

How Then Shall We Live?®
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Let's see a show of hands. How many people think that they are going to die? How many people think that they will live for 5 more years? How about 10 years? Many folks accept the truthiness of eventual death, but not the reality of what that means.

Last fall, I attended a retreat and one of the exercises that we had to do was to write our obituary. It was weird and poignant. It was bitter sweet. It was so moving to me as an experience, that I incorporated it into one of our last Coming of Sage class that I taught here. I recommend this exercise to you regardless of your age, because without seriously considering death, especially our own, we may lose out on a powerful way to recalibrate our priorities while still alive.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, the question is asked: "Of all the world's wonders, what is the most wonderful?" The answer is simple and direct: "That no man, though he sees others dying all around him, believes that he himself will die." Death is something we expect to postpone until we have received our fair share of what life has to offer us. If we believe we will live as long as we wish, we can afford to waste time; we can spend precious days, months, even years engaged in mindless activity and fruitless relationships. We can wait until we arrange our career, our friends, and our possessions just the way we like. We can then work for decades on our psychology, our spirituality, and our finances until we are perfectly content with our lives. Then - finally ready to begin our lives in earnest - we gather up the fruits of our labor and are rewarded with a happy and fulfilling life, free to enjoy for many years the harvest of all our good work.

If we buy this illusion that we will live forever, we can waste all the time in the world before we are ready to live. But this notion of "all the time in the world" is a seductive lie.

This is the third in a sermon series about living a spiritually mature life as a Unitarian Universalist. In the first sermon, "Who Am I?" we dealt with how important it is to really know ourselves and how to be attuned and awake to how who we are is always changing. The second sermon entitled, "What Do I Love?" delved into the understanding of how we are shaped by what we spend time doing and how much benefit there is to be shaped by what we love rather than what we were told to love. I believe, thanks to my fearless editor those sermons are on the UUCOD web.

In this third part series we will delve into how knowing we will die can reshape our lives. Knowing, really knowing, that one is going to die soon, changes everything, as those of us who have companioned someone through a terminal diagnosis know.

When folks receive a diagnosis of terminal illness, many of them are suddenly shocked into mindfulness. What have I done? What is my life about? What do I love? What do I place at the center of my life? Which people shall I invite as my companions, and which will I allow to fall away? Knowing the brief time I have left, what will I do with my days?

With so little time left, there is none to waste. Suddenly childhood traumas seem less compelling, money seems useful but mostly just for daily needs. Greed seems silly. Unproductive relationships are let go, and intricate career maneuverings seem wasteful, even comical. For those close to death, it becomes instantly clear that everything they do in their remaining days is precious. Every act is a sacrament, every breath a gift. Nothing is taken for granted; nothing is wasted.

Sometimes it seems as if we are waiting for permission to live this way, the permission that a terminal diagnosis will give us: to follow our own hearts, to listen to the quiet dreams and desires of our hearts, to quit what needs to be quit, and to follow what needs to be followed. But a terminal diagnosis is not the only way into a more vibrant, abundant life. In Buddhism, the practice of *maranasati*, or death awareness, encourages us to use the fact of our death to enrich, resurrect, and illuminate our life.

Here is a story that the Buddha told:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled. The tiger pursued him. Coming to the edge of a cliff, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down and saw, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to dine upon the vine. The man also saw a luscious, plump, ripe, strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Knowing we will die, how shall we live? The reality of our dying does not create these questions. Nor can our dying answer them. Rather, a clear perception of our death forces us to consider our life as something worth living -- an active, creative, passionate event. "Life is impermanent," says the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. "It is precisely because of its impermanence that we value life so dearly."

Millions yearn for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Sadly, many of us without the benefit of a diagnosis of terminal illness go about our lives as if we had all the time in the world to waste in unproductive work, joyless relationships, endless worries and plans for some distant

perfect future. Our presumed immortality permits us to be sloppy and imprecise in our actions and words; thinking that we can always clean up later. So we are not so careful with what we say, what we choose to do with our precious days on earth. We give hardly any thought to what we hold sacred. We simply wait until the world turns our way before we take the tremendous risk of becoming fully awake and alive. But all this waiting and worrying and sloppiness is nothing more than a form of sleepwalking from which we need to rouse ourselves in the here and now, in the power of the present moment.

Some people, in their confusion, believe that their life is simply preparation for a sweeter, more pleasing afterlife. They treat this life like a waiting room, something to endure until we are liberated into the life hereafter. But this is nonsense. Thich Nhat Hanh has these words for those who wait for the salvation that comes after death: "There are some people who believe that they will enter the kingdom of God or the pure land after they die. I don't agree with them. I know that you don't have to die in order to get into the kingdom of God. In fact, you have to be alive to do so."

As Universalists who valued the giftedness of the present moment, and the gardens of this life, we are also shaped by this theology. We aren't kind nor do we work for social justice issues so that we will be saved or get into a heaven when we die. We do this work and are kind because that creates the kind of world we want all people to have access to in the here and now.

Proximity to death wakes us up. Death dispels the most potent illusions about life - that it belongs to us, and that we have all the time we need to arrange it the way we want. In fact we must surrender our illusion that we will not die in order to live more fully.

I lived in San Francisco during the height of the spread of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's. I had never before (and hope to never again) see such devastation. I saw many men die and I observed many of them face their impending deaths with a variety of approaches. Some of the guys seemed to wake up and treasure every moment. Many tried and were able to repair relationships with families that they had left long ago. But some of these guys did not. Some slunk into despair and never looked up again. Others got stuck in some kind of weird materialistic loop. Scott was one of those guys. He was so angry when he found out he had the disease that he said "Screw you" to everything. He said yes to as many credit cards as he could and charged them all up to the maximum. He traveled all over the world and bought a lot of fun stuff, like a state-of-the-art stereo system and a very fancy sports car.

He did all this without a thought of taking responsibility for his life. He thought his anger at his death allowed him a free pass from any sort of spiritual ethic. He died that way, steeped in fear and unquenchable sadness, with little real joy, connection, or community in his remaining days. Scott was not the only man who did this. A lot of

guys back then, before medical advancements made it possible to live with HIV for many years, acted this way. But all that this did was illustrate to the rest of us that there was a better way to approach life and, therefore, death. This was not eating the strawberry.

Soon more and more of these men began to tune into the HIV support groups that were forming for them. These support groups provided more than meals and rides. They offered meditation, chanting, singing, storytelling, and other spiritual practices that assisted these guys as they allowed themselves to fully experience their sorrow and still feel a genuine sense of grace in their lives. Like I hope all of us realize, they learned that we are only here for a short time and the thing that matters most is being loving and kind.

Paul didn't have AIDS; he had different form of invasive fast-spreading cancer. As soon as he found out, he did a lot of research on the Internet. He read that it was possible to fight cancer with attitude and diet, in addition to radiation and chemo, and so all he did was fight. He became combative in all areas of his life. A three-week treatment in Mexico left him exhausted. One day he was on the couch with a cell phone in one hand and his land line in the other, on hold with two different doctors looking at two more treatments. He was frantic and exhausted. He occasionally needed additional hits of oxygen from the tank nearby. His friends and his wife gathered around him and asked him to turn off the phones.

One of his friends was a minister and asked Paul what he was feeling. It took a while for him to really know. Then he was asked where in his body was he feeling it? Finally, Paul allowed himself to feel the tenderness of his loss. He understood the deeper truth of his life and that it was, in fact, approaching its end. And this made him sob. Something he had resisted for a long time.

In the next few weeks he had a spiritual resurrection. A week before he died he spent most of his time sitting in a chair in the sun on his porch. He told his minister friend that he felt ready to go. He said, "Sometimes I still wish I had more time." His voice carried sadness mingled with acceptance, a melancholy softened with gentle peace. He knew that some of his dreams had come true and some had not. He had a readiness to die but it was accompanied by an equally passionate wish to live.

"I've done so much work to prepare for this moment," he said. "I've learned yoga, I practice meditation and have been loved by many beautiful people. I'm not unhappy with my life. I know I'm clear and whole inside and when I feel that, when I can touch that, and rest in that, I'm not afraid. I know it's time.

"But I also wish I could stay here. I wish I had 10 more years, free of this illness. With those 10 years, I could really live as I always wanted." The minister asked him what would he do with those 10 years? "What would your life look like?"

Paul knew right away. He spoke easily and certainly. "I would be kind. I would live my life with kindness," he said. "I would be kind to children; I would teach them to be kind, too."

Remember the Buddhist story where the tiger is chasing the guy and he grabs a vine and jumps off a cliff. And as he holds onto the vine, he sees another tiger below and two mice slowing nibbling away at his vine of life, and he sees a strawberry and reaches for it and puts it in his mouth. Each of us has a strawberry within reach. And as Diane Ackerman reminded us in the reading, what does it matter how silly we look dangling from that vine, with a strawberry stained hand?

We mistakenly believe that if we accept our death, we will begin to die. Curiously, the reverse is true: when we accept that we are already dying, we are set free to live.

It probably doesn't matter if . . . we try too hard, are awkward sometimes, care for one another too deeply, are excessively curious about nature, are open to experience, enjoy a nonstop expense of the senses in an effort to know life intimately and lovingly. It probably doesn't matter if . . . we sometimes look clumsy or get dirty or ask stupid questions or reveal our ignorance or say the wrong thing or light up with wonder like the children we all are.

Spring is still in the air, the trees and the succulents are gifting us with flowers. There is so much to appreciate about life. At the same time, I want us to think about and talk about the work that our awareness of our own deaths calls us to do.

May each of us grab that strawberry and celebrate our hearts true knowing. This then is how we shall live.

Blessed Be. Amen.

Note: This sermon is based on the work of Wayne Muller *How Then Shall We Live?*

References

Muller, W. (1997) *How then shall we live: Four simple questions that reveal the beauty and meaning of our lives*. New York. Bantam Books.

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