

“Life and Death: Facing Our Mortality”

Sara Lewis

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First Reading: “A Guided Meditation on Dying,” by [Joshua Leach](#), [Seth Robinson](#)

For this guided meditation, I invite you to get comfortable in your seat. Close your eyes, if you like, and take a deep breath. And another.

Now, imagine that your death is a person. What does this person look like? Is the person angry and cruel, or laughing and kind? Does this person attract or repel you? Imagine that this person has been with you your whole life. From the moment you were born, your death came into the world to keep you company. Your death is your oldest companion and friend who has never given up on you. Your death does not make its presence known to you when you don't wish to think about it, but neither does it allow you to delude yourself when you fancy yourself immortal.

Your death will come to you at last, but you don't know how, or when. It may tap you politely on the shoulder. It may cough and nudge you to get your attention. Or your death may come to you when you least expect it. It may come to you when you don't wish it to come, when it is the very last person you wish to meet. You may hate your death and fear it. That is okay. Your death realizes this and does not mind.

Imagine now you are finally meeting your death face to face. Your death knows you do not wish to meet it and is saddened by the fact, because they are your oldest friend and companion and they wish to be loved by you. You ask your death why—why should you love it? How does it answer? Does it remind you that you could not live if you did not also die? Does it tell you that life and death are not enemies of one another, but two sides of the same coin? Does it remind you of the other things that you love even though they, too, are finite, limited, terminal: other people, places, memories, objects? Or does it say something else entirely, or nothing at all?

What does your death look like now? Can you still see it? Does it look the same as it did at the beginning or has it changed? How do you feel when you stand face to face with this death, who came into the world with you the moment you were born, and who will take leave of it at your side as well?

Now, conscious of that intimacy you've newly forged with your death, allow your attention to linger there, at that moment of encounter, or let your mind take you where it will, touched by this meeting. Breathe once again deeply. In. And out. Continue breathing deeply into this knowing as the music bears us on.

Sermon/Homily: Life and Death: Facing Our Mortality

This summer I took a class on Death and Dying from the Chaplaincy Institute, as part of my seminary training. One part of this class was for each of the students to create a death plan for themselves. Writing a living will was easy enough for me, but thinking through my wishes for a memorial service and burial options was a deeper dive into my own values. I created and shared a plan for my own memorial and burial with my family – a very meaningful and important exercise in facing my own mortality.

It wasn't the first time I was confronted with the fact that I will die someday, of course. We all know this to be true after some point in our childhood when death first becomes real to us. For me, that time was when I was 10 years old and a friend of mine died. His funeral was a Catholic open casket service, and I remember looking at his face looking so strange, all covered in thick makeup, and being struck by the reality of death. When was the first time you became aware of death?

My own death took on a different meaning for me when I was 18 and joined the Army National Guard. That was the first time I was asked to formally write down who my beneficiary would be if I died. And then it became even more real to me when I became

a parent and realized I needed to choose a guardian for my child in case I were to die. When did you first have to plan for a future that wouldn't include you?

Maybe you've honestly never confronted death or your own mortality before. Or maybe you do a really good job of avoiding the idea. Many people have negative feelings about their own death that range from avoidance to full on terror at the idea.

Death anxiety and death terror are the subject of a book by psychiatrist Dr. Irvin D. Yalom, titled *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*. In this book, Dr. Yalom shares stories of the many patients that he has worked with as they confront their own anxiety or even terror at the knowledge that they will die. Unlike some other theorists, Dr. Yalom does not believe that a fear of death is a symbol representing some other anxiety, but is rather one of the fundamental anxieties that confront most people. He comes to the question of death as a rational humanist, with no beliefs in any sort of afterlife, and still finds that the idea of death can become comfortable for most people after they face their fears.

In fact, he goes further than simple comfort and believes that facing death can make our experience of life richer, as he writes: *Keep in mind the advantage of remaining aware of death, of hugging its shadow to you. Such awareness can integrate the darkness with your spark of life and enhance your life while you still have it. The way to value life, the way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost.*

This reminds me of the way our former minister, Arthur Vaeni, liked to speak of life itself as a gift, as the ultimate gift that we have all received. Each year that we live is a chance to seek truth and know love, which is a gift. He wove that understanding of life into the birthday song that he wrote and we sang for many years here, which some of the old timers will remember. That birthday song celebrated the preciousness of each new day that we are given.

I'm also reminded of one of my favorite Mary Oliver poems, the Summer Day. In this poem, she reflects on the meaning of life and nature and how she has spent the day simply being idle and strolling and appreciating nature. She ends with a question: should she have done anything else? Doesn't everything die? Too soon? Which brings the last two lines:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

Yes, your one wild and precious life. Isn't that just a delicious phrase? Knowing that this life is temporary makes it so precious. How will we each choose to spend the days that we are given? Treat them as though they are precious.

And life is also wild, a word that for me brings to mind the sheer adventure of not knowing what may happen or what may come next. We can embrace this kind of life, and live more fully precisely because we know it ends.

In the words of the country song by Tim McGraw, may we all get the chance to live like we were dyin'.

Of course, many people believe that there is something else after death that the human soul will experience. These are religious beliefs from many different traditions, but they also come from direct experiences that many people have.

Some people, including some of you today perhaps, have experienced past life memories. These are memories of being alive before, as another person, in another time. For people who have had this experience, and for those who believe in reincarnation, this is not our one and only life. Of course, it's still the one and only life that will be just like this, with you being this person that you are right now.

Others, including maybe some of you today, have experienced a sense of communicating with or seeing spirits or ghosts. For people who have had this experience, and for others as well, there may be a belief that the spirit or soul of a person lingers on after death and is still interested in what is happening in the living world. Many cultures and traditions include a belief in ancestral spirits still being connected and concerned with the lives and wellbeing of their families. Other beliefs include hungry ghosts or unhappy spirits that need to be helped in some way to be at peace or to move on.

And then there are people who have what are called near death experiences, where they come close to dying, may be technically dead for some period of time, and then come back to life with memories of an experience of something. Many of the descriptions of these experiences include similar elements, but not all do. Many are positive experiences, but it's estimated that one in five are distressing. Some people have experiences that they describe as hellish or awful in some other way, while others describe a sort of heavenly gathering. These near death experiences lead many to believe in some kind of afterlife that our spirits or souls will experience after death.

Anecdotally, people who work in hospice settings share that many people who are about to die will dream of or say that they are seeing loved ones who have died, come to tell them that it's all OK and they'll be together soon. Many people believe that there will be some sort of reunion with the souls of loved ones after death.

On the other hand, some believe that death is the end of everything and there is no afterlife. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus was one of the thinkers who proposed this view, with three arguments:

1. The mortality of the soul – the soul dies when the body dies
2. The ultimate nothingness of death – if the soul is mortal and dissolves, there is no “thing” to experience death, therefore death cannot be perceived and doesn't really exist for the dead

3. The argument of symmetry – the state of non-being after death is the same state as we were in before we were born

Dr. Yalom finds the third argument particularly comforting, writing: *I have personally found it comforting on many occasions to think that the two states of nonbeing – the time before our birth and the time after death – are identical and that we have so much more fear about the second pool of darkness and so little concern about the first.*

Others, including me personally, are not sure of any kind of after life for the soul, but still find comfort in the fact that we are all part of the matter and energy of the universe, and after our death the bits that made up us will return to the cycle and the interdependent web. Sometimes jokingly called “compost theology”, this is an awareness that living matter dies and is transformed into the stuff of new life, and is never really lost.

Or, in another metaphor that is popular for explaining one of the Buddhist understandings of death, a wave exists for a short period of time before coming down and becoming the water again. Where did the wave go? Back into the water, which never goes away. Each of our lives is like a wave, an illusion of separation from the essential larger reality.

Unitarian Universalism does not tell us what to believe about death. It is one of the great mysteries. What we do agree on is that we will accept each other’s diverse ideas, and that all are worthy and loved. Some have described the UU view as “whatever happens to us, it happens to us all, no one is damned while others are saved”.

Overall, we live in a culture that avoids thinking about death, along with the companion realities of aging and illness. It can feel almost as though death, dying, and grief are taboo subjects. While we do have one national holiday, Memorial Day, set aside for remembering those who have died in wars, the holiday is usually wrapped in a flag and BBQ more than being a time to acknowledge death.

I have found over the years that when we create space here for people of all ages to talk about death, they welcome it and also notice how unusual that is. It has stuck with me for years that at one of our children’s Day of the Dead classes one year, a young

boy who I didn't know well shared that his grandfather had died and then said that it was nice that it was OK to be sad here, that he couldn't be sad at school because people didn't like it.

We've built a culture where kids feel like it's not ok to be sad, where we whisk death and illness away out of sight, and where we avoid talking about the reality that all of us will die at some point.

Many cultures keep death closer and honor it as part of life. In recent years the Mexican holiday of Dia de los Muertos has become widely known, with the animated movie Coco bringing it into popular culture. We have, in the past, held Dia de los Muertos services here at OUUC. It is a beautiful example of a healthy engagement with death and grief. However, we've come to understand now, it is not appropriate for a mostly white congregation or for white folks in general to simply take on traditions and rituals from another culture without invitation or context.

This issue was well explained in a blog post by Aya de Leon, titled "Dear White People/Queridos Gringos: You Want Our Culture But You Don't Want Us – Stop Colonizing the Day of the Dead. She writes:

it is completely natural that you would want to participate in celebrating The Day of The Dead. You, like all human beings, have lineage, ancestors, departed family members. You have skulls under the skin of your own faces, bones beneath your flesh. Like all mortals, you seek ways to understand death, to befriend it, and celebrate it in the context of celebrating life and love.

However, she goes on to point out the difference between coming as a guest to an indigenous led event versus putting on your own event or wearing a costume, particularly in the cultural context of continued racism and oppression of Hispanic and Latine and Indigenous people. As she says *There's nothing wrong with wanting to participate in this deeply human holiday, there's something wrong with wanting to colonize.*

Of course, there are European traditions that honor death as well. The roots of the holiday Halloween, which we will celebrate next week, are in old pagan holidays such as the Celtic Samhain, which honored the dead. The Catholic church incorporated those old pagan celebrations into All Souls Day, a holiday for remembering the dead. Soul Cakes would be baked, and “Soulers” would go door to door singing and offering prayers for the souls of the people’s dead loved ones and would be given a cake in exchange. From that we get trick and treating.

And there is the European phenomenon of the memento mori, which is Latin for “remember that you must die”. Memento mori are artistic or symbolic reminders of the inevitability of death. Skull and coffin motif jewelry became popular in the 16th century, so our modern goth and emo kids are following in a long tradition.

There are cultural observances around death from African and Asian cultures as well, as people have always died and all cultures have recognized that in different ways. There are many rich sources to draw respectfully and responsibly from as we craft our own remembrances of death. We have many models of cultures that accept death in healthy ways.

As we accept the fact that we must die, you may want to prepare for your death. Leaving your loved ones with clear instructions for how you want to be treated as you are dying, how you want to be remembered, and what you want done to and with your body is actually giving them a gift, as they don’t have to guess what you might have wanted. Putting your affairs and your stuff in order, so others don’t have to sort through a mess is also a gift you can leave behind. And none of us are so young or healthy that we don’t need to think about this yet. We just don’t know how long our life will be.

This summer I put together some wording that I would want incorporated in any obituaries or other written remembrances of me, and a list of things I’d like included in a memorial service. In fact, one of the hymns Troy picked for today, “Let it Be a Dance”, is one of the pieces of music I put in my memorial plan. My husband wouldn’t know I liked that hymn, but now he does.

If we don't prepare and leave our wishes clearly stated, the practices around our death may not be in alignment with our values. Many of the default practices around death, such as expensive caskets, embalming, and cemeteries, are both costly and environmentally toxic. The funeral industry is actually controlled by only a few companies, that have bought up all the seemingly independent funeral homes and have a pretty tight grip on the industry.

Other options do exist. Cremation is increasingly popular, and here at OUUC folks have the option of having their ashes added to our columbarium. The names of everyone whose ashes have been placed in the columbarium are on a plaque inside the classroom wing entrance doors. In Washington State you can also choose a green burial or composting of remains. It's harder to find those options, so again, you might want to plan ahead if that is what you would want done with your body.

And, unfortunately, people who face marginalization in life may also face it in death. There are specific things you may want to think about ahead of time if you are a very large or overweight person, if you are transgender, or if you have a difficult or estranged relationship with your next of kin. It can be complicated, so working through those questions in advance helps keep you and the way you lived your life and want your death to be handled centered in the process.

If you are now curious about the whole funeral and death process, I recommend youtuber Caitlin Doughty, whose channel is called Ask a Mortician. It's just one more way to de-mystify the process of death.

Ultimately, I believe that having a healthier acceptance of death can help us all have a deeper appreciation of life. It is a fact that we will all die, that everything is ultimately impermanent. Some of us may be expecting something after death, while others of us don't or aren't sure. But whatever may come after death, it won't be this life anymore. This life, the life that you are living right now, today, is your one wild and precious life. It is a gift that you have been given. It probably isn't perfect, and we all face plenty of

boring, mundane, painful, or downright awful bits in our lives. But it's also our only ground as this person we are, and it holds the potential for so much amazing, wonderful, and profoundly true bits as well.

May we all live fully, love well, and leave this life, when we do, thankful for the gift that we have had. And may we remember those who have died, grieve as we have loved, fully and well, and honor death as a part of life.

I invite you now into a brief time of silence together.