

I OWE GOD A DEATH

My Easter sermon title comes from a quote from the essayist Wallace Stegner who wrote: “I’ve been lucky. I came from nowhere, and had no reason to expect as much from this one life as I’ve got. I owe God a death, and the earth a pound or so of chemicals. Now let’s see if I can remember that when my time comes.”

Yes, you and I surely owe God, the universe, ourselves and all whom we meet along the path—one death, especially following a full, generous existence. And it must be paid, when it comes our time to return to the ground.

Picture two children talking to one another around a tree. And the younger one says: “It’s a beautiful tree isn’t it?” “Yes, it is...” says the older child, “but it’s a shame that we won’t be around to see it, when it’s fully grown.” And the younger moans: “But why? Where are we going?”

You see, young children don’t really envision death or a finish line, certainly not their own. They understand sleep and separation, but not death, not the cessation of physical life.

To be sure, we adults have our own share of trouble with death. We tend to resist mortality. Death happens, but not to us.

We deny death; we fight or smother it in fantasies, theories, and cosmetics. In John Osbourne’s play *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter says, “Anyone who’s never watched a person die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity.” Virginity is another word for naivete, and Osbourne’s play is about learning how to live in the real world of blood, dirt, and death.

Will we face death in ten weeks or ten years or several decades and what exactly will be the form of our greeting? And which particular indignities might be in store for you and me? Well, whether death comes sooner or later, as a relief or as an outrage, we humans need to be prepared...that means making sufficient peace with its inevitability.

There's where I want to start this Easter morn. Ironically, just when all the world's great minds were beginning to accept that death is death, that it was inevitable, along comes a sane and respectable person by the name of Raymond Moody, with credentials in medicine, philosophy, and psychiatry who suggests that we should consider the phenomenon reported by people who've been "clinically dead" but then resuscitated by modern emergency medical techniques.

Moody—as well as other writers like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross—has claimed that there exist many such experiences, and he's even interviewed a large number of folks. Their experiences have a lot in common and seem to suggest that the first stages of death appear to be positive spiritually.

Many of those interviewed felt a feeling of peace and wholeness, and none of them has ever been afraid to die again. This is indeed reassuring news to any of us who've been frightened of what might happen to us following death.

However, these common components, while intriguing, in no way provide conclusive evidence of an afterlife. After all, euphoric feelings can be induced through drugs, and it may be that as the body dies, some mechanism is set off to chemically induce euphoria. We don't really know what goes on in the brain as the body begins to die. We're all making conjectures, capable researchers included.

Personally, I've come to a sort of benevolent agnosticism on the question of life-after-death or life-after-life. I don't anticipate one. I don't hunger for one. But there just might be one. And as a Universalist who believes in everlasting love, I harbor no worries, because whatever happens when I die, love will be the container. That's where my mother and I grew to agree, she from the perspective of her Christianity, I from the perspective of my Unitarian Universalism. Whether or not there is life after death, surely there is *love* after death!

In my opinion, death's sting is a crashing (not crushing) piece of reality to be entertained by us humans; an inevitability probably not to be feared, but never to be denied. Whether death is final or not, it still remains real. Whether it's a transition or a conclusion, it still happens and needs to be reckoned with.

I'll go further. Unless we make adequate peace with our own personal deaths, we'll tend to remain cowards about life, all of its faces—the good as well as the evil. “Consenting to die,” then, as the poet W. H. Auden put it, is a critical awareness and conscious decision during our earthly journey.

There's a corollary: the spiritual danger of focusing upon life-after-death is the temptation to treat this existence as merely a warm-up, as unimportant compared to the goodies you're going to get in the Great Beyond. So, death is real—indisputably real—and to be treated as such, especially in a death-denying culture such as ours.

As we say in our Unitarian Universalist memorial celebrations, right at the outset: “John Doakes has died; you and I are alive,” so we know who's still breathing in the room and who isn't. Yes, the spirit may live on; but the body of the dead person is gone...and that difference must be saluted rather than camouflaged in euphemisms like

“he’s gone away” or “she’s passed on”. Being dead means being dead.

In the Jewish burial ceremony, the family is urged to shovel dirt on the coffin of the deceased. The thud of dirt on the coffin is blunt, even brutal. It can jolt the heart, but hearing the thud impresses upon those surviving that this passage of death is utterly real. A fellow human being is being placed in the ground and will never return to touch and be touched by us.

Death cannot be tamed. Death is unknown. Death is mysterious. Let’s just say that death is death. And a central key to living fully is acknowledgement of that fact.

Death’s not only *inevitable*, it’s also *natural* in the overall sweep of things.

About 500 million years ago something happened on this earth that both dwarfed and made possible every succeeding event. Up until that time, death, as we understand it, didn’t exist. But neither did life, as we understand it. All the living that was done was done by a kind of organic slime, made up of algae and amoebas, whose life was one of continuous existence, growing at one end and sloughing off at the other. This pre-Cambrian world was one of genuine, physical immortality. Death was no more involved in that dull, ancient world than it’s involved in the paring of our fingernails, or the falling out of our baby teeth.

Then into that drowsy world of immortal slime came a transfiguring event. Life, as we understand life, began—the truly individual form of life. For millions of years that individuality was of the simplest kind imaginable. But it meant that there would come into being, mussels, trilobites, starfish, sponges, crabs, and spiders. And it meant that bewildering wonders would be possible, eventually human beings. A whole series of worlds was on its way.

And these wondrous combinations couldn't have occurred, unless they were partnered from the very beginning by death. Without this life-death combination, there would still be only immortal slime. If life was to mean variation, death had to be there to assure selection. If life was to mean a wild, mutating garden of individuality, death had to be there as the ever-watchful weeder. Without death, life could never have risen out of the immortal slime.

As Connie Barlow puts it: "Without the death of stars, there would be no planets and no life. Without the death of creatures, there would be no evolution."

So if we conceive of life as a gift, as a good, then we must also conceive of death as a gift, as a good. If there exists any part of living creation, any person that we love, then we must say: "this is possible because of death!" For without death there would be neither that which we love nor the ability to love at all.

That's how much we earthlings owe to death.

But I'll go even further. Death is *desirable* as well as inevitable and natural. I mean in general; I'm not simply referring to certain deaths that bring relief or release from agony. Let me explain.

Years back, I was a discussant on a TV show featuring a dialogue on *Immortalism*, the philosophy that we can, should, and will live forever. The spokesperson for this approach of cryogenics seemed relatively unfazed by my remarks, until I unabashedly announced that even if I could live forever in my current condition, I'd likely turn down the offer. I simply didn't hanker for everlastingness. He was incredulous, flabbergasted, and for the remainder of the dialogue kept trying to persuade

me that everyone, who was anyone, wanted to live forever. His exact words: “No one in their right mind really wants to die.” I said: “I do someday; I do.”

And I proceeded to elaborate. First of all, I said that I find most notions of eternal life or paradise singularly uninteresting. Oh, it’d be nice, in many cases, to reconnect with departed friends or loved ones, but not entertain an interminable sameness of our bonds. And who wants eternal bliss? Without the presence of sorrow and struggle, perpetual existence would prove oppressively bland.

Did you ever hear an evangelist describe heaven in terms of the challenges waiting to be faced or in terms of passion or toil or justice? No, it’s always an Elysian Fields, a sort of Palm Springs with a year-round irrigation system. Heaven is characterized by terrible constancy, with no further growth or change taking place. Destitute of variation or wrestling. How boring, how eternally boring!

To put it positively, death’s presence intensifies my capacity to love and my desire to create meaning. Every moment, with which I’m blessed, grows precious. My life possesses daily urgency and challenge, because I won’t always be around. I embrace life all the more, because it’s limited.

Psalm 90 reminds us that we’re like grass, that the years of our lives may be three score and ten, or maybe with luck, four score. Everyone dies from something, but the Psalmist admonishes: “Teach us to number our days that we might apply our hearts unto wisdom.” I take that as an encouragement to live with faithfulness, courage, and grace. Yes, let’s number our days, let’s pay attention to each one of them, let’s dearly and deeply love every blessed moment.

You may recall the Jewish admonition to repent one day before you die. But I won't know when that is, retorts the cynic. Well, that's the point, isn't it? We're nudged to repent as well as rejoice everyday, today, because we can't be sure that it won't be our last one.

So I praise a world that will not be forever, precisely because it won't be thus. If *it* were to be here forever, if *we* were to be here forever, there'd be no real reason to take special notice of this irrepeatably fresh Spring of 2008. There'd be an eternity of Springs to notice. So, it wouldn't matter if we missed one or two or a dozen. If we're going to live forever, it doesn't matter if we miss a season or two, or if we miss a person or two. There will always be time for other people, if we have an eternity.

Really, think that's true? I doubt it. On the contrary, it's because we *don't* have an eternity *with* one another that we must seize the time *for* one another. We treasure each singular season, precisely because we just might not experience another one.

How many of us would clean up the environment, or grow a beloved community or raise healthy children or do anything of much importance if we believed we had an eternity in which to do it? I bet few of us.

I'm increasingly aware, then, that my real fear isn't death. It's not even leaving life unfinished. My real dread is extinction without significance. I remember Carolyn's father saying as his death approached back in 1989, that he wasn't afraid of dying, but that he hated to lose out on life, since he had so damn much more to do. Truly, the voice of one who kept his candle burning brightly to the very end.

I personally possess an intense desire to make my years on this planet count for something. I want the world to be a bit better and braver for my having lived and loved,

suffered and died. And that, my fellow pilgrims, should suffice, will be enough for me. Yes, that's the death I owe God...a death that resembles the way in which I've tried to live, a death that doesn't contradict the conduct of my vocation, my partnership, my family, my way of life.

A good death permits us to be pretty much the same person dying as we were when we're alive. A good death doesn't mean I'll die peacefully, although I'd like that. A good death is more than going to sleep one night and not waking up, although I'll take that too. A good death is when I go into the ground essentially clean of regrets and resentments.

Do you or I have something we want to say, be, or do before we die? If so, let's get to it as soon as possible. What are we waiting for?

I recognize that my name won't last forever, may be sooner forgotten than I imagine, and my labors and visions lost in the shuffle. And surely all my sermons will be taken to the dump, if not by my children or grandchildren, by somebody, sometime along the line. But I do hope that my peculiar struggles and gifts will influence a slew of people for some length of time.

And yes, that brings us back to Easter, doesn't it? I can't believe that the triumph of Jesus was the victory of a resurrected body. But I can believe that only his body died, while what his life stood for triumphed over the tomb.

Now, Jesus' influence, for better and for worse, is going to last longer than yours or mine. Yet every one of us has a chance to achieve an immortality of influence that's indestructible because our journey—our singular, flawed, fragile time on earth—has generated some beauty and joy that live on, live on, live on...

Shalom, salaam, blessed be, and Amen!

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March 23, 2008