. I had just started my training for the Unitarian ministry at Manchester University in the UK. It was winter-time, it was dark and cold and I hadn’t yet met many people. So I watched a lot of television. And I had become hooked on one particular programme. It was called **“Drop the Dead Donkey.”** Some of you may be familiar with this programme. It was shown here in Australia on SBS television throughout its run from 1990-1998. The series was a comedy, satirising television news, the changing face of journalism, and it’s relationship with big business and politics. The series also laid out for the viewer’s scrutiny and musing the multi-layered and multi-dimensional personalities of each character. It showed the vanity, the neurosis, the superficiality, the dishonesty and the moral peril that so often characterises television, politics and big business, particularly when they operate together in a less than holy alliance. But the series was also bittersweet in its betrayal of these flawed, but deeply human people. Cracks of humanity kept forcing their way

through the harsh exterior, and the regrets and fears of these individuals were all too obvious at various points in the series.

I became hooked. It was riveting viewing. And, it was very funny. But it was much more than these things too. I had just got into a rhythm of racing home from college on a Tuesday night to be in front of the television by nine, when I heard that the final episode was to be aired on 9th December 1998. I left college early that day and set myself up for the finale. The first 45 minutes were good. The entire television newsroom was told that Global News-link, the company they worked for, was to be sold and they were all being made redundant. The staff all began to plan their individual futures. Desperation and panic, resignation and despair were splashed across all their faces.

All this was good television, but it was the final scene I thought, that was memorable. The viewer watched the newsroom engage in a kind of farewell party, genuine affection mixed in with artifice; wholehearted revelry mixed in with a desperation to forget, if only for a night. The viewer could only watch, we could not hear their conversations, for the sound was muted. But what we could hear was the sound track, the haunting: **“What Becomes of the Broken Hearted.”**

This closing musical montage was a marvellous finale. It played over shots of the newly unemployed staff struggling to come to terms with their lives, and the opening lines of **“What Becomes Of The Broken Hearted”** served as a summation of how they all felt as former employees of a multi-national employer about to be no more. It was a summation of how these newly unemployed citizens of modern Britain felt, so recently intoxicated with all the promise and inflated expectations of the newly elected Blair government. And **all** of them were middle aged people. Those haunting lines were a summation of how they ALL stood that day and how many other people both before and after them, all around the world, stand and feel at the crossroads that is midlife, those words that say:

**"As I walk this land with broken dreams
I have visions of many things
Love's happiness is just an illusion
Filled with sadness and confusion,**

**What becomes of the broken hearted
Who had love that's now departed?
I know I've got to find
Some kind of peace of mind
Maybe.**

**I walk in shadows
Searching for light
Cold and alone
No comfort in sight,
Hoping and praying for someone to care
Always moving and going to where”**

As the camera pans across the soon to be cast adrift journalists, editors, advertising executives, camera men, sound technicians and make up people, it pauses briefly on each person individually. And there we see the marriage break ups, the infertility, the secret gambling addiction, the alcoholism, the mental illness, the affairs and business betrayals, the friendships broken beyond repair by ambition and deceit, the bankruptcy, and the murky secrets never shared. All who the camera pauses upon are broken hearted in some way. All that they have put their faith in has failed them: the media, the multi-nationals who own that media, the tired platitudes of governments old and the inflated expectations of governments new. The promise of salvation, hope and progress that these institutions offered them, as a guiding narrative, has failed them. These things are now only an illusion. And now, it seems as though status, financial security, love, friendship and even sanity are all threatening to elude them. They have become the broken hearted.

That final three minutes of television was among the most powerful pieces of television that I've ever experienced. There WAS so much to say about it, there IS much to say about it. It was inspired. But like all good art, and like all good religion, it threw up more questions than it offered answers. At the end of that three minute musical montage I wanted to ask; What did become of all those broken hearted people? *Did* they ever find peace of mind? And if they did, *where* did they find it? And I wondered; Will people like that ever walk into my church one day? And if they do, what will they find there and will it help them come to terms with their grief and disappointment, their sense of loss and failure? Will the

church I serve, be one in which people come to me at that crossroads that is midlife, with such broken hearts and confused minds and will they find it a place to ask questions, a space that allows them to explore and experiment and to move along the road less travelled? And will it be a place that can allow and encourage them to, in the words of the great Australian broadcaster and writer Caroline Jones: **“Navigate the suffering of their lives with hope; celebrate the gifts of their lives with gratitude and reach out to find companions along the way.”**

The first part of that question I can answer. Yes, the broken hearted come to my congregation, and so they keep coming in abundance. And they bring with them a typical collection of challenges, heartaches and exciting possibilities that characterise a life lived in the middle of time. They come with all the **eternal** midlife challenges and questions, those things that have plagued humanity in the middle of our lives throughout the ages; and they come with some new problems and challenges, things that have just emerged in the recent decades. One of these challenges being, that these people are part of the ‘sandwiched generation,’ who spend their lives in some kind of tripartite uber juggle! Those people, who having had children later in life, find themselves caring for these small children AND their own aging parents, while at the same time occupying the most senior positions and shouldering more responsibility at work, than they have at any other time in their lives.

Some of these people come to our church after a sudden dramatic and usually traumatic event: the death of a child, the death of a parent, being made redundant, finally admitting to fertility problems, bankruptcy, a chronic health condition. And some come after several years of gnawing dissatisfaction, disappointment and anxiety.

The psychotherapist and writer Carl Jung once said that in the second half of life there had not been one problem **“that in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life.”**

Generally middle age is considered being between 40 and 60 years of age, but they are arbitrary dates of course. Middle age has less to do with numbers and more to do with a state of mind. And there is a point at which you arrive, either by a gradual process of realisation, or as a result of a sudden epiphany of

insight, when you come to understand that during the first half of your life you saw your life very much in terms of your **potential** and the potential inherent in life, now you start to see life in terms of life's and your **limitations**.

That is what is so great about being a child and a young adult. Kids see few limits to their potential. My seven year old daughter wants to be a writer, or a dancer, an artist, a netball player, a teacher and on and on and on. She appears to want to be all these things simultaneously or in some kind of parallel universe set up. She changes her mind every few days or weeks when she discovers something new. It's amusing, and it's exciting to see such enthusiasm and willingness to try something new.

When we are young adults, before we become middle aged, we tend to take part in that same type of parallel universe thinking, of thinking perhaps that we have more lives than one, if only subconsciously.

The year that I turned 40 I was granted a British passport, having lived in that country on and off for 10 years or so. I was very excited to have both an Australian passport and a British passport, even more excited when I realised that my British passport was actually a European community passport that enabled me to live and work in any of the 27 member states of the European community. Not long after getting my new passport I went on holiday to Sweden. I fell in love with the place and realised that Sweden was part of the European Union. And so I thought, if I wanted to, I could live and work there in Sweden for as long as I liked. I felt a surge of excitement as I imagined my life lived here in Australia, and my life in Britain, AND my life lived in Sweden. And then it suddenly hit me. The British government had given me a document that allowed me to live and work in 27 different countries. It hadn't given me 27 extra lives, or even one extra life. I'd been given more options for the one life that I had, but one life it was always going to be, and it was obviously getting shorter every year.

Middle-age is that point in your life when you shift from seeing the future in terms of your potential and begin to see it in terms of your limitations.

I remember another bittersweet moment when this dawned upon me. I was studying in Manchester in the UK and was looking for a new flat. A young woman from the real estate agency was driving

me around looking at flats. It was her last day at work. She was flying out to Australia in the morning with her boyfriend on an open one way ticket to travel the world. Her mobile phone kept ringing while her boyfriend was organising traveller's cheques and last minute provisions. She was tremendously excited. The future for her was limitless, potential unbounded. I remembered that ten years earlier I had my tickets and I was all packed ready to fly to the UK from Australia on a one way ticket with my boyfriend, the future unknown, limitless and free. And I reflected on how wonderful that had all been, maybe all the more wonderful for it having been a once in a lifetime experience. I noted in a bittersweet way that although I would encounter many more adventures in my life, many of them involving travel and the boyfriend I then married and had children with, that feeling of boundless adventure, endless possibility and a life and a world without limits, would probably never be felt by me in quite the same way ever again. The day belonged to her, it was no longer mine. That moment was perhaps the first of many times when I've known myself to be in the middle of my life; to know myself as middle-aged.

It is not something that preoccupies me on a daily basis (except of course when writing a paper about it.) However, I work alone a lot, writing sermons and papers and while I work I listen to the radio. I change the stations around, and frequently, I tune into an easy-listening station with hits from the 70's and 80's. And then, a pop song will come on that I've not heard for ages and I am caught unawares, and for just a split-second I think I am 21 again, and I'm transported back to those days of seemingly limitless possibility. And then I am taken back into my study and reminded of all that has transpired since those days and of the trials of those intervening years and the joys and achievements and the very different quality of happiness that has developed in that time.

The opening line in Dante's "The Divine Comedy", heralds a dramatic rupture to a life's journey. It tells us: **"In the middle of life's journey, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered from the straight path."**

To live 'in the middle' is to live in paradox. It is to live both road AND rupture. What can we offer as progressive religious communities for that 'living in the middle?' What can we offer for that exploration away from the straight line? What can we offer for

that living in both road and rupture? What can we offer to a life that is, and may always be, tinged with that quality so aptly described as bittersweet? What can we offer for living within that paradox?

I speak from the perspective of a Unitarian minister. Our denomination has no creed or dogma. We cover a wide theological spectrum extending at one end from liberal Christianity, right through to an atheist position at the other end, with many theists, and humanists both religious and secular in between.

This theological breadth offers much challenge AND solace to those who come to us in mid-life. It is also confronting and sometimes bewildering.

From where I stand, liberal religion can offer several things at this time of a person's life, but first it must understand what it must NOT offer. It must NOT offer formulas and it must NOT attempt to simplify, ANYTHING. For to simplify dilemmas and to break them down into a readily digestible formula is to patronise grossly and to delay and retard spiritual development when it so badly needs to be, complexified. The Episcopal minister the Rev Diana Butler Bass has said of complexifying:

“When you can see ten sides of an issue that you mistakenly thought had only two, only then can you work out of the polarisation.”

So, no formulas and no simplifying, whether they be theological conundrums, personal dilemmas or congregational polity. When you refuse to simplify and hide behind formulas, paradox and contradictions can arise and the fun can really begin.

How do we prepare the soil to elicit such complexity, such contradiction and paradox? How do we create an environment where people can sit easily with memories and feelings that are bittersweet? Where they can come to know that it is from this bittersweet quality that we all can begin to know a fuller and richer life; a life that is fuller and richer because it is now being lived in the middle, because it has collected memories and feelings and experiences that ARE of this bittersweet quality. I would suggest that there are many things that we need to do well. Among these things are good soulful pastoral care, a relevant adult religious

education programme that addresses issues of midlife, and a healthy congregational life with a balance of social, outreach and interfaith activities. However, the most important thing we as ministers, lay people, congregations and denominations can do is to take the conduct of public worship seriously and to do it well, really well.

We need to take the research and preparation of sermons seriously and allow our ministers the time and space it takes to research, reflect upon, write, prepare and practice each week. And we need to expect that they will take all the time they need to do this. We need to write sermons that are scholarly, yet touch the heart of human experience. We need sermons that use the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures imaginatively and with attention to reason and historical and contextual accuracy, AND we need to use words from other faiths. We need to use these other words to either tell a story we want to tell in its own right or when we want to emphasise and reinforce a point we have already made elsewhere. And we need to use words and images from the secular world, especially from the secular world; from novels, films, plays, music, galleries, festivals, television, the internet, sport and everyday observations and conversations.

We need to tell more stories in worship. Telling our own story is a healing experience and so too is listening to other people's stories. We all as children loved to listen to stories. But somewhere along the way we stopped listening. We stopped believing that stories had anything to teach us. We modern people are problem solvers, but the demands for answers crowds out patience, and especially our patience with mystery and things we cannot control. Intolerant of ambiguity, we deny our ambivalences, searching for answers to our most anguished questions in technique, hoping to find an ultimate healing in technology. But feelings of dislocation, isolation and self-centredness persist, as they always have. And I would suggest that never more than when we are in the middle of our lives and weighed down by all its attendant responsibilities, do we feel this dislocation, this isolation and this self-centredness. Parents, teachers and others have always known the value of stories for children, and occupational therapists and activity leaders in aged care facilities are coming to know the value of storytelling with senior citizens. I would argue that those of us in the middle need stories too. We desperately need them, and liberal religious spaces and liberal religious people, ministers and

lay leaders can be foremost in telling, and sharing those stories we so desperately need to hear, because as storytellers and writers Ernest Kutz and Katherine Ketcham say:

“Stories are circular, they are about imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story.”

What stories do above all else is hold up a mirror so that we can see ourselves. They are mirrors of our humanity, reflecting back to us our very essence. In story, we come to know precisely the turmoil and ambiguity of our being. In the mirror of **another’s** story, we can discover **our** tragedy and **our** comedy and therefore our very humanness, the ambiguity which lies at the heart of our human condition. Hearing another person’s story can occasion profound change. Telling the story of that change then follows the format of telling a story within a story. Kutz and Ketcham tell it like this:

“Once upon a time I did not understand very well, but then I heard this story and now I understand differently”.

The existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said of congregational life: **“The congruents are the actors, God is the audience, and the ministers are the prompters supplying the forgotten lines.”**

I guess we prompt those forgotten lines in many ways, in many places and at different times. We prompt those lines in pastoral care and in general congregational life. Most specifically, though, we do this in the conduct of public worship. When we preach we do as the great Unitarian Preacher Ralph Waldo Emerson said in his 1838 Harvard Divinity School Address, we offer **“you all our lives passed through the fire of thought.”**

We **“tell you the truth”** as the North American Novelist Annie Dillard says, **“But we tell it slant.”**

That is, we take the raw material that is the community’s stories, listened to in pastoral care and general congregational life, and we then craft them into a larger story to offer back to the congregation. The congregation, the community, then as yeast, if you like, take

those stories forward where they will. We, the preachers take the truth, work on it and offer it back to you, the community, slant.

I would now like to share with you a beautiful story on the power of public worship. It is the story of a dear friend and Unitarian colleague the Rev. John Allerton from the Bury Unitarian Church in Lancashire in the United Kingdom. It is his story about a middle-aged woman who has suffered a great loss in her life, maybe her first great loss, maybe one of many, we don't know. It is a story about the power of worship generally, the sermon in particular, and the role of the minister in these things:

A colleague at a nearby Unitarian church was on annual leave, so John was asked to conduct a funeral for a farmer who was a member of his colleague's congregation.

He tells the story:

“It was one of those grey, dark, miserable, winter days. I eventually arrived at a big farmhouse at the end of a long and muddy lane. The men-folk were working on the farm I was shown into the living room with the elderly widow—tiny, lean, tough as old boots - and her three daughters.

It quickly became obvious to me that one of the daughters was in a bad way. She sat a little apart from the rest of us, half turned away from us, gripping and twisting a sodden handkerchief while all the while wrecked by the soundless, tearless sobs of someone who has been very distressed without pause for some time. She took no part in conversation. She just sat there, with us, and sobbed quietly. At one point she got up and left the room. Immediately her mother and sister began to talk about her---she had neither eaten nor slept since her father's death and they were very worried. I went away wondering what, if anything, I might be able to do for the poor woman. First thing was do a good funeral.

The day came. I took the ceremony in the usual way. I spoke a bit about the man and his life, as much as I was able to gather from limited conversations and limited sources. I ended my address - as I sometimes do, with one or two generalities about the relationship between love and death

and grief. How we only grieve for those whom we love. That the price of love is a more intense pain when we lose someone we love, but would we forego the love in order to avoid the pain? And the same love which causes the pain is precisely the love which, in time, heals not only the pain but the experience of death itself. The love survives, strong and clear as ever, and within our love we realise that somehow we have transcended death and the separation of death; the usual stuff. I didn't feel that I was imparting anything especially new or profound. While I was saying this, I suddenly became aware of - well, the expression is 'a pair of eyes burning into me.' The youngest daughter who until this point had sat in her pew like a crumpled little black bag, was sitting bolt upright, leaning forward, lips slightly open. And a pair of dark, shadow-rimmed, pain-weary eyes were fixed on me with an intensity which was quite scary----I make a point of always being the last to leave. I watched as eventually, the family began to gather themselves and get into cars to go on their way. Suddenly, the youngest daughter detached herself from the family group and walked back up the slope towards me. Although her face still looked like a part of the battle of the Somme had happened on it, there was a brightness in her eyes and new firmness in step. She came up to me, grasped me by both hands, and said—and I can remember exactly what she said: *“Thank you ever so much. I never realised that a sermon could so change the way you feel inside.”*

John reflected upon this revelation:

“I never realised a sermon could so change the way you feel inside.” Her words cast into brilliant light again something which I had known, always believed, had in fact at least partly based my vocation upon, but which over the years had become partly eclipsed. She said she had never realised that a sermon could change the way a person feels inside. I felt like saying that I had once known, but had almost forgotten. I felt like hugging her for reminding me. I certainly have not forgotten either her or her words.”

What had happened at that funeral? What had John, the minister, said? It was I am sure nothing he said about the woman's father, he knew so little about him. It was, I would suggest, what he said about the dynamics of love and death and the liberating triumph

we experience when love is able to transcend death and the pain it causes. Nothing had changed for her, but paradoxically everything had changed. She had drawn from the minister's own store of understanding gathered together after many years of practical ministry, and his many hours spent reading and studying texts on bereavement, and the nature of love. She'd borrowed from this understanding and used her borrowing to effect a change within her deepest understanding of her circumstances and her response to those circumstances. She had been able to take the raw materials of pain and longing, of feeling bereft and despairing, and she'd somehow reorganised these things and re-structured them into her own new understanding of herself, her life, and the horrors of her current predicament of painful loss. The grieving woman had been able to restructure her loss and grief in a way that enabled her to handle it, cope with it, endure it, and ultimately transcend it.

Those who minister, have the opportunity and the enormous privilege of being at times in a position to offer people the means which might enable them to consider and reconsider themselves and their understanding of that experience, in ways which might prove more fruitful and creative than we can ever dream.

When we speak to people generally, and to those in the middle of life specifically, we Ministers must offer the tools of understanding with which these people are enabled to work on the fabric and materials of their lives and repair and even recreate themselves. It is not, for ministers to structure other people's lives according to our understandings, but to offer them the conceptual tools whereby they can do their own work on their own structural understanding of who they are and what it means to be them.

It is a privileged job to try and act as a resource for understanding to everyone in our community and beyond, including those in midlife. It is a privilege to lead worship; to read, research, observe, reflect, write, edit and deliver a sermon.

And we should always, minister and congregation, give it the time and the value it deserves. **FOR IT CAN TRULY CHANGE THE WAY YOU FEEL INSIDE.**

I still wonder what the script writers would have done with those broken hearted characters of theirs, had they made a sequel to **DROP THE DEAD DONKEY.** I still often wonder what would have

become of them had they been real people, because they were really, they were you and me and everyone else, who has every lived life in the middle, with all its terror and possibility. I think churches, liberal progressive churches, have a lot to offer people in the confusion and excitement of middle age. They provide an environment that offers the chance to complexify things and know the richness that is to be found in complexity, contradiction and compromise. They offer a community and a leader who appreciates the value of humble, modest, steadfast and very rich care; a community and a leader that values this care and allows the time and space and the support such care needs. They offer a community where ministers and worship leaders value good worship, and take the time it takes to become a real resource for understanding, who **“live their lives and pass it through the fire of thought”**; who **“tell you the truth but tell it slant.”**

Ministers and lay leaders take the raw material that are our stories, and then craft it into a larger story to then offer back to us, where we as yeast, take it forward, to live the story on into our own imaginative ending. A minister and a community can be for us the: **“Prompters of forgotten lines in the great play of life.”**

Sometimes we need, in the middle of our lives, someone to offer and suggest ways in which we can move beyond the current impasse in our lives. To imagine new possibilities, a different perspective, another life to the one we are currently living. At other times we need to be prompted to remember all that is good about our life and to pick up that thread once more and live it into the future.

I am in the middle of life, smack in the middle. It is by turn both fascinating and terrifying. I see possibilities. I see dead-ends. I see beginnings and endings everywhere. I know I will never again feel the boundless optimism I once had and I wait for the descending upon me of wisdom and contentment. But what is so rich, so very rich, is the sense of paradox, contradiction and complexity that characterises my life right now and the wonderful sense of mystery.

I allow those older and wiser than me in my religious community to prompt my forgotten lines, I allow those younger to remind me of the sheer joy and energy I once had and could have a bit more of, and when I am unable to listen to the wise words of others from the

pulpit, I try to write the words I would want to hear that week should I be one of those listening.

We liberal, progressive religious communities could be, and should be, places of solace and shelter, challenge and inspiration to which the broken hearted of middle age find their way and where they may come to know the truth of those words of paradox and beauty by Robert Frost:

“We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”

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