

“Expanding Life”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma
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Last time I stood in this pulpit I talked openly about something we don't often talk openly about. I started by saying that my topic today is more controversial than sex. That day my subject was money. You all responded so well to that conversation that today I am going to talk about an even bigger taboo. It's a subject we usually don't like to discuss: DEATH.

Isn't it interesting that money, sex and death, three of the things that have the most power and influence over our lives, are three of the subjects we have the most difficulty talking about? It's probably because these subjects are so powerful that we shy away from them, in some cases going to great and painful lengths to avoid them. Without a doubt, obsessing about any of these subjects is unhealthy, but acknowledging them openly can be empowering.

In the case of our subject today, conscious awareness and acceptance of the fact that we will die and others we love will die, allows us to live. To truly live! Death strips away our pretentiousness and reminds us of who we are beneath our labels, and job titles, our physical features and our financial net worth.

Because we all face the same ultimate reality, and this shared destiny, this shared vulnerability binds us together whether we realize it or not.

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... 1

When death comes... how will you feel about the way you have lived? There are many people I see walking around this world who seem numb, whose spirits seem deadened. Some of it comes from drugs and alcohol which are used to deaden life's pain. Some people's spirits seem frozen and diminished by the senseless competitions in life, the endless comparing of oneself to others. Many get trapped by the manipulations of consumerism that prey on our deepest longings and vulnerabilities. Consider the excessive brainpower, financing and technology that goes into advertising to lead us astray as to how we might respond to the longings within us.

Others of us are suffocated in life by certain cultural expectations and gender roles that strangle our spirits. “When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real.”² When it's over, I don't want to look back on my days and realize I've been fooled, or I have been foolish or I've squandered my “one wild and precious life.” Just like a river, it's the banks, the limits that allow the river to flow deeper and farther. It's in awareness of our limits, the boundaries of our existence, that we find the encouragement to reach deeper and expand farther. It's in this awareness of our finitude that we find the encouragement to be real, to take risks, to love, to choose courage in the face of fear.

As a minister I have the great privilege of regularly being with the those who are dying. I've learned so much from them about what's important. In the process of dying, not everyone, but some, open up more fully to life. Dr. William Fair, former chairman of Urology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, upon facing the reality of his own impending death to cancer, wrote that now he was working to ‘expand’ his life, rather than ‘extend’ it³. People like Dr. Fair, once they know a cure is no longer possible, begin to participate more fully in life than ever before. They begin to develop even deeper more true relationships. They do so by listening more intently, speaking more directly, acting more open-heartedly. They appreciate the stars and

the moon and the simple gifts of life more profoundly. In a sense they become more alive than ever, more ready to be who they are, and to accept and allow others to be who they are.

The reason I raise the subject is because I don't think we need to be on our death-beds to reach this level of authentic living. If we can remember that we are all terminal, we are all dying, then maybe we can cut through some of the artifice and posturing and celebrate the ability to truly live. But in order to truly live we have to be willing to face our pain, fear, anger, disappointment and death. We have to stop seeing these as problems to be avoided and realize that they are part of the deal, an essential part of who we are and what it means to be alive.

Therefore, in order to truly embrace life, we also have to accept all that we cannot, will not and may never understand. Suffering, tragedy, death of the young and innocent. People invent all kinds of theologies and elaborate explanations to make sense of these realities, but some things we just can't explain.

During our wedding, my wife Anitra and I each had three people stand up with us. At a designated moment we had the female attendants, one by one, ask me whether I would be willing to accept some aspect of Anitra that each woman felt was an important part of who she is. Of course, after each one I said "I will." Then we had the men do the same by asking Anitra. When it came to my brother, he said, "Anitra, will you accept those things in Marlin that you cannot, will not and may never understand?"

And Anitra looked back at him with a smile that said, "Are you serious?" And then she answered, "I'll try!" That was fair enough. It's hard to expect someone to accept those things that they cannot understand.

But at the same time if we don't find a way to creatively accept life's unexplainable losses, we are doomed, like Lot's wife in the Bible, to find ourselves looking backward and having our life turned into a pillar of salt. We can become frozen in one place, and part of the living dead.

So, truly living involves both opening ourselves in awe and amazement at life, so that we can recognize our life's own beauty and accept the beauty in others. And it involves acknowledging the bad things and the things we do not understand, because running from or denying the hard things only leads to dispiritedness, neurosis and addiction. All of which deaden the very spirit of life. We do this in so many ways.

I want to share with you this passage from a sermon by one of my favorite Unitarian ministers, Marilyn Sewell in Portland, Oregon. She writes:

I want to say a word... about whining and moaning. It's not good for you. Now, I'm not talking about genuine sorrow, genuine grieving, which has a clean, purposeful feel to it. No, whining and moaning are in quite another category. They signal excuses to avoid joy, to avoid relationship. They deal in stereotypes and negatives. Whiners and moaners say the same things over and over again, and their friends get tired of hearing it. 'I can't find a relationship, because all women are ____.' (you fill in the blank). Or, 'I'll always be a failure because my father was ____.' (you fill in the blank again).

You know, you can decide – on a very intentional, conscious level – to say 'Yes' to life. You may need some help to get over your woundedness. But redemption is possible. ...I've seen it happen. You've seen it happen.

This notion of redeeming our lives is an interesting one. Personally, I don't think it has anything - AT ALL – to do with the bloody death of that wonderful teacher and human being named Jesus, on a cross, some two thousand years ago. Unitarian Minister Forrest Church has redefined redemption in terms of a store coupon. Coupons when used for their intended purpose have a certain value. But coupons unused have no actual value in and of themselves (except for one tenth of a cent, which is written in fine print). In order to claim their value coupons have to be redeemed by using them. So, it is with our lives.

Our lives are redeemed by our using them for their intended purpose. We're meant to use our gifts and talents in the service of something larger than ourselves, and we're meant to fully experience the joy of love and the tenderness that brings tears. We find it all in the song by Greg Davis that he sang for our anthem this morning. He told me more about it and gave me permission to share the story with you. He wrote it about his friend Robin who had breast cancer. It turns out that years ago Greg was a song writer in Nashville, and he was diagnosed with AIDS and came back to Tulsa. He came back home to die. At that point he quit song writing because he saw no use for it anymore. He met Robin, who was a singer, while they were both getting treatments for cancer; his was AIDS related.

Eventually they both went into remission and were working together. But one day Robin's cancer returned. Greg went to visit her in the hospital every day and she asked him to sing for her and with her. They sang together in the hospital every day as she struggled for her life even until the day she died. Through the process Greg began writing songs again. In the song he wrote for her and sang for us he says: "I gave you a gift to get you through that gentle night but how was I to know what you were giving me. You brought my soul from its slumbering..."

Their story shows how when we give of our lives and gifts to others freely, it comes back to us. It echoes in our own being. In their story we find the raw beauty and sorrow of life, struggle and pain and death. But we also find it filled with kindness and generosity and redemption. Filled with a love that abides. Because even though death takes our bodies, the love we share lives on.

Rabbi L. Kushner has said that he believes we are put on this earth to learn to love. It's not a simple task. We say here each Sunday in reciting our covenant that "Love is the Spirit of this church." Love is truly the spirit that dwells within us all. It's always there for us to claim. Love isn't a way of being. It is our being. It is who and what we really are. But our true being, the love inside you and me, gets so easily covered over and diminished by the forces of fear and pride and greed and distrust.

To truly live has to do with tending to the spirit of profound love that is our true nature. To me that love is the Holiness that lies within each of us and within each moment of our lives. The spark of God. A simple gift just waiting for us to claim it and call it forth, to remember that it's there. To remember that it's at the core of who we really are, underneath all the ploys and pretense and scars. We fan the spark by living lives of kindness, and courage, and integrity. So many forces exist that try to deaden our spirit and rob us of life. These forces have been personified in some religions as Satan. Just as humans have personified God, we've personified the forces of temptation, deceit and evil that seem to come like thieves and steal our joy and break our spirits and rob us of our integrity. They lead us away from lives of deep celebration and purpose.

But, by remembering our mortality, we realize that we can't afford to put important things off. The unknown schedule of death reminds us that we don't have time to wait. Don't wait! As one poet has said, "Now is the time to give me roses. Not to keep them for my grave to come. Give them to me while my heart beats, Give them today while my heart yearns for jubilee. Now is the time!" (Mizwakhe Mbuli)

Friends, now is the time to live more fully, to love more deeply and to forgive more readily. "When death comes, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular and real. I don't want to end up having simply visited this world."⁴ Amen.

¹Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10.

²Oliver, 11.

³Morris, Virginia. *Talking About Death Won't Kill You* (New York: Workman, 2001) 255.

4Oliver, 11.