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March 25, 2018

*Living with What We Know*

I watch my Christian colleagues with a mix of bewilderment and curiosity. During Lent (the forty days before Easter) and now, as Holy Week begins, they wear their longing, an excitement about Easter that's almost visible. They know and look forward to the darkness in the next several days. They know how each step of the rituals will go, church services all this week, centuries-old prayers, the washing of the feet, the draping of the sanctuary in black, the vigil starting midday Friday into Easter.

Growing up, our family celebrated Easter in the Episcopal Church. I remember the dry palm leaves and the sweet fragrance of pots of hyacinths for the children. It was at an Easter service at my in-laws' little church, with our own young children, that my own spiritual journey took a turn. While the rest of the family went up to the railing for Communion, I stayed in the pew. Eyebrows went up that day, but the time had come for my heart to find its own meaning.

This Ash Wednesday, a literal acknowledgment that to dust we return, the local clergy group collaborated on a service. We talked about what this time of year meant to them personally. "I love this time of year," one of them said. "This is when I really think about my mortality, when I reflect on how I'm doing this year, what's going on with my sense of purpose, my relationships, my work. I love the reminder each year," he said, "to *go there*."

The intentionality in his words resonated. Maybe we're missing out on something, that we don't devote a whole season of the year to reflect in this way. It's not as if we're dealt a different hand than anyone else. Unitarian Universalists think about our mortality as much as anyone else does. Our faith does not declare set beliefs about what happens after we die—rather, we aspire to live *this life* in a principled way, on purpose. Still, knowing that we will die has a lot to do with how we go about our lives.

Who doesn't think about their mortality? "I think about it every day," said one of our octogenarians last week, sturdy as an oak. Sometimes we feel open to dying. We can romanticize death, intellectualize it. We also fear it, dread it. We deny death by staying busy or racking up accomplishments to make our living feel worthwhile, maybe hoping for a lasting legacy. We talk about the death we'd like to have, as if we can plan it. And many of us have become proficient at avoiding it altogether, although the truth is that we've been trying to wrap our heads around death since our first experience of it—a fish in its bowl, a relative, a friend. First, we experience the loss, but at some point we realize it's about us, too.

Those who have seen many days think about death. Over and over again, they bid goodbye to friends and loved ones. The body and mind grapple with time. Portland homeopath Nancy Frederick observes that the oldest of the old dematerialize before our eyes—the bones become lighter, the skin delicate and thin. They become smaller, too, losing inches of height, their senses less acute. Some elders occupy a reality not quite here any more, somewhere between here and

who knows where. Some wonder why they're still alive, what they are meant to do or learn by living to this age? Others relish every minute.

But elders don't corner the market on thoughts of death. Everyone wrestles with it, don't we? Adolescents, among others, struggle to find balance between belonging and individuating. Mary Rose O'Reilly describes this in her book *The Barn at the End of the Road*:

As an adolescent, I knew I was restless, but I didn't believe that it could be for God....If I could have articulated my desire then, perhaps I would have longed for a fuller understanding, an identity, instead of the tin of nuts and bolts and mismatched bicycle parts I seemed to have been issued instead of a self.

It's what I still long for [she says]. The heart longs to be free-running, instead of dammed up, transfixed by selfishness, compelled around some anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

In this day of random shootings, American teenagers are shining a bright light on their mortality. In yesterday's March for Your Live events, the world heard from them. Writer Nancy Jalbert declared, "Children as young as eleven years old...even nine years old, made speeches more stirring and bold than any I've heard from any politician in years."<sup>2</sup> In these days when our young children train for shelter-in-place and active-shooter situations, these articulate young people may well become the leaders of tomorrow.

We want our end to be a certain way and then fret about loss of control and when it will happen. On Broadway, Alexander Hamilton's drive to make history is matched by his wonderings about death:

I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory  
When's it gonna get me?  
In my sleep, seven feet ahead of me?  
If I see it comin', do I run or do I let it be?<sup>3</sup>

How does art factor into how you see your mortality? Music that feeds your soul? Thought-provoking stories? And poems—do images and fragments of sentences not carry us, lift us, save us even?

Just before the first hymn in our hymnal is a list of UU principles, by which we strive to live, below it a list of what inspires us. Our faith, it reads, draws from many sources. Surely literature and music and art belong here.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Rose O'Reilly, *The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Jalbert, 3/24/18 correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> Song "My Shot," *Hamilton* by Anthony Ramos, Daveed Diggs, Leslie Odom Jr., Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Okieriete Onaodowan.

“Everything in poetry makes me think of my mortality,” writes photographer Keith Carter. “It is not a dark thing in life; it prepares you for the graceful things that happen in your life. It gives me a license to make any kind of picture I want with great courage.”<sup>4</sup>

In a futuristic *New Yorker* story, you can find out the date and time of your death. The protagonist goes for it—and though decades away, instead of putting her mind to rest, knowing the day becomes her everything, always present and disturbing.

Years ago, neighbors threw a Valentine’s Day party. They asked everyone to bring their favorite love poem. What a gift to thumb through poems that week. We might do the same thing here, bringing in poems about mortality. A rich exchange....

Our death is the only thing we know for sure. We push it away...and we come back to it. And, given what we know (that we must die), we choose how to live. Stephen Batchelor, a secular Buddhist teacher, engages most every day with the possibility that this may be his last day on earth—a reasonable proposition for anyone. “Since death alone is certain,” he’ll say to himself, “and the time of death uncertain, what should I do?”

...these reflections are not in the remotest sense morbid or gloomy.

The weird paradox...is that the more you ask yourself that question...[it] brings you back to a very vivid sense that you’re alive. It intensifies the sense of aliveness, in terms of how you see the colors, the shapes, the leaves, the flowers, the — whatever impacts you visually or from the ears to the nose to the tongue to the body to the mind... almost a celebration of being here at all!

And that [he says] is infused not only with a sense of wonder, but also with a sense of possibility ...of responsibility — that in what you say, think, do, this may be your final legacy on this earth. That, to me, is where this reflection leads me....And that has made my life, I think, very full.”<sup>5</sup>

We may shy away from thoughts of our death or feel vividly aware of the passage of time. Yesterday, a friend wrote out of the blue, “I think I’m obsessed with time passing, to the point where I’m reading something and thinking—tick, tick, tick—minutes of my life are passing.” At the same time, as Benedictine monk Columba Stewart writes, “Awareness of mortality exerts a unique power to focus the mind and heart on essentials.”<sup>6</sup>

What *are* the essentials? How have your mind and heart focused at times when you’ve had a close brush with death—an illness, an accident or a quirk of fate when you have survived—when

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/blog/15678/23-quotes-by-photographer-keith-carter/>

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Batchelor, “Wondrous Doubt,” *On Being*, 1 March 2018. <https://onbeing.org/programs/stephen-batchelor-wondrous-doubt-mar2018/>

<sup>6</sup> Columba Stewart, 2 December 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/118522-awareness-of-mortality-exerts-a-unique-power-to-focus-the>

others have not and you're still here? What effect on your aliveness, your interactions, your gratitude, does the awareness that you're still here have? Touching, lightly touching our mortality can be a powerful gift.

"I want to step through the door full of curiosity," says Mary Oliver in her poem "When Death Comes":

what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, who would volunteer to spend a morning contemplating their mortality? But touching it, touching it lightly, we wonder. We lose ourselves in avenues of possibility that feel expansive and life-giving. Our faith tradition declares no answers, no certainty. And so, full of questions, we live into our answers, endeavoring to spend our days, as Rev. Forrest Church said, "in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for."<sup>8</sup>

A daily challenge, and a gift, at that.

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," *New and Selected Poems, Volume One*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Forrest Church, "Rev. Forrest Church on Love and Death," 22 July 2008. Beacon Broadside, A Project of Beacon Press, <http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2008/07/rev-forrest-chu.html>.

