

Endings¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

This week we celebrate Halloween, a modern secular holiday, but also an ancient spiritual festival that connects us with the great circle of life. In the European Celtic tradition it is called Samhain, and is a time when we are able to feel our bonds with all people who have come before us and who will come after us. The Christian tradition honored this time with the feasts of All Saints, and All Souls. Our Universalist ancestors especially loved the feast of All Souls, because it signaled their belief that all souls would be gathered into harmony with the divine, no one left out. It is a time when we draw near to those we love, both living and dead. We give thanks for the kinship we feel between us, and the vast circle of life on our planet.

FAMILY RITUAL: REMEMBERING THE DEAD

Introduction: At this time of year, many cultures have a festival to honor the circles of life, and to remember those who lived and died before us. In the early Celtic tradition it was called Samhain, and people gathered round bonfires on the hills, and set a place at the table for those who had died. They believed that the spirits of the dead could visit the living—since the veil between the worlds was thin, fairies and spirits might be wandering the town. So people would put offerings of food and drink outside their doors for the spirits. Most people stayed inside, but if they went outside, they dressed up in costumes to fool the fairies. So that was the origin of people going in costumes from door to door.

How many of you might be going out in costumes on Halloween? In my neighborhood, people decorate their houses with skeletons and ghosts, and black cats. And of course, we give out chocolate and other treats to the children to come door to door. The Christian church in Europe adopted these older festivals to celebrate All Saints Day and All Souls Day—feasts for all of the people who had died. In England, they set out treats for the dead called “soul cakes.” People who were in need would go “souling” and sing songs door to door and could receive a soul cake, in exchange for praying for the dead.

In Mexico the Christian holidays combined with older indigenous festivals to become el Día de los Muertos, which means the Day of the Dead. They create altars for their loved ones who have died, with all of their favorite foods, and with little dressed up skeletons. People have a picnic at the cemetery at night, and light candles to celebrate the ancestors who are buried there.

All of these customs help us to take a look at death. Death is a mystery to us—whether we are a child or a grownup. We know that when a person or animal dies, their body stops working. We know that their body goes back to the earth and eventually becomes recycled into other life. All of the leaves and flowers and birds and animals and people on earth keep recycling into other forms of life. But people have also wondered about what happens to the life inside. What happens to the person, and their awareness? Does that recycle too? Do people become ghosts, or go to another place? We don't really know the answers. This season is a time to wonder about the Mystery. But one thing we do know—even after people die, they are still important to us. Even though we can't touch them or see them, they are still with us. Can you think about how those we love are still with us, even if they have died?

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(Congregational conversation) Each of us will find our own way to connect with our ancestors.

Ritual

Today's ritual can be both sad and happy. We are going to invite those we love who have died—to be here with us in this room—in our memories and in our feelings and in our love. We are going to remember them by writing their names on little pieces of paper, or by bringing their photos or mementos to our altar. *This altar was decorated with apples, hazelnuts, candles, a pumpkin, leaves, pomegranates, flowers, acorns, skeletons and other symbols from these holidays.* We are also going to place chocolate treats (from these baskets) near the photos or names, as a symbol of the love we still feel for them. Later, after church, we will have these chocolate treats for a snack—but for now, we won't eat any, just put them on the altar.

First of all, we want to give special love and care to anyone whose loved one has died during this past year. The first year after a death is a special time of grief and change. After I ring this chime, I invite anyone whose loved ones have died this past year to come forward if you feel comfortable to do so, and say their names for us, or place a memento on our table, with an offering of a chocolate. ... I also want to say the names of our church members and friends who died during this past year, and were remembered in our midst: Cay, Don, Henry, Jan, Karen, Dottie, Charlie. We hold them in our hearts with love.

Now, I invite all of us to think about the people we love who have died. You can think about the animals you love too, since they are a part of our families. If you did not bring a photo, you can write their names on small pieces of special paper that the ushers gave to you.. If you need a piece of paper, you can find some here at the front. I invite everyone who wishes, families, adults and children, to come forward very quietly, and place the photo or name on the altar, while you think about the loved one who has died. Take a chocolate from the basket and put it near the name, as a reminder of love.

Music

Closing: Our loved ones who have died are always close to us when we remember them with love.

Reading: Blessing When the World is Ending Jan Richardson²

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

² © Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com. <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/18/blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/>

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face

toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

Sermon:

Last week, I learned that my mother is planning to move in with my sister sometime after the end of this year. Not entirely what she would most want. But my sister and brother-in-law live nearby, and have been dealing with the upkeep of both homes, as well as support for my dad, who's been in a nursing home since last December. It is getting to be too much, and so they all made a decision that mom would move in with them. My sister is the most loving and dedicated daughter in the world, but it is a hard transition for my mom.

She is grieving. This move will mean the loss of her home, and the loss of all of the things that have been characteristically hers: her pictures of horses and old barns on the walls, her collection of water pitchers, most of them with lovely blue designs, her Longaberger baskets tucked in everywhere, her sheep-themed towels, and country-style curtains. I think about how my mother has been a homemaker for most of her life—as our family moved from house to house during my childhood, and after I was long gone, she painted the walls, she decorated, she planted flowers, she created beauty. Even when she was working outside the home as a secretary, she was always the one who made a home for our family. The character of the home was her domain. And soon, the space that she can call her own will be reduced to one room in someone else's home. Who will she be without her home? It is difficult to face this ending.

We human beings live in time, which seems to take us in a straight line from the past through the present into the future. Until it doesn't anymore. To be alive means always to be facing endings. The ending of the summer season, the ending of childhood, the ending of relationships, the ending of careers. As a church this year, we are facing the ending of my ministry with you. As human beings, we must wrestle with this inescapable aspect of life, the transient nature of all things.

The Thai meditation master, Achaan Chaa, told his students, “You see this goblet? For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on the shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ When I understand that the glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious.”³

The glass is already broken. Think about the things in your life that you cherish, that you cling to. It is not easy to let go. Most of the time, we don't let ourselves think about endings. And yet, all things come to an end, and doesn't it make those things, those beings we love, all the more precious to us. But there is more. It is also certain that we too will come to an end.

³ From Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective by Mark Epstein.

The Irish mystic John O'Donohue writes:

There is a presence who walks the road of life with you. This presence accompanies your every moment. It shadows your every thought and feeling... When you were born, it came out of the womb with you, but with the excitement of your arrival, nobody noticed it. Though this presence surrounds you, you may still be [oblivious] to its companionship. The name of this presence is death.⁴

Why should we wake up to this presence all around us? He goes on,

Thinking of your death can help you to radically alter your fixed and habitual perception. Instead of living according to the merely visible material realm of life, you begin to refine your sensibilities and become aware of the treasures that are hidden in the invisible side of your life.

The Buddhist approach to endings is similarly direct. Practitioners are encouraged to meditate regularly on their own death. One such meditation chant is translated, “All beings will die, they are of the nature to die, and I too will also die, of that I have no doubt.”⁵ Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, talks about the purpose of such practices:

Life is impermanent, [he says] but that does not mean that it is not worth living. It is precisely because of its impermanence that we value life so dearly. Therefore we must know how to live each moment deeply and use it in a responsible way. If we are able to live the present moment completely, we will not feel regret later. We will know how to care for those who are close to us and how to bring them happiness. When we accept that all things are impermanent, we will not be incapacitated by suffering when things decay and die. We can remain peaceful and content in the face of change, prosperity and decline, success and failure.⁶

Lately, I have found myself thinking about big endings, about catastrophic endings. With the threat of nuclear war, the threat of climate change, the over-population of our planet, there are some scientists who think we have gone beyond the point of no return—that we are facing the demise of human civilization, and even the near-term extinction of the human species.⁷ I don't really know what to believe about all this. But if it is useful to contemplate our own personal transience, perhaps it might also be important to let ourselves ponder the possibility of this big ending, to contemplate the transience of humanity itself.

In contemplating such an ending, I realized that, up to now, when I have considered my own death it has always been in the context of the continuity of our human family. I have imagined something of me continuing into the lives of those who come after. For example, when Margy and I did our wills several years ago, I realized that it mattered to me what happened to my writings after I died. My journals, my sermons, my book. My writings are a bit like children to me—a way that I might be carried into the future. So I made provisions in my will for what would happen to those writings.

But if I imagine the extinction of human culture, or of human beings, it brings me into a much darker

⁴ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, (1998)

⁵ https://www.dhammadata.com/Books6/Ajahn_Brahm_Contemplation_of_Death.htm

⁶ <https://www.bcbstharmadharma.org/article/shining-the-light-of-death-on-life-maranasati-meditation-part-i/>

⁷ <https://earthnetwork.news/big-3/nthe/>,
<https://www.theguardian.com/the-guardian/2008/mar/01/scienceofclimatechange.climatechange>

place. If there were no human beings left, things like writing and stories have no meaning. There is no history without a future people to remember it and carry it on. And a deeper grief settled into my heart. A grief about the possibility of losing history, about an ending to the human story. And this was personalized for me by the realization that my own story would end with no one to remember it.

This grief also awakened in me a fierce tenderness, a tenderness for our human story, as full of brokenness and injustice as it may be. Our human story is also filled with courage and creativity, compassion, beauty and resilience. It breaks my heart to think of our human story coming to an end. And yet, I know that the earth is wounded. There may be a great dying. In fact, there has already been a great dying, hundreds of species lost and going extinct every day. Languages and peoples and cultures going extinct.

So much of our UU theological history has been the story of progress, of seeking to make the world better and better. Is there room in our theology for endings, and for the suffering we feel in the presence of endings? What could be the purpose of contemplating the end of humanity? What could be the purpose of our grief and rage and sadness? According to our many spiritual teachers, the purpose of death contemplation is all about how we live in the present. Perhaps that is also true of contemplating the end of humanity.

Carolyn Baker and Guy McPherson are two of the researchers who believe our species is coming to an end. Authors of *Extinction Dialogs*, they say that we humans should begin living our lives as hospice patients might, sure of the end, and yet fully present as possible in every situation. They are inspired to live with passion and savor aliveness and vitality. They suggest, as has often been suggested to those in hospice, that we should make a list of people to whom we would like to make amends and speak to them. Make a list of people whom we want to thank, and thank them. Deeply re-evaluate our time commitments and activities. Give of ourselves in service.

Poignantly, they hope we might commit ourselves to make extinction as easy on other species and other humans as possible. Spend time in nature, in gratitude, in apology, in grief. Immerse ourselves in love, both giving and receiving it. Immerse ourselves in fun, play and joy. Create beauty.⁸ They hope that we might transform the ending of the human story with loving kindness and compassion.

Another group of elders, facing the threat of disastrous climate change and the end of humanity, have thrown themselves into activism and engaged in civil disobedience and other risks they might not have considered. Claire Schoen writes:

At 65, I wasn't sure if I had any business getting arrested. Wasn't that something millennials should be doing? But then I met the 1000 Grandmothers — a group of elder women activists who formed to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. These women gave me a unique perspective on what it means to be an elder and an activist. And I was reminded of Bill McKibben's wise words: "One of the few unmixed blessings of growing older is, past a certain point, what are they going to do to you?" As he points out, "at 22, having an arrest record may not be the absolute best thing for your resume." But for guys "with hairlines like mine" there is less to lose. I realized that there an important role for elders in protesting climate change and perhaps we have a responsibility to be on the front lines of the fight.⁹

⁸ Paraphrased from *Extinction Dialogs*, Chapter 5.

⁹ <https://350.org/the-importance-of-sitting-down-3-things-i-learned-about-getting-arrested/>

When we contemplate our endings, what changes might that trigger for the present? If you take seriously the possible demise of our species, what might you do differently? What becomes less important to you? What becomes more important? Breathe with that thought for a moment. Breathe again.

This fall, Margy and I belatedly started watching a popular television program, “This Is Us.” We were able to watch the whole first season last month through *On Demand*, and started on the second season which is playing now. If you haven't seen it, I would say it is well worth it. I am intrigued by an underlying theme running through the entire series, about the impact and meaning of death. I won't give away any plot developments, but there is something I love about how the series unfolds. It brings a different perspective to past and present and future, and how our lives intersect in all dimensions. Each episode of the show includes scenes from different times in the characters' lives. So instead of merely progressing from the past to the present, it evolves like the peeling of an onion, revealing ever deeper parts of the story it is telling about a family.

There is one scene that made it all clear for me. Kevin Pearson, an actor, is rehearsing his lines for a play, with his two young nieces. But the content becomes a bit too heavy for their ages, and they run off. He later finds them in their room and explains:

I think I scared you before. All that talk of ghosts and... dying... all that adult stuff we were reading about. That's some pretty confusing adult stuff. So, uhh, I thought I'd come up here, show you my painting, tell you what I think my play's about because I was thinking that it might make us all feel a little bit better. But you've gotta promise not to make fun of me, OK? [He pulls out a small abstract painting that is full of color going every which way.]

So... yeah, I painted this because I felt like the play was about life, you know, and life is full of color and we each get to come along and we add our own color to the painting, you know? And even though it's not very big—the painting—you sort of have to figure that it goes on forever, you know, in each direction? So, like, to infinity, you know. 'Cause that's kinda like life. It's really crazy, if you think about it, that a hundred years ago some guy that I never met came to this country with a suitcase. He has a son, who has a son, who has me. So at first when I was painting I was thinking, you know, maybe [up here] that was that guy's part of the painting and then down here that's my part of the painting.

And then I started to think... well... what if we're all in the painting... everywhere? And what if we're in the painting before we're born? What if we're in it after we die? And these colors that we keep adding, they just keep getting added on top of one another, 'til eventually we're not even different colors anymore. We're just... one thing. One painting.

[He goes on:] My dad, he's not with us anymore. He's not alive... but he's with us. He's with me every day. It all just sort of fits somehow, even if you don't understand how yet. People will die in our lives - - people that we love. In the future. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe years from now. I mean, it's kind of beautiful, right, if you think about it, the fact that just because someone dies, just because you can't see them or talk to them anymore, it doesn't mean they're not still in the painting.

I think maybe that's the point of the whole thing. There's no dying. There's no 'You' or 'Me' or 'Them.' It's just 'Us.' And this sloppy, wild, colorful, magical thing that has no beginning, has no end, it's right here. I think it's us.

The great physicist Albert Einstein once said something very similar in a letter to the family of his close friend, Michele Besso, who had died. He said, "Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That signifies nothing. For those of us who believe in physics, the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."¹⁰

So perhaps, the glass is already broken, but the unbroken glass is also always present. All of it exists together. In that sense, those we love who have died, are always present with us right now. And we will be present to those around us, beyond the ending we call death. I will always be part of the ministry of A2U2, and you will always be part of me. And whether the story of humanity ends in the near future, or in the eons beyond, when the earth itself begins its dissolution into the sun, the story that is humanity is always the story of humanity. What matters is what we contribute to the beauty of that story right now.

Thomas Merton wrote,

In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.¹¹

Closing Words: David Rutschman wrote:

I was reading a poem by Ryokan about a leaf,
and how it showed the front and the back as it fell,
and I wanted to call someone—my wife, my brother—to tell about the poem.
And I thought that maybe my telling about the poem was the front of the leaf
and my silence about the poem was the back.
And then I thought that maybe my telling and my silence together
were honestly just the front of the leaf,
and that the back was something else, something that I didn't understand.
And then I thought that maybe everything I understood and everything I didn't
were both actually just the front of the leaf—
so that the totality of my life was actually just the front of the leaf, just the one side—which would
make the other side my death...
Unless my life and death together were really still only the front of the leaf?
I had left the branch. I was falling.
I was loose now in the bright autumn air.¹²

¹⁰ <http://quotingeinstein.blogspot.com/2013/06/einstein-and-michele-besso.html>

¹¹ Thomas Merton, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

¹² "I Was Reading a Poem" in *The Sun*, October 2017, p. 23.