

The Time of Our Lives

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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All Souls Sunday

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.

Opening Words

by Christine Robinson

At this darkening time of the year,
our thoughts turn to things past,
to life retreating, to those who are no longer with us.

Images come to our minds;
of dear companions, who once graced our lives,
loved ones whom we miss,
[people] whose lives made an impact on our lives;
of all those who were here, contributing, [and] caring,
and who are now gone.

Our memories bring both joy and sadness;
[in this precious hour,] let us not push these feelings away.

For our recollections attest to the enduring importance
of these people, this love, our memories.

May these brave and lovely spirits live again in our tender thoughts,
and prove that death and distance are powerless
to sever the bonds that connect loving hearts.

Reflection: “The Time of Our Lives”

It’s a wrist-watch that tells a lot more than time—
a new watch available for sale that
on the hour hand has the word, “Remember,”
and on the minute hand the words: “you will die.”

At \$157, it's a bargain,
for how often do we look forgetfully into the face of a clock,
wondering what time it is, without recalling
that it's, ultimately, the time of our lives?

“Remember you will die.”

A *memento mori* right there at the end of one's arm.
An unrelenting call, with each tick of the clock,
to remember our own mortality,
that we might make something of the time we have left.

This annual service honouring the traditions
of Samhain, All Souls, and Day of the Dead
is something like that watch.

At this turning time of year—
when the harvest has been brought in,
when the glorious growth of spring and summer
has given way, at last, to dormancy, decay, and death—
there is this moment we set aside from all the others
to remember our dead, and to be reminded of our own place
in life's great and mysterious unfolding.

Religious traditions the world over
have long marked this darkening time of year
by remembering those who have gone before.

The Pagan harvest festival of Samhain in the Northern Hemisphere,
the colourful celebrations of Day of the Dead in Mexico & Central America,
the feasts of All Saints and All Souls
observed in Christian and Unitarian congregations around the globe,
all involve setting aside time to call to blessed mind those who have died.

And all, through their bittersweet rituals,
leave us with the unsettled understanding that we, too, shall one day die,
and that our names—yours and mine—
will be lifted up in sacred memory before fading forever into history.

It's not an easy thought to have.
In ways it's the most deeply disturbing thing we might be able to conceive.
But, it also has the potential to be the most empowering.

Because as morbid and gloomy as all of this might sound,
looking squarely at death is, by my lights,
the surest way I know to uncovering our love for this life.

For it is when we come to realise that life is ultimately a time-limited offer
that we begin to receive the days we are given as the true gifts that they are.

Remember you will die so that you might just remember to live.

Mary Oliver, the great poet who has come as close as anyone to writing
Unitarian Universalist scripture, gets at this so poignantly
in her poem, "When Death Comes."

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
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 a 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.

I don't think any of us aspires only to have been a visitor to our lives,
but how very seductive it can be to sail along,
putting off having or getting a life,
thinking we have more time than we actually do,
or, just as damaging, if not more, thinking there's not enough time left
to make a meaningful difference and deciding to just pack it in.

Both ways of thinking can leave a life unlived.

It's worth remembering George Eliot's wise words that
"It's never too late to become who we might have been."

The tick-tick-tick of the clock can be for any of us a *memento mori*,
a constant reminder of the inevitability of our death,
but it can also, if we let it, be a *memento vivere*,
a relentless invitation into the fullness of life;
each tick-tick-tick the sound of the great heart beat
that pulses at the centre of life—and that beats within our own hearts
for such a beautiful but brief time.

Friends, remember that you will, indeed, die.
But, remember, too, that the purpose of our lives isn't to run out the clock.

Let us then, with each day that we are given,
strive to live a life worth dying for.
Amen.

Closing Words "Look To this Day" by Kalidasa

Look to this day:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of beauty;
For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today well-lived, makes every

Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day!