

“Facing Death With Life” a sermon
Rev. Brian J. Kiely Unitarian Church of Edmonton
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I have often told this story, but it bears repeating because of the truth it reveals about our culture and our fears: Back in the old church, every Monday morning, Freeman Patrick and Jim Campbell, both dead now, used to come in and tidy up after Sundays. They were dedicated, but also leisurely, so they were usually still there at lunchtime. Together they would open their bag lunches and read the paper. As is often the habit in older people, they would visit the obituary page.

“Hmm”, one of them would say, “No one died yesterday. Three people passed, one has gone to a better place, two more left and one is in the arms of Jesus...but no one actually died!”

And it is true. “Dead” is the last dirty word in our culture, usually only hurled as an angry epithet as in, “I wish you were dead!” Someone did a study recently and noted that only 3% of sympathy cards mention the “D” word. Sympathy cards! You know, the ones you send when someone is dead!

I have a friend who is an estate planner. He is very comfortable with death, of course, but realizes his new clients are likely not. He uses humour including he now says, the story I just told, anonymously, of course.

He also tells his clients, “We’ll just take all the ‘God forbids!’ as a given, you know like, ‘...when you’re dead, God forbid!’ It will save us a lot of time.”

I have never really understood why so many of us get all tied up when the subject under discussion is death. Perhaps it’s because it was far from my personal experience. I was the youngest family member in my generation and born to middle aged parents. In the generations above there were still four people of the grandparent level, and about 25 at the parent/aunt/uncle level all middle aged or older. The result was a lot of three day, open casket Irish wakes in my childhood, all funerals for old people who died in their time and not at all tragically. I was familiar with dead bodies, and kind of looked forward to funerals as times when I got to visit with my cousins. Old people died. It was normal. Sure, sometimes it was sad, but so was breaking your leg, having a friend move away, the Canadiens not winning the Stanley Cup. Death was just another part of living, and because of all those open caskets, so, too, were dead bodies.

It appears that mine is not a common experience anymore. Perceiving death as ordinary is pretty rare. I am surprised by the number of people in their 30’s that I meet who are about to attend their first funeral, and who have never seen a dead human body. We have become estranged from the one thing in life we are all going to face.

A lot of us are not comfortable contemplating our own deaths, or, perhaps more significantly, the deaths of loved ones. When pushed, we will admit that yes, we are the only species fully aware of our own future demise, but many of us will do it with a kind of intellectual distance and not accept it on an emotional level.

For the last few weeks 30 members and friends have been looking at the social characteristics of death in our “Facing Death with Life” course. We are testing this new Unitarian Universalist curriculum for Kate Walker a friend and colleague of mine who co-authored it.

Sometimes I wonder if these 30 folks are typical of our membership, for they are entirely willing to talk of death, to share stories of how the human species deals with death and so on. It's an easy course to facilitate. Ask an open-ended question and away we go! Although not designed as a bereavement group, there still has been a deep and meaningful sharing of stories often touching on anger and frustration with the way social norms have contrived to keep us from feeling what we need to feel, speaking what we need to speak and working with our grief.

It is very clear from the stories they share that shutting down discussions of death and our feelings about it has long been a hallmark of western culture. And we have perfected the "disappearance of death" as well. For several decades as the frequency of people dying in hospital has risen and fewer of us have died at home, death has become sanitized.

Instead of having to deal with the body of your loved one, perhaps even wash it and prepare it for 'laying out' as the saying goes, corpses have just disappeared. A ward full of hospital room doors are closed and the covered body is wheeled down an empty hall, taken and prepared by the funeral home. Often the bodies go straight to cremation never having been seen by family member or loved one. Or if they are prepared for viewing, the standard and necessary use of make-up made necessary by embalming makes the loved ones barely recognizable.

Fortunately, in recent years, grief counsellors and therapists have been able to buck that sanitizing trend. Families are now allowed to spend time with their recently dead loved ones, to say their goodbyes. There is something about seeing a lifeless body. It makes the death real. It hurts. It hurts badly. But it makes acceptance easier. It also tends to leave you believing in the life essence or soul as being somehow separate from the body. No one can mistake a dead body for a living one. It's really a very moving and mystical moment, and, I think of great potential benefit for those left behind. Of course, you have to be willing to face the dead, and there's the rub. It makes us uncomfortable. The thought of it gives many the creeps.

Now why is that?

Is it the holdover from the ghost stories and horror movies we watched as kids? Is it a fear that we will lose control and humiliate ourselves in some way? Is it the ick factor? Maybe it's all those TV cop shows when the maid or someone walks in, finds a dead body, drops the tray and runs screaming in terror from the room. I never understood that cliché. I could see, "Oh, heck!" or even "Oh my God!", but running screaming...does anyone ever do that??? But somehow it's in our brains as the way we are supposed to react. Run from death...it may be catching!

Perhaps that's part of why we don't like to discuss death. Why are we so afraid to face it?

Is it just the fear of the unknown? Is it that we can't stand the idea of not having a tomorrow? Is it because we are afraid that maybe, just maybe there is some giant scorecard in the sky waiting to show us how we failed at life? Are we afraid of survivors finding our secrets?

Perhaps, that's some of it. Another side may be trying to spare ourselves from thinking about the pain of losing someone we love. Life is busy enough and challenging enough as it is. The thought of the upheavals caused by the death of a spouse or parent may be too much to imagine. What will it be like to be alone? How will I cope

without that support, that income, that obligation? How will I work the negotiations with other survivors over wills and things? I suspect all of that plays a part in helping us conclude like Scarlett O'Hara, "I'll think about it tomorrow."

There are consequences about avoiding the topic, however. And there are people who have been very close to their own demise and recovered or survived who come away with a new appreciation of the time they have left. Their brush with the grim reaper teaches them that the time to put things right is now, the time to appreciate life is now, the time to get priorities straight is now.

First off, there are relationships. Most of us have some relationship that is in need of repair, often significant ones. When someone dies, the chance to fix things is lost, and that can be very hard on the survivor. It complicates grief. I only hope that as I age or become ill, I will work to find generosity in my heart for those I have wronged or who have wronged me. I hope I will make a few of those overdue calls and let go of my need to win when I do so. I don't want to be left hanging. I hope others won't leave me hanging either. Of course making those calls now would be the wisest strategy, wouldn't it?

When my daughters were born, I wrote them both letters and put them with my death things. Over the last seven years I have greatly appreciated the gift of being able to add more letters to the file, not every year, but now and then. Maybe it will make things easier for them. Maybe I will remember to write down the things I sometimes forget to say...or maybe because it's in writing, they will take notice of what I have said, over and over to the point of not being heard. But no matter what happens on the drive home, I have already said one goodbye.

A second point is that it's important for our loved ones to know our wishes about both end of life and what comes after. There are Living Wills and Advanced Care Directives available in various self-help book sections. They are easy to use. They have varying degrees of legality in different jurisdictions, and different physicians pay them different degrees of heed, but they are very useful even if offering no certain guarantees.

Why? Because they tell the people who love you and who may have to make the hard choices what you desire. How would you like to make the decision about discontinuing care – about killing - someone? Can you imagine what a burden that could be if you hadn't talked about it beforehand? I know many of you have been in that position, and I bet not having to guess is a godsend.

The same is true for memorial and funeral services. Next Saturday we will hold a memorial service for long time member Clarence Collins. In December, our Audrey Brooks sat down with him and got a great set of instructions about what he wanted in his service. He told us which bio to use, which music he liked, he even suggested hymns and readings. It made my interview with the family so very easy. They were able to shape the service to meet their needs knowing that their choices would have pleased him...and that's very comforting in the first days after a death. Best of all, he knew that there had to be a service...not for him, that's not his theology. No the service is for us, for the people left behind.

I contrast this with the story of a death of a woman I knew. She just hadn't been around for a few months. I learned one day from a message on my answering machine that she had died a few weeks before. No service. No call back number to the family I

did not know. No nothing. She wasn't a close friend, but she was someone I enjoyed. What now? I have to find my own way to say goodbye. She gave me this tie. I guess wearing it is my answer.

Please, as your minister, please, don't ever curse your eventual survivors by saying "No memorial!" I know you don't want to make a fuss, but frankly, after you're dead, it's not really about you. It's about the needs of the people you leave behind. You might not need a service, but they will even if, and perhaps most especially, if there is some tension among you.

I have never forgotten a scene from some old John Wayne western. On a cattle drive one of the cowboys dies and is buried out in the empty plain. Wayne is about to jump back on his horse when the youngest kid there says, "Ain't you gonna say some words? Somebody's gotta say some words." It's true. Don't deny anyone the words. There is no magic, but we need to say them, for as John Donne noted, no one of us is an island. Each death touches us.

Finally, we have to talk about death, because when we die we leave behind a mountain of paperwork. Do your eventual survivors know where your will is? Do you have one yet? Have you checked it recently? What about your bank accounts, credit cards and utilities? How about your deeds, tax files, shares, pension stubs and other financial records. Yikes! You may not be able to do too much to wrap that stuff all up before you die, but at least you can keep the material together in a findable place. And let your Executor of your family know where it all is. The last thing they need when you die is the added stress of having to find all of your stuff.

We don't like to talk about death, but it is something we need to do. And the conversations we need to have only become big deals if we let them. One reason we hate them is because they force us to contemplate losing someone we love (including ourselves). But here's another way of looking at it: Having those conversations is about bringing the love you feel to the surface and laying it on the table. Because I love you, I wish to make my death easier for you. Because you love me, you want to give me the peace of mind of knowing I have been heard. And then, if you like, you can both finish the conversation by promising to live forever.

It likely won't be the first lie you have told each other and most likely not the last either!