

BEING ALIVE, HAVING TO DIE
by Forrest Gilmore © 2008

Our opening words come from Rev. Forrest Church, long-time minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. He was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer, making his words all the more poignant. He says: “Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

As a child and young teen, I was terrified of death much of the time. I used to have nightmares about nuclear war, frightened by predictions of a coming apocalypse. I remember watching a show about Nostradamus, which predicted the end of the world in 1994. I added up the years, believing for a time that I would not live past my 23rd birthday.

As I grew older, I had the sense that I would not live a very long life. As I look back on it, this premonition was definitely connected with my sense of meaning in life. As many of my heroes did, like Jesus, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., I felt that I would die for something important – as a martyr for a cause.

But then in seminary, I took a class with Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy. She led a ritual for us called Embracing Your Death. The ritual process is rather simple. Everyone picks a partner who then represents your death, and likewise, you theirs. The exercise begins with everyone walking around randomly throughout the room as if you were living your life. Eventually, though, your eyes meet those of your partner and, in that instant, you begin the process of dying. Slowly, you face your death, and then walk gently towards him or her, until you reach each other and embrace, marking the end of your life.

As I began this exercise, I felt this drive to get it over with, to go and find my

death and be done with it. To my great surprise, though, I discovered that my death didn't want to have anything to do with me. Every time I tried to seek her out, she raced off the other way. I eventually gave up the pursuit and let my death decide when it was time for me to die. I think there's some truth to that. That when we die, death dies, too. It is certainly true for us – when a loved one leaves us, a little bit of us goes with them.

Finally, after a long while when almost everyone else in the ritual had already died, my death and I caught each other's eyes. Slowly, very slowly, we walked toward each other, and then held each other in a gentle and tender hug. Embraced by a death that would not have me. Nourished by a love that would not let me go.

The experience awakened clearly in me my search for importance and meaning through a life of sacrifice and martyrdom. For the first time, I considered the possibility that I might live a long and happy life.

As my father advised me, "Rather than what you will die for, think about what you will live for."

For many of us, death may be the last thing we want to think about. Yet, of course, all of us, whether we like to admit or not, are aware that we will not live forever. We, humans, are unique in that way. We know that someday we *will* die.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton, writes, "Life comes into being without any invitation of our own: we suddenly find ourselves in it. And as soon as we recognize ourselves as alive we become aware that we tend toward inevitable death."

This makes living very different for us. Looking into the inescapability of death we cannot help but wonder about the reason for our existence at all.

Leo Tolstoy wrote, "My question – that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide – was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man... a

question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?’ It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”

As Tolstoy reveals, in facing our eventual deaths, the potential for despair is enormous.

Merton cautions us: “If we do not gain some adequate understanding of our life and our death during the lifespan that is ours, our life will become nothing but a refusal, a series of complaints that it must end in death. Then the fear of death becomes so powerful that it results in a flat refusal of life.”

To embrace life while confronting our end, we, humans, seek meaning for our lives. As anthropologist Catherine Bateson says, “Human beings construct meaning as spiders make webs. This is how we survive, our primary evolutionary business.”

Jungian psychologist Alice O. Howell writes, “What we are looking for on earth and in earth and in ourselves is the process that can unlock for us the mystery of meaningfulness in our daily lives.”

It is this profound search for meaning, driven by both our being alive and having to die, that drives the need for religion in our world.

Theologian Harvey Cox wrote, “Religion... pulls together the life of a person... into a meaningful whole... It lends coherence to life, furnishes a fund of meaning... and guides people in making decisions. Religion, as its Latin root suggests, is what binds things together.”

Yet, religion’s great challenge is its tendency to obsess over ideology rather than support the deeper levels of human meaning.

Maverick Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello wrote, “As soon as you look at the world through an ideology you are finished. No reality fits an ideology. Life is beyond that. That is why people are always searching for a meaning to life... Meaning is only found when you go beyond meaning. Life only makes sense when you perceive it as mystery...”

And what greater mystery is there than death itself.

To paraphrase Forrest Church, from his sermon, entitled *Love and Death*, the sermon he delivered immediately following his diagnosis, “[Why do stories of death move us even if we never knew the deceased? Because their deaths are our death, too.] We are never closer than when we ponder the great mystery that beats at the heart of our shared being.”

As Carl Sagan offers, “In all our searching, the only thing we’ve found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other.”

So many of us search for meaning in so many places – in beliefs, in success, in power, in fame, in sacrifice, in spirituality, in service. Yet perhaps we find it most of all, lying in or sitting on the deathbed, when as Forrest Church says, “For a brief, blessed time, what matters to us most really does matter.”

He says, “Today, shielded from intimacy with death by the cold, mechanically invasive and antiseptic chambers of hospitals, we lose touch with how natural, even sacramental, death can be. If we insulate ourselves from death we lose something precious, a sense of life that does know death, that elevates human to humane, that reconciles human being with human loss...”

Perhaps the greatest irony of all – if the pain turns not into despair, if the fear turns not into isolation, that which gives our lives meaning may, in fact, be death.

Mary Oliver offers us this beautiful poem:

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up having simply visited this world.

When death comes, our own or a loved one's, we are stirred to appreciate what we have now... to be a bride married to amazement, a bridegroom, taking the world into our arms. When death comes, we are reminded to allow our gratitude to emerge out of

the ordinariness of life – to remember this season may be our last season, this touch may be our last touch, this look may be our last look, this goodbye may be our last goodbye. When we give our hearts away to love, death holds no sway. The Song of Songs says, “Love is as strong as death.” Standing in awe at the miraculousness of life, I say, Love is stronger.

So, I invite you, encourage you, challenge you, to live your life as if each day, each hour, each moment matters. Love your spouses. Hug your children. Tend to your friends. Forgive your enemies. Do the things you’ve been putting off. Take the risks you’ve feared. Reach out to those in need. Walk in the world with your eyes open, your senses awake, your heart available. And when death comes, may you gently embrace it, knowing you have done your best, your life has been full. More than a visitor, married to amazement, taking the world into your arms. What more meaning could there be?