

“Love and Death”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Memorial Day Sunday, May 30, 2010
Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Poetry for Order of Service

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

(Mary Oliver, from “In Blackwater Woods”)

Lighting of Chalice (spoken in unison)

We drink from wells we did not dig.
We have been warmed by fires we did not build.
We light this chalice in thanksgiving
for those who have passed their light to us.

(Deuteronomy 6:11, adapted)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Memorial Day Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

Our Responsive Reading this morning is related to the Call to Remembrance that will take place immediately following this reading. The words are those of a mentor of mine, Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, whom I would remember on this Memorial Day Sunday.

MINISTER: These are our dead. Short days ago they lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved, and were loved.

CONGREGATION: These are our dead. Some died in the fullness of time; they have seen and felt and known.

MINISTER: Others died abruptly before they had really begun to know the problems and sorrows, joys and delights, of mature persons.

CONGREGATION: We have had various relationships with them. Some were very dear to us; others were unknown except to a few.

MINISTER: Everyone that cares for us and for whom we care dies and tears something of the fabric of our life.

CONGREGATION: At times the loss is so great, the sadness so deep, it takes one's breath away. No matter how many deaths one has seen, it again seems unbelievable, unreal, not so.

MINISTER: So great is the sorrow, so deep is the threat, that, for the most part, we avoid thinking about it.

CONGREGATION: We hurry away from the grave; we take up again, with alacrity, the daily problems and confusions which seem so much easier to handle than the imminent specter of death.

MINISTER: But the richness of our life depends upon how we surround ourselves with those who care for us, and how much we live in the spirit that does not pass away with the passing of the body.

CONGREGATION: We need to treasure more deeply those who have loved us and died; they give greater joy and beauty, greater meaning and worth to our days, because they help us to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand more deeply.

MINISTER: Will not these qualities we have met in our departed loved ones go on to infuse all the days of our lives? Do we not owe gratitude and remembrance wherever we have met with any joy and intimacy?

CONGREGATION: And so this day we honor these, our dead, and all those whom we have known in the past no longer with us.

(Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair)

Reading

Memorial Day had its origin at the end of the Civil War when on this very day, May 30, 1868, General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, honored the soldiers and sailors who had given their lives in that horrific civil conflict.

And he honored the war dead not only of the victors but of both Union and Confederate soldiers who were buried at the Arlington National Cemetery, and he did so by decorating their graves with flowers. Thus, this day was first known as Decoration Day, a name that still echoes in my memory from my youth.

Later Decoration Day become Memorial Day, a day set aside by our country to memorialize and pay tribute to all those who have given their lives in military service for our country. And now, of course, the Memorial Day remembrance has expanded beyond that, becoming a general remembrance of our loved ones who have died.

Here, in our religious community, as in our “Call to Remembrance” earlier, we use this Memorial Day Sunday for remembering loved ones from this Fellowship.

My reading this morning is one of my favorite poems related to memory of our deceased loved ones. It’s written by Margaret Jane Cole and is titled, “Not Even Death.”

Not Even Death

There will be something here, some part of this
Left over past our final soft caress –
A breeze at twilight carrying a kiss,
The fragrance of a petaled loveliness
That we have known, some little shining edge
Of ecstasy on beauty’s golden dart –
And we will stand beside the jasmine hedge
Again, and love will spring from heart to heart.

For memory will keep what it has heard
Forever etched upon the heart’s own seed,
And time shall not erase one tender word
That love has written down for future need.
Oh dearest, hold this knowledge and be glad –
Not even death destroys what love has had.

(“Not Even Death,” Margaret Jane Cole)

“LOVE AND DEATH”

Introduction

Love has to do with our attachments in life, our connections, our relationships – all those persons, beings, places, and things that we are attached to and care about. And death, then, has to do with the severing of these attachments, connections, and relationships.

On this Memorial Day Sunday, as we remember those among us who have died, I will speak about the relationship between love and death, doing so in three parts: first, love *before* the knowledge of death; secondly, love *with* the knowledge of death, or love *in* the face of death; and, thirdly, love *after* the death of those to whom we are attached – the part most directly related to this Memorial Day Sunday.

1) Love before the knowledge of death

First, love *before* the knowledge of death.

We come into life with a natural exuberance for life. Without thinking about it, we naturally affirm life and are attached to it. *In the beginning*, as we read from the book of Genesis, we don't yet consciously ponder death – not our own death, nor that of others.

But something unusual occurs in our species at about the age of two. At about that age we begin to develop a sense of self-identity; we begin to use the magical word “I.” (I watched it happen with my children.)

And now our natural attachment to life begins to become conscious. And soon we become aware that what we are attached to can be lost to us through death, including our own death. We become aware that this being that we have come to identify as “our self” is traveling an uncertain and dangerous road that sooner or later will end with its own dissolution. We become aware that the gift of life comes with a price tag, namely, the knowledge of death.

The knowledge of death is the single greatest issue with which we humans must deal. I say the *knowledge* of death, not just death ... for in the natural world death is simply one event among others, simply part of a larger, ongoing process. But in our human world, with our capacity for self-consciousness, death is an event of monumental significance. It is *the* major philosophical and existential issue with which we humans must deal.

Before the development of this sense of self-identity, we, like other species, were psychologically innocent. We were psychologically immortal, for we didn't contemplate death. Other species, for the most part, seem, indeed, to be psychologically immortal, psychologically innocent. Some other species, elephants for example, seem to have some awareness of death.

But in our species it is very clear – we *are* aware of death. We are the species that knows of death. If you wanted to give a single characteristic by which to identify our species,

you might well say that the human species is the species that consciously knows of death. Our archeologists know that they have come across the remains of the species *homo sapiens* when they find burial sites, places that mark the realm of the dead.

The great myth from Genesis chapter three – the so-called “fall” in the Garden of Paradise and the expulsion from that Garden – is a story of our loss of animal innocence, our loss of psychological immortality. Or, playing it the other way, it is a story of the awakening of our species to the awareness of death. And forever that knowledge haunts our days and nights.

This Genesis myth is repeated in each of us as we lose our innocence and gain the knowledge of death, as we experience what theologian Paul Tillich calls the “existential shock,” the shock that nothing has to be, ourselves included.

2) Love with the knowledge of death

Thus, love before the knowledge of death has to do with our natural affirmation of life. But now, part two in the drama, what happens to that affirmation of life when it meets the knowledge of death?

The answer is that it causes us to question the meaning and value of life and our natural affirmation of it. And it does so, it seems to me, in two basic ways.

The first question is a more general, philosophical question relating to the value of this life; namely, if this life ends in death, if this life is what we have and all we have, is it worthwhile? And should I, perhaps, seek to detach myself from this life, or even renounce this life? Should I look for meaning and purpose apart from this present life? Does the knowledge of death render this life meaningless and purposeless?

And then a second and related question is a more existential, everyday question; namely, is the *value* of attachment in this life worth the *price* of attachment? Is the pain of loss and suffering that occurs when the attachment is inevitably broken, worth it? Does the cost of love outweigh the value of love? And should I, therefore, be wary of love, and seek to protect myself from it?

These, it seems to me, are the basic philosophical and existential questions that arise with the knowledge of death. The knowledge of death is also the place where religion originates ... for religion has to do with the most basic philosophical and existential questions of our lives: Who I am? Where have I come from and where am I going? What should I value? And how should I live? To what should I give my allegiance?

My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, who died this past September from esophageal cancer, wrote a book in the final months of his life as he was dying that he titled, Love and Death. (I took my sermon title this morning from the book title.) In this valuable book, he looked even more deeply at the meaning of religion, which he defined throughout his writing career “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and

having to die.”

The main questions that religion deals with are related to the knowledge of death: what to make of this life in the face of death, and how to live this life in the face of death?

The answers of religion

Religions propose a variety of answers to these questions. I grew up, for example, in a religious tradition that holds that ultimately there is no death for humans. The belief is that at some point in the future God will bring this era to a close and there will be a general resurrection of the dead – of which Jesus’ resurrection is understood to be the first fruit – and with that general resurrection of the dead there will be an eternal judgment. In this religious tradition, thus, personal identity is not dissolved; it is kept intact ... everlastingly.

It happened just this past week that I received a magazine from the theological seminary from which I graduated in the mid-1970’s, the Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The theme of this magazine issue was “Death and Dying,” and the articles in it were written by professors in the seminary, several of whom were fellow students with me back in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

The general perspective of the articles was expressed in a single sentence by the current president of the seminary, a brilliant and multi-talented individual, who was in the class ahead of me in seminary. In the cover article he wrote, “We will die, but not as those who have no hope.” (Rev. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Calvin Theological Forum, Spring 2010, p. 2)

This sentence expresses the idea that if this mortal life is what we have, then life is drained of its purpose. And from that perspective it’s hard to imagine how one who does not believe in a continuing personal consciousness after death could possibly find this life to be meaningful and worthwhile.

As one who many years ago shifted from that perspective and who has now lived with a more naturalistic world-and-life view for over thirty-five years, that perspective feels to me as if belongs to another lifetime, which in a sense it does.

And so let me speak for a bit about how I have worked with the question of death within a naturalistic philosophical and religious framework.

Death in a naturalistic framework

First, we can’t absolutely know what happens after death; we can’t know what happens on the other side of that curtain, that veil. The information simply isn’t there.

Reports of near-death experiences are intriguing, but they remain near-death experiences. No one has returned after a year or two in the grave to report on other realms. To me, these near-death experiences are most likely nature’s marvelous way of taking us out in a

kindly manner.

And so I live with the perspective of “one life at a time” ... and my operating assumption is that there is no continuing personal self-consciousness after death. I operate with the view that what I see happening to the other creatures of the earth is also our human destiny.

So now the question: Is this a position of “no hope”? Is conscious life that ends meaningless? And does the knowledge of death undermine and destroy love?

My experience is quite the opposite, namely, that the knowledge of death and the embrace of mortality doesn't destroy love but rather deepens it ... to the point that it seems to me that religions that deny death block us from life's present depth and meaning. Religions that look to an eternal life in the future may miss the “eternal now.” (The “eternal,” in my understanding, is the depth or vertical dimension of the present, rather than the horizontal extension of time into the future.) To quote Forrest Church in his book, Love and Death:

To the extent that religion is a death-defying act, offering strategies whereby we can live forever, it may instead diminish our reverent appreciation for life, thereby representing a failure of awe. (Love and Death, p. 83)

Thus, the knowledge of death is, or at least can be, *the* great awakener to life and to “what is.” In the face of death we become aware that nothing lasts forever, and that nothing has to be in the first place, and our appreciation for the miracle of “what is” is, thus, heightened, as well as our appreciation for the miracle of the fact of our own awareness that can appreciate “what is.” Says the poet Mary Oliver:

“Look, I want to love this world
as though it's the only chance I'm ever going to get
to be alive
and know it.”

(Mary Oliver, from “October,” New and Selected Poems, p. 61)

Thus, it's with the knowledge of death and through a meditation on death that our love of life and its preciousness is deepened.

I'm sure we've all had those experiences in which a brush with death, either our own or of those we love, instantly brings to our awareness the preciousness of life, increasing our gratitude for what we have, for what presently is.

And, so, to the philosophical question of whether death and the knowledge of death destroys our love of life and renders life meaningless, I answer that, quite the opposite, the knowledge of death deepens and heightens the meaning, value, and preciousness of life. The meaning and value of life and being is not in its longevity but in its “suchness” here and now.

The courage to be

And now to the existential question of whether the cost of love outweighs the value of love: Do we have the courage to embrace death and the anguish of death? And where can we find that courage?

There's a price tag that comes with attaching ourselves to this life, a price tag that comes with love. That price is the pain, the suffering, the sorrow, and the grief that comes when the ties of love are broken. As Forrest Church succinctly puts it, "Love is grief's advance party." (p. 8) When you love, you are setting yourself up for grief and sorrow. And, again, writes Forrest, "Suffering is a birthright more inalienable than happiness." (p. 35)

If we would be human, if we would accept the evolutionary development of self-consciousness that Being has thrust upon us, we must also accept its cost.

Is that cost too steep? Sometimes we feel it is, and we are tempted to withdraw from this life, or to anaesthetize ourselves from it in any of a variety of ways.

But here is how Forrest Church responds to the question of the cost of love in his tender testament near the end of life, his book, Love and Death. He writes:

We pay for love with pain, but love is worth the cost. If we try to protect ourselves from suffering, we shall manage only to subdue the very thing that makes our lives worth living. Though we can, by a refusal to love, protect ourselves from the risk of losing what or whom we love, the irony is, by refusing to love we will have nothing left that is really worth protecting. (p. 15)

Mary Oliver succinctly summarizes what is involved in the process of making attachments and of loving in *this* world. She says – and this is almost a mantra for me:

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:

[first] to love what is mortal; [that is, to attach yourself to what you know is finite and will change, decay, and die]

[secondly] to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it; [it's from love and attachment that meaning and value come in life]

and, [thirdly, the hardest part] when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

(Mary Oliver, from "In Blackwater Woods")

The courage to let go

What gives us the courage and power to let go when that becomes necessary?

The answer is that in addition to being attached to the particular loves one has in life, one must ultimately be attached to a larger, ongoing reality of life and being. One must ultimately identify not with one's personal consciousness, not with one's ego, but with the power of being itself, the very power out of which all life comes and back into which it falls.

It is to this larger reality and process that one must ultimately be attached, however, one names that larger reality – God, Being, Nature, Spirit, Consciousness, Energy. Whatever one names it and however one conceives it, one must be ultimately attached to that which transcends our individual loves and losses. Within that larger context, then, one can then give one's heart in love in this life, even knowing the price of suffering and grief.

Joseph Campbell and Buddha consciousness

With regard to identifying with that larger reality and consciousness, I once heard Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of world mythology, deliver a sermon in which he described to us how he explained to a group of prep school boys the idea of “the Buddha” as “the one who had awakened to the full knowledge of his consciousness.” Said Campbell:

I was trying to think how I would explain this [concept of Buddha consciousness] to these boys. I looked up at the ceiling, and some deity spoke to me. I said, “Boys, look up. You can say, ‘The lights (plural) are on,’ or you can say, ‘The light (singular) is on.’ These are two ways of saying the same thing. In one case, you are emphasizing or placing focus on the bulb, which is the vehicle; in the other, you are placing the emphasis on the general.

In Japan, there are two words to describe these two attitudes. Accent on the individual is called the *ji-hokai*. That is the individual realm. Accent on the general is called the *re-hokai*. Then they say, very succinctly, “*Ji ri mu ge*.” Individual, general, no obstruction. Just the same. And so you can say, “The lights (plural) are on,” or “The light is on.” Just the same.

Now, when one of those bulbs breaks or dies, the superintendent of buildings and grounds doesn't come and say, “I was particularly fond of that bulb. That was the one.” Nothing of the kind. He takes it out and throws it away and puts in another bulb. So you can ask, “What is important? Is it the bulb, or is the light that it communicates?”

So I said, “Now, boys, looking down from the bulbs in the ceiling, let's look at the heads around us here. What are these vehicles of? They are vehicles of consciousness. So what is important here? Is it the vehicle, or is it the consciousness, and with which do you identify?”

And then to us listening in the church, Campbell said,

You are consciousness. That's what you are, for a moment in this body.... And this body is gradually going to deteriorate. The consciousness will finally disengage itself altogether from this vehicle. When you have identified yourself as that consciousness, you can watch the body go, with gratitude, as the mask or the role that carried you to realization.

And Campbell made one final point, saying:

When you have identified with consciousness ... you have identified yourself with the consciousness that lives in others as well.... When that has happened, you can say as the Japanese say, "*Ji ji mu ge.*" Individual, **individual**, no obstruction. We are one.

(Joseph Campbell, excerpts from a sermon titled, "Trick or Treat: Round 2," October 31, 1982, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan)

So the way we find our way at death is ultimately by identifying with the power of life and being that both creates and transcends us as individual carriers of life.

3) Love after the death of those to whom we are attached

But, part three, let us not too easily transcend death. Let us give death its due, for we experience the power of life in specific, concrete forms and through individual vehicles. And, naturally and rightly, we become attached to those vehicles. We are not meant to be quite so casual as a superintendent of building and grounds tossing away a burned-out light bulb.

So what we can say after the death of those we love? Does death mean the end of love with respect to the vehicle of life and light that we had come to know and to care about?

My answer is that for those who are able to embrace the losses and changes that come with the death of an attachment, death is not the end. There is much to be found on the other side of death that is present in memory and spirit. In some ways, love can be deepened after death.

Of course, death brings huge losses and changes, which is why we legitimately fear it and often turn our face from it. It brings losses and changes that in some measure we cannot really know about until the losses and changes actually occur.

But if we are willing to count our losses and changes, and if we can manage to turn our face *toward* the losses and changes and not away from them, I believe we will find that our love is not destroyed.

But we must have the courage to face our losses and to let the grief in. As it turns out, grief is the cure for the injury and sorrow the salve that would heal the wounds that come with the death of those we love. To the extent that we refuse grief and snub sorrow, we block the very agent of our healing, separating ourselves from love. But to the extent that

we can embrace grief and surrender to sorrow, to that extent we open ourselves to continuing connections and ties that remain after death.

In terms of embracing our grief and pain, it may help to realize that these are proofs of love. Forrest Church puts it this way:

When a loved one dies, the greater the pain, the greater love's proof. Such grief is a sacrament. Sacraments bring us together. The measure of our grief testifies to the power of our love. (p. 10)

One of the ways I recommend for letting grief in is to read literature and poems related to the loss of love. This is an entry way to the tabernacle of grief. One of my favorite poems of grief and loss is from Conrad Aiken. It's titled, "Music I Heard."

Music I Heard

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved, –
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always, –
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

(Conrad Aiken, "Music I Heard")

This poem lets in the desolation of death. It recounts the losses by recalling the things shared and by numbering the things touched by the beloved.

To maintain love beyond death, one must be willing to recount the losses, for memory will forever be connected to the losses. One cannot remember without also remembering that the loved one is no longer physically present as before.

But, as I indicated, to the extent that one can embrace the loss and with it the grief and sorrow, to that extent one will experience the love that endures.

Also, as I said, the pain of loss is already a form of love and connection.

Thankfully, however, the love is found in more than the experience of pain. On the other side of death, there are things about the relationship and the love that cannot be known or experienced with the physical presence of a loved one, ways you are connected that you

don't fully know and can't fully appreciate until after a loved one is gone and the physical attachment is broken.

To some extent, the physical gets in the way of the spiritual and the essential. Often with respect to those we love we glimpse an essential life and a deeper connection that is more potential than actual.

Further, we often have a hard time expressing the depth of our connection. It's too much, and we hold back from it ... though, again, there are times, precious moments, when we break through to the essential.

But after death there are no more hindrances. Not that we would totally forget the actual realities of our relationship. But after death in some ways the essential can shine through more purely than before death. The essential is cleansed of its imperfections, the irritations brushed away or laughed away. Thus, in some ways we can be closer in spirit after death than ever we were in the flesh.

A personal story

I'm thinking this Memorial Day Sunday of my own mother, who is now approaching her own death.

This past Monday, Flossie and I visited her in Bellingham. My mother is now eighty-nine years old, mostly bed-ridden, deep into memory loss, and, as I say, nearing death – perhaps days, weeks, maybe months, we can tell at this point. But any visit might be the last; any phone call might bear the news.

And at this visit on Monday, for the first time, my mother did not recognize either me or Flossie when we came into the room, awakening her from sleep. Still, she was completely friendly and gracious when we introduced ourselves, and gaily and sweetly said “hi” to us.

Time passed as we stayed in her room talking with my sister and with a perfectly lovely Hospice nurse, who was also in the room attending to her.

After perhaps an hour had passed, I again sat on her bed with my arm over her as she lay on the bed. But this time as I sat down on her bed, ever so quietly she said, “Hi, Bruce.”

Now she did recognize me again, and when she spoke this simple greeting, I felt clearly and cleanly the bond between us, the essential bond of love that had been between us since life brought us together in the form of a mother-son relationship.

A large part of my mother has already died, and a large part of our relationship already exists only in memory. Her gentle and simple greeting to me felt almost like words that had come from beyond her death; it was almost like a dream. It was the essential love

cleansed of all imperfections, cutting through any hindrances. I trust I will carry this memory of love on the other side of her death ...

For memory will keep what it has heard
Forever etched upon the heart's own seed,
And time shall not erase one tender word
That love has written down for future need.
Oh dearest, hold this knowledge and be glad –
Not even death destroys what love has had.

("Not Even Death," Margaret Jane Cole)

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community,
or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Memorial Day Sunday, May 30, 2010. The spoken message, available on CD at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)