



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

It Springs Forth

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March 27, 2016

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I have always loved Easter. On Easter morning, my siblings and I would awaken to find the Easter bunny had visited our home, shiny foil eggs glistening atop the ivory of the piano keys. To this day, each of my siblings and our partners receive an Easter basket, complete with marshmallow peeps and a chocolate bunny, to be enjoyed ears first. And then, there was church, an early morning drive from Massachusetts up to Maine to my grandparents' Unitarian Universalist congregation. I remember the grand mahogany pulpits covered in fragrant lilies and the bright bounty of beauty after the harsh east coast winters. Afterwards, the feast of ham and scalloped potatoes and as many fluffy lemony deserts as we could eat.

As I age and create my new home in California away from family I feel myself drawn to traditions more and more. A few weeks ago I picked up Easter cards to send across the country, realizing I would be far away this year. Without thinking, I picked up one for my grandfather, who passed away two summers ago. Friday morning, Good Friday in the Christian tradition, I found the cheerful notes and went to write to him, as I did for so many years. I felt the pang of grief once again as I remembered he was gone. I remembered the way that he died, the memorial we had for him. I remembered the grave we now visit in Maine, engraved first with both his and my grandmother's names, his birthdate now accompanied by his death date.

My grandparents were married for over fifty years. They were, adorably, named Winnie and Windy, Winnifred and Winfield. After her sudden death from a swift and brutal cancer, the ten years of life that followed were for him a painful time of decline into confusion and dementia. These years would also bring us together in surprising and unexpected ways as I became both granddaughter and pastor. We would take long drives together to remote corners of the state of Maine to find the densest wild blackberry patch or the freshest lobster roll.

On one of our adventures he confessed to me that my grandmother was the only woman he had ever loved. We would often talk about her loss. Before he moved out of the house they shared for decades, he told me he imagined her there with him, appearing at the foot of the bed to comfort him before sleep. "Where did she go?" he wondered, and "Why did this happen?" On holidays we went to visit my grandmother's grave together. We spent time talking to her, offering flowers and updating her on the family's life, he took me over to another headstone. It was for a child, lost too soon, engraved with an anonymous poem attributed to Mary Elizabeth Frye.

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.

My grandfather found comfort in these words of poetry—they became sacred text for him. In his frustrated journey of grief he searched for a satisfying reply to the love that had disappeared so suddenly. He instead had found in our relationship a witness to his search, and a way to make meaning of her death among the living. Though we lived far apart, I would write him and share my own memories of Grandma that come to me in the red flash of the cardinal against the snow in winter and the heavy perfume of lilacs in spring.

A few weeks ago, we lost our congregation's oldest member, Sid Gally. Sid was a Pasadena legend, our resident historian who loved this church and loved his community fiercely. Until the end of his life, Sid retained all of his faculties, including his technological savvy. He always had his iPhone handy and skyped with his family in Saudi Arabia. We will celebrate Sid's life on Father's Day with his family, friends and members of this community. His absence leaves an unsettling chasm in our congregation's life. We struggle to articulate death's paradox, the very same one with which my grandfather struggled: we feel his presence among us still, and yet he is gone. "Where did he go?"

Katie Roiphe is an American writer whose new book is *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*. Through an early intimacy with her own death, Roiphe suffered from a particularly pernicious bout with pneumonia, leaving her body diminished into her adolescent and teen years. She became obsessed with stories of children's illness in times of war and duress, pouring over accounts of the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide.

In her adult life as a writer, discovering her own inability to articulate death's meaning she became fascinated by writers and artists who seemed to have it figured out. She asked, "If it's nearly impossible to capture the approach of death in words, who would have the most hope of doing it?" Unmoved by the heroes of organized religion or politics, she instead chose the lives of remarkable people that in her words "were puzzles, that confused and intrigued" her: Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, Maurice Sendak, John Updike, Dylan Thomas.

Typical autobiographies begin with the person's birth to tell the story of his or her life. Accounts tend to be sequential, starting with the beginning, middle and end, even if a person's life is interrupted or unjustly cut short. Conversely, with Roiphe's subjects, she begins by telling the story of the end of their lives. She writes: "In my head, I think of what I am doing as biography backward, a whole life unfurling from a death."

There is a more accurate flow to this backwards biography that mirrors the experience of how we grapple with death. Very often I sit with families who come to meet with me to plan the

memorial service for their loved one, which I will soon do with the family of Sid Gally. We bring out photos and mementos of the person to tell the story of their life. Nearly always, the first thing the family does is to share the story of how their loved one died. I have listened to accounts of deaths that were peaceful or violent, swift or prolonged. Grieving people tell the story to try to answer the same questions my grandfather struggled with so mightily: “Where did the person go?” And “Why did it happen?”

Always, there is a silent undercurrent of disbelief that the death occurred, some unconscious shattering of a hope for immortality. We somehow had hoped that our loved one would cheat death, or that it would visit at another, more convenient or natural time. One of the subjects of *The Violet Hour*, legendary psychologist Sigmund Freud, once articulated this phenomenon in this way: “Our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causation of the death—accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event.”

Our human tendency to deny our loved one’s mortality is embedded in our nature, our modern age has trained us to shield ourselves from the inevitability of death even as we are saturated by its reality. With more terror attacks this week in the Ivory Coast and Brussels, Belgium, the intimacy of technology delivers the brutality of death to our handheld devices. Conversely, our medical industry works to sanitize it and remove it from our view. In the early 1990s, surgeon Sherwin Nuland highlighted the mechanics of death with unfailing precision to bring the “why” of death more clearly into view. In his best seller *How We Die*, he wrote, “Modern dying takes place in the modern hospital, where it can be hidden, cleaned of its organic blight, and finally packaged for modern burial. We can now deny the power not only of death but of nature itself.”

Easter is a time where we celebrate the cycles of nature, the Earth’s renewal after the dormancy of winter. We rejoice in the rebirth of spring and the “greening,” or quickening of our own souls. We know that the birth of spring does not come without the death of winter. History has laid the Christian story of Easter over the Pagan traditions to bring us to this moment of our church year, the yearly marker of Jesus’ death and rebirth. Today we find ourselves in this backwards biography, tracing a life unfolding backwards from a death.

I wonder how you are arriving at the story of this puzzling death this Easter? Some of you may be drawn to the mystery of it, maybe like me you are perplexed by the power it still has for you. Perhaps you feel as if the Christian tradition imposes this death upon our culture and wonder what message it has for Unitarian Universalists. Perhaps the “how” and “why” of this death still feel gratuitous to your ears. In telling the story once again, we learn about: A persecuted body unable to be saved by his friends and followers, criminalized and murdered for his religious and political beliefs, a body placed for safe keeping in a cave, nature’s simple un-hewn tomb.

And then, a body that mysteriously disappears after death.

Tattered bandages that wrapped his broken body remain. An angel guards the empty tomb. And Jesus' followers, left stunned by a loss they did not believe was possible, are afraid. Jesus was supposed to redeem the world and become king, his leadership was intended to overcome the powers and principalities. Instead, he died a violent and traumatizing public death. This was not supposed to be a part of the equation. The lives of Jesus' followers are shattered after the loss of their leader—shell-shocked, they do the only things they know how to do when people die.

They share the story of his death with all who will witness to it. They break bread and share a meal in the way Jesus showed them how. They recite the sacred scriptures their teacher entrusted with them for safekeeping. And somehow, a transformation occurs. Jesus' friends begin to feel his presence emerge among them once again. Some even say they swear he walks and talks with them. Where there was once only the bleak wilderness of grief, joy springs forth, a way out of no way out. In her remarkable poem *When Great Trees Fall*, Maya Angelou writes:

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always irregularly.

Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

The Easter story tells of a fierce love that reaches backward into history with the same ache of our modern losses. When those we love die, in our grief we tell the story of their death, not to trap them in time but to give them life again. On this Easter Sunday as we rejoice in the rebirth of spring, we know death does not have the final say in the legacy of a life well lived. As we prepare to set the table for the Easter feast, may we discover blooming among us all the memories which live on in our hearts, the great legacy of love of which we are a part. This is the victory of resurrection Sunday. This is the Easter miracle in which we can all believe, the mystery of eternal life springing forth in the common work of love.

Amen, Happy Easter, and God Bless us all.