



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Don’t be Afraid of the Dark,”  
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on October 30, 2011

I’m holding two things in my heart today: the reality of death, the sadness and loss and finality of it, that’s one thing. And the other is my hope and faith that death does not have the last word, that death is not even to be feared or dreaded, but rather, seen as part of life.

I don’t want to sound like this is easy, because anyone who has ever lost someone to death knows it is not. But it is part of the price we pay for being human. It’s been said that the reason we have religion is because we know that we are going to die, and religion is supposed to help us live with that knowledge. It’s good that we have days, like this one, when we draw closer to death, because we live in a culture that doesn’t know how to do that very well.

When I was in 7th grade, my grandfather died in a house fire. He was on a golf trip with three of his best friends, and only one of the four survived. Those days seemed different in our house. In our family, we were taught to keep our feelings to ourselves. Looking back on it, it seems like we were strangers to one another. But when Pops died, we let down our guard. I saw my father cry, something I’d never seen before. And so I look back on those days with a kind of fondness.

That closeness, that taste of connection--sometimes I wonder if that’s why I went into the ministry. Because I get to be with people at this critical time of life. And it is a real privilege to be with folks when they are dying, or companioning a loved one who is dying, or in those moments and days when grief is fresh.

This summer, like some of you, I went to see the last Harry Potter movie. I’ve loved those books, and the movies too. If you haven’t read them, don’t worry, I won’t give away the ending. After seeing the movie, I was kind of confused about the ending, so I went back and read the last few chapters of the book. What struck me was how much it was about facing death, and the choices we have.

What makes Harry Potter so special is that he is not afraid to die. He doesn’t want to die, but preserving his own life is not his highest priority. Lord Voldemort, on the other hand, is terribly afraid of death. The difference between them is love--Harry has it, and Voldemort does not.

Several books before the last one, Professor Dumbledore says to Harry “It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, who lived a hundred years ago, said that if we humans have been cowardly, it has been in this way--that those things that are strange and scary to us, those things we don't easily understand, like visions, the spirit world, death, he said that we have pushed these things away so often that our ability to glimpse and grasp them has gotten less, and so we are less able to apprehend these mysteries, and God too.<sup>1</sup>

People can fear death the same way some people are afraid of the dark. But what happens when you are in the dark? Your eyes adjust, and you can see things that are not visible in the day. I like to look up at the stars and wonder about things. The other night I was driving home, and had just passed Kenoza lake, when a shooting star as bright as fireworks arced across the sky, framed in the middle of my windshield. Have you ever seen a shooting star during the day? No, neither have I. The beauty of the darkness is that it reveals to us some things that are hidden in the light.

This time of year invites us to look into the shadows, and even to face what we fear. It reminds us that we do not need to be afraid of the dark, that there is beauty and blessing there. It reminds us that we do not need to be afraid of death either, which is natural and part of life, and which reminds us just how sweet and precious this life is.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> What Rilke said was "That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called "visions," the whole so-called "spirit-world," death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God."