

David Rankin, a Unitarian Universalist minister wrote, “Every day is a preparation for the end, and every end should be a reflection of all the days that have gone before. Good living and good dying are a single, healthy stream.” Today I want to invite us to reflect together on the reality of death. I am sure that we all have many differing understanding of death, from how we get to it to what happens after it occurs. Rev. Rankin's assertion that every day is a preparation for the end is a strong and direct connection between the moments we live as they lead up to the moment of our death. It seems to me that those of us in progressive communities often have a difficult time talking about death in personal ways. We can mention the numbers associated with deaths by bombings, police violence, health disparities, and poverty but something seems to stop many of us from talking about the deeply personal feelings that accompany the inevitability of death. One of the seeds I wish to plant today is simply a wonder I want to share. Much of our struggle for justice is about a struggle for choice, not only the choice between a certain number of options but the power to determine and create the choices for our own communities. The inevitability of death, however, is not a choice. Regardless of how we live, regardless of how much justice we all work for, regardless of how loving we are, death will eventually find us. We may choose to eat all whole grains and organic foods yet we will still encounter the stopping of our heart beats and the silencing of our breaths. We may protest against it, but death will still come our way. Just as we experienced the transformation of birth and growing older, we too will all experience the moment of death.

The day after tomorrow is *Día de los Muertos*, The Day of the Dead. This celebration in Mexico is a time of honoring and remembering all those who have passed, especially those from the last year. It is a time of prayer, of dancing, of storytelling, and of parading. It is a time of weeping, of cleaning off grave sites, and eating food together. The Day of the Dead is a reminder that those who have died are still impacting the lives that we live right now through the memory of their lives and the impact they had on the world. The tradition itself is a combination of Aztec traditions along with Catholic religious roots, it is a reminder of the way colonized people keep their spiritual traditions alive even as they adopt aspects of the religion from the colonizer.

Let's take a moment to hold in our hearts and minds all of those who we have lost during the last year, or longer, and have a moment to remember the ways they shaped our lives. I invite you to call out their names.

A few years ago my mother's step-father died, after many years of being very sick. I attended the funeral with my mother and sat with her as we remembered this man in a very different way. It is said that we should not speak ill of the dead, but sometimes those who have died did not live lives of justice, love, and compassion. Some people who die lived lives that caused pain, suffering, and abuse – my mother's step-father was one of those people. As we talk about death there are more than just the commonly associated feelings that accompany this ending moment of life. We may not always go through feelings of sadness and loss; there may also be moments of relief that a person who caused harm has gone on away from the world of the living. It may be a healing moment to know that you will not have to look upon their face again or fear the violence of their hand. This is not a feeling that justifies the state taking an individual's life, but is rather part of the complex feelings that may come up as death touches people in our lives. Death is hardly ever simple. Rather death is a deeply complex experience that with each passing brings up a litany of new emotions.

Khalil Gibran, Lebanese poet and immigrant to the United States, wrote a beautiful poem exploring death:

*Then Almitra spoke, saying, "We would ask now of Death."
And he said:
You would know the secret of death.
But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?
The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.
If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.
For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.
In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.
Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.
Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose
hand is to be laid upon him in honor.
Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?
Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?
For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?
And what is to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and
expand and seek God unencumbered?
Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.*

Fear of death can become immobilizing for many. The fear of death can prevent us from living the life we want to live and yet Gibran's assertion that to die is "but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun" is such a beautiful image of what happens at the moment of our death. If that was how we approached death together, how might we act differently? I wish I could say that I was always feel that sense of security, that sense of poetry in the end of life. I enjoy the moments of clarity, but I wonder how many of us always have the feelings of comfort in the idea that after death we may, as Gibran says, "truly dance."

Langston Hughes, Black poet and humanist, wrote a short poem on death:

*Dear lovely death
That taketh all things under wing-
Never to kill
Only to change
Into some other thing
This suffering flesh,
To make it either more or less,
Yet not again the same
Dear lovely death,
Change is thy other name.*

For many of us death does not mean an entrance into an eternal bliss, a heaven governed by God. There are those of us for whom there is no belief in a soul, no spirit that leaves the body as we take our last breath. The lives we are living now is all we have to work with and gives us plenty of purpose and calling within the time we have in our lives. The change of death is a transformation of our bodies into a resource for the planet. For some of us we may donate our organs to another person, our livers might help another body live for many more years. We may allow our bodies to be used by medical students, our fleshy selves becoming a tool for young doctors to practice their skills to save the life of another person. We may allow ourselves to be buried in a grave yard so that our families, who may need a place to visit so as to remember our role in their lives, can come and tell stories of joy or shed tears of sadness, missing our wisdom and love. Regardless of whether there is a soul or spirit that transcends these bodies we live in, death brings change to the role of our bodies and the impact we have on the world.

When I was nineteen I was misdiagnosed with a terminal disease. I was told that I would likely die within months and that there was, essentially, nothing that could be done about it. I spent two weeks thinking that I was going to die. Unsurprisingly, I was terrified. I was sad, I was angry, I had no idea what I was supposed to do. My first thought was that I should buy a really fun jeep and drive around the country and see the things I wanted to see before I died. I did not want to die without seeing the redwoods or the beauty of the Alaskan wilderness. I imagined my sick body travelling the country until my last moment.

My misdiagnosis came at the same time as some of the large protests against the US invasion of Afghanistan and I wanted to be part of the movement too. It was during this time that I started thinking about what it meant for me not to believe in heaven or hell, to not believe in a comforting God. I found strength in journaling and power in fighting against my fear. I reflected on the beauty of anti-war marches and the incredible strength shown by people who were trying to transform the world. Yet it also made me angry that no matter how hard we fought, we continuously seemed to lose. No matter how many people marched in the streets, the government continued to cause harm around the world. I was angry that I would die not seeing a world rooted in love and justice.

My mom's semi-new age spirituality was also rubbing off on me some at the time. I thought about the combination of science and spirituality. I liked thinking that even though the anti-war marches were not bringing an end to US imperialism, the energy created by the space, the literal scientific energy of atoms vibrating at a particular frequency, could possibly be changing the course of the world, moving the world towards justice even if we were unable to see the immediate concrete results. That understanding gave me great comfort as I sat with anxiety about my death. While I had been told I would not see the world change before my death, I could believe in the possibility of love impacting and shaping the world through collective action. Regardless of the existence of God, there were arms of the universe to be wrapped in, comfort to be found in the history of human resilience, and hope that even as I believed I was dying, I could still be part of the world's journey towards liberation. Fortunately, I did not die, fortunately the doctors were very wrong. Though the lessons of that time are still pieces I hold onto for myself. Forrest Church, prophetic Unitarian Universalist minister wrote, shortly after learning he had terminal cancer, "When dying comes calling at the door, like a bracing wind it clears our being of pettiness. It connects us to others. More alert to life's fragility, we reawaken to life's

preciousness. To be fully human is to care, and attending to death prompts the most eloquent form of caring imaginable.”

As I close, I want return to one of my first point. The inevitability of death is not a choice. As people trying to transform the world, it is okay for us to admit our fear of death. It is okay to be afraid of the unknown. It's is not only okay, but good and necessary, to lean on one another when dealing with this anxiety. Ask for help when you are feeling fearful. It is okay to prepare for death and to talk about it openly. It is okay to ask questions and to not have answers. It is also okay for us to find comfort in God and the existence of heaven. It is okay to take comfort in the return of the body to the earth and a recycling of our organic selves into the ecology of the world. Clarence Russell Skinner, the founder of this church, wrote, “religion is something which exhibits infinite variety. It manifests itself under continually changing forms.” It is in our common purpose to come together each Sunday for this community and for the study of universal religion. As we continue coming together I am hopeful that we can make space for each other to explore death more openly, to talk with each other about what we believe, to share with each other our hopes and fears, and to foster a community that opens doors to new questions and truths that can give us the strength to acknowledge the inevitability of death without being immobilized by it.