



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “How Then Shall We Live, Knowing We Shall Die?”

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### Centering Thoughts

*Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them.* George Eliot

*Life is hard. Then you die. Then they throw dirt in your face. Then the worms eat you.  
Be grateful it happens in that order.* David Gerrold

*What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others  
and the world remains and is immortal.* Albert Pike

*I would rather die a meaningful death than to live a meaningless life.* Corazon Aquino

### Sermon

I will begin with 3 brief readings:

First from Steve Jobs:

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.

Next from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross:

It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather, our concern must be to live while we're alive - to release our inner selves from the spiritual death that comes with living behind a facade designed to conform to external definitions of who and what we are.

And lastly by Jack Kerouac:

I hope it is true that a man can die and yet not only live in others but give them life, and not only life, but that great consciousness of life.

*YOU* are going to die! “And You! And You! *YOU* are going to die.

It sounds terrible when I say it doesn't it? It is shocking...frightening and even a little disgusting. Yet it is true and we all know it even if we never want to hear anyone say it. It is a reality that all of us will eventually pass away. It is an inescapable fact of life...we all owe a death. Not only that,

everyone we love and care about will also someday die. Hopefully not for a good long time; and hopefully, at least for those younger than us, not even during our lifetimes, but they will, in time suffer the fate of all living things. And as I said, that sounds awful. Yet, I hope, that when we are done today, we might begin to think a little differently about death. (If you haven't already done so). Perhaps like Charlie in the story, you may start to think about death not only as implacable foe but instead perhaps a little bit like a friend.

The question for us today (and perhaps for a lot of our days) is how we can cope with these two facts: The deaths of those we love and our own deaths.

Some might say that people have invented and are drawn to religion largely to deal with these awful truths. It is a lot easier to deal with death if you believe that life somehow goes on after you are gone. It is very comforting to believe that we will all meet again someday in some kind of a heaven. And it is comforting to say "She is not gone; she is in a better place." Or to say "He is now with God and I will see him again after I die." Those are good thoughts and I would never wish to dissuade people who do believe that way, from using that means to cope with mortality. Yet not everyone, (and I dare say probably not a majority of us here today) believe that to be true. Even some who profess their religion may have doubts about eternal life. If death is not a stepping stone, but rather an absolute ending, how then shall we cope? These are awful thoughts not easy for anyone to contemplate. For some, this reality is truly devastating. One of my patients said to me she cannot contemplate living, if her life would end in death. She said she always would skip ahead to the end of a book to see how it ended and if she didn't like the ending she would not read the book. Do we want to think that a bad ending ruins all that came before?

I would respond with a resounding "NO!" We can fully experience every day of our life no matter how long or short it is or how it shall end. Rather than let the finite time span we have, affect our current existence. it should motivate us to make every day count. Live every day as if it shall be your last; and you shall have a fuller life than if you contemplate how much time you have left. Let me give an example from popular culture. "Justified" was a fairly successful television drama on the FX network for 5 years. It won one Peabody award and 2 Emmys. It was well written and well-acted. Justified's final episode was one of the greatest endings any TV show ever put together. All the loose ends were tied up nicely. Every character ended up with exactly the fate one felt they deserved. The worst villains were killed, the hero moved out of Kentucky to a better job in Florida and although he did not end up married, he had a good relationship with the mother of his child and was able to enjoy being a father. His major antagonist ended up serving a long jail term but he found redemption and a new gratifying identity as a sincere gospel preacher. The main female character with whom both of these men had relationships ended up in the Far West, mother to her child and no longer pursued by either man. It was the kind of final episode that just felt 100% right and satisfying...a perfect ending to a good TV show. Still the show will never be considered ground breaking or one of the best shows of all time.

The television show that was voted the best of all time by TV Guide and the Television Writer's Guild was the "Sopranos". It won 2 Peabody Awards and 21 Emmy's. It was subject of scholarly articles and huge public and critical acclaim. It truly changed HBO who aired it and the nature of TV drama. It was a great show. It did however, have one of the worst endings of any major television drama. After creating the suspense and tension of thinking the main character's life was in imminent danger, it showed him sitting down in a restaurant with his family and then suddenly the screen went black for several seconds. That was it. One thought their set was broken or something. We never did find out what his fate was or how the other story lines played out. It just ended...boom! An extremely poor conclusion to an otherwise great show.

So, did the awful ending ruin the six years of outstanding Television? Of course not. Nor did the perfect ending raise *Justified* to the ranks of one of the greatest series of all time. No, the ending does not control the value of all that went before. In the same way, the fact that we all must eventually die, need not reduce the meaning and satisfaction of our current lives. We can make our lifetimes an experience filled with wonder, joy, satisfaction and achievement or we can struggle with what life hands us; but either way, what matters is how we live now, not what the future may hold in store; even if that future does ultimately end in our demise.

In addition, we do have a kind of life after our deaths. Our lives have impacted many, many others. So long as they remember us and so long as their lives impact others, the influence of our existence may continue to spread like ripples in a pond. Of course, those of us who are parents and grandparents know that the young people who we have created and nurtured will extend the effects of our lives for many years after ours have ended. And if we have created other things those pieces of ourselves may exist long after we are gone. Shakespeare, Mozart, DiVinci are truly immortals as their creations will have life so long as our civilization exists. Anything that we have poured ourselves into may carry our essence forward... Even the achievements of someone like Hershel Walker will give him a kind of immortality so long as there are Bulldog fans.

I might be allowed to fantasize that after I am gone perhaps one or 2 of you may remember these words. ... Perhaps.....

In addition, we need to not look at Death in completely negative light. As the story I told in *Together Time* illustrates, Death, serves a useful purpose for all life on earth. After all, what is cancer but nothing more than a group of cells that keeps on growing without limit until it destroys the body which can no longer contain it? Without Death, all life would be like a cancer on the earth... expanding without limits. We need to make room for new life by ending lives that have reached the end of their appointed times.

Even if we could live forever, such a gift would quickly become a curse as the ravages of age and disease weaken our bodies. And if we could stay young forever, the problem would be over population with no room for new life but, since we can delay but not stop the aging process, we must inevitably deal with our bodies slowing and weakening and our abilities and powers fading over time.

And this is to say nothing about sickness, disease and trauma. These perhaps are what can be truly terrible about our physical decline over time. With illness comes pain; and from my point of view, pain and disability are the true enemies and horrors, not Death.

Jim Morrison the rock star died long before his time from a drug overdose but before then he said: "People fear death even more than pain. It's strange that they fear death. Life hurts a lot more than death. At the point of death, the pain is over. Yeah, I guess it is a friend."

Yes indeed to those who suffer from chronic pain and progressive diseases death is a friend; bringing a blessed ending when these miseries become intolerable.

Death is also not the enemy when one has reached the end of a long and fruitful life. My friend Harry was dancing and telling jokes at his 101th birthday party. He was alert, heathy and full of life. He had buried his wife of many years a time before that and he still was making plans for his future. Unfortunately, by his hundredth and second birthday he had started to need a wheelchair;

but his mind was as sharp as ever. He was looking to buy a second home up in Highlands, NC which seemed like a good and realistic idea. However, his physical health started to fade and he did pass away a few months after that. He never said he regretted anything in his life and I doubted he had much regrets about his death. He had lived a long life and lived it well. His passing was inevitable but not at least bit tragic.

We can seek to live good and meaningful lives and approach death as our well-deserved rest after the long struggle which is life.

But what about the death of others? Perhaps we can accept our own deaths but can we deal with the loss of those we love?

Indeed when someone is killed long before their time such as victims of crime, accidents, violence, terrorism or war these are tragic events. Similarly, when a young person we know or care about, dies of an incurable illness or other cause our hearts are broken. If we lack the comfort of believing they have gone to heaven and we will meet them again in an afterlife, we must gather our strength in another way to go on without them.

We can focus on the memories we hold dear, of who they were and how they touched our lives. We can know that our lives were enriched by knowing them and we can expand on the gifts that we have received from our interaction with them and use those gifts to make our own lives and the lives of those we in turn touch better.

The secret of dealing with the loss of one we have loved and who have loved us is to take that love and pass it on. When we share our love with others, we feel love inside ourselves grow. Like a song I like says: Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more....

Know that our missing loved ones would want the best for us ...and take these feelings and apply them to the folks we touch. When we give love, our losses seem much less. If we focus on what is gone and our own sense of loss and grief, those feelings grow. Sharing and caring for those still around us, is the best way to move on past the loss.

Even those tragic victims that we do not know personally, such as the people who were killed in that Charleston church, but whose deaths effect and move us can inspire us to make the world a better place. We have seen movements such as "Black Lives Matter" and the successful campaigns to remove symbols of hate and prejudice such as the Confederate Battle Flag from public display that were fueled by our horror and grief over these deaths. Again, we get over grief, sadness and our own anger, by moving forward to aspire to a hopeful cause.

Lastly, I want to apply what I had said about immortality to those we have lost. I want to speak about how best to think about the deaths of those we have known. Early death is a tragedy because of the loss of the potential of what that person may have been able to do had they lived. For this, we should mourn. But, when someone has lived a long and fruitful life we can turn our attention to who they were and what they have done, and the parts of them we carry with us for the rest of our lives. So long as we have been touched and changed by them they remain, in a sense, alive within us. And so long as we are alive, they live on in some way. And when the way they interacted with us, affects the way we interact with others, their legacy continues and grows. My Grandchildren would not be the wonderful little people they are had I not been loved by my parents and passed that love on to my children which helped make them such good and loving parents.

Soon, after a long time member of our congregation died, I spoke to her son. He talked about what a good life she had lead and how full of energy she was until the end: peddling her scooter around the neighborhood in the afternoon and passing away in her sleep that night. He missed her, as did all who knew her, but he said he was not sad. He looked at his children and grandchildren and knew how she helped make their lives so wonderful. You do not have to believe in heaven to appreciate how lives can continue after death.

I hope this talk has brought you some comfort as well as some food for thought. Now go out and pass on the love within you to those you meet.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Have you lost someone important to you Have your feelings about their death changed over time?
2. Have you thought about your own Mortality How do you feel about it now?
3. Does the reality of eventual demise change how you currently feel about your life and how you live it?