



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Shining a Light on Death”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

*Death is nothing to us, since when we are, death has not come,
and when death has come, we are not.* Epicurus

To be blessed in death, one must learn to live. To be blessed in life, one must learn to die.
Philippe Duplessis-Mornay

*Death is a sniper. It strikes people you love, people you like, people you know – it’s everywhere.
You could be next. But then you turn out not to be. But then again, you could be.* Nora Ephron

Sermon

Most of us don’t want to talk about our own inevitable death. We might talk abstractly about it in a discussion as if death wasn’t personal to us. We’re very good at pretending uncomfortable subjects don’t exist. We often hide the dying in bright, antiseptic hospitals where the person is hooked up to myriad machines.

The advent of good hospice care is changing this, and is helping to make a person’s death a more holy and sacred occasion, but still we typically avoid talking about or preparing for our own death.

Is there anyone here who isn’t going to die? (*One person raises their hand.*) Thank you for being my hoped-for exception! When we laugh at ourselves and at death, it helps to shake off some of our fear. And I think secretly we all wanted to raise our hands.

When we pretend we won’t die or we try to ignore death, I believe we do ourselves and our families a disservice. By making death taboo, we create suffering. I’ve ministered to people whose families wouldn’t acknowledge their loved one was dying, making it impossible for the dying person to express what was happening or receive appropriate comfort. When doctors or families hide terminal diagnoses, we deny the dying a chance to get their affairs in order or resolve embittered relationships. By silencing the dying, we cannot learn from their experience. By not admitting we will die one day, we maintain a fantasy that only makes death more difficult.

To face the reality of death, we lead a service focused on some aspect of death or dying every year. And in every memorial service, I say dying is a sacred act, as is living. I add that life is a gift we did not ask for, but we were given it just the same.

Since death can visit us at any time—let's wake up and enjoy life! Let's treasure the gift of life for as long as we have it. As our opening hymn suggests, we should answer "Yes!" to life. Living truly is a miracle and dying is the cost of living. It is a price I'm willing to pay.

It was a price the Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church paid seven years ago. Before he died from esophageal cancer he preached about and wrote of his journey towards death in his book, *Love & Death*. You may know him as the co-author of *A Chosen Faith*.

Forrest Church was not a saint. Like you and me, he was flawed. He divorced his first wife, the Dir. of Religious Education at the church he served, All Souls in Manhattan, in order to marry a member of his congregation, also married at the time they began their affair. This constitutes sexual misconduct and violates the UU Minister Association's ethical guidelines. Like bosses and their employees, ministers should not become involved with congregants because it undermines ministerial integrity and effectiveness and, far worse, is an abuse of power. When their relationship became public and a vote to dismiss him failed, a third of All Souls' members resigned. Additionally, Rev. Church struggled with alcoholism and, according to his biographers, no small amount of hubris. [www.danielharper.org/yauu/2011/10/a-portrait-of-the-minister-as-a-misconductor/ and *Being Alive and Having To Die*, by Dan Cryer]

I share his background to highlight that wisdom often results from struggle, from proverbial trials and tribulations. Sometimes these trials may be personal demons, such as mental health or dependency, sometimes from bad life choices and experiences, and sometimes from poor physical health or disease. Life – all that it encompasses – teaches us if we let it. And death teaches us, too, even if we face it with fear and trembling.

Rev. Church received his first cancer diagnosis in 2006. It was treated, but in 2008 it returned 'with a vengeance'. He expected to live only months longer, but in the year he actually had, he wrote first one, then another, 'last' book. *Love & Death* summed up his theology of love and death. In it, he acknowledged learning what wisdom he had from discussions with members and from members who were dying.

You teach me as well. Being with you, holding your hand as you or a loved one dies is a sacred privilege. You let me into your lives at their most fragile moment. I offer you my presence, my silence, and maybe prayerful words of comfort. And, if asked, I offer a thought on the age-old question, 'Why?'

I don't tell you some God has a plan or chose this time for you or your loved one to die. I cannot believe in a deity that causes plagues, wars, accidents, or disease. I can believe in a creative natural force that requires life to end because to have immortality would be a living hell, in my view.

That life ends makes life precious. That we love makes life and the pain that comes with

life enduring. And that love cannot die as long as we live.

God as the Spirit of Love is with us in our sorrow and joy. God is in the face of family, friends, and community who cry with us and celebrate with us. As Paul wrote in the first letter to the Corinthians, ‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.’ Similarly, Rev. Church affirms, “The one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.” (*Love & Death*, Introit, page x)

Indeed, love in all its forms walks with us all our days. And I believe a community such as ours provides some of the love we cherish and need to make life bearable and enjoyable.

Terry Gross, host of NPR’s *Fresh Air* interviewed Rev. Church during his last year. He recalled that after his first surgery, he was overjoyed to wake up afterwards. He felt he had a second chance to savor life and tie up loose ends. Cancer was a wake-up call.

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96169477]

But every day you and I wake up should be a call to cherish life anew. We all live on borrowed time. We’re all dying. But we’re not dead yet! Every day is a day to live fully. Let’s not wait for a terminal diagnosis to wake up.

Whether we die miserably fighting death or go gentle into that good night, Rev. Church believes depends on whether we have unfinished business or not. If you have unresolved relationships or something left undone, you may not be able to embrace your present moment or make the most of your dying.

In an interview with Bob Abernathy of *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, Church pointed out, “When you are given a terminal illness and you are not regretful of your past, so that you can embrace it and say yes to it, then you can live in each day and fill it with all of its amplitude, all of its glory, and you can celebrate what is, not mourn what isn’t.” Like the Jewish tradition of atonement, Rev. Church reminds us to redeem ourselves by righting relationships and living the life we want before it’s too late. [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2009/02/27/february-27-2009-forrest-church-interview/860/]

If we don’t stay stuck in wrong jobs or bad relationships after trying to improve them, and if we don’t let pride prevent us from asking forgiveness from those we may have harmed, then when death comes knocking, as it will, we can take comfort knowing we lived our lives well. If we cherish life while we have it, we won’t waste precious time with regrets.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I didn’t know if I had long to live or not. But none of us know the number of our days.

My own cancer wake-up call encouraged me to value life more. I didn’t want to die regretting how I had lived. I’ve been fortunate to live thirteen years since diagnosis and treatment, but back then, I asked myself how did I want to live during whatever days remained? I answered that I wanted to live with joy, love, and meaning. I wanted to know that how I spent my time not only gave my life meaning, but contributed to the whole of life. Our Seventh Principle says we are interdependent. That is written on my heart. I want my gift of life to be a blessing to the world. I

may be an imperfect blessing, but I can do the best I can. And you can, too.

“Death,” wrote Rev. Church, “is not life’s enemy. With birth, it is the hinge on which life as we know it—each individual unique, ephemeral, and therefore precious—turns....The purpose of life is to live in such a way, that our lives will prove worth dying.” [“Words to Live By” sermon, Oct. 28, 2007, www.allsoulsnyc2.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/words-to-live-by.html]

Is your life worth dying for?

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you *truly* believe you are going to die, and if so, does that affect how you live?
Please share.
2. If death demands that we give our lives meaning, how do you do that? Does UUFA help you?
3. What has been your experience with the death or dying of a loved one? Have you been close to someone who accepted death gracefully and what was that like?
4. Do you hope for immortality in some kind of afterlife? Describe what this might be.