Ashes, ashes, we all fall down…

It was a regular 5am hot summer habit, open the windows and turn on the house fan. A house fan is a huge vent installed on our Davis home that, at a push of a button and the roar of what sounds like a jet engine, the ceiling turns into a series of open shutters, revealing a dark network of air ducts. The outside air, from open windows, cool and fresh rushes into the house like the ocean winds at Manresa beach.

When we bought the house, we heard warnings about having such a house fan. We were told to use the more modern air conditioner instead. House fans are energy hogs, a 1960s relic, and were known to suck all the contents of your chimney into the house if you forgot to open your windows. But an air conditioner makes a house stale. Nothing refreshes a house like the intake of a cool orange blossom scented evening. In Davis EVERYONE had a citrus in bloom and fruit, and our back yard was no exception. There was always a fragrance of something in bloom.

That morning, two fires on either side of the Sacramento Valley, the LNU and the El Dorado Fire, were burning. Ash and smoke were thick, so thick, in our sleepy minds, the darkness outside was not 5am darkness but 7am in smoke. We turned on our house fan. In blew ash and smoky electrical scented air, all from the outside. The ash coated our bed, our couches, our floors, desks, bureaus, and floors. Our white footed cats, on their morning yard constitutional, returned with proud sooty legs and went everywhere, especially the bed quilt.

All this made us sick.

At heart, not in body, thank goodness. This ash represented the homes destroyed, the wildlife killed, the ancient memories of old trees we would never know. This ash represented a huge change in climate, a destruction of what once was a vast beautiful wilderness, and a loss of habitat of so many struggling species, including humans. Those humans on the verge of homelessness, now became so. And those whose life screamed luxury, now saw their god-like existence evaporate as their vineyards and mansions became fuel for a non-partisan fire. “Who’s next?” was a question on everyone’s mind.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

Ash represents the absolute end, as we know by this overused quote. Taken from the 1662 version of the Book of Common Prayer, an Episcopalian prayer book and pastoral how-to manual, here is the quote in its true context, reading used at funerals.

“*Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth,* ***ashes to ashes, dust to dust****; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.”*

Many cultures including our own use cremation as a form of burial for our dead. When I was working at Evergreen Cemetery in Santa Cruz, we referred to them as cremains. Ash, to our very cultural core means and is directly associated with death. In many cultures, ash is spread all over one’s body when the person is mourning. For some it means to show regret and repentance for a life doing harmful acts. And like the phoenix, ashes of its past life, are just that, a life extinguished.

When all the ash blew into our home from our activation of the house fan, I cried. Cleaning it up was a hard job, but that was not what brought on my tears. What this ash symbolized to me was the destruction of the world as I once knew, not the heritage trees or the extinction of species or the loss of historical structures and information, but of the life I had before becoming a minister.

And in a plague world of social isolation, this pain, this mourning, this GRIEF, is tripled within us. We may never be able to hug our beloved children and siblings who now live far away. We may never know what it is like to be on a crowded train or at a restaurant or go to a party. All of these griefs feel unending, interminable, and humbling. We are vulnerable, tender to the point of shattering. We ALL fall down, as the plague rhyme reminds us, because of these ashes of memory.

But shattering what? Falling down from where?

Grief breaks us down into our essential being. We are not our jobs, we are not our titles, degrees, or even our understanding of who we think we are. Grief can also look like other emotions. Anger, sadness, anxiety, even high functionality, and calmness can all be the many masks grief wears, depending on where we are in the cycle. And yes, like life and death, grief too has a season all its own. Grief reveals the past before we experienced loss and shows us how we did not value that time, and that time cannot be redone. And no matter how hard we try to rewrite it, we still have to include the fact that created our grief: the death, loss, or change of our circumstance.

What grief does is open up the door into our true nature. That tender, newborn soft animal part of us, that needs to be cared for and needs to be fed and protected. Grief reveals vulnerabilities in times when we feel we need to be armored. And that is the part where we can be in partnership with grief.

Grief's tenderness opens door to our inner capacity to change and grow. Yale environmental scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker and Professor Brian Thomas Swimme tell us that "Amidst such bonding and dissolution, the universe moves towards increasingly complex communities." These times are complex, with grief, joy, loss, and renewal coming at us at atomic particle speeds. We can and will grow.

<u>Do:</u>

- Reach out and call someone
- Be in nature
- Understand that your state of suffering is not permanent.
- Meditate on movement by moving in dance, walking, running, cycling, hiking…
- Know you are part of the universe, part of the beauty of creation
- Understand that this journey is important and transformative for everyone. Be honored to join in and learn.

<u>Do not:</u>

- Cling to the negative story, it is just a story that fuels the fires of our fears
- Lash out and blame, **instead**-wonder what CAN be done or write down what has been witnessed. Such in-person accounts will be studied and referred to for generations to come.
- Forget that you are part of history in the making. What is your role in this transformative time?