

Death Be Not Proud, Part II

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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In response to a number of requests from members of the congregation, and in honour of autumn—symbol in literature for old age, the time before death—we have embarked on a journey together in thinking about and encountering death—our own, and the death of others. Last week, we explored four ways humans wrestle and respond to death: death as something that invokes horror in us—that terror of the unknown which grips all of us at one time or another; death from the perspective of some classical schools of philosophy that aimed to face it courageously through a kind of contemplation of its facts that, they hoped, would bring tranquility of mind at the close of a person’s life. As well, we looked at two basic, religious responses spanning 2500 years of history and cultures both east and west: the first, which I called “religious naturalism,” sees death as a grievous, but acceptable moment in the Great Transcending Mystery of Nature. The other religious alternative, or “religious supernaturalism,” sees death as a curse, an enemy that will be defeated by an even greater, supernatural power that grants eternal life.

Last week, I neglected to mention an important fifth way offered by Allen Konisberg—otherwise known to us as Woody Allen—who shared these words of wisdom on our topic: To the philosophers, Allen’s response goes something like this: “It’s not that I’m afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” And to the religious alternatives, Allen writes: “So I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Actually, make that: “I RUN through the valley of the shadow of death—in order to get OUT of the valley of the shadow of death more quickly.”

Terror, avoidance, stoicism, humour, acceptance, hope in more life to come—myriad are the human paths we walk (or run), innumerable the emotions and thoughts we carry with us on our way through life towards our death.

Unitarianism has been around for almost five hundred years, and we have faced death in all of these ways: alone and terrified, with stoic tranquility of mind, with acceptance that is a necessary moment in the great Mystery of Nature—that when a candle is lit, a shadow too is cast. As well, many Unitarians—going back to our origins—have also believed confidently, in the words of the Polish Unitarian Racovian Catechism of 1609 and 1665, that “having passed through this evil world soberly, righteously and piously, and having an immoveable hope, we may [yet] pass into that future better world...of eternal life [with] God.” (Racovian Catechism...pp. cxl and 31) That, too, is part of our story; for virtually everything that can be imagined about death has been imagined, feared, experienced and accepted by our Unitarian sisters and brothers down through the centuries.

It is incredibly moving for me to read about the huge intellectual and emotional struggles that took place within Unitarianism in the 19th and early 20th centuries on how to meaningfully understand and deal with the facts of our mortality and of our ultimate destiny. Let me share a few examples. In the 1830s-40s, William Ellery Channing, that towering scholar, minister, and builder of North American Unitarianism, was preaching about “Immortality” and “The Future Life” with a confident, reasoned faith, and using the same kind of terms and imagery that I grew up with as a believer, and that I shared with you last week. (Here my youthful Mormon faith and 19th century Unitarianism were actually very close indeed.):

“There,” Channing says of the future life, “there live the great and good of all ages and climes...the prophet, the apostle... the father, mother, wife, husband, and child... There are all who built up in our hearts the power of goodness and truth... There they are gathered together, safe from every storm...and they say to us, Come and join us in our everlasting blessedness.” (WE Channing, “The Future Life,” *Channing’s Works*..., p. 366)

At the same time, there were Unitarians, younger contemporaries of Channing, who expressed their experience with death—their thoughts and emotions—in a minor key tinged with a more this-worldly grief unassuaged by promises of immortality and eternal felicity.

One example: Ralph Waldo Emerson's early life was shot through with death and disease: his father died when he was eight; two of his brothers died in their twenties; his beloved wife Ellen died when she was only twenty-years old; and his first son, Waldo, died when he was five. Each and cumulatively, these deaths affected Emerson profoundly; they disabused him of his youthful faith and his calling to Unitarian ministry. After Waldo's death, Emerson wrote *Threnody*, a widely read poem of mourning that included lines like these:

The South-Wind brings/Life, sunshine, and desire,/And on every mount and meadow/Breathes aromatic fire;/But over the dead he has no power,/The lost, the lost, he cannot restore;/And, looking over the hills, I mourn/The darling who shall not return.
...the deep eyed boy is gone.../was there no star that could be sent,/No watcher in the firmament,/No angel from the countless host.../Could [they not] stoop to heal the only child/Nature's sweet marvel...

With Waldo's death and those of his brothers and young wife, Emerson writes, at least for him, "a general hope/Was quenched, and all must doubt and grope." And what was left? "The eager fate which carried thee," he wrote, "Took the largest part of me:/For this losing is true dying." In a few short decades after Emerson wrote *Threnody*, Unitarians in the States were going to experience the particularity of death—death brought home into nearly every family during the US Civil War. What Emerson knew intimately, others were soon to learn: untimely, senseless death and slaughter. The death of a child, for Emerson, "brought an old order into doubt"—that was Channing's confident faith in a beneficent God and eternal life—that of religious supernaturalism. Soon, most Unitarians in the States were going to share Emerson's groping doubt and quenched hopes.

Now take four more steps with me in this story, and then we'll come to present, to our age, and consider resources we can draw from to better appreciate, prepare for and make some peace with death—our own and the death of others.

But first, in the last third of the 19th century, and into the first decades of the 20th, everything continued to change and call conventional beliefs into doubt. First, globalization introduced Asian cultures, beliefs, and practices to the West; people, including Unitarians, began talking about and embracing Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic ideas and beliefs, and practices like yoga and meditation techniques. Second, developments in historical and social sciences showed just how much our religions (including Holy Scripture) are constructed and culturally determined by historical human needs, wants and aspirations—all of this critically undercut the uniqueness, veracity and authority of the Bible (and those who preached it) in religious life and practice.

Third, the natural sciences had an enormous impact on our traditional beliefs about the human person, our mortality, our destiny. The mind-bending, awe-provoking age of the earth and the vast size of the universe began to really sink in—where in this picture did our brief lives fit? Where in the immensity of space-time could there possibly be some realm or dimension of being where we could say we and those who preceded us lived eternally after the death of the body? And then, evolutionary naturalism, introduced by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, just made the questions about conventional doctrines of God and human immortality that more acute and problematic. The consequences of Darwinism pushed Frances Abbott, John White Chadwick and other Unitarian scholar ministers in the last three decades of the 19th century, to seriously ask questions like: did the development of one species from another through the process of natural selection leave any place for a creative and concerned God in the cosmos? Did not the close kinship of human beings and other animals make it difficult to maintain faith in

an immortal soul that fundamentally separated humanity from other living creatures? (see David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, 1985, p. 108)

These questions and the reality behind them were engaged with particular force and sincerity by Unitarians because our religion has always affirmed that our faith should be tested and thoughtfully, critically correlated or harmonized with the findings of reason, the sciences, and historical experience.

Do you see what's happened? Once upon a time, Unitarians, though they expressed it in a more inclusive, sunny way, affirmed the sensibilities and hopes of religious supernaturalism—backed up by the authority of scripture—that death would be defeated by an even greater, supernatural power that grants eternal life. But then, step-by-step in the 19th century, that faith eroded under the acids of conflict and death, the globalization of religions, historical critical examination of scripture and religion, and developments in the natural sciences.

Finally, the tragedy and trauma of the First World War disclosed just how far we had travelled—lay folk and clergy—down the road from a supernatural religion to religious naturalism. Unitarian ministers in the UK and Canada, for the most part, could not in good faith, respond to devastated parents, spouses, kin and friends, with the traditional reassurances; they couldn't naively turn to the authority of scripture and tradition that had come so naturally to Channing seventy years earlier; they couldn't conjure forth the cozy, human oriented cosmos of an outmoded scientific era as an alternative habitation for the dead. If not in scripture; if not in an empirically real cosmos—then where/how are we to understand and approach our death? How to give meaning to senseless slaughter of the young in the trenches of Europe?

During that conflict, it became starkly clear to Horace Westwood and C.F. Potter, Unitarian ministers in Winnipeg and Edmonton that “conventional condolences” were futile, and that no way were bereaved congregants consoled with “the old platitudes.” Westwood writes:

“I had no answers...that would have given comfort and assurance to those who had been bereaved.” And it was Potter who discovered that the most effective form of ministry, in this situation, was to build a community of bereavement. Looking back on those years, Potter writes:

When I found one woman who had overcome her grief, I sent the next bereaved woman to her. And when she, too, had found [some] peace, I made her the consoler of another sufferer... [They] found much comfort together...and they were a help to me also, for their friendship was a beautiful thing to see, and to be near them was a benediction.” (Hewett, *Unitarians in Canada*, 1995, pp. 163-4)

It’s called shared ministry; we acknowledge that those who are dying, those who have suffered the loss of a spouse, a child, a parent, other kin and close friends can and should minister to one another because they—because WE—possess authoritative knowledge, expertise, and experience that cannot be found in a book, or the old platitudes, or conventional condolences.

What we fear most is the unknown; when we attend to it, give it thought, even push it away and try to evade it—still it returns, and the prospect of death can fill us with chronic anxiety—anxiety that arises out of concern for others, out of fear of pain, anxiety about the possibility of post-mortal possibilities and/or annihilation—the cessation of the self altogether.

Can the anxiety be altered or reduced? Can the experience of dying be otherwise? By listening to the wisdom gained through experience by those with terminal illnesses, the Vancouver based palliative care physician David Kuhl, says: “it can be so, but only by asking the questions directly that pertain to our anxiety.” “The anxiety,” he counsels, “must be translated into a fear, for fear can be met with courage. Begin by asking yourself,” he writes, “‘What is it about this anxiety that can be identified as a fear?’ Name the fears. The first step to getting rid of the fear is to say it aloud:

I am afraid. I am afraid of the disease within me. I am afraid of dying. I am afraid to tell you how fearful I am. I am afraid to let you know that I know I am very sick. I am afraid of speaking about my fears. I am afraid of how those around me will cope if I say out loud what I am experiencing inside. I am afraid that I won’t have the courage to do and say what needs to be

done and said. I don't want to die. I don't want to suffer. I need courage to face my dying. If I have all this fear, what does that say about my present existence? About my faith or my religious tradition? What does that say about who I am, who I have been, and who I want to be?

In this context, Dr. Kuhl writes, some people confront the fear by acknowledging that they are not living the life they would like to live, not being in relationships the way they would like to be, not experiencing spirituality in a way that is meaningful to them.” On a profound level, we are asking ourselves: Who am I? We want to speak our truth, name our fears, and listen to the truth of those who are dear to us, who will care to listen and be with us, in times of both joys and sorrows.

It is precisely here, where Rev. Potter of Edmonton a hundred years ago discovered a profound truth: conventional ministerial condolences and platitudes were of no use to his grieving congregation. We and they have walked too far down the road from scripture comfort and supernatural hopes. Members of his congregation consoled each other. They shared each others' pain, their fears, anger and sorrow. They spoke their truth; they named their fears; and those hard truths and fears were heard by others who knew fear, pain and bereavement. And in doing so, they found some peace. “It was a beautiful thing to see,” Potter wrote, “and to be near them was benediction.”

It is a benediction ... what we do for one another. That blessed work is taking place even now in this congregation; and it is a deeply moving thing to see. In visiting the sick and dying—in being present for one another—in speaking and listening to our fears, our truths—we assure one another what we really need to know—and that is we are not alone—that we are known, cared for, and loved by others; and that we will not be forgotten. In this, we truly live out the heart of our faith and values: those which affirm the dignity and worth of each person through deeds of compassion, acceptance of one another, encouragement in spiritual growth, truth and

meaning, and an affirmation that we live in and are an essential part of a transcending mystery and wonder—an interdependent web of existence which renews the spirit and which creates and upholds life.

For those of us who are looking for practical wisdom and resources for approaching life's end, I recommend Thomas Kuhl's book: *What Dying People Want* where chapter-by-chapter, he draws upon the lived experience and insight of the dying—the real experts. They talk about the therapeutic value of sincere non-verbal communication and touch, of writing life reviews as a way of understanding and finding meaning in our lives, of speaking the truth and attending to the unfinished business in our lives, before it is too late, as a path to finding resolution and peace. A whole chapter on physical pain is especially illuminating and helpful.

From a completely different angle, but in the end, one that I found truly helpful, was the experience I had reading Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea Trilogy* and Phillip Pullman's three book epic called *His Dark Materials*—reading these books out loud to my children over the years. Each is worth a sermon series in themselves. For someone who was slowly moving away from a landscape of religious supernaturalism, I found the deep wisdom, the art and beauty of these stories profoundly helpful. Let me read to you just one example from the *The Farthest Shore*, the last book in the Le Guin trilogy; and imagine this scene: a young father reading the following words to his four children at the close of the day:

Listen to me, Arren. You will die. You will not live forever. Nor will any man, nor anything. Nothing is immortal. But only to us is it given to know we must die. And that is a great gift: the gift of selfhood. For we have only what we must lose, what we are willing to lose... That selfhood which is our torment, and our treasure, and our humanity, does not endure. It changes; it is gone, a wave on the sea. Would you have the sea grow still and the tides cease, to save one wave, to save yourself? Would you give up the craft of your hands, and the passion of your heart, and the light of sunrise and sunset, to buy safety for yourself—safety forever?

Reading these books out-loud to my children were some of the best, most heart-breaking, life affirming hours of my life.

I have seen and experienced a number of deaths. I buried both of my parents. I was in the room when my mother passed quietly into death. On hands and knees, I cleaned up the blood in my father's house where he died painfully and alone. I have been in hospital rooms that looked like battlegrounds, where doctors and nurses strove frantically and with all their skill to save a dying man; to no avail. The family was on their way to the hospital—minutes away, and I had to rally nurses and orderlies transfixed with shock. Together we cleaned the corpse and scoured the room in haste, to make the body and room presentable to the grieving family rushing to the scene. As well, I have been in rooms filled with peace, with women and men at death's door transfigured with a kind knowing and sense of ripeness that passes understanding.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child”: but comes a time, and come it does and will, and “we put away childish things.” Ah, but even then, “we see but through a glass, and darkly.” We know only a part of it...

The members of this congregation, now dead, have taught me a lot about the kind of person I want to be when my time comes. I'll never forget Pat Hutcheon's calm, rational wisdom, or Tarel Quandt addressing her friends with peace and courage, or Ruth Shaw's sense of humour and matter-of-factness, or Harold Brown's grandeur even as he wasted away—“to be near them was a benediction.”

Just before his own death, Rev. Forrest Church told his congregation that: *Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.* Knowing that we must die, we question what life means. The answers we arrive at may not be religious answers, but the questions death forces us to ask are, at heart, religious questions: Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life's purpose? What does this all signify?

“Death is not life’s goal, only its ending,” Church writes. “The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.”

And so, for now, let me end as we brought last week’s service to a close, by reading these lines from Dylan Thomas:

And death shall have no dominion...
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion...

Until then, let us rage against the dying of the light, and live so long as we are alive.

Some recommended reading:

Thomas Kuhl, *What Dying People Want: Practical Wisdom for the End of Life*; Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*. Two doctors; practical wisdom

Forrest Church, “Love and Death,” an address given at the UUA General Assembly, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Friday, June 27, 2008, <http://www.forrestchurch.com/writings/sermons/GA-2008-Love-and-Death.pdf>; Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*. Two Unitarians facing the end of life.

Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*. A catalogue of 200 philosophers, their lives and deaths

Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*. A personal essay and memoir—darkly funny

Ursula Le Guin, *The Earthsea Trilogy* (especially *The Farthest Shore*); Phillip Pullman, *His Dark Materials*. Two great epic stories. They may be written in the fantasy genre—but don’t be fooled—some serious wisdom in these pages.