"Learning How to Live,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 5, 2014

"Everybody knows they're going to die," Morrie Schwartz said, "but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently."[1]

Isn't that what church and spirituality are for? Helping us to live differently? With more hope and less fear, with more care, and more commitment, and more joy? Rev. Forrest Church, for many years the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan, said "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." These questions, about how we live and how we die, are holy ones.

This month of engaging with death is about living these questions, so we might do things differently. The promise and paradox is that getting more in touch with death can actually help us to more fully live these lives we have been given.

If this is a topic that makes you nervous, hang in there. Death is a subject our culture tells us is sad, uncomfortable, a defeat even, something to be avoided. I have my own resistance about this. At first I worried that four Sundays of death might keep you from coming to church! But when I started to dig deeper, I realized that this is live-affirming work. And we want to live, while while here, don't we?

Fifteen years ago, I was part of a prayer group at the church where I became a UU. We met once a month for prayer, and, mostly, to talk about it. We shared what was going on in our lives, and one night, a man named Roger told us he had a brain tumor. A retired engineer, Roger was quiet and thoughtful, with an impish sense of humor. Over the next year, we heard about his treatments, and we prayed for him. We rejoiced with him when his cancer seemed to be under control. And we sat with him when he told us that his cancer had come back, and there was nothing the doctors could do.

We helped out as we were able. One day I drove Roger to get his glasses repaired. The person behind the counter said, "This is just a temporary fix. It won't last too long. You really ought to think about getting yourself a new pair."

Roger looked at her and said, "This should do. I'm not going need them for long. "

---

[1] Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie.*

At that same time I was listening to an audio cassette of Mitch Albom's book, Tuesdays with Morrie, the source of our reading today. It's a beautiful true story of a man who reconnects with his favorite professor after he learns that Morrie is dying of ALS. I'd get in my car, and pop in the cassette, and be pulled right into those Tuesday gatherings when Mitch would go and sit with Morrie, and they would talk about living and dying.

One day, I got in my car, but didn't push in the tape. I knew where the story was going, and how it was going to end, and I wasn't ready. It could wait. I didn't have the heart to listen that day. I could slow the process down.

At that same time, Roger's health was in decline. We knew the end was coming, but just not when. I figured I there was time to see him at least once more. But then an e-mail came from the church. "We're sorry to tell you that Roger Papineau died peacefully last night," it said. It went on to say that his men's group had gathered at his side a day before, and his children had been around, and there would be a memorial service in a few days.

I felt kind of cheated by this. I wasn't close enough to Roger to get invited to visit in those last days. I missed the chance to say goodbye. I realized that life is not like an audio cassette, where you can hit the pause button. Where you have that kind of control.

I went to the memorial service, of course, and it was good to be there, to have the time and space to grieve and say goodbye, to meet his children and to remember and give thanks for the gift that was his life.

My mom's father died in a house fire when I was in middle school. In the days following his death, something happened in our family. I saw my father cry at the kitchen table. I felt that Pops' death revealed to us what was really important. We let down our guard and drew closer to one another. Friends showed up with good things to eat. We gathered at First Methodist Church and sang, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

That experience, forty years ago, of death and family and mourning, stays with me. It informs my work and ever reminds me of what a privilege it is to be with those who are dying, and with those who grieve.

In our culture, there's this pressure to deal with death and move on, quickly. Just this summer, when I led the memorial service for a woman I'd never met, her daughter told me of how hard it was to get more than a day or two off from work; that her boss was pressuring her to deal with it and move on.

Here's one way we here can push back at our death-denying culture. We can offer a space here, a refuge for people who need a place and time to grieve. Where we tell the truth that grief takes its own sweet time. Where we provide a community of friends who support one another, tell stories, laugh and eat and pray together, as we remember the one who has died and companion the family through their time of grief and loss.

Do you wonder sometimes, “Should I attend that memorial service? I didn’t know the person that well.” None of us can do everything, but the answer is, “Yes. It’s good to show up.” There’s a poem about this, about showing up when someone’s died. It’s called “What I Learned From My Mother.” The poet says:

I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.[2]

It’s good to show up, and that simple act can means a lot to the family. But don’t we also need to show up for ourselves? To be reminded of our own mortality. To explore that mystery of what happens when we die. To sit there and wonder, “What will they say at my memorial service?”

My point today is this: to the extent that we kid ourselves about death, to the extent we deny that our days are numbered, to the extent we avoid death and push it away; we will live smaller, less purposeful and less joyful lives than we are capable of. We are meant to have good lives and good deaths. But too often, that is not the case.

Here’s one example. Journalist Katy Butler has written about her parents’ deaths, and how her father was not well-served by medical technologies that kept him alive after his quality of life was diminished. Because no one was willing face the fact that he was dying. Butler says, “Death used to be a spiritual ordeal; now it’s a technological flailing. We’ve taken a domestic and religious event, in which the most important factor was the dying person’s state of mind, and moved it into the hospital and mechanized it, putting patients, families, doctors, and nurses at the mercy of technology. Nonetheless,” she says, “we still want death to be a sacred occasion.”[3]

"There's a better approach,” Morrie Schwartz said. “To know you're going to die, and to be prepared for it at any time. That's better. That way you can actually be more involved in your life while you're living."

And how do we do this?

"Do what the Buddhists do,” Morrie said. “Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, 'Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?' Is today the day I die?"

Here’s what I hope you will do this month. Make it a practice to consider your own death. You could read Tuesdays With Morrie. Or one of these books I’m reading this month, the titles are printed in the Sunday Bulletin: Love and Death, by the Rev. Forrest Church, and A Year to Live, by Stephen Levine. You could come and talk to me about end of life issues; your wishes are for your final days, and your thoughts about your memorial service. You could even try writing your own obituary. What would you say?

---

[2] Julia Kasdorf, “What I Learned From My Mother.”

[3] Katy Butler, “The Long Goodbye,” in *The Sun,* April 2014, available online at http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/460/the_long_goodbye

Forrest Church was the prominent and prolific minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan for over thirty years; he was a pastor and preacher, a public theologian, who wrote or edited over twenty books. After being given a diagnosis of terminal cancer, he wrote Love and Death in a matter of weeks. Steven Levine is a meditation teacher and an expert on grief. His book, A Year to Live, is an exploration of the year he spent preparing for his own death, spending that year as if it were his last.

The invitation is to engage more directly with your own mortality. You don't have to do this alone. We have these companions and guides, ancient and modern, to help us along the way. We have this faith tradition, which assures us that we are part of a great Love that will never let us go. We have this church, where we know how to do death--it's one of the things we do well here, isn't it? Both our liturgy and the great receptions we have afterwards, often put on by our Ladies Circle; we know how to celebrate and give thanks for a life. And it is good.

Each of us, we know we're going to die. We just need to start believing that, and acting on it, taking steps to prepare for our death. Rather than make us sad or morbid, this will actually open us up to the gift that is this moment and this day. It will help us to live more fully these days we have been given.

Paradoxically, it is in accepting and embracing our death that we will really learn how to live. Let us be people who are able to say yes to death. So that we can also say yes to life.

Amen.