

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY  
**Life and Death**  
Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

**Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:**

In the struggles we choose for ourselves,  
In the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us,  
It is right to remember those who gave us strength in this choice of living.  
It is right to remember the power of hard lives well-lived.

Those who lived before have not disappeared.  
They are with us still.  
We, the living carry them with us;  
We are their voices, their hands, and their hearts.  
We light this chalice in memory of them.

*~ Adapted from "They are with us still" by the Rev. Kathleen McTigue, #721 in Singing the Living Tradition*

It is difficult to accept death in this society because it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact that it happens all the time, we never see it.

*~ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross*

**Check-in:** *What experience did you have this month that was especially meaningful to you?*

**Focus Readings:**

The first time I saw someone who had just died I was 19 and working as a hospital orderly. One of my assigned patients had died. Though he was ill, the suddenness of his death was unexpected. After the necessary notifications and business had been attended to, I walked into his room and looked at his body. I remember being struck by how wondrous and fleeting life is. I realized that where once a person had been present, this body was now not animated, was not moving. That peculiar organization we call a person was forever, irretrievably gone. Though I've been in the presence of death many times since, I am often struck by its finality.

When my father died I began his eulogy with this paragraph from *Fidelity*, a collection of short stories by Wendell Berry.

“Mat Feltner was my grandfather on my mother’s side. Saying it thus, I force myself to reckon again with the strangeness of the verb *was*. The man of whom I once was pleased to say, “He is my grandfather,” has become the dead man who was my grandfather. He was, and is no more. And this is a part of the great mystery we call time.”

*~ Rev. Craig C. Roshaven*

There are persons who shape their lives by the fear of death, and persons who shape their lives by the joy and satisfaction of life. The former live dying; the latter die living. I know that fate may stop me tomorrow, but death is an irrelevant contingency. Whenever it comes, I intend to die living.

*~ Philosopher Horace Kallen on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

We are conscious of our own selves, our own tasks, and also we know we're going to die. Man is the only creature -- men, women, and children sometimes even, are the only creatures who can be aware of their death, and out of that comes normal anxiety. When I let myself feel that, then I

apply myself to new ideas, I write books, I communicate with my fellows. In other words, the creative interchange of human personality rests upon the fact that we know we're going to die. Of that the animals and the grass and so on know nothing. But our knowledge of our death is what gives us a normal anxiety that says to us, 'Make the most of these years you are alive.'  
~ *Interview of Rollo May by Jeffrey Mishlove, Director of the Intuition Network*

In the Jefferson Bible, Thomas Jefferson separated the teachings of Jesus from what he considered to be the religious dogma and supernatural elements in the traditional Gospel accounts. He then presented the teachings of Jesus, along with the essential events of his life, in one continuous narrative.

In Jefferson's account, there is no risen Christ. His account ends with the tomb being sealed.

What then of Easter? What is left to celebrate?

It is easy to dismiss, as Jefferson did, the accounts of the resurrection found in the four gospels as so much superstition. But perhaps focusing on whether or not Jesus, in fact, rose from the dead is not the point.

The point may be that the story of Jesus

- Submitting to death by refusing to fight—admonishing his supporters to put down their swords and even restoring the ear of one of the soldiers who had come to arrest him.
- Submitting to death by refusing to flee, by coming to Jerusalem in the tumult and fever of Passover, a celebration of liberation from bondage by a people who were again in bondage.
- Submitting to death by refusing to defend himself from his accusers and even asking for the forgiveness of his persecutors, "For they know now what they do."

is a story that robs death of its power. It is a story that robs death of its fear. It is a story of liberation. It is a story of love being stronger than death.

~ *Rev. Craig C. Roshaven*

### **Focus Questions:**

1. As a child when did you first become aware of death?
2. How have funerals and/or memorial services affected you?
3. Do you agree with Rollo May that the basic human dilemma of knowing we are mortal makes us anxious? Does it change how you act and interact with others?
4. Rev. Forrest Church often said that religion is our response to being alive and knowing we will die. How has knowing that you will die shaped your spirituality and religion?

**Check-out/Likes & Wishes:** *Has this session changed your perception of/the way you think about life and death?*

### **Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:**

What we need to fear is not death, but squandering the lives we have been miraculously given. So let me die laughing, savoring one of life's crazy moments. Let me die holding the hand of one I love, and recalling that I tried to love and was loved in return. Let me die remembering that life has been good, and that I did what I could. But today, just remind me that I am dying, so that I can live, and love with all my heart.

~ *Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed*