



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“While I’m Here,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 1, 2015

This time of year, I find myself swinging back and forth between two emotions. On one hand, joy and excitement for the beauty that’s all around us these days; the crisp air and brilliant light of autumn in New England makes me feel alive. That’s why we love the fall, isn’t it? Because it wakes us up and makes us glad to be alive.

At the same time, there are days when I’m touched by melancholy and even despair, because all of this is fading away. More than any other time of year, I’m mindful of my own mortality and that of those I love; I find myself thinking of people who have died, and I expect you do too. And this makes me sad! The shortening days, this growing dark reminds us that things end, whether we like it or not. Reminds us, as the book of Genesis says, that we are dust and to dust we will return (Gen. 3:19).

So what are we to do about these things? What are we to do with this reality of being human; this awareness that each of us, and those we love, we’re all going to die?

You could pretend that it isn’t so, could try to ignore this fact or deny it, and some people do this; but you know it’s a strategy bound to fail. Because things end, and people die, and no amount of wishful thinking or denial is going to change that.

Sometimes I hear people say, “When I die, I don’t want a service. I don’t want people sitting around being sad, or making any kind of fuss.” So I remind them that the service isn’t for them, really—it’s for the living. Those of us who are still here, on this side of the grass, we will need to remember you and give thanks for your life, we will need to express our sadness and our loss, we need to console one another and be consoled too.

This afternoon some of you will be going to North Andover for the memorial service for Max lascone, a young man who was part of this church when he was a boy, who died, tragically, at age 22. You are going, I expect, because you have to. You know what it will mean to the family that you show up and bear witness to their loss. And you are going because you need to—you need to show up so you can express your own grief, and be in touch with your own mortality.

If there was no other reason for churches to exist in the 21st century, there would still be this—to provide a place and a way for people to face and engage with death, with healthy and life-affirming practices. I hope there are other reasons we exist too, but helping families to bury their loved ones, holding open a space where we can remember and celebrate a life and mourn its

end, this is something we know how to do, and do well. It is a ministry of love and care and hospitality that you all do well, that I am honored to be part of.

Think about the funerals and memorial services you have attended, and what they have meant to you. Most times there is some gathering afterwards, with food and time for conversation. I still remember when my aunt died in North Carolina after a long battle with cancer. After the funeral at the Methodist church, we gathered at my uncle's house where there was lots of that southern food I love so much: fried chicken and country ham biscuits and barbecue. Isn't our eating after a funeral a sacrament and an affirmation, a grateful acknowledgement that we are still alive? That we are still here.

One of the great blessings of life is to be mindful of your own mortality. Yes, knowing this can make you sad, can cause you to wonder about your life and why you're here. It can light a fire under you, remind you that you don't have all the time in the world. It can bring you purpose and even joy, for the living of these days that you do have.

There's a song that's been in my head this week, by the folk singer Phil Ochs. The first verse is printed at the top of the order of service:

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone
And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.¹

That is my simple message for you today, when we remember those who have died and contemplate our own mortality; this is the sermon in a sentence: live your life now, while you're here.

These two ways I'm feeling this fall—invigorated by the beauty and energy of our changing world, and sobered and sad by the death and endings this season evokes—these two go together, don't they? It is not an either/or. It is a both/and; two sides of the same coin, living and dying. They are the light and the shadow of this thing called life.

When someone you love dies, you feel sad, you grieve, because you have lost something significant and real. If this person had meant nothing to you, you wouldn't have these feelings. The grief that death brings is the price we have to pay for living and loving. The only alternative is to hold ourselves back from life, from its sorrow and its joy. And who wants to do that?

Another verse from Phil Ochs:

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone
And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone
Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

¹ Phil Ochs, "When I'm Gone," recording available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB-BBVQLnxi>.

I wonder: how many of you have had conversations with your loved ones about your wishes for your dying days? Though most of us know these are good and important conversations to have, we are pretty good at putting them off—most of us haven't had these conversations yet. This was experience of Ellen Goodman, the Boston *Globe* columnist—she says she talked with her mother about just about everything except for her mom's wishes for the end of life. And one day, it was too late. So Ellen Goodman started "The Conversation Project," a simple way to encourage us to have these conversations while we still can. Starting this week, more than thirty congregations in the greater Boston area are participating in what's called "Conversation Sabbath," a time to have values-based conversations about the end of life. And we're one of them. Next Sunday we'll offer the start of such a conversation. I hope you'll want to stay after church for a simple lunch and this important conversation.

This is a good place to talk about these things, and this is a good time. Today we celebrate the holy day that's in the church is called All Saints or All Souls Day, in earth-centered traditions it's Samhain, in Mexico it's El Dia de Muertos, The Day of the Dead. These all reflect ancient understandings that this time of year, halfway between the autumn equinox and the shortest day of the year, the veil between this earthly world and the spirit world is thin. The distance between the living and the dead seems closer.

The Irish priest and mystic John O'Donohue, drawing on his own Celtic tradition, said we have done ourselves a disservice by pushing the spirit world away, by thinking of it as out there somewhere, when it is actually right here, all around us. He wrote:

When the soul leaves the body, it is no longer under the burden and control of space and time. The soul is free; distance and separation hinder it no more. The dead are our nearest neighbors; they are all around us. Meister Eckhart was once asked, Where does the soul of a person go when the person dies? He said, no place. Where else would the soul be going? Where else is the eternal world? It can be nowhere other than here... We have driven the eternal out into some kind of distant galaxy. Yet the eternal world does not seem to be a place but rather a different state of being. The soul of the person goes no place because there is no place else to go. This suggests that the dead are here with us, in the air that we are moving through all the time. The only difference between us and the dead is that they are now in an invisible form. You cannot see them with the human eye. But you can sense the presence of those you love who have died. With the refinement of your soul, you can sense them. You feel that they are near.²

The invitation is to be present to this life in all its wonder and mystery. To be open to what life brings, while we are here. Knowing that we will die, embracing life in all its fullness while we can.

Can we hear the words of those we have loved and lost, calling to us from the other side, saying, "All is well. I am at peace. And you are still alive. So live your life right now, while you can." Can we have the courage to face the reality of death, and so see there really is nothing to fear? Can we talk about this with those we love, so we don't leave our wishes for the end of life unsaid?

² John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*.

Hear again the “Epitaph” of Merrit Malloy:

When I die
Give what's left of me away..
And when you need me,
Put your arms
Around anyone
And give them
What you need to give to me...
You can love me most
By letting
Hands touch hands,
By letting
Bodies touch bodies,
And by letting go
Of children
That need to be free.
Love doesn't die,
People do.
So, when all that's left of me
Is love,
Give me away.³

This is why we are here, to be part of the dance of life, holding on and letting go, while we are here; holding on and letting go. And when it's time, to take our place among that great cloud of witnesses; all the saints who from their labors rest. For them, and for these lives we have been given, thanks be to God.

Amen.

³ This poem, “Epitaph,” by Merrit Malloy, was the reading today. The full text of the poem is available at [http://whv.org/Healthcare/Zusman-Hospice/Grief-Blog/Grief-Blog-old/August-2013-\(1\)/Epitaph-the-Poem#](http://whv.org/Healthcare/Zusman-Hospice/Grief-Blog/Grief-Blog-old/August-2013-(1)/Epitaph-the-Poem#)