

## Where Peace Begins

Our lives begin with a sense of oneness. Literally. Infants don't make a distinction between themselves and the rest of the world. If I'm a baby and milk appears when I cry for it, that doesn't mean that the person caring for me figured out that I'm hungry and made a decision to feed me. It just means that I am super powerful.

Over time, the good-enough mother (who can be a caretaker of any gender) adapts less and less closely to the infant's needs. This is how the child becomes more and more independent and better able to cope with loss.

It's important, though, that the caretaker let go gradually. As one person put it, "The trick of the good-enough mother is to give the child a sense of loosening rather than the shock of being 'dropped'. This teaches them to predict and hence allows them to retain a sense of control."<sup>i</sup>

At the other end of life, a primary way we cope with loss is through ritual. Even when a death is sudden, these rituals—sitting shiva, bathing the body, holding a memorial service, wearing certain colors—can hold us in our grief, slowing us down and giving us a sense of control as we transition between what was and what will be.

Earlier, Rob told the story of Frederick May Eliot's experience during World War I. It's no wonder those young soldiers found comfort in that song, whose Welsh lyrics speak of the tranquility and constancy of starlight, a touchstone beyond our waking hours. They'd entered a war whose brutal efficiency and level of decimation the world had never seen before: 17 million dead in just four years. There was a palpable absence of an entire generation. It wasn't uncommon for people to be grieving multiple loved ones at the same time.

These layers of loss came not as a gradual loosening but as an abrupt shock that severed what was from what would be. Historian Bruno Cabanes notes that "the war put an end to all the procedures in preparation for mourning. It abolished the rites of separation that went along with the first moments of loss: the clock that was stopped, the curtains that were drawn, the keeping watch over the body. But what especially cut at the heart of mourners' pain was the absence of bodies to grieve over, since they remained on the battlefield."<sup>ii</sup>

Soldiers who did survive often had a hard time returning to civilian life—wounded, haunted, bereft when the dreams of home they'd clung to in the trenches didn't match the messier reality. Those who'd stayed home had to recreate their identities as well, including women who were expected to relinquish the expanded roles they'd taken on. People were reuniting with "loved ones [whom they] sometimes struggled to recognize."<sup>iii</sup> Still, across many levels of society, there was a drive to return to the "normalcy" of pre-war life.

But as poet Mark Doty writes:

Experience is an intact fruit,

core and flesh and rind of it; once cut open,  
entered, it can't be the same, can it?

Paradoxically, the war created intimacy among soldiers even as it wrenched them away from everything they held dear. Photographs from the time capture the closeness of these comrades-in-arms: “Moments of sharing, momentary escapes from the war...carefully preserved by soldiers or sent to their families.”<sup>iv</sup>

The war also offered opportunities for transformation. Soldiers took spent shells and cartridges and “re-fashioned [them] into jewelry, crucifixes, or vases,”<sup>v</sup> turning objects of destruction into object of beauty. Theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin felt what he called a “nostalgia for the front” that had to do with a peak experience of faith, an utter dependence on God in the face of constant danger and the stripping away of all pretense. And one Unitarian minister carried back an unshakeable commitment to the youth of his congregation and to bonds that nourish.

In her 1870 “Appeal to Womanhood Throughout the World,” also known as the Mother’s Day proclamation,<sup>vi</sup> Julia Ward Howe reminds those who would “barter the dear interests of domestic life for the bloody exchanges of the battle field” that their mothers have a previous moral claim on them through the suffering endured in childbirth. She invokes this “sacred and commanding word” to call for the end of further suffering through war.

She also urges women to “meet first...to bewail and commemorate the dead.” In other words, to engage in a communal ritual of mourning as a way to let go of what had been and turn towards envisioning what could be. Only then would they be ready to take council together on questions of international import.

In appealing to women all over the world to discuss how the “great human family can live in peace,” Howe calls us back to that underlying oneness with everything in our world. Not the naïve and self-centered undifferentiation of the infant, but a mature, compassionate, global interdependence. A recognition that humans have already experienced more than enough suffering and can choose a different, more loving way to relate to one another. She calls us to the bonds of intimacy, like those among a chaplain and a terrified group of teenagers who clung to their humanity in the midst of horror and sang to each other of peace.

- i David Straker, "The Good-Enough Mother," [http://changingminds.org/disciplines/psychoanalysis/concepts/good-enough\\_mother.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/psychoanalysis/concepts/good-enough_mother.htm) (accessed May 8, 2015).
- ii Bruno Cabanes, "Negotiating Intimacy in the Shadow of War (France, 1914–1920s): New Perspectives in the Cultural History of World War I," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 3, doi:10.3167/fpcs.2013.310101 (accessed May 7, 2015).
- iii Cabanes, 12.
- iv Cabanes, 6.
- v Cabanes, 10.
- vi <http://memory.loc.gov/rbc/rbpe/rbpe07/rbpe074/07400300/001dr.jpg>