

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Death

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook, NY, March 2014

Rev. Margie Allen and Rev. Dr. Linda Anderson

Opening words (*In Blackwater Woods* by Mary Oliver)

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Chalice lighting and silence

Covenant (optional)

Check-in (optional: Winter is over. How are your spirits as spring approaches?)

Topic Introduction by Rev. Michelle Collins

A favorite philosopher of mine brings us the gentle wisdom that “Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.” (J.K. Rowling) In the Harry Potter saga, this fear is what drives the majority of the characters to avoid naming the arch villain Voldemort and instead call him “You Know Who” or “He who must not be named.” Their fear of his name increases and feeds their fear of the person himself. The counterpart to Rowling’s gentle wisdom is that naming something or someone decreases one’s fear of it. Naming is powerful, both on a societal level but especially on a personal one.

Margaret Mead noted that, “When someone is born we rejoice, when someone is married we celebrate, but when someone dies, we pretend that nothing happened.” What do each of us name, and what do we avoid naming? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard someone avoid using the words “death” or “died.” Or even avoided talking about dying or losses in any terms whatsoever. Even with the deeply known understanding that not talking about it doesn’t change anything, and it doesn’t make it any less real. But yet the words are still avoided and danced around, questions aren’t asked, and fears aren’t shared. Not naming it increases our fear and pain and often our confusion.

Yes, these are tender topics, sensitive ones that touch on some of the deepest parts of our hearts. But part of being tender with oneself is caring for that vulnerable part of oneself by NOT putting it behind a wall of silence or euphemisms. Naming is powerful and can be a powerful act of love for each other and for ourselves.

Quotations

Activity (facilitators -- for this activity you will need paper and pens)

On sheets of paper have each person write down all the words/euphemisms/phrases they can think of for death. When they have finished, go around the room, each person reading one word or phrase they have written which had not yet been mentioned.

When everyone has run out of words, you can add the following if they have not already been spoken. (Kick the bucket, put out to pasture, expired, passed, gone to

meet his/her maker, asleep, put out of her/his misery, snuffed out, taken out, flatlined, belly up, left the building, gone home, croaked, checked out, went to heaven, breathed his/her last)

Questions for group reflection

1. What words do you use for death? How come?
2. Have you ever heard doctors or other professionals avoid saying death/dead/die/dying? What impression did that make on you?
3. What can you remember of your first experience of death? Share the experience with us.
4. If you are willing to think about your own death, what comes to mind?
5. What would you like to be remembered for?
6. Do you have any advance directives? What do they say about your wishes for end of life care?
7. What do you believe happens after we die? What were you taught as a child? Have your beliefs changed? What have you taught your own children about death?
8. Does your family have any particular rituals or practices when someone dies?

Likes and wishes

Closing words and Chalice extinguishing

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and
 Are melted into air, into thin air;
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherits, shall dissolve;
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep.

- William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Quotations

"I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." ~ Woody Allen

"I'm the one that's got to die when it's time for me to die, so let me live my life the way I want to." ~ Jimi Hendrix

"The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A (person) who lives fully is prepared to die at any time." ~ Mark Twain

"Death ends a life, not a relationship." ~ Mitch Albom

Life is for the living.
Death is for the dead.
Let life be like music.
And death a note unsaid. ~ Langston Hughes

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." ~ J.K. Rowling

"Each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn." ~ Mahatma Gandhi

"I want to write my own eulogy, and I want to write it in Latin. It seems only fitting to read a dead language at my funeral." ~ Jarod Kintz

"Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see." ~ Helen Keller

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice." ~ Steve Jobs

"I meant," said Ipslore bitterly, "what is there in this world that truly makes living worthwhile?" Death thought about it. CATS, he said eventually. CATS ARE NICE."
~ Terry Pratchett

"No one can say that death found in me a willing comrade, or that I went easily."
~ Cassandra Clare

"We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves." ~ Michael Ondaatje

“For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.” ~ Kahlil Gibran