

With the Flames at our Backs
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington
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Rev. Paul Ratzlaff

Some weeks ago, I received the following email from a person who has been checking out our congregation thoroughly to see if it meets this person’s religious needs.

Rev. Paul,

At the orientation [for newcomers] some months ago, I asked the religious education [representative], "What prayers do the kids learn?" And she said, "None."

Around that time I heard the 9/11 dispatcher tapes of phone calls from the Towers. A woman was weeping in the flames and smoke, saying to the 911 dispatcher "I'm going to die" over and over.

The dispatcher was good. She barely batted an eye: "Say your prayers; dear, just say your prayers. Say your prayers now."

What if she didn't know any prayers?

Nothing for her but the heat, [my interlocker observes.]¹

This is an instructive story. It gives us pause. “How prepared are we for any extreme crisis that may come our way?” “How prepared are we for being on the ninetieth floor with flames at our backs, and considering jumping – to what?”

We may do everything we know how to deny it, but crises will come. They are inevitable. Our bodies will age, get sick – die. On one level we know that. On another level we pretend that it will not happen to us. Like Woody Allen quipped, “I’m not afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”² I know this very well myself. I look at photos from our summer vacation, and I’m shocked and dismayed by the old man in the picture. I don’t like getting old. As several have observed, “Old age is not for sissies.”³

The song that Rich just sang is telling. When we brush against major loss – a loved one dies, a deep relationship ends, we survive a serious accident or bout with cancer – there’s a temptation to try to push that terrifying awareness away. “Maybe I’ll dye my hair...move somewhere...get a car...sleep real late...lose some weight...have some fun...meet someone and make ‘em mine.” Anything to avoid facing the dread.

How often do I hear, “I want to die in my sleep, just go to bed at night and never wake up?” That’s like Allen joked, “I don’t want to be there when it happens.” Other times, people say, “How fortunate. He died of a massive heart attack so suddenly.” Perhaps there’s only an instant of awareness, “I’m dying” and then one is gone.

A couple of generations ago, death was part of everyday life – and it happened in the home, in the middle of the family. Children died; mothers died in childbirth; parents died young. Of course elders died. For most of human existence on this planet children, youth, adults, confronted death everyday. But, in today’s world, we insulate ourselves

¹ Private correspondence.

² Quoted in *1,911 Best things anybody ever said*, Selected and compiled by Robert Byrne, 1988, Fawcett Columbine, New York, I-38, pg. 12.

³ Quoted in *1,911 Best things anybody ever said*, Selected and compiled by Robert Byrne, 1988, Fawcett Columbine, New York, III-216, pg. 312.

from death. Death is not a frequent visitor. And so we can pretend that death is not a natural end to life. Consequently, it’s tempting for us moderns to pass through our lives without considering, and preparing, for our own death. But does that help us when the flames are at our back?

An important dimension to spiritual deepening is preparing for our death. As my colleague Forest Church says, “religion is how we deal with the twin mysteries of being born and knowing that we must die.”

As UUs we don’t hold one common belief about death. There is no official UU way to prepare for your death. We are not a creedal religion. Instead we affirm that these questions are unknowable, and that different people will find different answers persuasive. As a covenantal religion, we promise to be there for each other, even as we may differ in the answers that we hold. We trust that our lives will be enriched by sharing our diverse perspectives.

This freedom to find answers that speak your truth has a downside and an upside.

The downside of this religious freedom is that you are left on your own. That may mean that you avoid preparing yourself for life crises. That may mean that you do not pursue, as our third principle affirms: “The free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Obviously, I and others can urge you to attend to your spiritual life, but we cannot force you, or manipulate you into that self-care. I can only remind you that if you avoid preparing yourself, you are likely to face the crisis with overwhelming fear. The downside of religious freedom is that you may use your freedom to avoid facing the mystery.

The upside of this religious freedom is that you will be more authentic in holding on to what comforts you.

I personally find Buddhist teaching resonates with my being. At the end of the Heart Sutra there are the lines, loosely translated:

*So you should see all of the changing world –
a passing bubble in a rushing stream,
A flash of lightening in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.*

In other words, when you attend deeply to your experience, you see that everything changes, that our ego-identity is constructed, and is really empty, and that all the things we take as substantial are really fleeting. With such awareness comes compassion and equanimity – a freedom to live joyfully in the moment, whatever that moment is. As Sylvia Boorstein says in her inimitable way, “You don’t have to be pleased to be happy.”

But others may find Buddhist preparation too stark. Deep within they want to nurture a sense of presence so that even in those moments when they are most alone – when the flames are at their back – they can count on a sense of presence to accompany them.

An older man was dying of kidney failure. He reported to me among his last lucid moments that he had been visited by his father. His long-deceased father assured Frank that he would be with him. A sense of peace radiated from Frank as he told me this. Clearly others report in near death experiences that they are assured by a white light, or even more embodied presences, that everything is OK.

One might find meaning in the prayer, “Dear God, assure me that everything will be OK – that my family and loved ones will be alright, and that I may be held in comforting hands as I pass from this world.”

From an earth-centered faith, there may grow a sense that one’s individual life is just a vehicle for the forces of earth and sky. Therefore it’s a mistake to get too caught up in one’s individual story, and to want, as human as it is, to prolong it forever. One prepares one’s spirit for one’s death by celebrating the larger forces that continue long after one’s individual life is gone and forgotten.

One of my favorite poems, *Inscription for a Gravestone*, is by the nature poet Robinson Jeffers:

*I am not dead. I have only become inhuman;
That is to say,
Undressed myself of laughable prides and infirmities,
But not as a man
Undresses to creep into bed, but like an athlete
Stripping for the race.
The delicate ravel of nerves that made me a measurer
Of certain fictions
Called good and evil; that made me contract with pain
And expand with pleasure;
Fussily adjusted like a little electroscope:
That’s gone, it is true;
(I never miss it; if the universe does,
How easily replaced!)
But all the rest is heightened, widened, set free.
I admired the beauty
While I was human. Now I am part of the beauty.
I wander in the air,
Being mostly gas and water, and flow in the ocean;
Touch you and Asia
At the same moment; have a hand in the sunrises
And the glow of this grass.
I left the light precipitate of ashes to earth
For a love-token.⁴*

Some find inspiration in a poem that they learn by heart. When I was suffering with severe sciatica, I would repeat Stephen Mitchell’s adaptation of the fourth Psalm:

*Even in the midst of great pain, Lord,
I praise you for that which is.
I will not refuse this grief
or close myself to this anguish.
Let shallow [people] pray for ease:
“Comfort us; shield us from sorrow.”
I pray for whatever you send me,
and I ask to receive it as your gift.
You have put a joy in my heart*

⁴ Quoted in *Great Occasions*, edited by Carl Seaburg, 1968, Beacon Press, Boston, 396-397.

*greater than all the world's riches.
I lie down trusting the darkness,
for I know that even now you are here.*⁵

Reciting that to myself gave me comfort as I suffered the pain of the sciatica.

The presumption I find implicit in the email message with which I opened, is that someone who has faith in God is better prepared to face the crisis when it comes. I would question that presumption, because I think it depends on what I would call the maturity of that person's faith. If they assume that God will rescue them through some miraculous device, they are likely to have as great despair as the person who doesn't believe in God – perhaps even greater, because they may feel betrayed. How can God do this to me? I prayed and prayed, and still God is letting me die! On the other hand, the person whose concept of God includes the possibility of personal tragedy may find comfort in prayer. “Lord, whatever happens to me personally, I know that your love goes on.”

I would note that this same sort of comfort is available to the atheist. Bertrand Russell, famous for his atheism, wrote a compelling aspiration in the face of death.

*In an old man [or woman] who has known human joys and sorrows, and has achieved whatever work it was in him [or her] to do, the fear of death is somewhat abject and ignoble. The best way to overcome it ...is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river – small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The [woman or] man who, in old age, can see [her or] his life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things [she or] he cares for will continue. And if, with the decay of vitality, weariness increases, the thought of rest will be not unwelcome. The wise man [or woman] should wish to die ..., knowing that others will carry on what he [or she] can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done.*⁶

As I understand this, Russell urges us to prepare for our death by expanding our sense of personal identity. You can find the same theme in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and earth-based religions. No longer is your ego identified with this particular mind-body, with its accumulated stories, scars and glory. Instead you identify more with the causes and forces that will survive your death. Life in its glory and its suffering will go on.

May each one of us develop within ourselves the faith that will support us even unto death.

⁵ Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew*, 1993, HarperCollins, New York, 4.

⁶ Bertrand Russell From *New Hopes for a Changing World*, quoted in *Great Occasions*, edited by Carl Seaburg, 1968, Beacon Press, Boston, 253.

In the most recent copy of the *UU World*, the Rev. Deborah Hafner writes an article titled, “How to Raise a Mensch: Cultivating your child’s ethical and spiritual growth.” In it she quotes the scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

*Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best, it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service; a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one’s own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event. Men and women of this kind of faith face catastrophe and confusion, affluence and sorrow, unperturbed; face opportunity with conviction and drive; and face others with cheerful charity.*⁷

May we grow such faith not only in our children, but in ourselves. Indeed if we are to grow it in our children, we must model it ourselves. And may we grow it individually and in caring relationship with others, as our Mission Statement puts it.

Thus shall we be prepared when the 911 operator says to us, “Say your prayers, dear. Just say your prayers.”

⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, From *Faith and Belief*, quoted in “How to Raise a Mensch” by Deborah Hafner, *UU World*, Fall 2008, 32.