READING FOR SESSION 9

Mark Twain had some fun with death. Once, while abroad, he read his obituary in an international newspaper and wrote, "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska concludes the poem "A Word On Statistics" with these words: "Mortal: one hundred out of one hundred —a figure that has never varied yet."

Death happens. We are, all and each, merely guests of existence.

To dramatize that truth writer Elie Wiesel tells the Hassidic tale of a nineteenth-century tourist from the United States who visits a famous Polish rabbi, Hafez Hayyim. He is astonished to see that the rabbi's home is only a simple room filled with books. A table and a bench are the only furniture.

"Rabbi, where is your furniture?" asks the tourist.

"Where is yours?" replies Hafez.

"Mine? But I'm only a visitor here."

"So am I," says the rabbi.

Only two problems really exist, and neither one can be solved. One of them is life. And the other is death. As Forrest Church puts it,

> When we die, everyone else's story goes on, but we are not there to discover how they turn out. . . . But that's the way it is. Our lives stop in the middle. They don't reach a conclusion, they simply stop. The middle of the story is where all our stories end.

On the other hand we can be in denial, so enraptured by our own existence that the prospect of our death is unreal. After all, when we are alive, it is extremely difficult to imagine things happening without our being present to experience them. While this may seem a typical example of youthful exuberance, it also afflicts those of us older souls who are overwhelmed with the wonder of ourselves. We forget the words of playwright Arthur Miller: "Immortality is like trying to carve your initials in a block of ice in the middle of July."

At our most philosophical we may look upon death as a great gift, because it means if we must die then we must be alive. We have life—a great gift though we did nothing at all to deserve it. As Huston Smith writes, "Thanks be for these, for birth and death; life in between with meaning full; holy becomes the quickened breath; we celebrate life's interval."

In a way we are blessed to be thinking of death and dying. Why? Because that very reflection reminds us of the precious time that has been allotted to us and encourages us to use that interval between birth (over which we had no control) and death (about which we have no choice), and use it wisely. As some wise soul says, "God created time so everything wouldn't happen all at once." We have the opportunity to live our lives not all at once but over a brief but precious interval between two eternities.

If we lived forever, we could constantly postpone everything. As we accept life we accept finitude as part of the bargain. And so death becomes as much a part of life as birth. We are obliged to render something of meaning out of our finite piece of eternity. Length of life does not matter if we cannot create something significant out of our years. Victor Frankl reminds us that if our life is meaningless, it wouldn't take on meaning by becoming eternal.

Elie Wiesel relates the old Hassidic story of a rabbi who is being formally installed in his position. While notables and dignitaries extol his virtues at great length and with excessive eloquence, a strange expression comes over his face.

"What are you thinking of?" the others ask him.

"I have the odd feeling I am attending my own funeral," the rabbi replies.

One of the best ways to understand Unitarian Universalism is to attend our memorial services. We acknowledge death as a natural part of life; we recognize the uniqueness of the deceased; and we remind ourselves that the cycle of living and dying goes on. Often we invite worshipers to speak of the one whose life we have come to celebrate. We share happy and sad stories, anecdotes revealing the best and the not-quite-best of the person. There is laughter; there are tears; the service is in every sense of the word a celebration of life. As J. Donald Johnston tells us, "In the presence of life we say no to death; in the presence of death we say yes to life."

A UU memorial service begins with the words "We light this chalice in memory and in hope." At the conclusion of the service, we say, "We extin-

guish this flame but not the memory or the hope—they live on in that great mystery of things in which we live and move and have our being." Death is not defeat. Paradoxically it is the culmination of life, that which helps life take on meaning.

The words of the late Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen sum it up for us:

> Yes, there is such a thing as a good death. We ourselves are responsible for the way we die. We have to choose between clinging to life in such a way that death becomes nothing but a failure, or letting go of life in freedom, so that we can be given to others as a source of hope. This is a crucial choice, and we have to "work" on that choice every day of our lives. Death does not have to be our final failure, our final defeat in the struggle of life, our unavoidable fate. If our deepest human desire is indeed to give ourselves to others, then we can make our death into a final gift. It is so wonderful to see how fruitful death is when it is a free gift.

Joe Bartlett, a Unitarian Universalist minister and one-time president of Starr King School for the Ministry, inspired many when he wrote of the way in which he accepted his fate. His dying words are memorable: "And with deep satisfaction of my work completed—no gnawing 'might have beens' or guilt that in any but forgivable ways, I've let people down. . . . Yet I feel a certain euphoria. What a launching pad into The Yonder! . . . So this is my farewell to you, to say—yes, really! All is well with me."

Unitarian Universalists tend to have memorial services, without the body present, rather than traditional funerals, so we might focus on the spiritual more than the physical. It might be interesting to write a service for yourself as if you were attending—and you will be, in a way—and indicate what you would like to hear. A similar experience might come from writing one's own epitaph or obituary. While these exercises might seem a trifle odd, they are powerfully value-clarifying experiences. Why?

Sometimes we are so close to the details of daily living we cannot see our lives whole. When we imagine ourselves at our own memorial service, living takes on a new dimension. We begin to realize we are not going to be here forever; what we wish to make of our lives we had better do, if we have not done so already. We see ourselves as others see us—if only in imagination. We sort out the consequential from the trivial. This perspective is harder to find in the crush and rush of daily routines.

Take the case of Alfred Nobel, the Swedish chemist and industrialist who once had the life-changing experience of reading his own obituary. His brother had died, but a Paris report made a mistake in reporting the death of the "dynamite king." Nobel awoke to find his life laid out on the front page of his morning paper. The shock was overwhelming and life changing. From the report, it would have seemed that death, destruction, the arms trade, and money were his life. Nobel had a kinder view of himself, but this was ignored. He was, to the public, simply a merchant of death, the dynamite king. Nobel resolved to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life. He devised a plan to dispose of his fortune so that it might support individuals and groups who are effective in working for understanding and peace. The Nobel Prizes, then, were born from a mistaken obituary.

In Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Professor Morrie Schwartz, who is dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, returns disappointed from a colleague's funeral at Brandeis University. "What a waste," he says. "All those people saying all those wonderful things, and Irv never got to hear any of it." And so he made some calls and set a date, and on a cold Sunday afternoon he and a small group of friends and family had a "living funeral" —for him. As Albom describes the event,

> Each of them spoke and paid tribute to my old professor. Some cried. Some laughed. Morrie cried and laughed with them. And all the heartfelt things we never get to say to those we love, Morrie said that day. His 'living funeral' was a rousing success.

One devout Christian, dying of Alzheimer's disease, writes,

> The greatest fear I have is what this disease does to your personality. It can make you angry, ugly, obscene, paranoid, cursing, and very difficult to handle before you become comatose. Pray that I be spared part of this personality change. Pray that I in no way inadvertently disgrace the Lord, this church, or the people whom I love. Pray for Betty (his wife) as I turn guardianship over to her. I will not suffer nearly as much as she will.

. . . And please have patience with me. . . . Please remember me the way I was.

Who are we anyway? What is our essence? Are we what we are now? Or what we have been? One day we will be at the last stage. Let us remember, let everyone remember that our lives are not simply what we are at the moment, for good or ill. We are the sum of the parts of an entire life. Please remember us the way we were.

Our mortality is tenuous. We are but guests of existence, brief visitors upon this earth. Many of us are agnostic about immortality. We do not know. We try not to be in denial about our mortality. Woody Allen writes about death,

> It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens. . . . Death is nature's way of telling us to slow down. . . . Some people want to achieve immortality through their works or their descendents. I prefer to achieve immortality by not dying. . . . I do not believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear.

As Alan Watts says, "No one imagines that a symphony is supposed to improve in quality as it goes along, or that the whole object of playing it is to reach the finale. The point of music is discovered in every moment of playing and listening to it."

Each moment of life is an event worthy in and of itself. Death points to the precious quality of each instant. Some among us believe in a mystical kind of immortality—a spiritual existence beyond death. Some believe in a kind of biological immortality—our ashes will help nourish the earth. Some believe in influential immortality—as the stone thrown into the pond causes ripples that reach the farthest shore, something of what we are and do will never be lost.

Some of us do not believe in personal immortality, some conscious existence beyond death. If we're wrong, there surely is no better way to prepare for it than living this life as if it is all we'll get.

In one sense we are always preparing for our memorial service—not as an event but as a reminder that while life can be understood backwards, it is lived forwards. We have the benefit of time to do a summing up, a life review. We have the opportunity to create an "ethical will"—a legacy of words and deeds far more important than our material leavings. We have the luxury of contemplating that celebration of our lives without expecting it to be right around the corner—but who knows? This exercise in spiritual imagination challenges us to deeper and better living. The prospect of our own memorial service greatly concentrates our minds. Contemplation of death greatly intensifies our experience of life.

And so as we face up to our inevitable demise, we say not "please, more"—but "thank you for so much." Perhaps as we consider attending our own memorial services, contemplating how we wish to be remembered, we will be prompted to live so well, as Mark Twain says, "that even the undertaker will be sorry."

Resources on Death

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