

Reclaiming Our Death
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
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How often do you think about your death? I don't think about mine often at all – it seems very far away. Even so, the subject of death interests me very much. Like life, it is a bottomless subject, relevant in so many different ways - in its inevitable reality, in its symbolism, and in its spiritual capacity to inform how we live. As Kenneth Kramer writes in the introduction of his book, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, “how we perceive death affects the way we live” and “how we live affects the way we die.”¹ Also in his introduction is a list of over 60 euphemisms we use for dying, to help us avoid speaking of death directly. Some of these are, Kicked the bucket, Passed on, Checked out, Bit the dust, Pushing up daisies, Departed, Rode into the sunset, That was all she wrote, and my personal favorite, Croaked.²

I am drawn to the subject of death because our culture tends to avoid it. I am convinced that, along with other errors of our post-modern thinking, we are also making a grave error in skipping a greater awareness of death. Not only are we making the deaths of loved ones tougher for all concerned, we are missing out on the spiritual benefits of how death can teach us how to live.

If you search on Amazon, you learn that there are many books about death – most of them about how to grieve after the fact. These are the books you might as well buy new, because books about grief are in high demand. But there are also many books about religious and philosophical views of death that you can buy pre-owned for under three dollars (shipping not included), because these books are not in demand. Many of them are textbooks for people who are required to read them for coursework. Death is clearly not a popular subject.

But it is a fascinating subject. In preparation for this sermon and for the class on death that I'm going to be teaching, starting this Wednesday, I ordered many books. Reading them I realized how numerous and varied the topical themes of death are. Let me list these for you: there is the topic of how death is in our culture now, shrouded with avoidance, the fear of an undignified and prolonged death, and in the grip of the medical industry rather than our own hands. For these reasons, there is the topic of how to reclaim our death, to better prepare our selves and our loved ones for it. There is the topic of spiritual death, which at first sounds like a bad thing, but is actually a very good thing, because it is only spiritual death that can precede a spiritual rebirth.

Then there is the topic of death as a daily teacher, where we learn to improve our quality of life by learning to be present to and accepting of all the little deaths contained in our everyday lives, from moment to moment. As you might guess, this teaching has a Buddhist origin. And finally, there is the topic of how, now more than ever, a collective death of this gluttonous era of human history is needed, that we may survive and thrive on a planet of limited means.

I realized that I could preach five different sermons on death – and that would be over-kill. So today, I want to introduce us to thinking about death, and why it's good to reclaim the role that death plays in our lives. Neither this sermon nor the class shall be about grieving after loss, at least not directly. That is a very important subject, but we're more indirectly interested in grief, by focusing on what comes well before death. It's like focusing on the cause of an illness rather than its remedy. Today we're interested in the questions, why prepare for death? And how did we get to a place where it is necessary to reclaim death?

In my parents' house is an entire wall of older photographs that are portraits of the family – most of them in black and white and most of the people in them are dead. The earliest ones go back to the turn of the century, from 19th to 20th. Of course the people are not dead in the photographs, though, because

¹ *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 1988, by Kenneth Kramer, p. 12, published by Paulist Press.

² Same, p. 14.

back then they couldn't smile to ensure the clearest exposure, they kind of look like they'd rather be dead.

Right before this time, just before the modern age began, it would have been common to have pictures of your dead relatives, with them actually dead in the photograph. Doing research in a small Wisconsin town almost 40 years ago, a man named Michael Lessy discovered a trove of black and white photographs dating from the 1890's. The photographs revealed a horrifying portrait of Black River Falls, a mid-western town collapsing with the US economy of the day. But they revealed something else: a picture of death and dying that today we might envy.

Here is how Lessy describes death and dying in small town America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

They died at home. The corpse was photographed. And often the photograph was placed in the family album parlor, so that when people came to visit, they would often go through the family album and use that as an occasion to talk about the passing of that person . . . One could choreograph the end (my italics). One could arrange to say the proper goodbyes, be given the sacraments, be surrounded by your family. You could ask to be forgiven. And they could slip away.³

The important points here about what dying was like before the modern age is that one, the dying were more likely to be in charge, and two, death was more personal, familiar, and visible.

Dying was far more likely to happen at home than it is today. Today, somewhere between three-quarters and four-fifths of deaths take place in institutions, in hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice centers, where the medical staff, doctors and nurses, are, in effect, more in charge than the one who is dying. Back in the day, family doctors who made house calls were in a better position to let the family take over when the time was right. Today, we are more likely to be dying in the presence of medical professionals, with whom we have no personal relationship.

Think of your best death scenario. All of us hope for a death that looks something like this: we are home, we are looked after well, our pain is managed, we are surrounded by our family and friends, everyone has a chance to say goodbye, our Ts are crossed and our Is are dotted. These beautiful deaths do exist, and they are tremendous end-of-life blessings for all involved. But the truth is that they are the exception. Sometimes, even with great planning, death comes suddenly, or is painful, undignified, and lonely. Which is one reason why it is so important to take charge of our death in the ways we can now.

The story of how death became more hidden and unpredictable today is interesting, and particular to our western culture. According to historian Philippe Aries, who wrote *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, for nearly 2,000 years death was, in a sense, tamed, by the religious preoccupations of the time: the certainty of a personality-intact afterlife served to direct the fear of death. It's hard to imagine today, in the post-modern era, how much St. Augustine's Christianity influenced the western mind. And while it's true that an obsession with the quality of an afterlife granted a power to the church that we would be quite uncomfortable with today, we have experienced a loss in going too far in the other direction. Eventually, as we moved from a traditional worldview toward a scientific worldview, the western mind concerned itself not with the soul's destiny after death, but to life here and now.

While making our life here and now our priority is more comfortable to us, here's what we've lost: our spiritual interests have to compete with our secular and material interests, and for more and more people today, they cannot compete. In other words, our death is no longer a tool of focus for monitoring our spiritual fitness. What shifted from the pre-modern era to the modern, was an attachment to the after-life to an attachment to our actual life. The scientific worldview not only served to weaken the traditional worldview, but as you know, it also became the tool that prolongs our lives, for better or for worse, through medical technological advancement.

³ Philosophical Thinking About Death and Dying, 2007, by Vincent Barry, p.32, published by Thomson Wadsworth.

Now, the post-modern era, starting about 1975, has brought the arrival of a paradox about our dying. On the one hand, we deny death, and want it to never happen – we go to lengths to prevent the aging process altogether, while science searches for a cure to death. How telling it was this week when it was announced that Social Security was soon going to be unviable, not because of the economy, but because our life-expansion has surpassed the pay-in.

On the other hand, we are also confronting death today with surprising candor. We discuss the merits of euthanasia and Dr.-assisted suicide. People buy burial plots in advance, and execute directives for end-of-life treatment. In other words, we plan for death. The paradox, according to sociologist Jeanne Guillemin, is that our fearful denial of death runs parallel with our rational planning for it. She says,

“death is far from tamed . . . The current discussion of how to die gives evidence of terrible fears that those final circumstances are beyond one’s control. In a culture that prizes individual autonomy . . . American anxiety about dying centers on how the individual can avoid dependence.”⁴

What are we to make of all this? On the one hand, we understand that planning is important. On the other, the fact remains that we really don’t know how we or anyone we love is going to die, so how much control should we try to have?

The well-known 12-step saying is an appropriate segue at this point in the sermon, as we shift to a more spiritual discussion of death: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

We who love control must let it go, and have the courage to focus on what is within our means to influence. While it can be a nebulous endeavor to urge our loved ones, such as our parents, to plan for their deaths, we know we can do our best to plan for our own. But I’m not going to talk about wills or directives now. That is another important topic, and one that our Pastoral Care team can help get you started with. For example, it is vital to find out everything you can about a terminal illness and the end of life treatment options, as soon as the illness is diagnosed. It is vital to make your specific wishes known to people who will have the legal authority to honor your wishes. But as I said before, even with our best planning intentions, the precise circumstances of our death will remain out of our hands.

What we can control is the quality of our spiritual life that will affect how we die. Anyone can begin to work on this now. And this is what my course, *Stories of Death*, will focus on.

Christina Baldwin, the author of *Storycatcher*, says this:

“We each create a story of the self that begins with our birth story and then continues with what we remember, speak, and write about our own lives. We decide throughout this process what we want our lives to include and what kind of legacy we want to leave behind, and then we are challenged to act on this story – to become who we say we are.”

All of the world religions have instructions for how to prepare for your death. Unitarian Universalists? Not so much. Perhaps it’s because our personal beliefs about what happens after we die vary so much that ministers are at a loss as to how to accommodate for this diversity. But we all have a story of the self; any of us can identify the prominent themes of our lives, if we choose to do so. The endeavor can reveal priorities – and attending to these priorities may bring us greater peace, and make it easier to go gently into that good night.

Some of us feel no need for such exploration, which is fine; you may already know your priorities, or you may already have made significant adjustments to who you are, toward greater self-awareness.

But there are just as many of us for whom a spiritual death is needed, sometimes desperately needed. According to Kenneth Kramer, a fundamental teaching of the world’s sacred traditions is that ordinary human consciousness is wounded or divided, and that any healing or reunification occurs as a function of

⁴ Same, p.48.

spiritual death and rebirth. So, spiritual death refers to a death/rebirth experience that is necessary for one's well-being and personal wholeness. It is the death of old patterns, habits, roles, and identities. Because the old self dies and a new self emerges, spiritual death transforms one's attitudes both toward life and, in the face of death.⁵

To die before dying is a universal spiritual feat. And it would look different for any individual, but the end results all have one thing in common. You are free of fear. The self-serving person becomes free of greed and fear. The abused spouse becomes free of abuse and fear. The depressed person becomes free of anger and fear. To die spiritually is to "de-repress" our internalized fears. The less afraid we are to be who we are meant to be, the less afraid we will be to die.

The theme of control resurfaces, as to die spiritually involves surrender, and letting go.

Perhaps actual death has become such a frightful prospect in our time because we have neglected to work on our dying before dying. When the real end is near, we realize in horror that there were transformations during our lifetime that we didn't permit. Each life contains unique challenges, and it is a paradoxical discovery indeed, to realize that meeting those challenges requires our dying. That to live, to really live, means we have to die.

This is the point in my sermon where my mentor would say I'm getting really airy-fairy. Let me conclude with a concrete example.

Most of you will know the name Cat Stevens, the wonderful musician. In case you didn't know, Cat Stevens is dead. He died when he became Yusuf Islam, in 1977, when he had an Islamic, spiritual awakening.

Yusuf didn't record very much secular music for 30 years, but just this year a glimmer of Cat Stevens returned from the dead through Yusuf. Yusuf's 2009 record, called *roadsinger*, sounds a lot like Cat's *Tea for the Tillerman*, and has the familiar Cat Stevens themes of love, the precarious state of the world, and of course, spiritual rebirth.⁶

For those of you who were sorry to see Cat Stevens croak, *roadsinger* is an awesome album! One of the best songs begins with the introductory bars of one of Cat's songs, but then becomes Yusuf's new song, called *Be What You Must*. Here are two of the verses:

I have journeyed, endless miles
Seen many others, where I took rest a while
On this boat called "near and far"
To be what you must, you must give up what you are.

Be you dust or be you star
To be what you must, just reach out for what you are.
and here children's voices join in the singing:
And though you travel many roads,
There's but one way and that's the one you chose.

One of the lines in the verse I left out is "Those who do not leave and choose to stay, many survive." Since Yusuf's song is so clearly about spiritual death, I interpret this line as challenging us to consider if surviving is the same as living. Surviving is definitely not thriving.

Many if not most people in our world today are merely surviving, as they do not choose a spiritual death, or a spiritual journey of any kind.

⁵ *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 1988, by Kenneth Kramer, p. 12, 22, 187.

⁶ *Rolling Stone*, Issue 1078, May 14, 2009, p. 23.

The good news is that we get to choose. And as more people choose to address their spiritual capacities and potential, then the more people there will be who have come alive, and the more our world as a whole will thrive.

We don't have to change our name, but we can each consider what our spiritual death might look like. Let us not fear to look death in the eye, and ask death to teach us. Let us learn to die, that we might live – living so that when we die, we're really glad we lived that way.