

Unitarian Universalists Small Group Ministry Network Website

Fear of a Name (on Death & Loss)

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware, by Rev. Michelle Collins, 2012

Chalice Lighting, by Howard Thurman

Open unto me, light for my darkness.
Open unto me, courage for my fear.
Open unto me, hope for my despair.
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me, strength for my weakness.
Open unto me, wisdom for my confession.
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins and shortcomings.
Open unto me, love for my hates.
Open unto me, thy Self for myself.
O God, open unto me! Amen.

Check In

Reading: 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.

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.

Discussion & Sharing Questions:

- Can you think of any euphemisms for death or dying?
- Have you ever heard doctors or other professionals avoid saying death/dead/die/dying or some other critical issue? What impression did that have on you?
- When have you avoided talking about something? What do you think was going on for you then?
- 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.”
 - How have you experienced this cultural legacy of denial?
 - How does this wall of silence affect each of us?
 - What are some ways that this legacy of denial can be subverted? Do you have any particular perspectives or spiritual practices that work to subvert this denial?
- The reading encourages us to name death and losses. It reminds us that, “Naming is powerful and can be a powerful act of love for each other and for ourselves.”
 - What are some ways that you can name things that you might be avoiding?
 - What are some ways that you can encourage others to name them for themselves?

Closing Thoughts

Extinguishing the Chalice



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