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*Find joy in having had loved ones in your life.*

### *Beaming Out At You*

*Rejoicing* about dead people?

“I don’t like Day of the Dead at the UU,” my friend says. “I’m not into it.” It can feel a little wild and manic, right? After all, none of us is going to get out of this alive, and that’s sobering.

We humans have been trying to wrap our heads around this reality for a long time. We think about death, puzzle over it, fret about it, desire it! We hypothesize, write theories, and we have doctrines....On a nuts and bolts level, we *do* death really creatively: funeral pyres on the Gange; Native American bodies laid in trees to guide the spirit’s ascent; Jews burying their dead within a day and sitting shiva; Christians and heaven. As a patient once said to me, “I can’t wait to get there and sit at the Lord’s feet.”

Almost ten years ago, when UU Rev. Forrest Church was diagnosed with a terminal cancer, he wrote, preached and gave interviews about death:

During the days after my diagnosis, through my brain, as if on a Mobius loop, cycled my theological mantras.

Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

We are the religious animal; knowing that we must die, we cannot help but question what life means.

We are more alike in our ignorance, than we differ in our knowledge.

God is not God’s name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.

Whether or not there is life after death, surely there is love after death.

The one thing [that] can never be taken away from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die.

The purpose of life is to live in such a way, that our lives will prove worth dying for.<sup>1</sup>

I think of the first as his most famous: “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” We don’t think about being alive and having to die every day, but

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<sup>1</sup> Forrest Church, National Unitarian Fellowship Newsletter, p. 16, [nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/pdfs/NL420.pdf](http://nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/pdfs/NL420.pdf)

it has a way of focusing our attention. Awareness of our mortality gives urgency to the question, “In the time we’re given, where do we want to put our energies?”

We live with another dual reality: being alive and having those we love die. This, too, profoundly meaningful. Whether it surprises us or we know it’s going to happen, death changes everything, even the view out the kitchen window. Almost twenty years ago, I took a call from my mother one August day, went down the back steps to stand by the flagpole where the signal was better. I can feel myself standing there. “Dad,” she said, “is in the hospital and he’s fine but...”

As her words began to register, I looked out, down the path out to the road, tall trees up to the right, and I watched it all shift, as if the diagnosis—“a few good months, then a decline”—had changed the very landscape.

Grief changes our landscape, too. An individual thing, different for each of us. Deep in grief for his wife for well over a year, a doctor friend often asked what could be done to get through with it. How to *do* this unbearable grief?

We have to live it. Live *in* it, and trust that, with grace and with time, we will come *through* it.

Grief hits us randomly. You mention your brother, gone a year, to someone and suddenly have to walk away quickly, overcome by emotion. You think you’re finally OK about a loss when a wave of grief blindsides you. As if it has a life of its own.

Talk-show host Diane Rehm was amazed at how hard and confusing grieving for her husband was. She’d feel nostalgic about their courting days and fond of his quirky ways...and then angry about things he’d done or guilty about going on with her career even as she walked with him to the end. Was this what everyone felt? Bewildered, she asked her friends, “What was it like for you? What are you going through now?” Grief, she found, was unpredictable. Uneven. Our emotions all over the map. Aching. Tender. Plaintive. Furious.

On the door of a local physical therapist, a sign with two graphs greets you. “The Progress of your Recovery,” it says. One shows a nice 45-degree line doing up. The other line looks like a tangle of string, jutting up, diving low, wandering, and *trending* upward, finally ending with a little hopeful arrow pointing up.

I love that little arrow—it means we’re finally out of the woods, on our way, the tangle of the struggle behind us. With exceptions, of course, most of us make our way out of grief. We don’t notice the moment this happens—but something shifts. The cold snap of fall that brought an anniversary into devastating focus last year feels unaccountably freeing now. Pulling out decorations—inconceivable at first—now brings comfort. Amazing to come so far, up into the world of possibility again.

One of the best quotes ever comes from Sue Monk Kidd's book, *The Secret Life of Bees*. Words spoken to the girl Lily about her mother, who has died:

"Really, her spirit is everywhere, Lily, just everywhere. Inside rocks and trees and even people, but sometimes it will get concentrated in certain places and just beam out at you in a special way."<sup>2</sup>

The hard parts don't gone away. We'll never forget them. But a joy, and a gratitude in remembering, slip in. Beam out at us. Unpredictable. Uneven. Pleasure pulling out our mother's everyday teapot—we look forward to its company. Laughter! We tell a hilarious story about the friend who died way too young, and surprise ourselves with our boisterous irreverence.

Maybe the merriment of Dia de los Muertos has something for us. Maybe it's not so garish and foreign but an important reminder that the gift of loved ones once in our lives *is* a joy.

When a flash of someone beams out at you--a face, a laugh or a turn of phrase--smile back!  
When the photo in the corner catches your eye and that face or that scene even hints at beaming out at you, go there! Whatever your theological, humanist or scientific mantra, when the spirit of a being you loved, a holy departed one, beams out at you, give thanks! Let the noisemakers and the graveside parties in. Ride grief's little arrow right up into joy.

May our grateful hearts rejoice in remembering. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, NY: Penguin Books, 2002, p. 141.