

HOW WE HONOR THE DEAD

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, October 31, 2004
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In one of my favorite Peanuts cartoons, Charlie Brown and Linus are pondering a tree that they've just planted. "It's too bad that we won't be here to see it in a hundred years, when it'll be fully grown," says Charlie. "Oh?" says Linus, "are we going somewhere?" It's not just when we're young that we deal with death through denial, however. Like the couple traveling in Europe together, having a wonderful time. So good that one of them turns to the other and says, "You know, dear, I think if one of us dies, I'll move to Paris!"

Humor: the buffering of the foibles of our shared humanity with laughter, as we try to be humane toward one another, in the time that is ours, before we return to the *humus*, the good earth that bears us all. The connection is sometimes more than mere word play.

One evening this week I spent a little time with Mary Valle and her family, as she and Tom talked with their children about her father's death, which, after a protracted illness, had taken place earlier that day. Among other things – including tears, prayers, and tender memories – they tried to prepare the kids for a traditional funeral and wake – including the likelihood that people at the wake might be laughing and telling funny, affectionate stories. Mary recalled that when *her* grandfather died, the people laughing and telling stories about him had offended her and made her angry. She wisely counseled her children to try to take it as a sign of love

Later, I recalled how my mother's resilient wit helped me last year when my father died. Dad had said he wanted cremation, and his ashes scattered at sea, since he'd been a naval architect and marine engineer. I fell to me to make sure that this was okay with Mother. "The cremation is fine," she replied. "That's what I want, too. But I don't want you to scatter his ashes on the ocean just yet. Keep them and wait until I'm gone, too. Then mingle our ashes and scatter them all. It will be our first trip overseas together!"

In a book published by our own Beacon Press, called *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, the British anthropologist and archeologist Timothy Taylor begins by unearthing how he became interested in our relationships with those who have died. When he was a graduate student, at a college where his grandfather had been librarian, while conducting a dig, on an ancient gravesite where there were signs of violence, he suddenly remembered that when he was six years old, his grandfather had lost his temper with him at the dinner table, at Easter. He chased Timothy around the table and up the stairs. Several months later, his mother told him that her father had been found to have suffered a heart attack that day. He was now in the hospital with another. Tim was taken to see him. When his grandfather died, Tim asked why. And his grieving mother angrily told him that he had killed him.

After denial, in the resolution of grief, comes anger. But too many of our relationships with those whom we have lost go underground, into the unconscious, through guilt, buried anger or ambivalence, don't they? Sigmund Freud, among others, knew that. When he died, in the fateful year 1939, the poet W.H. Auden wrote in his memory:

Only Hate was happy, hoping to augment
his practice now, and his dingy clientele
 who think they can be cured by killing
 and covering the gardens with ashes.

They are still alive, but in a world he changed,
simply by looking back with no false regrets;
 all he did was to remember
 like the old and be honest like children.

He wasn't clever at all; he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the Past
 like a poetry lesson till sooner
 or later it faltered at the line where

long ago the accusations had begun,
and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
 how rich life had been and how silly,
 and was life-forgiven and more humble,

able to approach the Future as a friend
without a wardrobe of excuses, without
a set mask of rectitude or an
embarrassing over-familiar gesture.

In the angry phase of resolving grief, there are unanswerable questions, “Why? Why me? Why my loved one?” Individually, collectively, we too often seek scapegoats to blame. Anger at God is common. As one friend says, if God brought order out of primal chaos, why does the chaos have to show through so often? Why does there have to be so much randomness, indeterminacy, and freedom at every level of existence? Allowing viruses to mutate, cells to replicate themselves wildly, and human beings to misuse their freedom to wreck violence or vengeance on one another? The only adequate answer, it seems to me, is that without freedom, the evolution of life itself would not have been possible – no growing diversity and inter-relatedness, and no possibility of our spiritual development.

In Taylor’s book, *The Buried Soul*, what I found uncovered for me chiefly this: throughout the evolution of our species, we humans have collectively been going through something akin to the stages of grief.

Our earliest ancestors simply did not acknowledge or honor their dead, it seems. They simply abandoned them to be eaten, to decay. Then they began to bury at least their more important leaders. The fragile thing we call ‘civilization’ is arrives with such practices. So does religion, with burial rites, rituals, and varied beliefs about the souls of the dead, who are often felt as frightening.

Taylor traces how not just ghosts, but other themes of this season developed out of our forebears’ experiences with burial. Enemies or violent criminals might be buried with massive stones on their chests – to keep them dead. Because burials were sometimes in scarce bottomland also needed for farming, skeletons might be exhumed and the bones collected in ossuaries or chapels. soil chemistry or other conditions would delay decay or cause mummification, leading to legends of the evil ‘undead,’ vampires, and werewolves. Tonight our children go out in costume to exorcise again these ancestral fears.

Those same ancestors often tried to carry on a form of bargaining with or for their dead. The death of a king or warrior often required other deaths – captives or slaves to accompany him to the next life. All the way down through the sale of indulgences in medieval Christianity such bargaining is a theme. But along the way, more mature reformers in religion have called for transcending such practices: Moses, for the keeping of moral covenant in this life with the Transcendent, with no focus on the next one; the Buddha, for accepting death and the transient nature of existence, with compassion; the Protestant Reformers, for putting aside trying to bargain one’s way into heaven.

A few years ago, I found myself in Transylvania at this season, where the Unitarian community celebrates this as Reformation Sunday and tomorrow as All Souls Day, going to the cemetery, sweeping the leaves off the graves of loved ones, telling their stories, and then decorating the graves with garlands and wreaths.

In our tradition, when someone dies, the arrangements are often simple and inexpensive, not wasteful or guilt-ridden. Recently I’ve been to a number of memorial services for colleagues in the liberal ministry. When we do such services well, I’ve been reminded, the emphasis isn’t on achievements, even when they have been real; rather it is on the formation of real human character, in the midst of life’s challenges and inevitable losses. Foibles can be authentically invoked. Humor isn’t banned, though neither are tears. Because both help to heal, so that the living can be empowered to pay the highest tribute: by living their own lives fully and well.

Such services are for the living, not for the dead, and so I don’t encourage people to try to plan every detail in advance. But as your minister, I do want to ask you today to consider talking to me – and to your loved ones -- about what arrangements you’ve made or want. At the most recent memorial I attended, the children talked about how their meticulous mother had left a file on the center draw of her desk, labeled “In the event of my death,” where they immediately found everything they needed when she had a sudden stroke. Later I found myself telling Gwen things about what I want done when *my* time comes.

Too often unresolved grief stands can hold back our spiritual growth and maturation. Only slowly do most of us become spiritually capable of accepting and embracing the reality of death, overcoming denial, transcending anger, bargaining and negotiating around the parts of our own souls that have become buried, numb, or self-protective against grief, raising our better but vulnerable selves to live fully, compassionately and passionately, among other vulnerable human beings. But living well is not only the best revenge; in the end, it is the way both the Spirit and evolution itself seem to want us to live, as the best way in which to honor our beloved dead.

Pura vida, Melissa Gosule called it: pure life. Past denial, unrighteous anger, the grave dangers depression, and all sick bargains, may it come to us all. And may we accept that it comes at this price: that we learn how life and death, for all souls, are intertwined. Amen.