

**PREPARING FOR DEATH**  
LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP  
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We are all, each one of us, going to die. We don't know when, and we don't know how, but rest assured, or in peace, that the only thing that can be predicted with 100% accuracy in this life, is that we are going to die. A colleague of mine puts it this way: life is a sexually transmitted terminal condition.<sup>1</sup> There. It's been said. No point in trying to deny it. No point in trying to ignore it. There it is...sometimes in shadows, sometimes intentionally pushed into corners, sometimes alarmingly visible...coexisting with whatever joy we find in our days, side by side with whatever satisfaction we can garner in our activities and our work, and menacingly present whenever we experience pain and sadness. Death is ever-present.

For some reason, western society has attempted to push death out beyond the margins of our awareness. I think it is unfortunate that we've been quite successful at this. The majority of us die in hospitals...removed from view, removed from everything that has represented our lives. Set aside from what has offered comfort, in unfamiliar surroundings, many face death in these sterile institutions, hidden from the public view. Preserving youth, especially in our appearance, is a multi-billion dollar industry. We can surgically reshape ourselves to eliminate the signs of aging. We worship vital youthful bodies and are willing to spend whatever it takes to obtain them. We throw away things that are out of fashion or outpaced by something newer and faster. But, try as we might, even though we have learned how to medically extend life, we cannot live on forever.

I don't know what this means on a psychological level, and perhaps there are those in this room who can add some thoughts about this during our dialogue. It's interesting to me that while we put aside the vestiges of death that are real and personal, we also surround ourselves with images of danger and dying. Crime investigation shows are rampant...with images of untimely and bizarre deaths, often with gratuitous

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<sup>1</sup> "Why You Need to Hear a Sermon About Death," Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube [www.eruuf.org/May20\\_2001.htm](http://www.eruuf.org/May20_2001.htm)

violence...perhaps making us feel even more removed from a natural death. Death happens to the rich and famous, the glamorous, those living dangerously...but not to us.

Throughout history, humans have had the desire to live forever. Immortality (or eternal life) is the concept of existing for a potentially infinite, or indeterminate length, of time. For whatever reason, the idea of 'forever' is comforting to us. Just as in Robert Munsch's story... "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always"...and this is so naturally a lullaby...a comforting back and forth motion. Back and forth. Resting in the idea of forever.

What form an unending or indefinitely-long human life would take, or whether it is even possible, has been the subject of endless speculation, fantasy, and debate.<sup>2</sup> It's the regular stuff of epic and myth. It has been a focus of most religions; in trying to understand the mystery of life, and perhaps in response to a fear of death, religions offer an assurance of everlasting life, the promise of eternal paradise for the faithful, infinite nirvana for the enlightened. Unitarian Universalism, at least in its most humanist strands, stands virtually alone, with the notable exception of Taoism, in affirming the value, centrality, and reliability of life on earth. We believe that this existence is all that we can truly know; so our focus is on embracing our humanity. We rely on human reason and experience as the key to understanding and ultimate knowledge. And yet, try as we might, our mortality is the one frontier that knowledge and science have been unable to conquer. What lies beyond this life?

Here's a hard truth. The question of what comes next cannot be settled...or at least, we are not the ones who can settle it. So what are we to believe about death when this life is all that we can truly know? UU churches that are entering a search for a new minister conduct a congregational survey that creates a picture of who they are across a broad range of perspectives... philosophical, financial, theological, demographic... One of the questions on the survey asks respondents to identify which of the following most closely corresponds with their belief about immortality; a) A person's memory lives on in the

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortality#Definitions\\_of\\_immortality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortality#Definitions_of_immortality)

minds of their loved ones; b) A person's body dies but their spirit or soul lives on; c) At some point in the future, a person's body and soul are resurrected; or d) A person's soul is reborn into another living being.

I don't know who drafted this survey. Presumably these options are listed because they represent the probable range of beliefs to be found in a UU congregation. I have seen results of this survey from a few churches, and they show large majorities in the first two options...that a person's memory lives on in the minds of their loved ones, or that a person's body dies but the spirit or soul lives on. In this week's 'episode' in the Joseph Campbell series being shown here on Thursday nights, Campbell spoke of death as our return to the collective unconsciousness. Still, these are unverifiable beliefs...we get only a glimpse, or a personal feeling, about what might come after life.

Humanism might encourage us to ignore the existence of death because it cannot be known. Death, like birth, is an event which brings us up against the edges of our knowledge, up against life's most profound mysteries.<sup>3</sup> We can't understand it, we can't prove what happens, so perhaps we choose to ignore it. This tendency is reflected in some Unitarians' desire for less ritual at the time of death or even to have no memorial service at all, and also in our inclination to move from grief to memorializing too quickly.<sup>4</sup> More and more of us choose cremation, and while this is also my preference, I recognize that this is one more way in which the reality of death is removed from our sight. There is no body, no vigil, no ceremonial washing, no contact with the most tangible evidence of death...a lifeless body. Yet, Unitarian Universalists have also been in the forefront in changing society's views about death toward a more natural acceptance, toward sensitive care for those who are dying, and toward more simple ceremonies which focus on the value of the life of the person who has died. This practical humanist perspective tends to accept death as an integral part of life, embracing it and honoring it. And this kind of an integrated acceptance would be my recommendation for us all.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.uua.org/clf/betweensundays/earlychildhood/Spirit\\_bkg.html](http://www.uua.org/clf/betweensundays/earlychildhood/Spirit_bkg.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.uua.org/ga/ga01/0005.html](http://www.uua.org/ga/ga01/0005.html)

Barbara Coombs Lee, in an article in the UUWorld, writes that an acceptance of death can help us to live better lives (and is this not our goal?) In her essay she quotes a dying cancer patient who said this: (quote) 'Death transforms living in ways that we in this culture do not understand. I think we need to think of death as sugar, as something that gives life that pizzazz.' (unquote)

It seems that to deny death actually robs us of some of the sweet richness of life. Like those lines in the *Fragments of Perfection* song... "all of us, and everything, are given life's confection." Even death is a part of this everything. A denial of death disconnects us from one of the core truths that can connect us to all living things on the planet.<sup>5</sup>

In this, we can see a more environmentally-based perspective on death...that death is not reserved for humans alone, but for all carbon-based beings and life forms. We who come out of the earth and return to the earth do so just like lilies and grackles and walleyes. In this, we are synonymous with all that is. I'm actually surprised that this kind of a statement is not on the survey I mentioned earlier, since it has been my experience that many UU's embrace this notion of death as compost. In a sermon about death given at General Assembly in 2001, the Rev. Judith Meyer reflected on Thomas Wolf's work, *You Can't Go Home Again*, in which he writes of a future "more kind than home, more large than earth." Rev. Meyer says:<sup>6</sup>

(quote) "The "conscience of the world" assures us that [a land more kind than home] is there. Nature itself flows toward it. What better affirmation can any of us make, if not that somewhere at the end of all our struggle and effort, there is a place we can envision, and it resolves the injustices and contradictions of our human ways, and it forgives what went wrong and it keeps what is good; a place that is not really a place at all, but a moral role in creation, that heals divisions and stands for some great benevolent truth we know in our hearts is real."

(unquote)

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<sup>5</sup> [www.uua.org/world/2004/05/what.html](http://www.uua.org/world/2004/05/what.html)

<sup>6</sup> [www.uua.org/ga/ga01/2072.html](http://www.uua.org/ga/ga01/2072.html)

This is beautifully painful, isn't it? To see death as a final and moral resolution to these wonderful wacky difficult lives that we have lived? Nature itself flows toward it. In our death, we finally conquer all that is unresolved. In the end, after living within 'a shard of elation' and having hopefully made some contribution to the happiness of others, our tale is complete and we return to the earth, in one final act of right relations. This is how it should be.

That said, how might one 'prepare for death?' This may be an impossible challenge. But did you hear me say earlier that facing the reality of death is a way to live a better, more courageous, sweeter life? An awareness of our mortality is a source of courage in living; it's an awareness that helps us to say and do things that need to be said and done in order to be fully present with ourselves, with our loved ones, with our life. In other words, the best way to prepare for death is to live life to the fullest...to spend all of our resources...of time, and talent, and energy, and money...in service to what we love. After all, we certainly can't take it with us.

In grasping for immortality, we miss the blessing, the mysterious temporal joy of being mortal. In his book, *Facing Death*, Rev. Paul Smith makes the simple yet elusive point that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Missing out on life is the worst thing that can happen. When we live as though death is the worst thing that can happen to us we become locked in fear and denial. By turning away from death, this core truth of our common shared humanity, we stand to lose something even more precious than life itself: we stand to lose our passion for life and our call to savor it every day to the very core of our being. An awareness of death helps us live in the moment, in community with all of life.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, all that lives will also experience death. In this truth, we commune with and understand and interconnect with all that is. Death is both one of the deep mysteries of life and one of its core truths. Death is inseparable from life.

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<sup>7</sup> "Compassionate Advocacy" by Barbara Coombs Lee <http://www.uuworld.org/2004/05/forum.html>

Many of you have experienced, I imagine, that a dying person often drops roles, takes off masks, and strips back to what really matters.<sup>8</sup> Just so, living with the reality of death can perhaps offer us a small refuge from everything that is not genuine or authentic. In the presence of death, what really matters becomes most apparent, and we can become whole in a way that embraces the totality of existence. The baby is rocked by the mother, who is rocked by the son, who rocks the new baby. From birth unto death, unto new life...a continuous circle that we enter for the briefest moment... which is all the more reason to enjoy it.

One of my favorite poets is Kahlil Gibran, because he repeatedly speaks of the coexistence of dualities...dualities that represent both ends of the spectrum, bringing it all into the full circle of wholeness. In *The Prophet*, in the section on death, he writes:<sup>9</sup>

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

(and later)

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

Blessed be.

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<sup>8</sup> "Compassionate Advocacy" by Barbara Coombs Lee <http://www.uuworld.org/2004/05/forum.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/propht.htm>