

“Counting Love’s True Cost”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Sermon

Tonight, across our city, gremlins and goblins will reign supreme.
To be sure, there will be plenty of princesses,
and probably a few Lady Gagas throw in, as well—especially down in The Village.

There will be trick-or-treating, with tons of chocolate being handed over
to fulfill an ancient bribe warding off those who would make mischief.

Yet, what we know today as Halloween is only half the story.

With all the pumpkins and candy,
the gore and grotesque masks,
the vampires, the witches, and the zombies,
we can easily forget that Halloween used to be about death.

Not make-believe death,
or dress-up-and-scare-each-other-half-to-death-death,
but death of the most frank and final sort.

Between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice,
the Druids of old observed a quarter day at this time of year
to mark the descent into darkness.

The season of winter was considered to be a time of death,
and on the night known as Samhein the barrier between the worlds
of the living and the dead was thought to be thinnest,
a time when the spirits of the dead roamed the earth.

The early Christian church didn’t care for this idea one bit,
and responded by setting aside the next day
for a commemoration of all the Saints, and the next day for All Souls.

But, for all its complicated history,
this group of days has come down to us as an invitation—
an invitation to remember those who have gone before,
and, an invitation, I believe, to be mindful of our own mortality.

This is an invitation it seems we increasingly need.

Unlike all our human forebears, even up to just a generation or two ago,
we, by and large, live our lives in this part of the world
insulated from the daily reality of death.

We die, often out of sight, in hospital and in hospice,
even though most everyone I know longs to pass away
in the comfort of their own bed surrounded by those they love.

Afterwards, our bodies are handled by professionals
rather than by our family and friends,
as it's been done from time immemorial.

The result is that, often, when someone dies,
most of us never even encounter their body.

We hear the news through one of those calls
so many of us have had to make—
the awkward ones that are always so short, but so full.

“So and so has died. I thought you'd want to know.”

On the other end of the line, we begin to absorb the shock.
And, because it feels disrespectful
to turn to the weather or the World Series,
we bring the conversation to a quick and quiet close.

When there is no direct contact with the body of one who has died,
it's understandable enough that we might find ourselves
doubting the truth of it all—in our grief,
deciding that perhaps our dearly departed has headed to Tahiti instead,
and just not bothered to tell anyone of their plans.

There are benefits to truly saying goodbye.

While some may find being in the presence of the dead upsetting,
there is a finality that it conveys that is hard to come by in any other way.

Being with a person's corpse is not always possible,
and it's not always advisable, if death has come through violence.

But, what concerns me is that with our move to direct cremation,
as the large majority of Unitarians seem to prefer—
having our remains taken straight from where we die to the crematorium—
we are often depriving those we leave behind
of the profound experience of sitting in the presence of death, of saying our goodbyes.

It's not always been like this.
The human experience for most of our history
has involved frequent and up-close encounters with death.

People watched their elders die, and very often, their children, too.
Their bodies were washed and prepared for burial at home.

In more recent centuries, the bodies would lie in repose
in the family parlour or even on the dining room table.

While there is much to be said for the conveniences
of the modern funeral home, I'm not so sure
that the direction we're headed is serving us well.

For all the knowledge we humans have amassed,
we have always learned to die
by watching carefully those who've died before us.

We have learned how to care for the dead by seeing them well-cared for.

But, without that most fundamental experience readily available to us,
I fear that this most sacred tradition,
passed from one generation to the next, is being lost.

More and more, I'm finding the grown children of those who die don't really
know what the family traditions are when it comes to death.

In planning memorial services,

I'm often told to keep it light and uplifting.

But, there are reasons why religions
have long gravitated to ritual at the time of death—
to mark and declare, to find assurance and the courage to carry on.

And to remember.
To bring our dead to life through sacred memory.

What I most cherish about our Unitarian tradition of memorial services
is the way that we celebrate the whole
and sometimes complicated person who has died,
acknowledging their strengths, struggles and shortcomings,
and honouring their loss by acknowledging the depth of our sorrow.

We rightly call them “celebrations of life,”
but we do ourselves and the deceased a disservice
if we fail to acknowledge plainly that it is death that invites us together on these occasions.

After one of these services, I often have people
tell me they've never seen anything like it,
and that they found it profoundly moving to have been invited
to focus on the life that was lived among us,
rather than the possibility of some life to come.

These services are such an affirmation of life,
that there are some of you who make a point of attending
even the services of people you did not know.

We learn to die by watching those who've gone before us
do so with dignity and grace.

The great paradox of death, is that the closer we draw near to it,
it is always life itself that we most deeply encounter.

This hallowed season can help us to face the fact of death—
for ourselves and those we love.

It can help us to know ever more abundantly
the fullness of life, and health, and wholeness.

If we hide death away—or, worse, hide from it,
we are left to live in fear of it.

But faced, despite our fear of the unknown or our own finitude,
we can begin to understand ourselves
as part of the great natural cycle that is the story of life itself.

A few years ago, a man in his 80s in a congregation I served
told me that he became a Unitarian as a young man
by shopping around to see what different faiths had to say about death.

I think whether we're as intentional as Stewart was, or not,
everyone does this to some degree over the course of their lives.

A death comes, and if we are attentive to it,
it leaves us with questions we will work very hard to have answered.

Such an experience is faith's most teachable moment.

That moment when the coffin is closed for the final time,
and lowered into the Earth.

That moment when a fistful of ashes is scattered,
and we turn to walk into a world that will never again be the same.

It is a teachable moment because the response of any religion
to this hardest fact of life tells us everything we need to know
about what any faith has to say in the face of life's ultimate questions.

The poet and undertaker, Thomas Lynch, says that:

The crisis presented by a death in the family
has not changed since the first human mourners
looked into the pit or cave or flames they'd just consigned their dead to
and posed the signature questions of our species:

*Is that all there is? Why did it happen? Will it happen to me?
Are we alone? What comes next?*

The corpse, the grave, the tomb and fire
became fixtures in the life of faith's most teachable moment.

We learned to deal with death[, he says,] by dealing with our dead;
to process mortality by processing mortals
from one station to the next in the journey of grief.¹

I believe Lynch is right: how we deal with our dead has much to say
about how well we deal with death—or how poorly.

How a religion responds to the fact of death,
tells us a great deal about what any given faith
considers to be the true meaning of a human life.
And what it means when that life comes to an end.

So much of religion is centered on answering these two fundamental
concerns—the meaning of life and the meaning of death.

The first, the meaning of life,
is one we take up often and easily as Unitarian Universalists.

It is with energy and excitement that we speak of living lives of purpose,
in the here and now—seizing our “one wild and precious life.”

That part is usually very well-reflected in our memorial services.

Yet, the second conversation—the one on the meaning of our deaths—
seems to be something more of a struggle for Unitarian Universalists.

And, I think it is reflected somehow in the fact that we,
at a vastly disproportionate rate choose cremation over burial.

I think our motivation for doing so has been in the right place—
to take up a smaller footprint on the planet.

But, as Thomas Lynch puts it,
too often in choosing cremation as an alternative to burial,
we’re really seeking an alternative to bother.

And, yet, bother is a very important part of what we do when someone dies.

¹ “The holy fire Cremation: A practice in need of ritual” by Thomas Lynch.

One of death's bittersweet gifts is its reminder that the meaning of life and the meaning of death are so intimately and inseparably connected.

For when we truly honour the hard mystery of death, we find that our lives take so much of their meaning from the fact that they will eventually come to an end.

And, when we sit before the mystery of death, when we think on those we have loved and lost— and on the fact that we, too, will someday be gone from this life— we begin to count love's true cost.

The love we know in this life is eventually paid for with grief. Lynch says, that “grief is the tax we pay on loving.” And, so it is.

That is why today we have remembered our dearly departed by bringing photographs, mementos and silent memories to this altar.

And that is why we have called out their names. That we might build bridges of love to affirm that “so long as we live, they too shall live.”

To affirm that no tax is too high for the love we have known.

In this season of remembrance, may we hold close to our hearts the memory of those who are with us no more, and may we hold, too, the lessons of what it means to be mortal, that we might live our lives ever more abundantly, as the great and fleeting gifts that they are.

Blessed Be.