

Into the Valley of the Shadow – On Death and Dying

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Over the past 4 months, 3 members of my husband's extended family passed, I prefer that word to the term died. They each had lived a full life reaching between ages 86-90. Aunt Olive lived through Alzheimer's disease for 10 years ago, Aunt Violet had progressive emphysema, and Uncle Lit, at age 90 died following an accident in his new Prius. He was the one we thought would live to be at least 100. For Aunt Olive and Aunt Violet we knew it was coming and there was a sense of relief along with the sorrow of the loss. Uncle Lit was the shock. He was a life long athlete who never drank or smoked and still biked 3 miles a day. He stopped his 4 times a week 5 mile run at age 85. It was his time my grandmother would have said. There is after all a time for all things.

Death can either come quickly or over a period of time but it does come. In fact the onset of death begins at birth. I asked myself the following in preparing for today:

1. Why is death and dying something we don't like to discuss
2. Why do we have a fear or foreboding about our own demise or that of someone close
3. What is it like to know you are dying and how do you know
4. What happens when you die
5. What is death

I think we aren't comfortable discussing death because of a fear of the unknown and lack of control over the event. Much of this is based on religious beliefs, past and present, cultural orientation and too many movies about zombies, being buried alive, Bella Lugosi like vampires, Frankenstein and ghosts that haven't moved on. Oh yes, and "the Fall of the House of Usher".

At the 2008 UU General Assembly, Rev. Forrest Church, then senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in NY and a prolific writer on UU thought, announced that he had terminal cancer and that his life would be measured in months rather than years. He went on to say that he felt lucky. His last book, "Love and Death...My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow" helped me to rethink my feelings about death and dying. Church states that religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. He continues "Death is not life's goal, only life's terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for". Adding the concept of love, the major premise of his book is that the one thing that can't be taken away from us, even by death, is the love we give before we go. Rev. Church passed one day after his 61st birthday on September 24th, 2009.

In other cultures and times, warriors who perished in battle died an honorable death and went to Valhalla preferably on a funeral pyre. Ancient Chinese and Egyptian royalty

constructed during their lifetime huge monuments to serve as their portal to the underworld often taking their spouses, servants and a small army with them. Construction, thought to be permanent, can also be an attempt at immortality.

In traditional Black African tribal cultures, animists thought their ancestors returned as good or evil spirits. Reincarnation in one form or another, either back to the earth or a type of heaven is a reoccurring worldwide theme. Most folks don't want to leave the familiar for the unknown. That is the basis of the fear of death.

Then there are the Unitarian Universalists. We are supposed to focus on the here and now, love and purpose. We are supposed to think of death as a part of life. The term Universalist means that if there is a life after death every one experiences the same phenomenon. Death is the great equalizer. Yes, every religion that I can think of, with UUs as the exception, addresses death and what happens after we die. We UUs acknowledge that it is an unknown. However, the idea of continuing through our children, touching others in a positive way, making a difference, being an organ body donor or being cremated and having the ashes scattered to refurbish the earth is another way of addressing immortality.

Most of us have known people who were terminal. I first studied the process of dying in my first year of graduate school. In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote "On Death and Dying", required reading for us sociology majors. She listed the stages as (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression and (5) acceptance. Not everyone goes through all of the stages. To quote from the poem "How Did You Die" by Edmund Vance Cooke, "Death comes with a crawl, or comes with a pounce, and whether he's slow or spry, It isn't the fact that you're dead that counts but only how you died."

At the end of a pastoral visit, the minister of friend's mother said he would see her the following day. Her reply was "I hope not". She was ready, her affairs in order. In an email from a minister she informed me of the terminal illness of a long time friend. He had had many cards and visits from the congregation and she asked him if he had a message he would like her to send back to them. He said "It all comes back to love". Another close friend awaiting a heart transplant kept telling an out of state relative to delay his visit. The week that he passed, he called that relative to say now is the time to come, not for him but to comfort and support the wife he would leave behind. Some folks take matters into their own hands, take charge and go the way of euthanasia, others must be given permission to let go. I don't know how one knows when the time has come but sometimes we are fooled and recover. A close friend diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor 15 years ago is still very much alive designing websites and publishing newsletters for non profits.

The way the family or congregation in the case of no family handles the demise of the body says much about our society and the individual. My great grandmother, a 50 year member of her church wrote out the entire funeral service which was a two day affair. She was a take charge person, a primitive Baptist who went to glory with all 4 choirs singing, two sermons and more wailing than I thought I could handle. It was the last full

scale funeral for a family member. We all decided to be cremated, most opting out of a service.

My grandfather wanted his ashes flushed down the toilet...no money for the undertakers, His brother-in-law's occupation. Speaking of undertakers, an article in the March 09 issue of Smithsonian Magazine, "The surprising Satisfactions of a Home Funeral", cited the average cost of \$6500 for a funeral not including cemetery costs. It states that about 13% of the median American family's annual income is spent so that the living doesn't have to deal with the physical reality of death. The article points out that most people in the world don't spend 13% of anything on dead bodies, even once in a while. Seems that modern embalming started during the civil war was the driver. The author lost his father and father in law within 7 days of each other. One wanted the family to prepare his body with the viewing held in his home. He wanted food drink and song and got it. The family even made the coffin. The other wanted the full blown religious service, incense and all. His wishes were also followed. I wonder if the after life ritual such as it is, is for the living rather than the dead.

Our aunt's husband didn't want a cheap looking coffin, authorizing expenditure up to \$10,000. Of course it cost an additional \$1400 to open the mausoleum on a weekend, \$300 more than on a weekday, and then afterward about 100 folk were fed well and we had a live jazz combo. Her husband purchased the mausoleum for both 20 years ago because he didn't want to be under ground. "Wanted to be able to sit up and look out."

Another friend wanted to be cremated and requested that his ashes be sent to the IRS with a note attached saying "Now you have everything" The first part was followed but I think his ashes are in the family compost heap. Then there was the Shakespearian artistic director in Chicago who willed his head to his theatrical company. It was to be used in productions of Hamlet.

My final thoughts aren't really original. I have read that death liberates the soul from the bondage of the flesh. I know that in many cultures life and death are not viewed as opposing forces but aspects of the same existence.

I hope to continue living the UU principles though I struggle with universal love-there are some folks I will never like or respect let alone love. I review periodically and revise my personal creed recognizing and not wanting to ever be perfect. I want to die well with my affairs in order (get them together now) and think of death as the final adventure. I am an organ body donor to be cremated by the medical school. I would love for my ashes to fertilize

A garden however if this is not possible let the medical school get rid of them. I may write a few words to be read but I don't think in terms of a memorial service but rather a celebration of life, have a pot luck party with music, laughter and dance.

Prepare to ease the grief and follow up process for those you leave behind and remember the key to immortality is living a life worth remembering, a quote from Brandon Lee, son of Bruce Lee the martial arts king.