



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Learning How to Die

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Every year, my iPhone calendar sends me a reminder:

“Memorial of Elaine’s death.”

Elaine Lowe was a close friend of mine from my high school church youth group. We grew up together and went on youth retreats not unlike our high schoolers are going to this weekend in Las Vegas. She was always slightly cooler than me, with a dramatic flair and strong opinions about everything from the perfect cup of coffee to her beloved Red Sox.

Elaine was diagnosed with a very rare form of terminal cancer around her 25th birthday. For many years, it didn’t slow her down very much. Our peers were struggling with the questions of young adulthood-- how to find the right partner by dating all the wrong ones, how to find the right job by having all the wrong ones, pondering how our future would look with the delayed gratification of graduate school. Elaine was struggling with a different set of questions. Valuing her own space, Elaine wanted to remain independent as long as possible, what life goals she wanted to accomplish in the time she had, and how she wanted to balance invasive treatment with comfort measures. She also thought a lot about religion, exploring spiritual questions and wondering about different religious traditions approach to death.

She was a truly inspirational person who I deeply miss.

In the last months of her life, she streaked her hair blue, went on an African safari, became a baker's apprentice, cultivated fluency in Spanish as a way to widen her perspective on the world, and celebrated the fifth annual gathering of dear friends at Mill Island, Maine. Even in the last weeks of her life, she attended a wedding in Brooklyn, went to see her housemate's band, and sat with family to watch the Patriots beat Dallas. (from Ellen’s obituary)

On the day she died, I texted her in the morning asking if I could come and see her. Yes, she said, but come soon, my symptoms are bad today. I jumped in the car and made it from New York City to Connecticut before I got a call that Elaine had passed away. After she died, her family sat quietly with her body for many hours, praying with their minister. We held a beautiful but very sad memorial for her at our home church in Concord. An oak tree was planted in her memory whose foliage turns outrageous shades of orange and red at anniversary of her death. When Virginia Kimball brought us leaves from the High Sierras for our altar this morning, I smiled to myself... Elaine is here with us.

Elaine did not grow up planning for her life to end with a terminal illness at such a young age.

But none of us do.

In Western culture, we don’t often think of death as a constant companion... but something we are forced to confront, often reluctantly, when crises arise. If we are preparing for our own deaths, it might be in the practical sense—setting forth our wishes in the medical and the material sense. Perhaps we are prepared enough to have an advanced directive which states our medical wishes for our bodies, a life insurance policy, or a will or trust which directs our resources after we die. These are important things to do which can provide

us with a lot of peace of mind as we contemplate what might need to happen for us to put our “affairs in order.”

For his incredible book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Dr. Atul Gawande interviewed over 200 patients facing terminal illness across the lifespan. He also interviewed doctors, geriatric and palliative care and hospice professionals. What he discovered is that people facing the end of life overwhelmingly wish to focus not on prolonging their life, but on the quality of their deaths. Gawande suggests reflecting on basic questions he says doctors rarely ask.

“What do you want at the end of your life?”

“What are the tradeoffs or sacrifices you would make to maintain your life commitments?”

These questions begin to uncover the spiritual dimensions to our dying.

Rishi Joan Halifax, the Abbot at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, an anthropologist and expert in end of life care. For forty years, Joan has sat with dying people. She writes in her book *Being with Dying: Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion in the Presence of Death*:

What conventional health care institutions have often failed to realize is that spiritual care can reduce fear, stress, the need for certain medications and expensive interventions, lawsuits, and the time doctors and nurses must spend reassuring people. It can also benefit professional and family caregivers in helping them to come to terms with suffering, death, loss, and grief.

We aware that we always in the process of learning how to live. We are always starting fresh, setting forth the intentions for the quality of our lives. We too have to remember that we can bring equal intention and bravery to the process of learning how to die—the quality of our deaths.

We do not have control over when the end of our lives will come. The reality of death’s proximity is often hidden from us, and revealed in times of crisis. The most common way we learn how to die is by witnessing people close to us go through it. We may be helping support that person as they are coping with their own dying. Bearing witness to their new wisdom about the dying process is a great gift.

We all have teachers in our life who helping us learn how to die, whether we recognize them that way or not. I’m sure you can think of someone in your life who is helping you learn how to die right now. Maybe it’s a parent, a friend, a co-worker, or a sibling. Someone who is directly in touch with the journey of dying who is sharing the lessons with you so you may use them to guide your living now. Maybe you are grieving a recent loss. Our losses change us forever—we don’t just “get over them.”

There is no right way to approach death, your own or your loved ones. It is normal to want to cover your ears and eyes, to be terrified or in denial about the reality of death, our loved ones and our own. In the Hindu Epic Mahabharata, the son of Yama, Lord of Death asks “What is the most wondrous thing in the world?” The son of Yama Replies: “The most wondrous thing in the world is that all around us people can be dying and we don’t believe it can happen to us.”

To stay open and curious about learning how to die is perhaps the most challenging and rewarding spiritual disciplines we can practice. Eastern traditions embrace death with more ease than our Western culture. A saying of the Buddha goes:

Of all the footprints, that of the elephant is supreme. Similarly, of all mindfulness meditation, that on death is supreme.

Opening to the reality of our own deaths can bring greater freedom to our lives—a new intimacy with death not as a final stop on life’s journey, but as a mysterious companion whom we come to know, and to trust, when our time comes to let go. Buddhist tradition calls for a four part meditation on death every day, starting with the moment of our own death to our body’s return to the earth. “We must look death in the face, look at it and accept it, just as we look at and accept life,” wrote Thich Nhat Hanh in the *Miracle of Mindfulness*.

There is one easy thing we can do to spiritually prepare for our own deaths today.... to practice meditation as a way of accepting and finding peace with our deaths.

Rishi Joan Halifax, the Abbot at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe tells this story:

When I first met her, Julie’s breast cancer had already metastasized into her liver, lungs, and brain. She was going blind, and her death wasn’t far off. But Julie had a spirit that wouldn’t quit, and she was determined to die with acceptance. One day she invited me over. After we visited for a while, she asked, “Would you mind telling me how to die?” I told her that what I might think I know is really just speculation. I am only a student of dying, not an expert. Then I suggested that we meditate together.

So we breathed together. I suggested to her, “When you breathe, let your attention be on your out-breath, because that will be your last breath indeed, that out-breath. When you let go of the out-breath, see how deeply you can let go into peacefulness. Think of it like this: Maybe you’ll take another inhalation, and maybe not. For now, let most of your attention focus on breathing out.”

For today, can we gently focus on that out breath.

Breathe in

Breathe out

So now please ask yourself what you are doing to prepare for the possibility of a sane and gentle death.

What can you do at this moment to support your peaceful death?

What can you do tomorrow to realize the best death possible?

What would you change in your daily life?

What do you need to let go of, what habits do you need to break, in order to die peacefully?

Which relationships need to be addressed?

From whom do you need to ask forgiveness?

Who do you need to forgive?

What in yourself do you want to nurture at this time?

To whom do you want to express your deepest love and gratitude this week?

What is the most important thing you can do today in light of this possibility?

What has been the biggest gift you have received in this life?

With whom do you want to share your love for the last time?

Now take this love and thankfulness and go back to your mind and heart so that you can bring this strength to your living.

Breathe in
Breathe out
May it be so
Amen