



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Life’s Big Mystery—Death”

© by Rev. Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die; ...a time to weep, and a time to laugh... Ecclesiastes 3*

*One is responsible to life. It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness
from which we come and to which we shall return. James Baldwin*

*The word ‘death’ is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because
it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it;
it is one of his favorite toys and most steadfast love. Octavio Paz*

*Every day I stand in danger of being struck by lightning and having the obituary
in the local paper say, for all the world to see, “She attended frantically and ineffectually
to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.” Victoria Safford*

Reflection: (preceded by a talk of Día de los Muertos and Jane Kenyon’s “Otherwise” poem.)

The tragic events of yesterday in Pittsburgh, and the threats to civic leaders earlier in the week, remind us of the fragility of life. Whether in a house for Jews, Muslims, UUs, or others, death can come at any time—you know this. So I’m not going to tell you anything you don’t already know. I know that you know intellectually, in your minds, that you’ll die one day. But, do your hearts know it?

Many of us put barricades around our hearts that keeps this truth away because it’s too frightening to contemplate our own death. The idea of being absent from the world, missing friends and family, just might be too emotionally painful, might break our hearts, might make us too vulnerable. The possibility that we might die a slow, physically painful death is not something we look forward to either. So we pretend life will go on each day, as it has each previous day, trusting we’ll awake each morning.

If you remember the old children’s bedtime prayer, join me: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Though I doubt you recite that prayer anymore, I’ve heard many of you say you hope to die in your sleep. I’ve said it, too. I think this hope expresses that the best death is one that takes us by surprise. It’s one we don’t have to prepare for, one that allows us to avoid thinking about it ahead of time.

But that ideal death won't happen for many of us. Debilitating age or terminal illness may cause the Shadow of Death to hover over us for a long time. Even then, many will live their last days in denial or unrealistically demanding miracles from doctors in order to keep death away. Family members also may pretend we're going to get well, refusing to acknowledge our likely death or their oncoming grief. Denial makes it impossible for the one dying to discuss their true feelings or be appropriately comforted. Sometimes, hope for a miracle is misplaced, and ignores the truth of dying.

Death is a stranger to us. Advances in preventative and hospital care, surgical procedures, medications, and better nutrition combine to increase our life spans. When life spans were shorter and the dying kept at home, death, though not welcome, was more familiar, and perhaps more natural and less frightening.

More frequent use of home hospice care may reverse death's estrangement. Besides allowing the dying to stay in their homes they can more easily be accompanied by family and compassionate caregivers. In my ministry, I sit at hospital and home bedsides, and I see how comforting it is to be in home-like environments. I recognize significant medical needs may make this impossible, so don't feel guilty if this choice isn't available to you.

I talk about death and dying, not because I want to hurry your end. But, as I say at most every memorial service, death reminds us to live while we can. Even if we know we're dying because of an illness, we're not dead yet. And, frankly, we're all dying.

So don't waste your life. Make the most of it while you're able. Live fully now. If you're unhappy in a career, a relationship, or another aspect of your life, do something about it. Try to fix it or try something new. Ask yourself if you're doing what really matters to you. If not, what might make life more meaningful?

No decision has to be forever. If something new is calling or awaiting you, minimize your risks, then leap. As the UU Reverend Victoria Safford's Order of Service quote advises, don't let your epitaph indicate you "attended frantically and ineffectually to a great many unimportant, meaningless details."

A few years ago, Ariana Huffington wrote an article about how most of us live as if we're writing our resumés rather than our eulogies. She writes, "At HuffPost [we're] ... redefining success beyond money and power to include well-being, wisdom and our ability to wonder and to give. ... It's easy to let ourselves get consumed by our work. It's easy to use work to let ourselves forget the things and the people that truly sustain us. It's easy to let technology wrap us in a perpetually harried, stressed-out existence. It's easy, in effect, to miss our lives even while we're living them. Until we're no longer living them." Unlike a resumé, she points out that a eulogy indicates how we'll be remembered: were we kind, generous, connected, and did we impact others. What really matters is whom we loved, and who loved us. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/are-you-living-your-eulogy-or-your-resume_b_3936937.html

Frank Ostaseski writes in his book, *The Five Invitations*, "We cannot truly live unless we are aware of death. ... Awareness of death can be a valuable companion on the road to living well, forging a rich and meaningful life, and letting go of regret."

If you're doing exactly what gives you joy and satisfaction, if you're spending time with people you care about, and if your days are filled with meaning, own that happiness! Rejoice!

And then if you get a life-threatening medical diagnosis or you're hit by a bus, you'll know your life wasn't wasted. Then your epitaph might read, you "gave to life all you had to offer and you lived it well."

One of the gifts of being told you have a terminal illness is time to get ready. To resolve old conflicts, seek forgiveness from others, express gratitude to loved ones, and say goodbye.

Since many of us are uncomfortable speaking of death, we often avoid those we know are dying. We don't know what to say. We don't know how to be. And those who are dying may not tell you of their impending death because they don't want you to distance yourself from them.

But that is exactly the time to be with those we love, to assure them they are loved, and made your life better. Being with someone who is dying, especially in their final days, is a privilege. Sharing your love and compassion will give your own life greater fulfillment. So don't abandon the dying; don't deny love at a time when it is most needed.

We may not know what comes, if anything, after life, but we do know how death affects us in this life. Just as our fear of dying affects how we are around those actively dying, we're also awkward around those who are grieving.

We may say the perfunctory, "I'm sorry for your loss," but then what? More often than not, we expect the grieving to get back to 'normal' quickly. We don't know how to deal with their grief. And they may not want constant expressions of sympathy, reminding them of their painful loss.

So just stay connected, don't abandon them, either. Let them tell you if they need something. Offer to share a story about the person who has died, but accept it gracefully if they decline to hear it. Avoid telling them how they should feel or what they should do. There's no correct amount of time for grieving, and it may come and go. Listen to them, for they know best what they need.

Life is an unasked for miracle, so embrace it joyfully.

Death is an unavoidable mystery, so meet it unafraid.

Death will come to us all. And maybe someday we'll know what awaits us on the side. Just maybe, we'll be the spirits who come back whenever we're remembered by those we loved and who loved us.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. How do you remember loved ones who have died? If you do nothing, might you create a new, meaningful tradition?
2. What was your first experience of death? Did you receive help in understanding the loss, were you comforted in some way, or were people silent around you about this death? Share.
3. Have you made plans for your own death by making your wishes known to family, doctors, lawyers, minister, etc?