



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Unfinished Business,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 19, 2014

For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise;
For all life is a gift which we are called to use
To build the common good
And make our own days glad.¹

I love that hymn--the words, the piano part, its reminder that all life, each day, each moment, is a gift. Which is so easy to forget, or take for granted. It's so easy to move through our lives, going through the motions, taking care of our daily business, but unaware of what a gift it all is.

Too often we hurry through our days, don't we? We forget to notice what a miracle it all is. That we are here! That we have these bodies, and these lives, and these companions. This sanctuary that others built for us, even the coffee and tea that we will hold in china cups and enjoy in just a few minutes!

On Thursday night I was here for a meeting. The Merrimack Valley String Orchestra was practicing in the Murray Room, so when I needed something from the church office I cut through the dark sanctuary, down this aisle and through that door. On the way back, I looked across these pews, and thought, “This church can seat a lot of people!” The sanctuary was lit by light coming from the Murray Room, and I looked around, and was struck by how beautiful this space is, especially in the dark. The shapes and patterns, the volume of space, they are part of it, but the real beauty has to be what has taken place here, all the souls who have gathered and worshipped here over the years. And the thought came over me, “I so love this place.”

It was one of those moments of realization, when what you know becomes clear, a deeper kind of knowing. This is not about the building, though I love it too. I'm talking about this congregation; who we are and who we are becoming. The luminous faith that you have, that you live out in so many quiet and unassuming ways, that I am so blessed to see and bear witness to. That's what I love being part of.

Our lives should be full of these moments of grace, like I had on Thursday night, when we realize what a gift it all is. But they can be few and far between. It's so easy to be distracted by the many things that want and need our attention, to be worn down and pulled down by the bad news and

¹ “For All That is Our Life,” words by Bruce Findlow, hymn #128 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

the sad news of this life. It's no wonder that we take refuge in TV or the internet, or use food or alcohol or drugs or work or busyness to numb ourselves to the pain and sadness of this life.

But that's not how we're meant to live. The theme we're engaging this month is death, and I hope that an awareness of our own mortality will be a big reminder of how precious life is, because it's so easy to forget. I hope that getting more in touch with the fact that each of us is going to die will help us to more fully live these lives we have been given.

When I spend a summer as a hospital chaplain, I had lots of bedside conversations with people who were at the end of their lives. What struck me was how often they told stories of wounds and regrets from long ago--the way a parent had mistreated them, or a broken relationship with a sibling or friend that had never been healed, or some mistake they had made that still haunted them. As death approached, these good people were trying to work out those things that were unresolved, in their hearts and in their lives.

A few years ago, my friend Dan was telling me about his father's declining health, and he said his dad was showing a newfound interest in religion and spirituality, now that he could see the end coming. Dan, who tends toward the skeptical, put it this way: he said, "It's like my dad is cramming for the final exam."

It's human to push away that which is painful or uncomfortable. But you don't want to get to the end of your life and discover that it's too late to deal with your unfinished business.

Stephen Levine has spent a lot of time helping people who are dying. He's seen this firsthand. "On their deathbed some people look back on their lives and are overwhelmed by a sense of failure," he says. "They have a closetful of regrets. They become disheartened when they reflect on how they have overlooked the preciousness of their relationships, forgotten the importance of finding their 'true work,' and delayed what some call 'living my own life.' Because they had left so many parts of their life for 'later,' they felt fragmented about unsatisfying work, unfinished business in relationships, and compromised lifestyles. But 'later' came much sooner than they expected, and they found themselves burdened by unfulfilled dreams and a sense of incompleteness."²

None of us want to end up like this. I urge you to take account of your life, and ask yourself, "Are there things I need to deal with? Are there relationships I need to heal? Am I living the life that is mine? If I had a year to live, what would I do?"

That's what Steven Levine did--he spent a year acting as if it was his last, and he wrote this book about it. I'm reading *A Year to Live* because I want to walk the path that he traveled. I want to start now--not wait until it's too late. And I hope some of you might join me.

How many of you have some version of that recurring dream where you show up in class and it's the end of the semester, and it's time for the final exam, and for some reason you haven't been

² Stephen Levine, *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as if it Was Your Last*.

there all semester? You're completely unprepared; maybe you wake up in a cold sweat, "Oh, that dream again!"

Is it possible that dreams like this, where we feel unprepared and unready, are not about our past struggles as students, but rather, a way our psyche is trying to get us to do the work that lies before us right now? Are you living the life that is yours? Are you ready for the final exam?

Stephen Levine tells us that, at the end of life, "Many people, although they have few other complaints, experience a certain remorse about having neglected spiritual growth, while even more express dismay that there has been so little authentic joy in their lives. All but those who have fully opened to life say that they would live differently if they had just one more year."

We are here, in this church and on this earth, to learn how to open more fully to life. If you had one year to live, if you knew that October 19, 2015, would be your last day on earth, what would you do differently? I'm reading Levine's book because I want to be more intentional about how I spend my days. Are any of you interested in walking this path with me, reading *A Year to Live* and getting together to do this work of facing our own mortality? If so, please let me know.

I don't want to wait until it's too late, I don't want to be one of those folks cramming for the final exam. I want to be like the poet Mary Oliver, who writes,

When death comes...
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?...
When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.³

Who among us wants to be just a visitor here, a troubled guest⁴ on this planet? Just because our hyperactive, consumer-driven, death-denying culture is telling you, all the time, to move faster, to live in a state of distraction, to not pay attention to this one life you have been given, to ignore what is real--you do not have to do that! For your life's sake, you should not do that. There is another way, open to the beauty and pain and blessing of this life. Aware of the changing seasons, the living and the dying all around us. Open to the wonder and mystery of this moment and this day. You don't have to go anywhere to do this. You just need to bring your attention to what is going on right now, right where you are.

³ Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes."

⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "The Holy Longing": "And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow, you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth."

And if you do this, you will become more aware of what needs attention in your life. I suspect that each of us does have unfinished business, things we have put off dealing with, things that were easier to push away rather than face. There is no shame in this. But there is a cost. In the long run, it's actually easier, and certainly better, to face things rather than try to avoid them.

There's a scene in the movie "On Golden Pond" when Jane Fonda is talking to her mother, played by Katherine Hepburn, about her difficult relationship with her father, played by Jane's real-life father Henry Fonda. Jane is complaining about her dad, about wanting to have a better relationship with him, and her mom gets exasperated and says, "Your father is eighty years old. He has heart palpitations and a problem remembering things. When exactly do you expect this friendship to begin?"

People think that facing death will make us sad and discouraged. And there's certainly a healthy amount of sadness one must feel around the loss that death brings. But that's not the whole story. The truth is, getting in touch with our own mortality, rather than making us perpetually depressed or discouraged, can actually light a fire under us and set us free to live more fully the days that we have on this good earth.

If you had a year to live, what would you do differently? What is your unfinished business? Some of us have "bucket lists" of things we want to do before we die. In addition to the places you'd like to visit and things you'd like to do, what else belongs on that list? Restoring a relationship? Deepening your spiritual life? Finding your vocation? Living more joyfully?

I hope being part of this church helps you to be in touch with the fact that life is precious and this moment is sacred. Next Sunday we observe All Souls Day, a time to remember those who have died. We create an altar here, with their photographs and other mementos that you bring, we speak aloud the names of those who have died, we sing, "for all the saints, who from their labors rest."

As we remember them, those who have died, this question comes to the fore: how are we going to live while we're here? You don't want to get to the end "sighing and frightened or full of argument." You want to have lived the life that was yours. You want to have said what you needed to say, and done what you wanted to do. You don't want to have any unfinished business. You want to be free. The time to start is now.

Amen.