

Death and Dying: Is it Everlasting?

Sermon by Rev. Kathleen Owens

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This Big Question series has been very rich and I know our chalice circles have enjoyed plunging into the questions and sermons and mulling over the various topics. I've been mulling quite a bit lately, turning over this topic of death and dying and how it would be to preach on this subject so close to Valentine's Day. And it's a subject that I expect I'll be mulling over for a long time. It has been interesting to play with, how, in fact, they do go together in some ways.

Some of you may remember the scene in the movie, *The Matrix*. Neo, our hero in the story, has been shot and is dying. And just when we think he has breathed his last, we see the love of his life, Trinity, confess her love for him. She kisses him and we see him take a deeper breath. He gets up and continues on. In the sequel, it's Trinity who has risked her life for his; she is shot and he, in his deep love for her, reaches into her wound and massages her heart back into a life-sustaining beat.

In our culture and in the media it is love that has ultimate power over death—it is the ultimate source of power—love conquers death. And I don't think it's only in the movies that this truth is realized. I think it's true in our lives as well, if we're willing to bend our thinking and allow ourselves to think and experience our loved ones who have died, in a different way. I think there is so much more to life than just this tangible, physical form, this body. And after the death of a loved one, we are invited into this different way of thinking, of experiencing, of maybe even believing that life does in fact continue—that love can conquer death.

Death isn't something we talk about often or with ease in our lives. We are so unaccustomed to discussing death that, even at a memorial or funeral service, we find ways to talk about everything else except our grief and the reality of death. And in our culture, we try to do things to stave off death; we try to eat right, get enough exercise, take vitamins and herbs. And all of this can help us enjoy our living. All of it can help our bodies become healthier and more energetic, but doing all of that does not keep the reality of death away. A few years ago I saw a bumper sticker that summed it up this

way: "Eat right, exercise often, die anyway." And it's true.

Death will come for each of us regardless of what we do. In our fear and in the uncertainty of death and what happens during and after it, we have removed ourselves from this natural process. It wasn't that long ago, maybe in our grandparents' generation, that when people died, they were laid out at home. Family and friends came to the house and would eat and drink together and share their stories, their memories—all right there in the house. Now, in our time, we have removed death from our homes. We have institutionalized it. Death is something that happens over there—in another place. But death is a natural part of living. From the moment we are born, and perhaps before that—even while in the womb—certain parts of us die so that other parts can thrive. And once we're born, we begin to die, in slow, gradual ways for most of us. Our birth is the beginning of our death. It was the poet T.S. Eliot who said, "In my beginning is my end." And it is in his East Coker section in his extended Four Quartets poem that echoes the ancient Hebrew writer of The Book of Ecclesiastes, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." Eliot ends that quartet with, "In my end is my beginning." Death is part of the larger circle of life and energy; and it is our energy, our matter that, upon death, changes forms and, I believe, continues on.

Our own dying is one thing. Some die slowly and others quickly. Some are in pain and others die in their sleep, seemingly without much resistance. The few I have heard discuss the subject speak of their own deaths almost matter-of-factly. This tone changes dramatically, however, when they speak of their partner, their parent, their sibling, or another loved one's death. One of the most painful aspects of death is not necessarily the dying part, but the living after death has occurred. Being named someone's survivor can be the most difficult state of being while on this earth. There is the incredible and almost indescribable sense of loss and emptiness afterward. After the memorial and the wake—after the minister has tried to make sense of life and death, has tried to offer some meaning to

others about this part of our reality, and after the relatives have gone home and the daily routine of life continues—being in that place, having to continue on in the face of such loss is one of the hardest challenges of our lives. How do we do this?

It was in September that her mother died. On the cross-country plane ride Barbara Hamilton-Holway, in her book *She Speaks of Death*, talked with a hospice volunteer. “He said, ‘At the end of life people wonder, who will remember me?’ Facing her mother’s death, Barbara wondered, ‘Now, who will remember me as a baby, as a girl, as a young woman?’” In her memoir of grief and recovery, Barbara writes about the complex, rich, difficult, emotional, loving, and challenging relationship she shared with her mother. The death of her mother left her feeling alone as no other death can do. She is now motherless, and who will remember the little girl with the skinned knee; the teenager whose own growth competes with family needs; the young woman coming into her own sense of self and awareness. And in the midst of her grief, Barbara finds she is still nourished by her relationship with her mom, even after her death. Her grief and suffering were not all consuming. As Forrest Church wrote, “Everyone suffers, but not everyone despairs. Despair is a consequence of suffering only when affliction cuts us off from others. It need not.” The exploration of her mother’s death revealed the importance of the community she had around her as her mother died. She was surrounded by family members, by her own children, and by her mother’s church community and minister, and by her own church. Barbara said, “In the midst of chaos, grief, and loss, I’m not alone. Each family member is stepping forward. Each one of us is doing what he or she can. Each becomes the face and voice and hands of love. I put my trust in this love. . . .each of us steps forward, offering a simple, single action that ministers and makes all the difference.”

How do we cope? If we are fortunate, we belong to a community (one like this one) that will love and comfort, accept and live with us in our grief. We surround ourselves with people who have experienced this part of life before and allow their presence to nurture our hurting souls. The Rev. Forrest Church wrote, “religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” In our search for meaning and living, when death happens, it is here we are reminded that death is not too high a price to pay

for having lived and loved on this earth. It is that connection with others that sees us through.

I think we cope best with a balance of solitude and community. It is important to spend some time alone and, in that aloneness, experience that in fact we are still connected. We are connected to life and to love and to that person whose physical body is no longer next to us or at the other end of the phone cord or receiving our cards and letters. But their essence, our memories of them, the love we continue to feel for them—all of that is still present and with us, surrounding us and carrying us through the grief, carrying us through to the other side of being alive in this world without them in the way we were used to being with them. We come into community into that group of people who love and support us. We enter into the company of loved ones who will hold us with our aching, throbbing hearts laid bare, and they will meet us in our hurt and be the divine in the flesh, offering comfort, offering companionship, offering tenderness in our vulnerability. And then encouraging us to continue on, to find our meaning and reach out to another.

In a previous sermon I stated that our faith is not an easy one. It does not tell us what to believe; it does not offer answers but encouragement in seeking the truth. It also does not provide much teaching about life after death. Christianity, Islam, and other world religions promise an afterlife filled with mansions and a promised land where there is no suffering, no tears. Our faith has no collective belief about the afterlife. So where is our comfort? What gets us through when we do not believe in a heavenly home?

I cannot speak for you, but I think peace and comfort come when we can acknowledge a life well lived—a life that made a difference in the lives of people. Our UU faith asks us to focus on this life rather than on an unknowing hereafter one. Our faith and our lack of dogma compel us to live lives that are filled with meaning, filled with service, filled with joy. It takes great courage to live in this faith that asks us to confront this world, to face the hard questions of this life rather than offer promises of an afterlife paradise.

Coming into this faith from another tradition we learn to survive the death of certain ideas or hopes. I came from a faith tradition that offered absolutes and answers about life after death. There was great

comfort in that, given the finality of death. Considering Unitarian Universalism, I knew I had to let die those ideas and thoughts that gave me that false sense of comfort. Instead I was and still am, as you are today, encouraged to live with uncertainty and find comfort and meaning in the present. We come together to learn how to live lives worth dying for.

I offer a traditional Oriental story. The country was at war. The people were terrified and had fled to the hills in the face of the advancing enemy troops. By the time the army arrived, the place was deserted. The fierce-looking general called his troops together. "Where has everyone gone?" he demanded, raging. "They have all fled in fear of us," they replied. "Is there no one left to pay tribute? No treasure to plunder?" The general's rage knew no bounds. "As far as we can discover, the only living person here for miles around is an old holy man living in a hermitage just outside the village." Without any more ado, the general marched to the hermitage and demanded to see the holy man. After a search, he found him quietly meditating. The general was furious that the holy man refused to acknowledge him as conqueror. He shouted at the holy man, "Don't you know who I am? You are looking at the man who could strike you dead without batting an eyelid!" The holy man raised his eyes and fixed his gaze steadily on the raging commander. "Don't you know," he said calmly, "that you are looking at a man who can be struck dead without batting an eyelid?" For a moment the general was speechless, fixed by the cool gaze of the holy man. Then he bowed low, called his troops together, and left the village without doing any further damage.

For me, the important question is: Are we, right now in this moment, living lives that are worth dying for? How do you know? What would that look like to you? One way for me is to open to loving more, experiencing and expressing more compassion. To live with hearts and arms wide open, to acknowledge the pain and be willing to live fully anyway, especially because there may be pain along the way.

How willing are you to open your heart—especially a heart once hurt with loss—and risk living? Risk loving? Risk caring? Death and dying and Valentine's Day: they all go together for they are all a part of life, a life for which we long. Forrest Church wrote: "Whenever we give our hearts in love, the burden of our vulnerability grows. We risk being rebuffed or embarrassed or inadequate. . . .we risk the enormous pain of loss. . . .All of this is worth it. Especially the pain. If we insulate our hearts from suffering, we shall only subdue the very thing that makes life worth living. We cannot protect ourselves from loss. We can only protect ourselves from the death of love. And without love, there is no meaning. Without love, we are left only with the aching hollow of regret..."

This world is longing for you, for your life to open to love, for you to risk the pain of loss. People here are experiencing the many different deaths that are possible in our life—the death of a hope, the death of an idea that once gave comfort, the death of a loved one—and they are waiting for you to be the divine in the flesh who will minister to them. This faith tradition encourages you to focus your energy and your time on this life, to be concerned with this day, this moment, and to make a difference, make it a better place than before. Today, you are encouraged to love more and live a life worth dying for. Death and dying are natural spokes in the wheel of life. There are no escapes, nothing you can do to prevent them. So how shall we live instead? Knowing death is imminent, how shall we go on? There is a line in one of my favorite songs that says: "the only measure of your life will be the love you leave behind when you're gone." Because of this community and your participation in it, may your life be well lived, may you make a difference and leave behind relationships that continue to sustain and nourish others. May the Love you leave behind, and thus your life, continue on and indeed be everlasting.

Blessed Be.