

On Death. . . and Life

July 23, 2006

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Good morning. I just want to look around here at everyone for a moment! I'm so delighted to be back among you today. It's been awhile.

As Cathy mentioned, I was here as a ministerial intern for 2 years, part-time, between 1996-98. I have only the best memories of my time here. And the experiences that I had gave me a firm foundation for parish ministry. From Cedar Lane I went on to serve the UU Fellowship of Southern Maryland near Lexington Park for 5 years. And then when we moved to Annapolis, I became one of the staff chaplains at Anne Arundel Medical Center, the large complex just off Rte. #50, in Annapolis. I'm pleased to be here today. And I'm pleased to have the opportunity to reflect on a topic that I give quite a bit of attention to in my ministry at the hospital.

Last week I was in my basement searching for a particular resource, and I happened to come across a book that is a collection of letters that children had written to God. It included one from a young girl named Jane. In large manuscript letters it read: 'Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?'

I like your style, Jane! An interesting concept! How many of us have had similar thoughts? How many of us would like to keep the status quo, to keep close to us those we love, never to lose

them to death, never to die ourselves. But, of course, we know that is not the way of life. We know the world is in a dynamic state of change, and so are we, and that we will only be here for a limited amount of time, the exact period unknown to us.

One of our UU ministers, Forrest Church, writes that facing the inevitability of death has awakened his understanding of what religion means: "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Knowing we are going to die not only places an acknowledged limit upon our lives, it also gives a special intensity and poignancy to the time we are given to live and love. The fact that death is inevitable gives meaning to our love, for the more we love the more we risk losing. Love's power comes in part from the courage required to give ourselves to that which is not ours to keep: our spouses, children, parents, dear and cherished friends, even life itself. It also comes from the faith required to sustain that courage, the faith that life, howsoever limited and mysterious, contains within its margins, often at their very edges, a meaning that is redemptive." (1)

The subject of death can be an unsettling one. But it is an important one, because it's a reality that we all face. Rabbi Earl Grollman, who has written extensively on the topic of death reminds us that death is real, death is permanent, and that the inevitability of our personal death is not an "unfounded rumor". So let us struggle together with this subject this morning as we address what I think is one of our most important on-going developmental tasks as an evolving human being, that of moving along in the process of becoming more comfortable with death. I know it's certainly been a process for me. I very vividly remember about twelve years ago when I was beginning my chaplaincy internship. This is one of the requirements for UU ministry—working in an institutional setting where our pastoral skills can be honed and developed. For my clinical pastoral education, as it is called, I chose as my setting a large, multi-level

care retirement community on a campus north of the Washington beltway.

When I arrived for my initial interview with the supervising chaplain, she asked about my professional growth goals for my ministry there. I had three goals in mind, two of which involved developing specific ministerial skills. But it was my third goal that was most challenging to me, the one that really caused me anxiety and discomfort, but the one I felt I must address.

I told my supervisor that I had never been with a person at the moment of death. I had been with family members when they were very ill, and I had seen people after death at funerals, but for some reason, it seemed very important to me to experience being with someone who was actively dying, to reassure myself that I could, in fact, be with people, companion people, in every circumstance and stage of life, including the final stage.

I expressed this to her somewhat hesitantly, wondering if she might think I was a little strange. If she did, she didn't let on. She said, "Well, I can't promise you that experience because life is unpredictable. But I can promise you that we'll do our best to support you in this goal."

It was a few days later that I was buzzed on my beeper. One of the other chaplains alerted me that a resident in his care was nearing death. I rushed over, feeling extremely nervous and anxious. However, I look back on that day as a turning point for me because the next few hours were among the most holy that I have ever experienced.

During that afternoon, and then again during many other subsequent times in my ministry, I've had the blessed privilege of being with people in the final moments of their lives. It's something I no longer fear, because these times are absolutely sacred moments, occasions that fill me with a deep sense of awe,

as I stand in company with another person on the very margins of their existence, witnessing to the power that grants life, that sustains life, and also allows life to cease.

People often ask me my opinion about what happens to a person beyond this life. Is there a heaven? What about hell? How does one come to terms with the idea of our personal non-existence? How does one come to terms with the idea of being dead for eternity? These are heavy topics but in our humanity we wrestle with them. Every one of us.

I've spent years reading the answers that theologians have to such questions. Many, in faith, believe in heaven. Others doubt that there is such a thing. When I was in seminary, I took an elective class at a Roman Catholic seminary, taught by a nun who was well-known in the field of pastoral care. One afternoon, she divided our class into groups, and our assignment was to discuss our visions of the afterlife.

I looked around at the other members of my group, all Franciscan and Dominican brothers. Feeling quite certain that my theology and visions of the afterlife would be different from theirs, I mentally rehearsed what I planned to say, wanting to speak with integrity about my beliefs while being respectful of their theology. Imagine my surprise when the first brother spoke saying, "I'd like to believe that when I die, I'll be met at the gates of heaven by our brother Jesus. But the truth of the matter is, we don't know what will happen." Our group had a great discussion.

It is all speculation. No one knows for certain. I don't know if there is a heaven or what it might be like. In talking with people on this topic, I usually ask them what they believe about heaven and the answers are as varied as the people.

Upon occasion I've been asked about hell—if there is such a thing, and if people go there as punishment for iniquities performed in

this world or for not holding the right beliefs. On this topic I'm firmly aligned with our Universalist ancestors. The Universalists believed in a loving God, one who would not commit humanity to eternal damnation, one with whom all people would be reconciled. I see hell as a human contrivance, one made not by God and existing in the next world, but one made by humans, right here on earth, and found in conditions such as violence and genocide.

When I think about the afterlife, it is not the words of philosophers and theologians who help me come to terms with the concept. Instead, it is the words and images of poets who speak to me and give me comfort. This poem by Florence Luscomb:

Some day some atom of this flesh shall be
Commingled with a tree,
Will taste the resinous sap spicing its veins;
Wrestle with tempests; dance with silver rains;
And stand a singing tower against the sky.
...
Fear? Fear transfiguration glad as this?
Such loveliness?
With these I have so loved, to be unfurled,
Inwoven in all the beauty of the world?
Perhaps - who knows? - My very heart shall be
For one mad hour of flaming ecstasy
a sunset! (2)

This poet seems to have come to an acceptance of death. For most of us getting to that point is a journey. For there is a certain amount of anxiety connected with death, fear of the unknown, and fear of losing control of ourselves. Practically speaking, the most we can do to prepare is to arrange our personal affairs as best we can, to address unfinished business, and to work toward coming to a personal understanding of death.

What has brought me some measure of comfort is to put my trust into the awesome power of Life and have faith that all will be well. I like this story told by the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen. He describes meeting a trapeze artist after seeing his breath-taking performance of flying through the air and doing all manner of gymnastic turns and flips. After the performance Nouwen complimented him on his acrobatic flying and asked him the secret of his success in the air. The flyer confided, "The flyer does nothing. It's the catcher who does everything. When I fly, I simply stretch out my arms and hands and wait for my partner to catch me and pull me to safety."

Nouwen uses this as a metaphor for dying. Dying is trusting the catcher. Personally, I'm not sure how the process of catching will work, but I have faith that it will. I have faith that when I die somehow I will be caught by the awesome mystery of the universe. That metaphor is comforting to me.

In the meantime, even though "our lives are always moving toward completion", even from the start, I think our focus should be on our living. Our biggest fear should not be death itself so much as that we not "[squander] the life we have been miraculously given".

(3)

"Tuesdays With Morrie" is a book about the relationship of a young man, Mitch, with his former college professor, Morrie Schwartz. When Mitch learns that Morrie has just a short time left to live, he arranges to spend each Tuesday with Morrie. Morrie passes on his wisdom with these words: "Everyone knows they're going to die...but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently... There's a better approach. To know you're going to die, and be prepared for it at any time. That's better. That way you can actually be more involved in your life while you're living."

In the same vein, recently I was talking with a friend who had survived a serious heart attack. He spoke of how his brush with death has served as a wake up call to him to really appreciate life and all the things he has taken for granted, and to savor each moment. He said when he left the hospital, he walked outside and was overcome with the abundance of life. Suddenly everything leaped sharply into focus. It was as though he was living the words of UU poet, ee cummings:

I thank you God for this amazing day;
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees
And the blue true dream of sky;
And for everything which is natural, which is infinite,
which is yes.
Now the ears of my ears awake and
Now the eyes of my eyes are opened.

After his illness he saw life through a new lens, a lens of wonder and gratitude. He was moved to live with a sense of mindfulness and dedication and appreciation.

In the same spirit these words by a Japanese Buddhist monk: “If [we] were never to fade away like the dew of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us!” (4)

As I mentioned earlier, in the words of Forrest Church: “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

And so, my message today is that one of our on-going goals as a human being might be to work on becoming more comfortable with the idea of death, especially the inevitability of our own. But just as important, and maybe even more so, it’s critical to keep before us the goal of living deeply and well.

In closing I share with you this story of several years ago. As a young adult, before I had the responsibilities of home and family, I dabbled in the sport of skydiving. There is a very spiritual dimension to skydiving, and of course, there’s also quite an element of risk as well. I remember my first group training session when I learned about the equipment, jumping techniques, and how to land so as to lessen the possibility of breaking a leg. At the end of our class, the instructor finished off with a joke, famous in skydiving circles. He said people often ask him this question: If for some reason my chute doesn’t open, and then my reserve gets tangled, how long do I have before I reach the ground? His answer: You have the rest of your life!

And so do we. We have the rest of our lives before us. So let us not live: “empty lives, loveless lives, lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of us have been given”. Let us be reminded of death so that we might “savor and love” with all our hearts. (5)

So may it be.

Resources

1. A Chosen Faith, p. 5-6
2. “Some Day This Flesh”, Florence Luscomb, quoted in *Ourselves Growing Older*, by Paula Brown Doress and Diana Laskin Siegal, p. 396
3. Mark Morrison-Reed
4. Yoshida Kenko
5. Mark Morrison-Reed

