

“Everyday a Blessing”

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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.

About a year ago I decided to create an online dating profile. And in and amongst all of the questions asking you to describe yourself and your favourite things one of the questions asked – What are the 6 things you could not live without? Now I am certain that the writers of these questions assumed people to answer things like “My cell phone, passport, food, air, water, my dog.” But for me, being a seminary student, and recognizing that really I could live without a lot of the things that I find essential to my life, I decided to take this question deeper. What were the six things – that if I didn’t have – would change me, change who I am at the very core of my being. Those six things - some of my most cherished blessings are:

My father's logic.

My mother's emotional support.

My grandma's wondering questions.

My grandpa's wisdom.

My dog's unconditional love.

And my friends' Devil's advocacy.

If for some reason I woke up tomorrow and I no longer had any one of those six things, I know that my life would be irrevocably changed. And yet I know that at some point in my life one of these people will die, and I will have to manage along without the connection that we now have, and while I will be changed for it, it does not mean that I could not live without it.

When I was 11 years old my Great Grandmother died. I had visited her a few times; she lived on the West Coast, and I remembered eating plums off the trees in her backyard. But more recently she had been living in a seniors care center in Camrose, where one of her daughters, my great Aunt Judy lived. She had begun to decline and I visited her a few times while she was in the center, although her dementia made it hard for me to talk to her, and for her to remember the stories that I wanted to discuss. I remember my father being so sad when he found out she had died. We were eating dinner in the family room, when Aunt Judy called, and he cried. I had only seen my dad cry on a few occasions, but this time he sobbed. It was then that I had become afraid of dying. I didn't really know what happened, and being raised a

Unitarian Universalist meant that no one would tell me what happened when we died, other than saying that the person that you loved would no longer be around. That they had stopped breathing, and that they were going to be buried, or cremated. I didn't understand what happened, my mind could not wrap around these concepts, and I was afraid of them. Afraid to die, afraid of the people I loved dying, and afraid of the hurting that I saw in my dad that evening on the living room floor.

It was a long time before I was able to come to terms with the fear of dying, probably until 3 or 4 years ago. My undergraduate degree was in the Arts with a focus on Psychology and Religious Studies. One of the classes that I took was called Death and Dying, and while it talked about what physically happens to a body as someone dies, the majority of the class focused on the rituals and practices that happen within different faith traditions, and within the "Western Secular World." We studied Dia de Los Muertos or The Day of the Dead, a Mexican celebration that happens every year at this time, to welcome the spirits of the dead back to the world of the living, so that the spirits could listen to their prayers and hear them reminisce about their loved ones, allowing each side – the living and the dead – to celebrate the blessings of their love for each other and their lives. And many of the rituals surrounding death that we studied during that class were created for similar purposes, to be in communication with loved ones, as well as to honour and celebrate the individuals' lives at the time of their passing.

One of the stories about death that spoke loudest to me was about a river, a story of the experience of death from the Coast Salish people of the Pacific North-West. The story goes that:

There's a beautiful river that runs through the center of the community. It's wide and gentle, and covered in mist. And the community spans this river, and contains two villages, one on either side of the river. The river separates the two villages, but it also holds them together.

When we die, we don't leave our larger community, we just move across the river to the other village. We change our address, but we stay connected to those we love, on both sides of the river. Your mother is still your mother after death; your friend is still your friend. While dying does change the relationships that you have with people, it doesn't end them.

Most of the time, the two shores of the river are hidden from each other in the mist. But when someone in the Village of the Living is dying or being born, the mist lifts a little, offering a gentle blessing: Village members on both sides are

able to see each other more clearly. We remember our ancestors at a birth and at a death. And they remember us.

It is said that sometimes our dead come across and visit us on this side of the river, showing themselves in dreams, visions, and synchronicities. Like when I eat a juicy red plum, and am transported to my great grandmother's back yard. These visits help both the living and the dying prepare for the changes that death will bring.

When it's time for somebody to die, and their soul leaves their body once and for all, and they begin to make their way from the Village of the Living, it can take a while to adjust to life without a body, and for the first few days they might come back occasionally and check on the body they used to live in. They might visit other people in the Village of the Living.

But when they finally do make it to the shore of the river, they see in the sand the footprints of those they love who've died before them, people who have crossed the river. They realize that it is time to cross the river, but they can't make the journey alone. They need help, and they get that help from both sides of the river.

First, those in the Village of the Living build a canoe for their loved one. They build it, out of love. They pour their love and appreciation into creating a sturdy vessel that will carry the spirit of the one making the journey. The living also fuel the canoe for the journey, and they fuel it with the energy of their grief. Paddles are shaped like tears, and when we focus our grief on our loved one's behalf, it gives their canoe the energy it needs to propel them out into the water.

The second group to help the canoe get across is the inhabitants of the Village of the Dead. They know when a death is going to happen (even an unexpected one) and they begin to gather down by the shore, excited to receive the person who's coming to join them.

Everything in nature is balanced, and the grief we feel on this side is perfectly matched by the joy felt by our Dead on the other side. When we send the canoe out from this shore on the energy of our grief, it makes it exactly half way. The Dead then reach out and receive that canoe, using the energy of their joy to pull it towards them, celebrating the person's arrival with the same intensity as the living mourn the person's departure.

One of the things that I love about this ideology is that we are always in community, always in relationship. Whether it is during the time in our lives when we are with the people in the village of the living, or when we are in the village of the dead we are always in community. Not only then but also when we are at our most vulnerable. When we are all alone, by ourselves in the canoe it is the love and the energy of the people from both sides of the river that help us make our crossing. Such a blessing, being in relationship, being a part of one another – in life and in death.

It wasn't long after I had read this story, or listened to the discussions during our class, that I realized the reason why I was afraid of death. I was afraid of forgetting people, and I was afraid of being forgotten. Of making it through a day and not remembering the way my Great Grandmother Pearl's house smelled after she had made a pie. Or the way she felt when she would hug me tight around my neck. What if I forget my dad's way of logic-ing through any problem I could take to him, or if I forget how my mom would sing me lullabies, and brush my hair, as I would try to fall asleep after spending the evening crying. What if I forget about my grandmother's ability to ask questions, about ministry and why I feel called to be here, helping me to feel certain about myself and my struggles. Or I forget about my grandfather's wisdom about the earth, science and history. Because I have forgotten things about my great-grandmother Pearl, and if this could happen to me, now, then what will happen when I am older, what will happen when I die? Will people forget me?

Being able to recognize that death does not separate us completely from our loved ones, but instead puts speed bumps between us, has helped me to realize that I am not afraid of death, and in being able to name that I am afraid of being forgotten, has given me permission to figure out how to remember.

In the Christian Scriptures there is a passage that talks about being Surrounded by a Great Cloud of witnesses – Hebrews 12:1: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Commentators of the New Testament suggest that the author, the Apostle Paul, was meaning that Jesus is supporting you throughout life and will be running with you, supporting you, offering you perseverance. But when I read this passage I am reminded of my Cloud of Witness, those who are supporting me and who are giving me the perseverance to run this race. These are the blessings that I cannot live without:

My father's logic.

My mother's emotional support.

My grandma's wondering questions.

My grandpa's wisdom.

My dog's unconditional love.
And my friends' Devil's advocacy.
And I know that I will never have to live without them, because I will never forget them.

Whether we create a practice of remembering borrowed from the Mexican culture, where images and meaningful objects adorn our tables at this time every year, or we believe that we are all a part of a community, where the mists part from time to time, and we have connections with our dead. Or we remember the most valuable pieces of our families, the most sacred moments in the pieces of life that we share together, and offer those blessings up every day. I believe that the importance of these moments is the remembering.