



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**A Life Worth Dying For**

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These days, I have been preparing for a wild occasion that I thought I might never experience, my wedding which will be celebrated this upcoming weekend. As my partner Sam and I discussed our vows on Friday evening, an unusual theme came up. Death. In my history of marrying nearly 100 couples, not one had been interested in including words about death in their ceremony outside of the standard “till death do us part.”

Marriage ceremonies are about celebrating the life ahead, and most people it seems want to feel far as far away from death as possible on their wedding day. As the poet Li Young Lee has written, “There are days we live as if death were nowhere in the background.” But our wedding is not one of these days for my beloved, which is one of the reasons why I am marrying him.

Sam and I are both steady companions with the presence of death.

In my own family, we have celebrated the lives of far too many of our beloveds in the past years, most recently my mother’s partner. In my calling to ministry, life passages are a central part of my work and one of my greatest joys. In many ways, I am hypervigilant of death’s constancy. When moments of tragedy like the Vegas shooting grip our hearts with grief, I create our church be a place for us to hold the heavy burden of death, especially when death comes in senseless, unexpected and violent ways.

In more daily way, I support members of our congregation who are aging and living with illness, or who are themselves caring for family members or friends. On rare occasions, I’m gifted to witness moments just before death, and to pray and sing with our members as they approach their transition, as I was blessed to be able to do this with our member Barbara Masters this summer.

Most often, I sit with the living after death, grieving together and creating meaningful memorial services.

Sam’s primary connection to death is his mother, who at only 74 years old is in the late stage Alzheimer’s disease. As her primary caregiver, Sam has been there through her swift decline. We recently moved her from Riverside to a wonderful new facility in Altadena to be closer to her. This week, two of the residents passed away.

Every week, he watches his mom lose a new motor skill, like spitting out toothpaste or using a straw, and he wonders how long he will have with her. Being Sam’s partner means supporting him as he cares for her. I’m continuously amazed at his patience and devotion, his ability to stay present to her needs with a joyfulness that is unending while privately grieving the everyday losses of her decline and eventual death. I often find them dancing together to classic tunes of the 30s and 40s, singing along to church hymns and relishing a egg salad sandwich. While he may cry on the way home, he makes every visit with his mother count, greeting her with delight and unconditional love. Sam has taught me that living with death means that every moment with a dying loved one is a gift to be savored.

So in our vow writing exercise, I suppose it is not so much surprising that death made its way into our promises to one another. I want to share a sneak peak of one of our vows which is my favorite one. I can’t take credit because Sam wrote it, but here it is nonetheless:

*I promise to accept the impermanence of life, to embrace both life and death with equal reverence and holy regard.*

When I heard him share this vow with me tears came to my eyes, tears of gratitude and recognition that I have found my life partner and spiritual companion as we together face the many ways that life and death will comingle in our lives.

Accepting life's impermanence as sacred is not an easy task. In fact, embracing life and death with equal reverence is a spiritual discipline that all of us are required to learn at some point in our lives, whether we choose to or not. Each one of us is confronted with the reality of our own deaths, and the deaths of those we love. Likewise, each of us find our own ways that we live with the presence of our own mortality and process our grief for those we love and are losing, or those we have already lost.

The Rev. Forrest Church is one the most articulate theologians about facing death as a spiritual discipline in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Forrest's life was not without controversy, but in my mind his work endures as the best contemporary expression of our liberal faith. Without fail, if anyone asks me for a book for Unitarian Universalists on death, I recommend his slim but powerful book *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Shadow*.

Forrest's book was written after his terminal cancer diagnosis, which would claim his life at the young age of 63. Over the three years of his diagnosis, Forrest used his remaining time to urgently chronicle his ministry and personal experiences with death and dying, which he found the most important task over all of his endeavors, far beyond his successful career as a public theologian and his many books. I spent five years in the presence of Forrest's ministry at All Souls, and came to understand his theology intimately by ministering to his former congregation.

Over those five years, I was often called upon by community members to attend to memorials of strangers who shared their deepest moments of grief with me. These community members came to the church wanting their loved ones to be remembered, to have a public gathering where the love they still felt for this lost loved one would matter to a place and to a group of people. I officiated for a homeless man who mentored others in his community, a woman who dedicated her time to feeding the homeless, sudden deaths, murders, young people, people who died of old age after a life well lived. I have done a memorial for one person for one family, and a mass memorial to remember the victims of AIDS. Just as Forrest did through his memorial ministry at All Souls, I came to understand death in a new way. Attending to life and death with equal regard is one of the central tasks of the religious community, one that will never cease in importance, even with the anxiety about the future of religious institutions and the ebbs and flows of public religious life.

Forrest puts it well:

Death is central to my definition of religion: religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

We are not the animal with advanced language or tools as much as we are the religious animal. Knowing that we must die, we question what life means.

The answers we arrive at may not be religious answers, but the questions death forces us to ask are, at heart, religious questions. Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life's purpose? What does all this mean?

Religious community helps us to struggle together to respond. In addition to the insights of the world's religions, science, psychology and history, each person's experience helps the congregation reach a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life and death. One of the most prominent functions of the liberal church is to offer a way for people to approach death not with fear or an unreasonable theology. We don't ask you to ascribe to a theology about heaven or the afterlife, but to lean into the questions and the mystery of the inevitability of death which we share. Ours is not a faith that offers certainty about what lies beyond our experience of this life. Even ministers don't pretend to have all of the answers. We can provide love and comfort in times of sorrow as we question together.

Our task together is to take up the vow that Sam so insightfully offered me for our wedding day.

*I promise to accept the impermanence of life, to embrace both life and death with equal reverence and holy regard.*

We must hold this dual reality of "being alive and having to die", at each moment, and adapt to the ever-changing landscape of grief and loss. We must reflect on our own mortality, and keep our own legacy in mind, the way we wish to be remembered when we go.

I think of the memorial services we hold here at Neighborhood church. We practice a memorial service tradition to honor those who have died, where we draw people together to remember their gifts in poetry, song and story. To remember is to literally re-member, to continue to connect the person's life to membership in our family, circle of friends and community, where their love will on live eternally and their gifts expressed through our lives. We call our end of life services "memorials," not funerals, and often call them "celebrations of life." Our memorial ministry is one of the most important public ministries we do as a congregation, and perhaps our least visible. It is when we open our campus to the community to celebrate the lives of our members that we have the greatest chance to share what is unique and special about our faith's approach to death. It is also in these memorial services that we begin to think about how it is that we wish to be remembered. In Forrest Church's: "Many of the same guides who teach us how to live also teach us how to die. They may even do both at once."

One way we can approach thinking about our own death is by cultivating what New York Times opinion writer and commentator David Brooks has called our "eulogy virtues" as opposed to our "resume virtues." In a 2015 Sunday Review piece for the New York Times entitled "The Moral Bucket List," David Brooks writes of the virtues that can't be easily qualified:

It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful.

Were you capable of deep love?

Ultimately, it is the legacy of love we leave behind that matters more than any fortune or fame. What is it we want more than to be remembered? To be loved.

In Forrest's words:

The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.

Amen and blessed be.