

“Grace and Forgiveness in Life and Death”

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Unitarian Universalist Church in Reston

Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman

The Worship Theme for October is “Vulnerability and Forgiveness”

UU minister Rev. Forrest Church defined religion as that human cultural practice that clarifies our awareness of existence and the reality that we will die. Indeed, ‘being mortal’ (also the title of a recent best-seller by Atul Gawande) may be one of the greatest sources of vulnerability that we experience as human beings. Let us consider how grace and forgiveness might lessen the sting of mortality and enhance this process called life.

READING: from *Lifecraft*, Forrest Church

The search for meaning is a religious search. Admittedly, I define religion broadly. I don’t restrict the religious impulse to those who identify with the rules and beliefs of distinct communities of faith. Putting aside the existence or nonexistence of God --- even Buddhists don’t “believe” in God --- my definition of religion is simple and inclusive: **Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.** We are not so much the animal with advance language or the animal with tools as we are the religious animal. Having discovered relics and flowers in ancient graves, certain anthropologists actually apply to us the sobriquet *homo religiosus*. We have honored our dead from time immemorial, even as we continue to sift through their ashes in anticipation of our own earthly remains.

If you define religion more narrowly (as a group whose rites and practices involve belief in and worship of God), my point still holds. From atheists to Christian, we mortals are seekers of meaning. In response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, we question what life means while attempting to create meaning within it. To answer this question, what an abundance of material we have to shape and ponder. Our lives are novels, filled with diverse characters and shifting plots, narratives connected and configured by memory. Our lives are pictures from an exhibition, snapshots in an album. They are molded and remolded from human clay. They are carved and weathered, built and remodeled. With a given melody and added harmonies, our lives, whether marked more by consonance or dissonance, can compose themselves into majestic symphonies. I call this --- the art of meaning --- lifecraft.

SERMON: “Grace and Forgiveness in Life and Death”

This sermon is for everyone. I’m not trying to be haughty or arrogant when I say that. This sermon is for everyone because it concerns the cycle of living and dying. As Forrest Church explained, this is a ‘religious’ theme because it applies to each of us. We humans are all connected --- “re-ligio” --- by this common experience of living and dying, and in the course of living, seeking meaning for both: why do we exist and what happens when we die? No matter what “distinct communities of faith,” in Church’s word, we come from, we seek and construct

meaning about living and dying, trying to make sense of how this process called “life” is filled with both mystery and commonality, both vulnerability and privilege. We wonder how we have been given life against so many odds.

This morning, let us consider both themes: dying and living. As for the former, I wonder if the human species of the 21st century is more conscious of death, being surrounded as we are by horrific acts of gun violence, or by increasingly intense events of Mother Nature as global warming dries out landscapes which fuel unmanageable fires, while also delivering devastating floods and tornados. Perhaps death is on our minds more frequently as we live longer, having more time to contemplate the end of life and to develop physical and mental challenges which were hardly identified as recently as a century ago.

While we may be alert to death all around us, are we also more willing to accept the death of others as just a regular part of the living process? Are we losing a sense of what Forrest Church called the ‘mortar of mortality’ which connects us. In some ways, we in the west seem less acquainted with death as a natural human process. We have moved dying into hospital wards, nursing homes, hospice units. Not only death and dying, but in cases aging has become clinical, antiseptic, sometimes mechanically invasive, removed from home and loved-ones. Are we foregoing the sacramental meaning of death as a multi-generational experience of family life. When death occurs in clinical settings, are we missing out on an important part of living? Granted, religious practice calls many of us together after the death of a loved one, but is one morning or afternoon devoted to a funeral or a memorial service enough time to remind us of our connections, our “re-ligio”?

I am grateful for stories like “Ten Good Things About Barney,” which we heard earlier in this service. Stories like “Barney” teach our children that death is a natural component of living, part of the interconnected cycle of existence.

Fear and vulnerability around death and dying

If any of us experience fear and vulnerability around the subjects of aging, or death and dying, let us ask what generates these feelings? Do we fear humiliation as we anticipate bodily incapacitation? Are we confused about why we focus so hard on all this living, when it only ends in dying? Do we fear the unknown that death represents: unless one practices and believes in Spiritualism, the nineteenth-century practice of talking to departed loved ones, it’s not possible to know what this next step is like. Do we fear losing control, giving in to this process that is bigger than any one of us. Do we fear separation, from other persons and from activities, connections, and creativity?

Perhaps fear about death is compounded as we age. Some suggest that fear of mortality is not a quality in the young: that it takes a certain amount of living --- at least into our twenties --- before we develop a tangible awareness of mortality. This theory could explain something about the demographic profile of mass shooters and suicide bombers.

This is tough stuff, isn’t it, this religious awareness of mortality. We can take solace in knowing that there are many resources out there to guide us, through living and dying. I expect many of you know about the pioneering work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Her classic 1969 book *On Death*

and Dying helped expand ways to make death more acceptable by defining five stages of grief likely experienced by the one dying, their loved ones, and health care professionals who serve them. Among Unitarian Universalists, there are also wonderful resources. Rev. Forrest Church, author of the earlier reading, offered much assurance about living and dying. Rev. Church, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City for thirty years, was the son of Senator Frank Church, who died just short of his sixtieth birthday. Perhaps motivated in part by his father's relatively early death, Rev. Church published several books about end of life. Then in September 2009, his life was taken at the age of sixty-one by throat cancer. I recommend his books, in particular *Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*, written when he knew he was in his terminal year.

Fear and vulnerability around living

Rev. Church asks how well equipped we are for death? If we feel fear, perhaps the issue is not really about dying, but how well we know how to live? How well do we cherish each and every moment of this precious gift of life. How well do we make the most of the days and years we have been given? If we are confused about the meaning of death, could we actually be more confused about the meaning of living and how to fully celebrate every day that we have the gift of breathing.

One of the most inspirational messages for living I have come across is a small book titled *Tuesdays with Morrie: an old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson*. It's the memoir of a young man, Mitch, who interviewed his former professor, Morrie, during Morrie's last months of living with Lou Gehrig disease. During one of their conversations, Morrie advised Mitch that, while everyone knows they are going to die, nobody believes it. If we were prepared for death at any time, we would actually be more involved in living. Although born Jewish, Morrie took inspiration from all the world's religions. His advice to Mitch: "once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

I wonder sometimes why we humans often end up in tombs while we are living. Why is it that we enter dark and secluded places, detached from love and connections? The possibility of disrupted places of living seem to be part of the human condition. It might not even be depressions which remove us, instead perhaps experiences of shame or disappointment. Who among us has not been in some sort of tomb, or in need of re-establishing right relations with others? Is there not one of us who wouldn't want to live parts of our lives over again? Experiencing these places is not the 'catch:' it's how we deal with them. Unfortunately, it is when we are in the tombs of our lives that we usually feel the most challenged to sort out meaning and purpose for living. Emotional and spiritual tombs may feel like little deaths.

Morrie taught Mitch the importance of coming out of the tombs and getting rid of grudges. Morrie invited Mitch to consider how we can heal our hurts through acts of forgiving others or being forgiven ourselves. Perhaps we begin by forgiving ourselves for all the things we judge ourselves as not having accomplished. Morrie was grateful for being able to survive for awhile with a terminal disease: he would not have come to a profound religious understanding about the meaning of life. Through tears, he said to Mitch: "Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Don't wait, Mitch. Not everyone gets the time I'm getting. Not everyone is as lucky." Morrie learned about living: every day as he continued to take a breath he defined as a gift. His whole life a caring

teacher, he deepened all the more his appreciation for what a miracle it is, that any of us is here to experience life.

Morrie's lessons to Mitch parallel what I learned in a graduate class as a musicology student, when we examined how the reality of death stimulated the creative spirit in many composers. Indeed, some interpretations of the history of composition of Mozart's Requiem take this view, that Mozart was inspired to compose that magnificent work because he was anticipating his own death.

What grounds us as we face aging and death

I expect that our various religious traditions are a big influence on how we deal with living, as well as with aging and death. How does our liberal theology support, or perhaps challenge, these life processes? Persons drawn to this liberal faith tradition tend to be fairly self-reliant, in control of our own lives. Might aging and dying frustrate us because these life events challenge our being in control, it challenges our dignity. Try as any of us might, I guarantee you --- death and taxes are unavoidable, for each of us. So the question is, not IF we will die, but HOW we will come to terms with giving up control, especially to be in control of accomplishments. Morrie advised Mitch to orient his life less around ambition and more around relationships.

Relationships are what allow us to experience a larger unity of existence. I wonder how this lesson of letting go --- letting go of the drive for a promotion, or a bigger house, or the need to win every argument --- might enhance our living, at any age.

I also wonder if proponents of liberal theology might experience particular uncertainty around end-of-life because most people have no assurance that a personal God will ease our pain, perhaps welcome us into heaven. We have no confirmation of seeing loved ones who have gone before us to the other side. Also, we don't necessarily have markers of trust drawn from Scripture which include surefire explanations about the mysteries of life. I recall ministering to a dying woman in a hospital in Austin where I was part-time chaplain a decade ago. I don't remember what church she came from, but she was at peace with dying because she looked forward to seeing Jesus when she got to heaven. She asked me to pray with her, and I did: I prayed for her safe passage. I supported her source of comfort, easing her living and her dying. Religious faith, in all its diversity, helping this process of being human.

Challenges to current methods of dying in USA

While I've offered some negative critique of how we have made end of life clinical, I also realize that many of us have or will have to call on institutionalized health care for ourselves and our loved ones. Even as many would strongly argue that the American health care system is broken, so others would celebrate some recent advances in end-of-life care. For one, a recent best-seller titled *Being Mortal* by Dr. Atul Gawande offers hope that modern health care can bring more dignity to end-of-life medical practice. In part from walking with his own father's terminal illness, Gawande challenges modern science, which can sustain life far beyond its capacity to have meaningful relationships with other human beings. He also challenges health care in facilities which deprive residents of adequate treatment or coerce treatment they don't want. He also regrets that health-care professionals are not well trained in talking about the realities of living and dying with patients and family members. End of life in the twentieth-first century takes so much longer on average than it did in George Washington's time, Gawande writes, and in the process modern

culture has lost touch with the art of dying. Gawande has promised to be a different kind of doctor to his patients.

The call for more humane methods of dying has also entered the political arena. On Monday, October 5, the state of California took an important step in the Death with Dignity movement when it became the fifth state in this country, after Oregon, Washington, Vermont, and Montana to pass an 'End of Life Option Act.' Under this law, a terminally ill resident when still of sound mind may arrange for aid in dying, with approval of two doctors. Public awareness of Death with Dignity enjoyed huge notice last year when twenty-nine-year-old Californian Brittany Maynard moved to Oregon to die with dignity after learning of her terminal brain cancer. Oregon was the first state to pass Death with Dignity, in 1994, through a bill spearheaded by a member of First Unitarian Church in Portland.

Death with Dignity has political opponents: some fear that it opens the door to pressuring individuals to end life against their own free will. The movement also has opponents, who agree that we die badly in this country but argue that rather than directing resources to dying, wouldn't it be better to improve health care for the living, especially to train medical professionals in more humane interactions with patients and families. Perhaps the lethal prescription would also be less appealing if people felt that their families wouldn't be bankrupted by exorbitant medical costs. To quote a report from California: "If you are seriously ill, you face an uncertain future of whether your symptoms are going to be well-controlled, whether your doctor will have the basic skills to communicate, and you're worried about being pauperized, becoming an indigent simply for being seriously ill and not dying quickly enough."

Proponents of Death with Dignity argue that it puts individuals in the driver's seat, having a choice in the matter of ending suffering and terminating life which is devoid of rational or spiritual meaning. Many who apply for end-of-life medication never even use it. Gov Jerry Brown, a former Jesuit seminarian, signed the bill into law in California. He said that he is still not sure if he would personally use this option, but he did not believe he had the right to stop others from doing so. At least two dozen states currently have Death with Dignity bills in various stages of development. Some of you may have seen an article in last Sunday's *Washington Post* about advocacy for the law in the state of Maryland.

What can you do

What meaning do you taking from living? What stories and pictures will shape the legacy you leave after your living is over? Will your legacy include love and forgiveness?

Here at UUCR you will have a chance to explore these and other questions in an upcoming Adult Faith Development class on End-of-Life issues. Keep your eye on the schedule: we'll be offering this class sometime in the New Year, probably in January. The class will include conversations about practical aspects of life planning, pastoral care through illness, how liberal faith sustains your living and dying, and more. Like this sermon, this class really is for everyone.

May we be connected through this human process of living and dying. May we never go to bed holding grudges. May we celebrate each and every day of this precious gift of life.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO.

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