

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Being Mortal

By Jan Thomsen, UU Fellowship of La Crosse, Wisconsin, December 17, 2015

A discussion based on

“**Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End**” by Atul Gawande

CANDLE LIGHTING

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS:

Today I would like us to focus on the difficult problem of continuing to live life as our physical and mental abilities lessen and we need more help. Most of us have cared for aging parents or loved ones, and for sure, all of us are going to be in the position of being cared for in the future. Atul Gawande has ideas about what is wrong with ways Americans have dealt with fragile elderly, and shows some interesting alternatives. Today let's think about what might work for us.

CHECK IN:

Take a few moments to share some thoughts, knowing we're listening without interrupting and keeping your comments confidential.

READINGS:

“A few conclusions become clear when we understand this: that our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and the aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer; that the chance to shape one's story is essential to sustaining meaning in life; that we have the opportunity to refashion our institutions, our culture, and our conversations in ways that transform the possibilities for the last chapters of everyone's lives.”

– [Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*](#)

“In the end, people don't view their life as merely the average of all its moments—which, after all, is mostly nothing much plus some sleep. For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story. A story has a sense of a whole, and its arc is determined by the significant moments, the ones where something happens. Measurements of people's minute-by-minute levels of pleasure and pain miss this fundamental aspect of human existence. A seemingly happy life maybe empty. A seemingly difficult life may be devoted to a great cause. We have purposes larger than ourselves.”

– [Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*](#)

GROUP DISCUSSION:

- The lot of the elderly has changed so much in the past century. The concept of retirement is relatively new. Social Security, which established the age of retirement at 65, has only been around for 80 years. Life expectancy has increased. What changes have you observed in the way elderly people are cared for within your own families? Did grandparents live with you when you were a child? How were safety and autonomy balanced, or was safety always the top priority? Please share what you can of your experience.
- Gawande says that nursing homes were originally not meant as permanent residences; rather they were to take the burden off hospitals, more like rehab places. Two events that tried to replace the “end of the road” nursing home were described in the readings: The development of the first assisted living facility in 1983 in Portland by Keron Wilson, where autonomy was equally important as safety, and the innovations at Chase Memorial Nursing Home in New York which introduced animals, live plants and other home-like features into a nursing home. What did you

think of the residents' reactions to the new ideas? Are these ideas practical or feasible for the majority of fragile elderly? How about the less-fragile?

- What kind of situation do you want for yourself as you grow weaker in body and mind?
- Do you know of a facility in which you would like to live, or is staying in your house of primary importance, and why?
- Are you comfortable with letting your children make decisions for you?

CLOSING WORDS:

“A poor life this, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare,” said the British poet, William Henry Davies. With the gift of age, we have the opportunity to become more and more aware of the wonder and magic present in any moment — even the humblest moment.

Accepting a cup of coffee from the server in a coffee shop is an act of grace. Taking time to admire a tree or flower is an act of grace.

We also have the extraordinary privilege and opportunity of savoring what is always here with us in any moment — the stillness and peace of our own eternal being.