

## *How Do We Face Death?*

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Sunday, April 3, 2005

**Readings:** excerpt from “Good Friday World,” by Anne Lamott

“So I turn my head and look towards death now,” by Karen Paine-Gernee

### **Sermon:**

*There is a legend about a bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. From the moment it leaves the nest it searches for a thorn tree, and does not rest until it has found one. Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself upon the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying, it rises above its own agony to out-carol the lark and the nightingale. One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole world stills to listen, and God in [...] heaven smiles. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain... Or so says the legend.*

I chose this morning’s sermon topic months ago – long before Terri Schiavo’s end-of-life struggle re-emerged on the forefront of our national discourse... long before Pope John Paul II was on his death bed. And in the past couple weeks we have been bombarded by these conversations about death so much that the sermon seems almost redundant. Almost.

I admit I have been intrigued by these news stories along with the rest of our voyeuristic world. And while I don’t fully understand the motivations of the family of Terri Schiavo – and I regret the unseemly media spectacle surrounding their lives and her death these past few weeks – I am immensely grateful that the visibility of Terri Schiavo’s struggle has brought the conversation about end-of-life options into our living rooms. And while I don’t quite understand personally the kind of devotion that Roman Catholics worldwide feel for the Pope, I admire their openly-expressed grief. And I’m grateful that, despite the recitation of the adage that “a pope isn’t sick until he’s dead”, those devotees were acknowledged by Vatican officials, allowed openly to express their grief in the public square, and to pay homage to their Holy Father before he died.

If you came this morning hoping – expecting – that I was going to explain or even speculate about what happens *after* our earthly death, I urge you now to let go of that expectation. It is not a question I am uniquely qualified to answer, though it is one that can lead to interesting speculation – speculation that is sometimes meaningful. But frankly, we are misguided if we choose to focus more on what happens after an earthly existence, rather than on how to be better humans, leading meaningful lives, *during* this earthly existence. Instead, I think we ought to be asking how to allow death naturally into our lives... how to acknowledge the inevitability of death in a way that enlivens the limited time we have here.

I am grateful for the media exposure around Terri Schiavo and the Pope, because for me one of the greatest tragedies about death in America is that we pretend it doesn’t exist, and then it

comes careening toward us with what seems like no warning at all. Whereas if we would allow death – or at least the talk of it – into our lives now, we may better cope when it comes knocking at our own doors, or at those of our loved ones.

Most of us remember the days when sex – or even talk of it – was taboo on television. Married couples slept in separate twin beds, and the word ‘pregnant’ wasn’t allowed on television. We may also remember when death and mourning were shared more openly and publicly – expected, not disguised. And now the tables are turned, it seems – we cannot turn on a television or open a newspaper without seeing images of sex and sexuality (though rarely are these *healthy* images), and yet we avoid talk of death. We use euphemisms – speaking of “passing away” or of someone having “gone to a better place”. (But thanks to the creators of shows like “Six Feet Under” and “Dead Like Me”, maybe we’re breaking down that barrier, too.) And yet we avoid confronting the reality of death in our own lives. And our progressive culture encourages avoidance – we don’t have to get near death physically, because someone else is paid to handle the bodies of the deceased, to clean them up and prepare them for burial; to do the burying (or cremating) while we’re at a safe distance. It’s all very neat and sanitary.

Alternatively, imagine the physical and emotional release that is allowed, brought about, by the ritual in India, as described in the Lonely Planet travel guide:

*In India death ... happens in public: funeral pyres are open to everyone, and there’s little of the fear or squeamishness everpresent in Western funeral parlours. Little kids rummage through the ashes for valuables that the owners will no longer be needing, while only metres away the devout cleanse themselves in the (slightly ashy) waters of the Ganges.*

*... [a] shrouded corpse is carried through the streets by outcasts known as chandal, followed by the deceased’s family, chanting and praying. Funeral pyres are built and tended to all day... The Dom Rajas are keepers of the sacred fire – which is never allowed to be extinguished...*

*Some 250 corpses a day are dealt with at the burning ghats. Once the cremation is complete, the remains are scattered to the four elements, with most of the ashes ending up in the water, floating merrily on their way to moksha.*

Not only do we here shelter ourselves from the physicality of death, but we avoid the emotional dimensions, too. A tragically small number of us have living wills – though that number certainly is rising now. We don’t talk with our families about our wishes or expectations surrounding our own deaths, or even about what we might believe happens when we die.

And when someone else suffers the death of a loved one, we go to great lengths to avoid witnessing grief. At a funeral or memorial service, it’s okay – but nowhere else. When speaking with a grieving spouse or other family member, we don’t speak the name of the deceased, for fear of evoking emotions we don’t want to see. And in another congregation I

heard from a grieving parent after the death of her child, who reported the callousness of an acquaintance who asked, “You’re not over his death yet? But it was six months ago...”

Yes, we have room to grow in our relationship with death and grief. And it must start by talking with one another. I agree with these sentiments of Pico Iyer, who wrote an essay titled “The Ultimate Near-Life Experience,” in which he writes:

*There is nothing any of us can do about death, and there is no virtue in dwelling on it, or trying to penetrate its mystery... philosophy is famously helpless before a toothache. But there may be some good in coming to death at least as well prepared as we go to our vacations, our driving tests, or our weddings. If I were to die tomorrow, as the old saw has it, what would I wish to have done today? Or, as [the author of The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying] says, “If you’re having problems with a friend, pretend he’s dying—you may even love him.” Especially good advice if that friend happens to be yourself.*

One of my mentors, C., tells a story about her grandchild T. The family was in a unique situation because C. and her spouse were co-ministers of their church, and the family of one of their children were members of the congregation. So the grandchildren had a unique relationship with the ministers, and the ministers had a unique opportunity to expose their grandchildren to the depth and breadth of life through the lens of ministry. So it was that early on a Sunday afternoon, not long after the second service had ended, when a few folks were still lingering, C. was making her way across the large church patio with a box in her hand... She was headed toward the canyon behind the sanctuary in their church, where they sometimes scattered the remains of bodies that had been cremated.

On her way to the canyon C. ran into T., then about four years old. He asked, “Grandma, what’s in the box?” “Ashes,” she answered. “They’re the remains of the body of a man who died a couple months ago.” “Can I see?” the curious child asked. C. hesitated, questioning at first the appropriateness of this interaction. Then she said yes, and opened the lid of the box. T. peered in. As you may know, cremated remains look much like dust and dirt, though the discerning eye sometimes notices pieces of bone. “Can I touch it?” T. asked. Again, Grandma hesitated, and then said, “Yes, but be gentle...” Carefully, respectfully, T. reached in his tiny finger and gently touched the cremains. Then, she says, he lifted his finger and looked at it, seemed to marvel ever-so-slightly, sniffed it, then lost interest and returned to his play...

C. told this story in a sermon she titled “Making Friends with Death.” T.’s innocence, his lack of fear, his lack of repulsion at the site and touch of cremains... these served as a reminder to C. – and to the rest of us – that death is itself an integral part of life. We cannot avoid our own death, nor are we likely to live full lives without facing the death of loved ones. Why then do we perpetuate fear of death, instead of nurturing a more meaningful relationship with this very natural experience?

At once, death is an experience that will be universally shared by us all, and yet is an experience for which we have no first-hand accounts – or maybe a few, depending how skeptical you are. We *have* experienced pain, and we have experienced loss, and tragedy and terror... and we fear those with justifiable anxiety. And I think that is part of why we fear death – even if we believe that our own sense of consciousness and self-awareness will cease with death, we grieve the loss that comes with it. Especially those of us who find life’s greatest meaning through relationships with other beings, we fear the missed opportunities for intimate contact with our beloved companions, for deeper meaning in our existence, for adventure. It’s not so much death that we fear as it is the loss of truly meaningful life.

And that is the bias that landed me so firmly on one side of the Terri Schiavo case. I have no doubt that this woman’s body was functioning, and I understand the technical explanations that say that food and water do not qualify as life support. But with the limited information I had – and let us not wonder whether our information was truly *limited* – it seemed only too clear that Terri Schiavo as a relational human being already had been dead a long while. Clearly, there are those who loved her tremendously, and were willing to care for her. But her life in itself seemed to have ceased – she was unable to make conscious choices, to show love, to experience emotion.

Ah, but it is a slippery slope, isn’t it? Who am *I* to say when another’s life is no longer meaningful? I have found some of the explanations from disability rights activists to be especially compelling. A severe disability, they say, is not the end of life. And yet I know that I – admittedly a temporarily able-bodied person – would not choose life in such a persistent vegetative state...

The day that Terri Schiavo died, Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. wrote a reflection. In it he said:

*Terri Schiavo’s death, hard as it was, feels like mercy. For her and for us. Once again, we can avoid confronting our irresolute feelings and fears.*

*There is, however, wisdom here, for those [who] care to seek it. Roughly distilled, it goes like this: to face reality is not to betray faith.*

*God answers every prayer, a preacher once said.*

*Sometimes, the answer is no.*

Our job as faithful persons is to offer the prayers faithfully – prayers for wisdom and peace and life-affirmation – and to listen to the answers, from wherever they come. As Anne Lamott wrote about herself and her siblings as they struggled to care for their mother: “*We don’t know what we’re doing. We don’t know if we should put her in a home, and if so, when. We don’t know what’s true anymore.*” The nurse asked gently, “*How could you know?*”

For many of us, it's the dying that we fear – our own and others' – more than death itself. Will there be pain? Suffering? Regret? If we learned nothing else from the spectacle made of Terri Schiavo, we learned to communicate with one another about those fears – and how best to prevent the manifestation of whatever might be the worst-case scenario for us.

I learned some of my greatest lessons about death while I was serving as a chaplain in a hospital in Boston. Several of my patients there died – though more of them lived and left the hospital healthier than when they arrived. With dying patients I learned a lot about grace, and truth-telling, and courage. And I learned that platitudes never help. Not once did I meet a patient who appreciated hearing that God wouldn't give her more than she could handle, or a parent who was comforted to hear that his child was now in a better place. No, at the time of death – or in anticipation of dying – we were honest about the grief and the impending loss. We recognize the pain and the fear, and we allowed it to be expressed.

How *do* we face death? Part of the answer is that as Unitarian Universalists we face it honestly and openly. We do not pretend that death can be avoided – that ultimately it won't happen to us, too. This is not to say that we face death joyfully, without sorrow. But we recognize it and name it honestly. We are truth-tellers, as they say.

Very often I am approached after memorial services by attendees who are not Unitarian Universalists. With a sense of awe they express appreciation for the honesty and openness with which we celebrate the real lives of those among us who have died – offering opportunities for laughter and tears, joyful celebrations of life, and expressions of grief at our loss.

But there's also the question of how we allow death to shape our lives while we're still living them. Several years before he died, my grandfather suffered a brain aneurysm that left him unable to communicate verbally, although it was obvious that his cognitive abilities still were sharp. I remember the urgency with which I rushed to the hospital after his first surgery, fearing that he might die before I got there. It wasn't so much his death that I feared – not in itself. Rather, I feared that he might die without knowing for certain how dearly he was loved. I needed to be certain that he heard it from me. But I realized later how tragic that experience was – not because I didn't get there before he died (I did), but because I hadn't been sure every time I saw him to reiterate that love.

At their best, openness and honesty about death allow us the opportunity to do that which we strive to do as people of faith – to live meaningful lives.

Some of you may be familiar with Bill Moyers' series a few years ago on PBS called "On Our Own Terms: Moyers on Dying." One of the resources provided by that series on the PBS website is something called "Taking a Spiritual Inventory," by a psychologist and hospice worker. She identifies "questions that those who have had a near-death experience report that they have been asked." She writes,

*They are questions that pierce through the frivolousness at the surface of life and confront us with the value and significance this precious gift of a human life offers.*

*It is not too late to take stock of our lives, even in the last weeks and days of terminal illness. And for those of us in the midst of life, in the apparent safety and security of our health, it is not too early. No matter how much time we have left to live, the answers to the following questions, voiced in the quiet honesty of our own hearts, provide direction to the rest of our living.*

They are questions like, *How have I used my gift of a human life? What gives my life meaning? For what am I grateful? What have I learned of love and how well have I learned to love? What have I learned about tenderness, vulnerability, intimacy, and communion? What have I learned about courage, strength, power, and faith? How can I best share what I've learned? If I remembered that my breaths were numbered, what would be my relationship to this breath right now? Who am I?*

Consider these questions as you wrestle with how to face death – discussing it in your I&U groups, with your families, with your friends, or voicing the answers in the quiet honesty of your heart. *What gives my life meaning? If I remembered that my breaths were numbered, what would be my relationship to this breath right now?*

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*There is a legend about a bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth... One superlative song, existence the price.*

You are a human being, and you have more than one superlative song to sing in this earthly life. But you are going to die someday. Each of us will pay the price of our existence.

What will you have given to Life in exchange?

Amen.

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