

Dear Lovely Death
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, March 25, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

An excerpt from Being Mortal by Atul Gawande

Dear Lovely Death by Langston Hughes

Sermon – Dear Lovely Death

When you're dead, you're dead.

That was the opening statement of the class from the professor of the systematic theology. *What?* was the quizzical look on the faces of those in the class. Clearly this was not the pastoral care class.

A physicist, and a theologian, he continued – *when you're dead, you're dead. And by that, I mean you don't magically go to some eternal paradise, your body doesn't come out of the ground like some zombie – your body is dead. And if you believe that God, or the Spirit, or the Sacred Mystery is infused in all things, then you were born, and lived, and died, in the embrace of the Holy. Death is as simple, and as beautiful, as that.*

In a way that only a senior member of the faculty could say it, one tried for heresy in the 1960s still kickin' – he spoke a theology that, for some in the room, was like a breath of fresh air – a theology they could live with – they could make sense of in the modern world - and for others, it was a theology that terrified them, and shook their foundations.

That is a Universalist theology, in many ways but also an earth-centered theology – a spirituality that is based in both the world of metaphor and poetry, as well as the physical world of earth and biology and science.

It is a spirituality of naming, with humility and with honesty, the realities of life, and death.

We live in a culture that often seems to dwell in extremes, in many ways, including how we relate to death.

At times, we ignore death – we ignore the devastation to our wildlife and ecological populations and health, we ignore death when it happens to social outcasts or the historically oppressed, the poor, the marginalized –

because the narrative or progress doesn't leave much room
to honor and name the humanity of someone who didn't have a certain status,
or the sacredness of some landscape or species
that could be used or moved for industrial development.

Or we ignore it in our socially accepted allotments of time to grieve
move on, keep producing, get over it, our society demands of us –
we aren't encouraged to take the time to breathe,
to wear a black band on our arm, around our heart,
to stop and rest and acknowledge the depth of impact
from a death, and grief – which are as natural as life and joy.

Other times, we glorify death –
we play with toy guns,
and view gory, bloody scenes on TV or video games –
we funnel aggression into virtual reality
which we think is some safe, separate container –
as if it can be blocked out, separated from the rest of our lives.

And still, at other times,
we soften death –
we use seemingly kind phrases or words,
almost always which are kind-hearted and without mal-intent –
we say *passed away* or *no longer with us* instead of *died*.
These are subtle, but impactful, differences.
They've gone to a better place, they are at rest.

But too often, in our wanting to be gentle or kind,
we speak into the silence that is meant to stay silent,
or only be met with an embrace or tears.

When you meet someone deep in grief,

writes poet Patricia McKernon Runkle,

*slip off your needs
and set them by the door.
Enter barefoot
this darkened chapel*

*hallowed by loss
hallowed by sorrow
its gray stone walls and floor.*

*You, congregation of one
are here to listen
not to sing.*

*Kneel in the back pew.
Make no sound,
let the candles
speak.*

Ours is a culture of stuff, and we like to fill up empty spaces.
And that includes filling up the soul
filling up the void left by grief,
filling up silence or sadness or loss
by ignoring, or glorifying, or softening,
and never getting quite real enough,
tangible enough,
honest enough,
about death.

We fill up the void of grief or sadness
with words that, while gentle, often fall empty or worse.
We do it, unconsciously, well-intentioned, kindly,
because we live in a culture that often doesn't
teach us, help us, allow us,
to know how to deal with, much less talk about,
death.

Atul Gawande, in his book *Being Mortal*, lifts up that there can be a tendency in care for elders, and in medical practice generally, and cultural assumptions around health, that our goal, as a wider culture, is far too often focused too much on longevity – keeping the mechanics of the body working.

And it's also built into our DNA, in part. It is about survival, it is about centuries of death happening much younger and more often, that somewhere deep in our psyche the protection, and prolonging, of life, is not only our instinct, it has been, historically, for the necessity of our very lives and cultures to continue to exist at all.

But today, our science, and our medicine, is quite incredible – something I don't need to remind many of you given the city we live in.

And there is some middle ground, between the extremes, perhaps some of you have found it, perhaps others are searching for it, where we can sit with grief, and take some time to feel, and not live in fear of death, but know it and speak of it as part of natural cycles, without pretending it has no emotional impact.

When we honor death for what it is – both a real end, in many ways, and a real chance to consider how lives continue far beyond their bodies in memory, in story, in impact on another – then the grief and sadness need not be so terrifying, even if it breaks our hearts. The focus on longevity, and the technicality of medicine instead of well-being, perhaps is most acutely experienced in elder care.

You likely have experience with this – in your work or with loved ones – where it has become clear over time that elder care, for years, was like the worst form of an institution.

Schedules rigidly dictated for residents,
sterile environments, robotic-like protocols –
a dismissal of humanity to a population,
that in many cultures and centuries, were revered.

Thankfully, in many places, that has changed or is changing,
finding the right balance between necessary care of the body,
and necessary care of the soul.

One experience in particular that Gawande lifted up
was the transformation of an elder care facility.

It began with a physician in New York, Bill Thomas,
who, after leaving ER work, began serving in nursing homes,
while living and working a hobby farm.

What he noticed was stark contrast between the vibrancy of his farm,
and the nursing home.

So they began an experiment – of infusing the facility with life.
Oh, it was met with skepticism and cynicism
that often comes up in the way of change or transformation or anything new –
it's never been done before
it's too complicated –
we don't have the money, we don't have the people
the litany of we can'ts and we don'ts
were met with persistent optimism and determined hope
that life in that facility could be better.

So, in time,
they added birds –
the timing of which didn't work out too great,
as the birds arrived before the cages,
so they were dropped off in a room until the cages came later that day –
but the entire community rallied –
residents came out of their rooms to help –

staff quickly began to see that part of their role in caring for this community
was to help creating a lively, vibrant environment –

everyone pitched in
and eventually
they had birds in each resident's room, who wanted one,
and had cats and dogs for the building -
they set up an after-school program for children of staff to come
and together, they infused life,
decreasing social isolation, cases of depression,
and even the use of some medications.

A person working there recalled the transformation, saying
*“when you transform a place like this,
you see people come alive.*

*You see them begin to interact with the world,
you see them begin to love and to care and to laugh.”*

There are other ways, than what is often offered in the wider culture,
to think about, feel about, live about, the end of life, and the meaning of it,
in light of the realities of death.

Has there been a time
when the proximity of mortality, of the fragility of life
has invited you to pause,
and think deeply about how you want to live –
your priorities, your values -
how to infuse moments of vibrancy, of beauty,
into your life and relish it for what it can be
and how to dwell in the finite possibilities of life?

“People with serious illness have priorities besides simply prolonging their lives.”
writes Gawande,

*Their top concerns include avoiding suffering,
strengthening relationships with family and friends,
not being a burden on others, and achieving a sense that their life is complete.*

*As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures –
companionship, good food, sunlight on our faces.*

*We become less interested in the rewards of achieving and accumulating,
and more interested in the rewards of simply being...*

*we have a deep need to identify purposes outside ourselves
that make living feel meaningful and worthwhile.”*

Being mortal is a reminder that our finite lives are part of the infinite –
that we are made out of a material, and dust,
that was created long before us and will continue long after us
and life is an invitation to experience
the fullness of this world –
its beauty, its grief, its possibility –
and to find ways, and people, and places,
that help orient our hearts, our souls,
to what matters most.

A few years back,
a family pet had died.

*And I have to stop here and say – when I was writing this,
I literally typed “passed away” instead of “died”
and had to go back to correct it.
So never be fooled that I’m following my own advice –
I need to write these sermons mainly as self-help.*

Anyway, a few years back,
a family pet
travelled across the rainbow bridge.

We gathered
like in some old-time movie,
with the body of the beloved cat in a small box from the vet,
and we moved to the back of the property,
after a quick google search on local ordinances,
and a few of us digging a hole large enough and deep enough,
we now knew we could, in full compliance,
bury the beloved pet in the back yard along the ravine.

Spike would now join *Ginger* in the family pet plot.
We apparently didn’t care about ordinances when *Ginger* died.

So we circled round –
and anyone with a beloved pet knows
that the grief felt for an animal is often as strong as that felt for a human –
and tears were shed, and stories shared –
and grandma, and parents, and auntie, and cousins,
as young as 3,
threw on some dirt, and said, “we love you, Spike”
and bid farewell to a beloved being.
And, to be clear, and for any of you religion nerds,
this is theologically, and even biblically sound.

In Ecclesiastes from the Hebrew Scriptures, it says,

*who knows whether the souls of humans ascend and the souls of animals descend –
for we are all made of the dust, and to it we return.*

Or, in modern terms –
all dogs go to heaven.

But the moment that struck me
was the moment of deciding – *should the children come, too?*

And the striking part was a quick, *yes*.

Yes – because their parents wanted to open the conversation,
and this was tangible, real, and perhaps a little more manageable –
this real, lived, moment of death and burial and family grief –

and the child gained some coping skills,
and now relates any news of death to this moment:
their body stopped working, they say, just like Spikes.
I miss Spike - but he lives in our hearts.

And then the child moves on
to crayons and coloring, to books and songs,
to splashing in the springtime mud.

Because mortality
is a reminder
that death is as natural as life,
that there are things that are finite,
and there are things that are infinite,
and those things intertwine and weave together
the fabric that makes us who we are.

Facing mortality,
facing death,
clearly and openly with reverence and humility and humor,
puts death in perspective, in its place.
It invites us to orient our heart
toward those places, and experiences, and people,
that we love the most –

it helps us to not be daunted by the mystery of death
but be nourished by the mystery and simple pleasures of life –
to know death comes, sometimes harshly,
sometimes too soon,
always with grief,
and we can name it and know it and sit with it,
and then turn back again to life
and crayons and paper and color
and rain and sun and splashing,
remembering what makes life
worth living in the first place.

There is a place
where the soul can set down its fear
and rest in the mystery and beauty of life.

There are moments,
where we can speak our hopes and wishes
all tangled together with our fears and our uncertainties,
and share them with a loved one
so that we all can travel a little easier
when our days grow short.

There is a possibility,
that death is known and held like familiar family –
something lovely and beautiful, even if it hurts,
that brings us back to the source of life –
that we are born, and we live, and we die
in the embrace and presence of God, Goddess, Spirit, Earth.

Perhaps there is some way for us to enter into these words, from Tamara Madison:

*You spat it out like venom
at your playground enemy
and it felt so good to say
Drop dead! Late in life*

*it becomes a sweet mercy
to imagine: one minute
you're treading the earth
as ever, the next you're gone!*

*No hospitals, MRIs, CAT scans,
surgery, no loved ones
standing around wondering
if you're still breathing*

*and what to do with you
in case you are. And though
I'll never be ready for you to go,
as long as it is your wish*

*to leave this way, it is mine.
And may it happen on a day
when you are singing with friends,
laughing at a joke, dancing*

*in your living room.
May it come to you before
you know it and you'll find
yourself flying, a balloon*

*cut loose, taking one last glance
at this fond world that you have loved.
Though it will feel so cold to us,
this world without you, still*

*with all my heart here is my wish
for you dear friend,
kindred soul: when the time comes,
Drop dead!*

What are the colors, the textures
of the sands that are in your hands
ready to be shaped
not only by your hands,
but by the community you have come to know as *your people* –
what plans have you drawn up,
what time have you set aside
to pour hours upon hours upon hours,
to creating something so beautiful, so intentional with your life –
that you are willing to give your heart to it
even while knowing, in time, it will be swept away?