

*Memento Mori: We Remember Death*  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario  
Sunday, November 22, 2015

**Reading #1: "Those Who Are Dead Are Never Gone"**

[Birago Ismael Diop -1906-1989 - was a Senegalese poet and storyteller]

Those who are dead are never gone:  
They are there in the thickening shadow.  
The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the tree that rustles,  
they are in the wood that groans,  
they are in the water that sleeps,  
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,  
the dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone:  
they are in the breast of the woman,  
they are in the child who is wailing  
and the firebrand that flames.  
The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the fire that is dying,  
they are in the grasses that weep,  
they are in the whimpering rocks,  
they are in the forest, they are in the house,  
the dead are not dead.  
Those who are dead are never gone.

**Reading #2: "To Live in This World"** by Mary Oliver

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:

To love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes, to let it go,  
to let it go.

**Sermon: "Memento Mori: We Remember Death"** by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

**To My Old Brown Earth** – Pete Seeger, still in his 30s, wrote this song in 1958 after the funeral of a friend.

Sung: *To my old brown earth  
And to my old blue sky  
I'll now give these  
last few molecules of "I."*

*And you who sing,  
And you who stand nearby,  
I do charge you not to cry.*

*Guard well our human chain,  
Watch well you keep it strong,  
As long as sun will shine.*

*And this our home,  
Keep pure and sweet and green,  
For now I'm yours  
And you are also mine.*

Source: <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/p/peteseegerlyrics/tomyoldbrowneathlyrics.html>; accessed 7 February 2014.

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Memento Mori – thinking about death, especially one's own death.

A story:

A bagpiper played many gigs. One day he was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. The homeless man had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the back country.

Not familiar with the backwoods, the bagpiper got lost and, being a typical guy, I didn't stop for directions.

He finally arrived an hour late and saw the man from the funeral home had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left at the graveside, and they were eating lunch.

The bagpiper felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. He went to the side of the grave and looked down, and the vault lid was already in place. He didn't know what else to do, so he started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. The bagpiper played with all his heart and soul for this man with no family or friends. He played like he'd never played before for this poor, homeless man.

And as he played 'Amazing Grace,' the workers began to weep. They wept, the bagpiper wept, they all wept together. When the bagpiper finished he packed up his bagpipes and started for his car. Though his head hung low, his heart was full.

As he opened the door to his car, he heard one of the workers say, "Charlie, I never seen nothin' like that before. And I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

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When you're thinking about death, death seems to turn up everywhere.

I recently had two weekends off – and spent the intervening weeks reading several murder mysteries – one set in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome [featuring a young female detective], another in 1890s New York City [with a midwife as heroine]; a book located in modern-day

Los Angeles [the chief character is another young woman, a bicycle cop]; and a fourth mystery series located in a tiny southwestern English village with the former MI5 Anglican vicar as hero]. Even in my down time I seem to be going out of my way to consider death.

Death is a major theme throughout this month.

Three Sundays ago, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, we celebrated Dia de Los Muertos – the Day of the Dead – at the congregation in Virginia, Minnesota. We created an altar to the ancestors, remembered the dead, and the children learned about *offrenda* – the offerings to the dead, *calaca* – the various, often funny, skeleton figures that represent death, and they decorated *calaveras*, sugar skulls.

### **BREATHS**

Sung: *Listen more often to things than to beings*  
*Listen more often to things than to beings*  
*'Tis the ancestors' **breath** when the fire's voice is heard*  
*'Tis the ancestors' **breath** in the voice of the water.*  
*Whsshh Aahh Whsshh*

*Those who have died have never, never left*  
*The dead are not under the earth*  
*They are in the rustling trees; they are in the groaning woods*  
*They are in the crying grass; they are in the moaning rocks*  
*The dead are not under the earth.*

On Tuesday, November 10<sup>th</sup> we remembered the sinking of the S. S. Edmund Fitzgerald, the death of all its 29 crewmembers. The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The Gordon Lightfoot song:

Sung: *The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down*  
*Of the big lake they call Gitchee Gumee*  
*The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead*  
*When the skies of November turn gloomy.*

On Wednesday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, Remembrance Day here in Canada [Veterans Day in the States], and we remember our war veterans, living and dead.

In the States we are also commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The American Civil War [waged from 1861-1865.] And, in Duluth we remembered a man by the name of Albert Woolson, the last surviving Union veteran [that means, he fought for the Northern U.S.]. Woolson was a drummer, enlisting when he was 14 years old, and he died in 1956 at age 109 – the last surviving veteran of our Civil War.

That Wednesday evening our Tai Chi instructor apologized for being so disconnected. His older brother Randy had died on Sunday – not unexpected, but too soon for a 63-year old, and Richie was feeling adrift, between worlds.

Last Friday [Nov. 13] the bombings in Beirut; last Friday night the attacks in Paris.

Memento Mori – Remember death.

But ours is a culture that admires youth and vigor and liveliness. Our living, our approaches to health and to death often mirror that admiration.

“Bioethicist Daniel Callahan suggests that we have built our medical models on two unquestioned social convictions. First, we have an exaggerated sense of individualism that includes the need to control every aspect of how we live and die. Second, we believe that nature can be brought under human domination and made to do what we want it to do.

The Western perspective on death and dying is the direct result of a medical model that considers death to be the enemy. Science has godlike powers; the cure is within our grasp. It is only a matter of more time and resources. Our unqualified confidence in science creates the illusion that death is an option.” [*The American Book of Living and Dying*, 18]

In the face of this denial – or avoidance – of the idea of death and dying, the authors of *The Book of Living and Dying* cite the modern hospice phenomenon. This not-so-new [indeed, resurrected] idea of hospice, of an organized end-of-life care, “seems to be taking to heart Carl Jung’s admonition that ‘Death is as psychologically important as birth... and to shrink away from it is both unhealthy and abnormal because it robs the second half of life of meaning and purpose.’” [*American*, 19-20]

Our culture does glorify youth and vigor and liveliness.

But, as we mature, thoughts turn to our mortality, the fragility and transience of life, our ultimate frailty. We think about death.

And, thinking about death, we need not reinvent the wheel.

“People die today much as they have always died. The struggles, fears, and concerns at the end of life are essentially unchanging: fear of the unknown, reluctance to leave behind loved ones, and, for all its pain and sorrow, a desire to cling to life. For at least three millennia, societies have recorded these perennial concerns.” [*American*, 21]

The Egyptian Book of the Dead: “When the eye of the body is shut by death, the eye of the soul opens to a far brighter light.”

The Tibetan Book of the Dead – the practice of coaching the soul involves telling the dying person that, because there is no death in the circle of life, only great change, it follows that fear itself – certainly fear of death – is an illusion.

The Celtic Books of the Dead, with their idea of spiritual midwifery – the *anamcara*, the soul friend, the seasoned end-of-life midwife who could ease one’s passage out of this world by tending to both physical and spiritual pain.

“The ancients knew that death to ego, to role, and to identity were necessary precursors to the final Great Death, which would only be as painful as our unwillingness to face our Truest Self.” [*American*, 22]

Memento mori – remembering that death is not an option. How we die – the options reside there.

Death is a major theme throughout this month.

I recently visited White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Mahtomedi, Minnesota and picked up their monthly newsletter. The theme this November 2015: *Mortality – the practice of being alive*.

This brought to mind my time as a philosophy grad student. One day our professor

turned to the eight of us ranged around the seminar table and asked us: if we knew we would die next week, what would we be doing in the interval? How would we change how we were living our lives?

Memento mori – to think about our own mortality, while we engage in the practice of being alive.

I have had a couple rare moments of calm and centeredness where I have been gifted with the thought that yes, I would die someday and, yes, that transition would be okay and, yes, the world would be well and good when I was dead and separated from this physical existence.

In the White Bear newsletter their minister Victoria Safford writes: “My life is a small, fleeting chapter of a larger, older story – something that goes on and on. It’s not a sad thought.” My moments of calmness and centeredness considering my death were not sad thoughts.

Did I mention, those moments have been rare?

Usually, when I think of my dying I think: “Whoa! Not yet.”

And then I think of all the practical considerations that go into preparing for dying while I’m still alive and otherwise occupied.

Not one of these practical considerations is easy. All of them are easily put off.

Considerations like:

Simplifying our lives –getting rid of the clutter and accumulation of stuff.  
[Those of you who have visited my home in Duluth know that I love my *tchotchkes* – my trinkets: my chimes and bells, my stuffed animals, my rocks and noisemakers, my movies; and my books. I like my stuff. I keep hoping the grandkids will get places of their own in which they can eventually keep all my stuff.]

Considerations like:

Making out a Health Care Directive, sometimes called a Living will: appointing another person to make health care decisions on our behalf if we are unable to do so. So we write down how we feel about specific medical treatments – transfusions, ventilators, feeding tubes and such. We try to express our beliefs about the quality of our end-of-life vs. the length of our life. We tell folks how we wish to be cared for when we’re dying.

And, of course, there is the drawing up of a will – deciding who will get the meager dimes and many *tchotchkes* that make up my life.

Autumn seems a time to consider these various life tasks, and the bigger picture of – eventually – dying.

So, last month I attended the first of a series of four two-day-long workshops called “The Sacred Art of Living & Dying.” These workshops are presented by a couple of former MDs – a gynecologist & a general surgeon, and by a man who used to be a Catholic priest and a canonical lawyer.

The premise of these workshops is that we all need to reflect on “the painful-blissful encounter [between] the mystery of life” and the inevitability of our death.

The premise is that – especially at life’s end – we need to undertake several assessments of our lives:

What purpose and meaning has our life provided?

Are we suffering from “forgiveness pain” – do we need to forgive another? Do we need to ask for forgiveness? Do we need to forgive ourselves?

How healthy is our connection to others? Are there relationships that need mending?

Where is our hope?

Come, come whoever you are

Wanderer, worshipper, lover or drunk

It doesn’t matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vows a hundred times

Come, come again to hope.

Rumi [Halal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet & mystic]

Memento Mori – Thinking about death is a process of thinking about our lives and what matters most to us.

Ira Byock, a professor and a hospice physician, writes about *The Four Things That Matter Most*, and calls his *A Book about Living*.

Byock’s prescription is simple – which means, it reads simply but is often harder in practice.

But practice we must. Like piano practice. A meditation practice. A swim practice. What matters takes time. And practice.

And this is what Byock tells us – this is what matters most: we say four things.

***Please forgive me.***

***I forgive you.***

***Thank you.***

***I love you.***

***Please forgive me. I forgive you.***

As I mentioned in my September sermon, forgiveness does not mean excusing someone’s bad or destructive behavior. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Forgiveness “involves opening your heart in full awareness that you have been harmed or hurt and that you still feel it.” Forgiveness is about yourself, fully recognizing the past, able to live fully today, and plan for a future.

Please forgive me. I forgive you.

A reminder: forgive yourself. Know that “you are who you are and that’s good enough.” You are worthy. You are worthy.

### **An Extreme Prayer When Forgiveness Is Difficult**

Written by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp

O lord, remember not only the men and women of good will,

But also those of ill will.

Do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us.

And when they come to judgment,  
Let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.

**Thank you.**

“If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is *thank you*, it will be enough [that would suffice].”

[Meister Eckhart, 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic.]

Say thank you early & often. Give thanks for food and family and friends and your next breath.

Byock reminds us that it is “important not only to express our gratitude; it’s also important to be able to receive [gratitude], take it in, feel appreciated.”

“There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.” Mother Teresa

And finally:

**I love you.**

Byock tells a story about introducing The Four Things – I forgive you; please forgive me; thank you; I love you – to a colleague who replied: “Yes, but *what if you’re Lutheran?*”

Many of us come from stoic British and Dutch, German and Polish stock, in which there is no tradition of openly expressing affection. Not through words. Not through touching or kissing or hugs. Not through honestly expressing our feelings.

[That particular colleague and his dying father came to express their love when the father asked his son to shave him.]

If I knew I would die next week, what would I be doing in the interval?

Just this.

Saying:

Forgive me for any slights or injury I may have caused.

There is nothing for which to forgive you.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve you.

I love you dearly.

If we knew we would die next week, what would we be doing in the interval?

How would we change how we were living our lives?

How would we rest assured that the world would go on, go well, without us?

A song by Pete Seeger, written in 1973 [RIP Pete Seeger May 3, 1919 -- January 27, 2014]

Sung: *Well may the world go,*

*The world go, the world go,*

*Well may the world go,*

*When I'm far away.*

*Well may the skiers turn,*

*The swimmers churn, the lovers burn*

*Peace, may the generals learn*

*When I'm far away.*

*Sweet may the fiddle sound  
The banjo play the old hoe down  
Dancers swing round and round  
When I'm far away.*

*Fresh may the breezes blow  
Clear may the streams flow  
Blue above, green below  
When I'm far away.*

As we sail the earth, with our ship's companions, may we be filled with love and gratitude, hope and compassion.

May we rest assured that the world will go on, blue above, green below, when we're far away.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.