

# “The Love We Leave Behind”

The Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
27 October 2013

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.

**Reading**                    from “A Candy bar for death” by Doug Muder

Tonight, when there is a knock at my door, it might be Death.

Probably, though, this version of Death will only be about four feet tall. He will carry a plastic scythe, and his dark robe will not completely hide his tennis shoes. I will give him a Snickers bar instead of my life, and he will say “thank you” before turning to run back to a parent waiting on the sidewalk.

If I look scared, I will only be pretending.

Halloween is full of cute and non-threatening reminders of death: ghosts, skeletons, tombstones. Zombies, werewolves, and other murderous monsters roam the night, but they can be bought off with bags of M&M’s.

And yet, in the background lurks something more authentically ominous. I can hear the trick-or-treaters coming a long way off, and not just because they talk and laugh and argue about who will ring the doorbell. Their feet crunch through the fallen leaves—leaves that just a few weeks ago were gorgeously red or yellow or orange, and that a few weeks earlier were green and supple. The porch lights and flashlights and passing cars illuminate some actual skeletons: spindly tree branches that not so long ago were bursting with life. Now they have pulled their vitality deep inside to keep it safe through the coming winter.

Halloween really does begin the season of Death.

Not so long ago, in the days before houses had heating vents in every room and hospitals were stocked with antibiotics, the dark half of the year was a serious hurdle that many of the old and sickly would fail to jump. Even if you were young and healthy and careful, you had to face the fact that the growing season was over, and the harvest would either last until spring or it wouldn’t.

Halloween was a time to look around and wonder who would still be at the table to celebrate Easter. Or whether you would be there yourself.

### **Sermon: “The Love We Leave Behind”**

None of us can ever fully know when the knock will come.  
When the big door-bell will ring.

And the stranger standing outside our front door  
isn't some short and harmless pirate or princess  
out trick-or-treating for the night.

But something more ominous.  
A most unwelcome guest that has come calling.

Such is the situation in that classic scene, you might recall,  
from Monty Python's “The Meaning of Life,”  
when a small dinner party in a quaint English cottage  
is interrupted by an ill-timed rap on the door.

When the woman of the house goes to greet her unexpected guest,  
she finds a figure, all draped in black with his tell-tale scythe.

When he announces that he's the Grim Reaper,  
she mistakenly thinks he's come to trim the hedge.

When he further reveals himself to be death itself,  
and carries on at length about reaping,  
the woman, in a hurry to get back to her party,  
simply says that they don't want any.

And who could blame her?!

In time, at her husband's prompting, she invites him in  
and introduces him around to her guests  
as Mr. Death, the reaper who lives down in the village.

Though she pours him a drink,  
he's not come for small talk.

With little patience for social graces, he reveals he's come for them all.

They've all been done in by botulism, as it turns out.  
They're off to meet their maker on account of bad salmon mousse.

"Because I could not stop for Death," wrote Emily Dickinson,  
"He kindly stopped for me."

And so death does, and will, one day, for us all.

In the new movie "Gravity," Sandra Bullock plays an astronaut who is,  
to put it mildly, having just about the worst day imaginable.

I won't give away any more details, in case you plan to see it,  
except to say that the most gripping moment of the film, for me,  
was when it dawns on her that this looks like "it,"  
that her luck had run out—  
and that today, this day, will be the day that she would die.

The medicated manner in which we humans die in Western cultures today  
doesn't always allow for this poignant moment of knowing,  
of deep awareness, that we are, indeed, at the end.

And yet.

In his titled poem, "For the Anniversary of My Death," W. S. Merwin writes:

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day  
When the last fires will wave to me  
And the silence will set out  
Tireless traveler  
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer  
Find myself in life as in a strange garment. . .

Every year, as we spin on this globe around the sun,  
each of us passes the anniversary of our death.

That final date that will at some point in the future,  
be entered by others into countless forms to settle our affairs,

and perhaps even etched into granite  
to mark the years we were given on this earth.

It can be a deeply unsettling thought.

After all, there's little in this life more sobering  
than thinking of ourselves in the past tense.

Which makes it highly tempting to say to the reaper  
that we don't want any of what he's selling.

And, yet, that deeply unsettling thought  
can be the key to unleashing life itself.

Because it prompts us to ask what our lives are for.

Because it drives us to question our own life's purpose,  
and ponder the meaning of our days.

Because it causes us to wonder at what of us will survive after death,  
what of us—the things we did, what we loved, and who we were—  
will live beyond the grave and carry our legacy forward in the world.

Few, if any of us, will fall into the category of those long-remembered,  
generations and generations hence.

More likely, the impact of our lives, will be, as it always has,  
like gentle ripples moving out in ever-widening circles—  
shaping the planet and people yet to come  
by how we lived the days that were ours—and the days that are ours still.

In this month, when so many of you in your Theme Groups  
are grappling with the question of what it means to live a life of purpose,  
I wonder how have you answered that question for yourself?

What progress have you made in finding your own answer to that eternal  
question at the heart of being human—the one that leads us ever on  
in hopes of understanding the meaning of our lives?

Robert Fulghum tells of the time when he was trekking around Greece,

with a group guided by a marvelous man named Dr. Papaderos.<sup>1</sup>

Papaderos had a steady habit of asking if there were any questions before moving his gaggle of tourists along from each stop.

At the very end of their two-week trip, Fulghum seized the opportunity when asked if there were any questions, to ask his guide to explain the meaning of life.

He says, “The usual laughter followed and people stirred to go. but Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at [Fulghum] for a long time, asking with his eyes if [he] was serious and seeing from [his] eyes that [he] was.

With that, he said: “I will answer your question.”

He then took out his wallet and “brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.”

And what he said went like this:

When I was a small child, during the war,  
we were very poor and we lived in a remote village.

One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror.  
A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

I tried to find all the pieces and put them together,  
but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one.  
And by scratching it on a stone I made it round.

I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact  
that I could reflect light into dark places  
where the sun would never shine—  
in deep holes and crevices and dark closets.

It became a game for me to get light  
into the most inaccessible places I could find.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Laid Down On It*.

I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up,  
I would take it out in idle moments  
and continue the challenge of the game.

As I became a man, I grew to understand  
that this was not just a child's game  
but a metaphor for what I might do with my life.

I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light.  
But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there,  
and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror  
whose whole design and shape I do not know.  
Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light  
into the dark places of this world—  
into the [dark] places in the hearts of [women and] men—  
and change some things in some people.

Perhaps others may see and do likewise.  
This is what I am about.  
This[, he said,] is the meaning of my life.

I'm moved by that image—of light reflected from us out into the darkness,  
sending forth love and healing and hope where it's needed most.

Ripples radiating out from our life in every direction,  
and sometimes moving in unexpected ways.

It's not always easy to see or understand the impact our life makes.  
To see the light we reflect beyond ourselves,  
or the ways that it touches others.

Sadly, it's sometimes not clear until it is too late.  
Often, it's only after someone is gone that we see the meaning of their lives.

Not too long ago, a middle-aged woman named Joanne found herself  
rummaging through her closet in search of an old viola.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Lipman, "And the Orchestra Played On," *New York Times*, 28 February 2010.

She hadn't seen the instrument in ages.  
She "barely remembered where it was, much less how to play it."

But word had come that her childhood teacher,  
Jerry Kupchynsky—"Mr. K." to his students—had died.

As she puts it, in East Brunswick, N.J., where she grew up,  
"nobody was feared more than Mr. K.  
He ran the town's music department with a ferocity never before seen  
in [that] quiet corner of suburbia.

"In his impenetrably thick Ukrainian accent,  
he would berate [his students] for being out of tune,  
[having their] elbows in the wrong position, our counting out of sync.

"Cellos [you] sound like hippopotamus rising from bottom of river,"  
he would yell out during orchestra rehearsals.

He admonished "wayward violinists" for playing "like mahnyiak,"  
while "hapless gum chewers" were said to "look like cow chewing cud."

He would often rehearse the orchestra to the point of exhaustion.

"Mr. K. pushed us harder than our parents," Joanne said,  
"harder than our other teachers,  
and through sheer force of will  
made us better than we had any right to be.  
He scared the daylight out of us.  
[And] I doubt any of us realized how much we loved him for it."

That is why, all those years later, she was in a frantic search for an instrument  
she had not held in her hands in more than two decades.

All for a teacher, who after almost a half-century of teaching,  
had died at the age of 81.

"And across the generations, through Facebook and e-mail messages and

Web sites, came the call: it was time for one last concert for Mr. K.”—performed by his old students and friends.

Though Joanne had been a serious student, she had given up playing twenty years before when “work and motherhood intervened.”

As she opened “the decrepit case,” the hinges creaked.

She found it “pure agony to twist [her] fingers into position.”

“But to [her] astonishment and that of [her] teenage children—who had never heard [her] play—[she] could still manage a sound.”

When she showed up at a local school for a rehearsal a few days later, it turned out that there were 100 people like her—“five decades of former students,” who were now doctors and accountants and engineers, and not a few music teachers.

They came because Mr. K. had taught them something more than music.

And, yet, as touching as this true story is, it is incomplete.

There was more to Mr. K.

“As a teenager during World War II,  
he endured two years in a German internment camp.  
His wife died after a long battle with multiple sclerosis.  
All those years while [his students] whined  
that he was riding [them] too hard,  
he was raising his daughters and caring for his sick wife on his own.

“Then his younger daughter Stephanie, a violin teacher, was murdered.  
After she vanished in 1991, he spent seven years searching for her,  
never giving up hope until the day her remains were found.

He had known crushing pain in his life,  
and was more entitled than most to feelings of bitterness and resentment.

And “Yet the legacy he had left behind was pure joy.”



It could be seen “in the faces of the audience  
when the curtain rose for the performance that afternoon.”

“You could hear it as his older daughter Melanie, her husband and their  
violinist children performed as a family.”

“You could feel it when the full orchestra, led by one of Mr. K.’s protégés,  
poured itself into Tchaikovsky and Bach.”

And “It [was what] powered [this motley crew] through the lost years,  
the lack of rehearsal time...and the stray notes from [the] rustier alums.”

Amid the hardships and heartaches of his life,  
Mr. K had left a legacy of joy—  
a joy that had been born from the purpose he found in making music.

This morning, as we look into our memories of loved ones lost,  
as we see their shining faces looking back at us,  
as we recognise the ways in which they taught us  
and reflected light into our lives,  
let us not forget that our work in this world is not yet done.

May we make of ourselves mirrors.

May we find our purpose in spreading the light of life.

In how we contend with the struggles that come our way,  
may we become teachers of deep and lasting truths  
about the meaning of our days on this good, green earth.

That when the proverbial knock at the door does finally come,  
it will be a legacy of love and joy we leave behind.

So be it. Amen.