

Order of Service
Unitarian Universalist Church of Norwich
November 8, 2020
Speaker: Rev. Lilia Cuervo

Opening Words Let Me Die Laughing Mark Morrison-Reed

We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion.

We need to learn to live with death, and to understand that death is not the worst of all events.

We need to fear not death, but life-
empty lives,
loveless lives,
lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of
us have been given,
lives that are like living deaths,
lives which we never take the time to savor and
appreciate,
lives in which we never pause to breathe deeply.

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, savor, and love with all my heart.

From: Been in the Storm so Long. A Meditation Manual. Edited by ark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James. UUA 1991.

Chalice Lighting Excerpt from “On Holy ground” by Richard Gilbert

How strong is our need for one another
our silence beckoning to our neighbors,
our invitation to share life and death together,

our welcome to the lives of those we meet,
and their welcome to our own.
We kindle our chalice, a bowl of light.
reflecting the Eternal Light which
shines always around and before us.

Hymn: # 346 “Come, Sing a Song with Me”

Time to honor and remember our beloved dead

Moment of silence

Let us have a moment of silence to keep in our hearts all the beautiful memories shared in community. And let us elevate our gratitude for all the people who have gone before us, and for their many contributions to our lives.

Time to bring to our minds and hearts those close to us who are ill with Covid virus, or any other serious or terminal disease.

Prayer/Silent meditation

Spirit of Life, infusing our first breath, and receiving our last. Here we are gathered, to remember and honor our beloved dead, to remember their deeds and examples, and to feel their presence consoling us. Some of us are feeling down, battling personal disabilities and sickness with little or no hope of recovery from them. Some of us are deeply sad, with heavy hearts at the loss of parents, children, close relatives, friends. 70 million in this country are disappointed and hurt by the loss of the elections, fearful of what tomorrow might bring. Some of us are worried about debts, employment, health, and some of us are isolated and lonely. Spirit of Healing and Comfort, help us to find ways to regain hope, peace, and joy in our lives.

And here we are gathered, some of us with joyful hearts as life has been good and abundant to us. United with 74 million more we are filled with expectations that our new government led by the president elect Joe Biden and vice-president elect Kamala Harris, will guide our nation into a healthier, peaceful, more loving future. Together, those grieving and those celebrating, beating as one heart, express our gratitude for the many gifts we enjoy every moment; for our lives, our families and friends, and for our faithful companions in our journey of spirit here at the UU Congregation in Norwich.

O great Love, embracing us all, give us courage as we recommit to work for peace and justice, Remind us to walk softly on this earth, aware of our connection with all that is, and help us to find and honor the sacred in ourselves and in those we meet. Blessed be. Amen.

Following the sound of the bell let us have a few moments of silence to listen to our inner voice, to reflect, or to elevate a personal prayer.

Hymn #123 Spirit of Life

Sermon

... 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, savor, and love with all my heart.

This excerpt from the Opening Words which I used this morning, by Mark Morison-Reed, perfectly encapsulate my wishes of how I want to live, and how I would like to experience the last and most sacred moment of my life.

In these days in which we are facing daily records of people contracting the corona virus, and records of people dying because of it, I keep thinking of two cruel aspects of this pandemic: one, that thousands died and will die without holding the hand of one they love, and without having someone helping them recall that they tried to love and were loved in return. Two, that a good portion of those infected do not have symptoms and become carriers of this disease involuntarily contaminating those they love. Because of this, countless persons and their families were caught and are being caught unaware when the virus arrived at their door and were unable to prepare emotionally and spiritually to help their dying or to help themselves.

Losing my mother was the most painful and indescribable experience of my life. But because I was able to prepare and accompany her through the months during which she was terminally ill, and because she gave me the gift of dying in my arms, I will always remember her death with sadness, but also with love and a profound sense of satisfaction.

Before my mother got sick, I had been volunteering with Hospice Care of Long Island. There I learnt how one can tend to one's feelings and physical needs while tending to the feelings and physical needs of a beloved one facing death. By paying attention to my emerging feelings of sadness, as I saw my mother declining, I realized that I was experiencing what is called "anticipatory grief." As the name suggests, anticipatory grief is the emotional reaction to a loss or a death before the loss or the death happens. By the way, its physical and emotional manifestation can be similar to the grief experienced after a death or a loss occurs. At Hospice Care I also learnt that by being attentive to our mood changes, to emotional gestures like listening, communicating, and interpreting without judging what the dying person is trying to say, it was possible to give and to receive what are called "final gifts." Today I want to share in some detail how by practicing anticipatory grief and by exchanging final gifts, my mother and I grew closer, and were able to handle with compassion and calm what could have been a terrifying, confusing period between the moment we realized she was dying and the moment she gave her final breath.

My mother was a fiercely independent woman who had a deeply ingrained work ethic, taking very seriously her calling to serve the poorest of the poor as a public health nurse. She lived in small towns where she established and served health posts, becoming in her long life the healer of hundreds, if not thousands. Wanting to give me the best possible education, she sent me to boarding schools with Catholic nuns. Thus, with the exception of two years in which I attended day school, I lived with my mother only during my school vacations. Yet, because I was her only child, we created an unbreakable bond of love. This bond felt at times too tight for comfort, especially after my mother retired and I had become a wife, and a mother, and had a full career. Ironically, at the time I converted to Unitarian Universalism, she became a Seventh Day Adventist. Sometimes we would have heated arguments about religion and other matters. So I worried about what would happen if my mother died after one of our arguments and I had not made peace with her.

In 1991, she started feeling weak and losing her appetite. I was crushed and bewildered learning from the doctors the extent of the damage caused by a now active tropical parasite which had been dormant in her liver for many years. Leaving the hospital the day we received the diagnosis, I was numb with the realization that my most terrifying and feared time was at hand. My mother was terminally ill. I was going to lose her. In a rush, doctors, nurses, medical technology, hospital beds, blood, tears, pain, scans, my office duties, my home life, her church, my church, friends, even what to wear to her viewing, passed through

my mind. Yet, she was there, holding on to my arm as we descended the stairs to the parking lot. Oh, how I tried to calm my mind and to practice being in the moment. I told her that we both were going to go through ups and downs but that we were there for each other and that we had good friends and family that cared for and loved us.

At the time, my youngest daughter, wanted to visit some campuses in search of a college. Since my mother always loved to travel and meet new people, I invited her to join us. At first, she was apprehensive; but then she reasoned that, if she was going to die, she might as well do something meaningful and fun while there still was time. We all had a wonderful time visiting national parks and colleges in the West. Right after the trip, wanting to ease the transition from her independent life to a more restricted one, I prepared a room in my house and I invited her to use it as she wished. As my mother's illness progressed, she moved with me. We started to create some rituals like praying together in the morning before I went to work. At first, I would just listen to her praying, sometimes silently criticizing her theology. Then I started saying the words with her, listening for the sentiment, not the theology, progressing to holding hands during our prayers. We talked about death and she would ask about my beliefs in the afterlife. I reassured her many times how interesting and valuable her life had been. I asked her to remember the thousands of people that she had helped during her career as a nurse and later when she volunteered in so many places. I told her that if I had the chance to be born again and choose my own mother, I would surely pick her. I also told her that I wanted to become a minister in part following her example of caring service. We talked about funeral arrangements and what to do with her ashes.

As her death approached, my mother became very peaceful and even sweet most of the time. Her demands decreased and she was much more accepting of my religion, my ideas, and even my cooking! This made it easy for me to become more affectionate and open regarding her religion and her idiosyncrasies. Our new-found level of acceptance made it more difficult for me to leave her when I went to work. I would wait for the weekends with anticipation knowing that I could be around her for longer periods. At times, when holding hands, I would close my eyes and say to myself: "Imprint the warm touch of her hands in yours; you will never feel it again."

On the afternoon of the day my mother died, I put on soft music in her room and brought her fresh flowers. Around 3:30, I was alone with her and I felt moved to put one of my hands on her forehead and the other over her heart. I told her that I loved her very much, I thanked her for all she had done for me and my children, and I told her that it was O. K. to leave if she was ready. I recited her mantra, "Your will be done, not mine", several times. These moments were as perfect as I ever experienced in my life. Later when I entered the room, I asked my mother how she was feeling. She turned towards me and said with her sweetest voice: "My love." Those were her last words. After dinner, I decided to lie by her side with one of my arms under her head. Myself, my children and a friend that were with us noted a feeling of serenity permeating the room. I was still holding my mother when, at 11:55 p.m., she breathed for the last time.

Although I was very sad and missed my mother terribly, thanks to my anticipatory grief I didn't feel guilt or major regrets after her death. Even today, I feel peace and love every time I remember her and our exchange of final gifts. I gave her the final gifts of holding hands while praying, learning to enjoy when she read from her Bible to me, reassuring her many times how interesting and valuable her life had been and telling her that it was O. K. to leave if she was ready. My mother gave me so many final gifts - accepting my becoming a Unitarian Universalist, surrendering control and letting me tend to her basic needs, accepting my cooking and being open with her wishes for what to do after she died.

In her book How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies, Therese A. Rando, explains that Anticipatory Grief *does not mean premature detachment; rather one can grieve the loss of a loved one in the future and still be involved with the person in the present.* She advises, *recognizing your separateness from your loving dying one and learning to tolerate the awareness that the loved one will die while you will continue to live.* She says that one should *remain as involved as possible with the person dying promoting whatever continued communication, interaction, dignity, control, living, and meaning remain available.* She suggests *starting slowly to incorporate changes in your identity, roles, experiences, expectations, that reflect the present and will begin to prepare you for a world without your loved one.* Rando's another important suggestion is *planning the*

future together, so that you do not feel that such plans are betrayals after the person dies. Finally, very important also is the process of reviewing his/her life and learning how the person wants to be remembered.

All these ideas suggested by Rando are indispensable in our understanding and practice of anticipatory grief as well as in identifying final gifts we can offer each other. Sooner or later, our lives will end. How we prepare for the departure of those we love and for our own will determine in great part the degree of peace and joy we will add to our lives. The more compassion and understanding we display toward those leaving us, the more satisfaction, and less guilt we will experience after they are gone. Likewise, by preparing for our own death with care, we will show compassion and love for those we leave behind. These days in which we are suffering the consequences of a deadly pandemic, in which we are daily made aware of so much illnesses and death is pertinent seems to me to ask ourselves: What regrets would I like to eliminate from my mind and heart before my loved ones die and before my own death? What last dispositions would I like to make? If I do not act now, what important unfinished business would I leave? It is not easy to answer these and other questions related to death or to act accordingly. But just think, if it is difficult to make decisions while we are feeling well and full of energy, how much more difficult it will be when our faculties might be impaired by pain, by weakness, or by sedation.

When facing the impending loss of those we love, or the loss of our own life, it is greatly satisfactory to be able to change fear and anger into love and peace, indifference and denial into awareness and care. Practicing Anticipatory Grief as we contemplate our own mortality and that of those we love, and exchanging final gifts with those facing death, is a rewarding and compassionate way to insure peaceful, loving and guilt free transitions. May we all be able to resolve the big questions in our hearts, before it is too late. May we all be able to exchange nurturing final gifts. May the Spirit of Life sustain us and those we love, so that when the time comes, we may be able to peacefully transition into the realm of the great divine mystery, our final resting home. Amen and blessed be.

Closing Hymn # 301 “Touch the Earth Reach the Sky”

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice remembering that

as long as we live, our dead too shall live
for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

Benediction Because of those who came before, by Barbara Pescan

If you are blessed with company this morning, please join hands to receive the
benediction. Those alone, let us join hands virtually with the people around the
world.

Because of those who came before, we are;
in spite of their failings, we believe;
because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,
we, too, dream.

Let us go remembering to praise,
to live in the moment,
to love mightily,
to bow to the mystery
