

Facing Death
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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In my childhood I knew three grandparents, three great-grandparents and multiple great aunts and uncles. We regularly went to visit these people and eventually we, all of us, including children attended their funerals. I knew early on that old people eventually died.

We had goldfish and cats and dogs and chickens and a rabbit and a pony in my childhood. Goldfish turned belly up in the bowl. Cats ran out on the highway and were killed by cars. Dogs and the pony eventually died of old age. My father dispatched chickens to the freezer. I knew that animals died.

But then when I was about nine or ten a little girl about my own age whose family belonged to our church but who did not regularly attend died of a brain tumor. It was the first that it began to dawn on me that I could die at any time not just when I was old.

Perhaps it made even more of an impact because I had been in the hospital over my ninth birthday to have a bone tumor removed from my right leg. I didn't really understand words like benign and malignant, but I knew my parents were worried. They did not know my tumor was benign until it had been removed and biopsied.

A new concept began to take shape in my child brain. Anyone could die. Everyone would die.

Speed forward eleven years or so and I am in my first year of seminary studying for the ministry. I am going to school and working as an assistant to a hospital chaplain at a general hospital. There are only the two of us to serve the whole hospital. The chaplain asks that I concentrate on the cancer and cardiac patients. It is 1981. These are the patients most likely to die. Many of them do.

One morning in that year I wake up with a strange but strong premonition. This is the day that I will die. I can tell myself it is just because I have been around so much death. I am making this up. BUT the feeling is so strong. I begin to think, if this is the day I am to die, what should I do? I could drive home to Pennsylvania and tell my family I love them, but I have been there recently, and I have told them I love them. I could stay in bed for the day, but one can die in bed as well as anywhere else. Finally, I decided to do what I would normally do on this day. I get up, get ready, go to work. I, obviously, do not die. But I learned something. I am in the right place, doing the right thing. Even if I know I will die today, these are the things I will do. It is reassuring knowledge.

It is a couple years later, and I have graduated. My parents are accompanying me to my new home, a United Methodist parsonage in Weatherly, Pennsylvania. As we pull up to the side door,

I can hear the phone ringing. I run in to answer. It is the wife of the previous minister. There has been a death in the congregation. Do I need him to return to officiate or can I take the funeral. I tell her I will take the funeral. I have three funerals in my first month of my first ministry. My sister says I must have a very sickly congregation. I tell her the youngest one of the three who died was 86. I learn to sit and listen to family of those who have died. I begin to learn not just about death but also about loss and mourning.

One congregant lost her baby girl a year earlier to a heart defect. She has not touched a thing in the nursery. I do not know how to help her. It is appropriate to mourn, but she is allowing this loss to devastate her life. I am a 24-year-old pastor who does not know what to do.

Seven or eight years later and I am in the process of switching denominations. I need to belong to a Unitarian Universalist congregation as a member for a year, so I do a year-long Clinical Pastoral Education residency at a general hospital. Unless I am on call on a Sunday, I am free to attend services. My first day on call, a weekday, I am called to the emergency room. It is a crib death. I do not respond well. My cousin has just lost her first baby. When the family's priest arrives, I flee. My supervisors have to walk me through how I might have responded more pastorally and better. I do learn, but the calls I dislike most in that year are the ones to OB/GYN.

I can see healing though even in attending those deaths. The mother of a young mother who has just lost her baby is sitting with her. The nurses bring in the dead infant for the mother to hold. They take a picture for her to keep. The grandmother remembers how when she lost a baby, she was never allowed to hold it, never even allowed to see it. She expresses thanks to the nurses for their care for her daughter, and she seems to have some healing for her own past loss.

After my year of Clinical Pastoral Education, I serve a small Unitarian Universalist congregation as they begin their search for their first called minister. One of my members comes to me. He belongs to my congregation. His wife belongs to a synagogue. They have just lost a baby. His wife needs a ceremony, something to mark their child's brief life, but her rabbi has said the baby did not live long enough to hold a funeral, could I officiate at a ceremony? Yes. Yes, I could.

I wrote a poem for that ceremony that I still have. "In Memory of Eric."

"Red and wrinkled they come out from the womb.
Are they newborn or is the world?"

"The universe changes with their birth.
A thousand promises lie within the child.

"A day, a year, a score, three score and ten
With what measure of life will they grace us?
How many smiles, how many tears will one life evoke?"

"New life dawns
Shining as briefly as a firefly
Or as long as the summer sun.

“It shines and there is light.”

When a child died when I was a child, I learned that I could die. When I witnessed the death of children as a young adult, I learned how hard that kind of loss can be. Even as I sat with a 90-year-old by the bedside of her dying 70-year-old daughter I knew how much pain there is in seeing your child die before you.

There are other things I have learned about death. Sometimes our own minds betray us. They tell us that dying would be better than the pain of living. Back when I was doing that residency year of clinical pastoral education, I had two units on which I concentrated my work. One of those units was the psychiatric ward. One of the rules of chaplaincy is that you work with a patient from within their faith tradition. You don't try to convince them of yours. But what does one say to the person who says, “Heaven is a beautiful place. I just want to go there and be done with this world and its pain”? You know it is part of the depression, the illness, that makes the person feel that way, but, somehow it also seems that their religious beliefs are pushing them closer to suicide rather than away from it.

In one congregation I visited several times with a member who was in and out of mental hospitals for his severe depression. Often, I visited him along with his mother. I knew that her greatest fear was that she would eventually lose him. I was at General Assembly, our denominational annual meeting, when I received the call. He was gone, jumped from a bridge. I returned home early.

Years later my now ex-son-in-law's father also jumped from a bridge. My son-in-law does not practice any faith, but his family is Roman Catholic. My grandsons were little, and I went along to the funeral in case they got too restless and needed to be taken out of the service. I was a bit worried about a Catholic service for a suicide victim, but it was fine. A deacon officiated as the priest was away on a mission trip. He very purposely told my son-in-law's grandmother that the church used to say that those who committed suicide would not be allowed in heaven. He said that they had learned things since then. Depression was an illness. He assured her she would see her son in heaven.

The organist at the service played Deep River, which is a song I love. I did not think at the time how cruel that might have felt to others.

I don't understand an illness that turns your own mind against you so that you become the instrument of your own death. I do know that depression and addiction, which often comes along with it, run in my family. My mother gave my brother and sister and me a serious talk about cancer being in the family and told us to make sure we were regularly checked. She did not give us the same kind of talk about depression. Perhaps she did not know how or what to tell us.

Facing death through much of my life has been real. I have been with the dead and the dying and those left to mourn. But sometimes we play games with death. What would be the worst way you would want to die? For me it would be to be eaten alive by another animal or to die in a fire, simply because both seem like they would be particularly painful ways to go. Although I suppose surviving a fire might actually be more painful than dying in one. But growing up as a

woman the danger that was most impressed upon me by those around me was not the danger of carnivorous animals or fire or flood but of men.

My first job in my teens was at a sandwich and ice cream shop at a local shopping plaza. Employees were to park at the far end of the mall parking lot leaving the closest spots for shoppers. My grandmother regularly told me to not get into my car before I checked the back seat to make sure no possible attacker was lurking there.

Occasionally such dangers became more than imaginary. In my twenties my mother told me that Donna Laudermilch, a girl who lived a couple miles down the road from us in my childhood, and with whom I would occasionally play, had been killed by her boyfriend.

When I went to a friend's wedding with my own boyfriend shortly after breaking up with him, he acted crazily on the way home, driving erratically and going right by my house. He did take me home, but when I discovered no one else was there, I went to my grandmother's. I was afraid he would come back and did not feel safe.

I hate horror movies. I do not want to be entertained by violent deaths. So often those who like them will say to me, "But you know it is all fake." Except that I know that though the movie may be fake, violent deaths are not. In the 200-300,000 years of our existence why have we not been able to eliminate murder and war? To die in an avalanche, to be eaten by a lion, to die by flood or landslide are all violent, but why do some of us die by the hands of others of us? That seems particularly cruel.

On the Buddhist website Lion's Roar, it says that "Maranasati, also known as mindfulness of death, or death awareness, is a Buddhist meditation practice in which one aims to keep death in the forefront of thought. Such contemplation of death changes awakens us to the present moment, fostering a greater appreciation for life itself," [Buddhist Beliefs About Death | Lion's Roar \(lionsroar.com\)](http://lionsroar.com). I hope that that is what I have been about as I reflect with you on death in this sermon today. May our contemplation of death awaken our compassion for ourselves and for others.

UU Minister Mark Morrison-Reed wrote,

"We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion.

We need to learn to live with death, and to understand that death is not the worst of all events.

We need to fear not death, but life—

empty lives,

loveless lives,

lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of us has been given,

lives that are like living deaths,

lives which we never take the time to savor and appreciate,

lives in which we never pause to breathe deeply.

What we need to fear is not death, but squandering the lives we have been miraculously given.

So let me die laughing, savoring one of life's crazy moments. Let me die holding the hand of one I love, and recalling that I tried to love and was loved in return. Let me die remembering that life

has been good, and that I did what I could. But today, just remind me that I am dying so that I can live, savor, and love with all my heart.”