



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Gift of Life”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Psalm 66:1; Psalm 98:4

We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy. Joseph Campbell

When you start each day with a grateful heart, light illuminates from within. Unknown

Sermon

Life is the greatest gift of all the riches on this earth. [NOTE: This sermon began after singing hymn #331 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.]

I need only look at the face of my newborn grandchild to know this truth. I need only to look into your faces when you share life’s joys and sorrows with me to know this truth.

And this truth motivates me to begin a memorial service with these words:

A human life is sacred.

It is sacred in its being born.

It is sacred in its living.

And it is sacred in its dying.

This brief litany expresses our entire life cycle. It acknowledges that death is a fact of life; a fact of our living. For me, death gives life meaning and begs the question Mary Oliver asks in her poem, “The Summer Day.” She writes:

[Due to copyright concerns, please follow this link to read Mary Oliver’s poem:

<https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>]

Our lives are indeed wild, precious, and sacred. They are wild because they are unknowable, chaotic, uncontrollable, and we know not when they will end. They are precious

because they are unique and unrepeatable, finite, not everlasting—they will end. They are sacred because our time on Earth is but a fleeting moment.

I believe our lives also are precious and sacred because we seem set apart as conscious beings, aware of our existence. If other creatures are not sentient as we are, then not only are we unique on earth but perhaps one-of-a-kind in the universe. The rarer something is, the more precious it becomes.

The gift of life truly is the greatest gift.

A number of years ago I was astonished by the discovery that life exists miles down below the surface of the ocean, in deep trenches and rifts. There giant tube worms were discovered. At these depths sunlight cannot reach. At these depths the pressure is immense. And with the ‘black smokers,’ the vents to the interior of the earth from which intense heat and chemicals pour out, together these factors make it an unlikely place to find life. And yet, it’s there.

Instead of photosynthesis, these tube worms depend upon chemosynthesis – the bacteria and microscopic life that live around the vents with the tube worms synthesize chemicals and minerals in the water for their own energy and nutrient needs. In turn, the tube worms depend upon these smaller critters for their own needs.

Before this discovery, scientists had thought it was impossible for life to exist in such difficult, remote places. Photosynthesis was thought to be the only way to provide energy for life. Tube worms were miraculous.

This discovery opened up a host of new possibilities for where life might be found. Since the tube worm discover, scientists have discovered other life in equally harsh environments. These discoveries offer hope that extra-terrestrial planets with similar hostile conditions might harbor life.

The existence of life in unlikely places testifies to life’s powerful will to live. Where life can exist, it will. That’s a lesson for us about the value and preciousness of life.

Do you wonder why life exists at all? The theory of evolution seems to answer pretty well how life on earth developed, but we don’t know definitively how it began. Scientists can’t tell us exactly what triggered the universe or if it had a beginning beyond the beginning we know about—the Big Bang.

Whether a divine mind or breath had something to do with the creation of life we’ll likely never prove. But for me, whether divinely created or the result of a series of serendipitous cosmic occurrences, life remains precious and sacred.

What, then, do we make of this gift of life we have been given? How do we answer Mary Oliver’s question?

For me, I try to live the best life I can live. I want to be happy and live joyfully, especially if this is the one and only life I get. I choose to live as if this is my one wild and precious life. If there is more to come after I die, so be it, but that mystery doesn't influence how I live this known life.

Living happily and joyfully is impossible when I see so many other humans and creatures suffering. I can't be happy when I see so many injustices in the world. And I can't be happy when I know the planet that supports our lives being threatened by our unsustainable activity.

I find purpose and meaning in my life by the many ways I act to help life thrive. By lifting up our values in the wider world I hope to change people's belief that some lives don't matter. That capital punishment is an acceptable practice. That gunning down people who disagree with you is wrong. That politicians who trash whole groups of people need to stop. And, that trashing our planet needs to stop.

Life is sacred, animal, vegetable and human. Rivers, oceans, and plains must be treated for the sacred spaces they are because they support life. If we desecrate the planet we will certainly end life as we know it and perhaps all life. Earth could become a run-away greenhouse like the planet Venus.

Let that not be our legacy. Let life thrive on this one precious, sacred planet, for life is a gift.

May we appreciate and protect this sacred gift. And may we experience joy and happiness in our living.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What makes you glad to be alive? Describe a time you felt most joyous and alive.
2. Share a time you felt moved by the beauty of something in creation. Can you repeat or return to that experience? Why or why not?
3. How do you explain the origin of life—accident or divine design? Does your belief make a difference in how you live your life? Please share.