

The Blessing of Being Mortal
A Conversation Sabbath sermon given at Temple Beth Elohim
Friday, November 13, 2015

When death comes, writes the poet Mary Oliver,
*When death comes, like the hungry bear in autumn,
...I don't want to wonder if I've made of my life something particular and real...
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Mortality has something to teach us, if we will let it.¹

It's a complicated teacher, full of lessons on spiritual maturity, letting go, meaning and love and loss. As difficult as these may seem, grappling with them leads us to insight and to understanding the myriad blessings of this being mortal.

There are jagged edges to this contemplation... So we try to soften them with humor. William Saroyan, quick with the quip, did it, saying: "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case."

My favorite for batting away any creeping seriousness, is from Woody Allen: "I'm not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

It's a little bit of a rueful laugh that rises as we recognize how much we identify.... But seriously friends: we really don't want to talk about it. Of course, we *think* we *should* talk about it! 90% of Americans surveyed said it's really important that we talk with our loved ones about our wishes for the kind of care we would like at end of life... Yet fewer than 30% of us have done it!

What is in our way? Is our fear really so great? Do inherited superstitions hold so much sway?

I'm sure no one here has ever had the uncomfortable and not entirely rational thought that if we talk about dying, it might happen sooner.... Maybe it just feels—weird. Awkward to bring it up with your closest friends and family?

There are, no doubt, barriers to having conversations about the possibility that we may not always be in control. So, I am very grateful that you here at TBE are joining more than 30 other faith communities throughout Greater Boston this month for Conversation Sabbath—teaching the importance of talking about our wishes for end of life care sooner rather than later. You are at the vanguard of transforming our cultural aversion.

I am also grateful for the inspiration and blessing of "Being Mortal" the best-selling book by Boston surgeon Atul Gawande that we will be discussing tonight at the program after dinner. With the skill and grace he's cultivated as a scientist and writer, Dr. Gawande pulls back the curtain on how we grow old and die in America—and offers us so much food for thought.

Through moving stories and statistics, he illuminates the gap between what we hope for ourselves and our loved ones, and the reality of what is happening.

What's the gap? Well, 70% of us hope for the deathbed scenario that may be familiar to your imagination: at home, pain free and peaceful, surrounded by loved ones

¹ Ira Byock, intro to *Being with Dying* by Joan Halifax.

But in reality, 70% of us are dying in hospitals and nursing homes, many after spending 10 days in an ICU, undergoing invasive, sometimes painful, often expensive, and futile interventions. Interventions that many might have chosen NOT to undergo IF they had had meaningful conversations with their loved ones and health care providers along the way about their wishes...

At the Conversation Project, where I work with Harriet Warshaw, we aim to narrow that gap. I risk casting a shadow on Shabbat this evening in order to shine more light on having these meaningful conversations.

You see, we don't think it's a morbid conversation. If you ever saw our team working together, you might be surprised by the laughter, by the joy we find in our work. How can that be? I think it's because we see the life-affirming effect these crucial conversations are having on all the people in a circle of care...

I'm not saying it's never sad. No amount of talking will take away the sadness of losing a beloved...

But talking together, cultivating a subtle day-to-day awareness of our mortality, is a deeply spiritual practice. It's a practice that nourishes a sense of awe and joy and gratitude for this one, unique, amazing life we have been given!

It is the practice that allows us to join Mary Oliver in her realizations about our impermanent, and beautiful lives. Facing the truth that someday death *will* come like the hungry bear in autumn, she sings:

*“And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular, ...
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.”*

Atul Gawande brings the same courage and compassion that allows him to cut into living flesh for the sake of healing, to a profound inquiry into aging and dying. He peels away the façade that medicine can always cure everyone.

There is no cure for mortality. There IS the possibility that our aging and our dying can be blessed with a kind of healing wholeness when we restore these human events to their place in the sacred cycle of life.

WE need courage and compassion to contemplate this mortal existence... if we are to extract the blessings available in the intimate and essential conversations we need to be starting in the comfort of our homes and houses of worship—not waiting until a loved one is in the ICU.

When we start talking about what might matter most to us at the end of life, we are sharing more than our thoughts and concerns about medical treatments. We are sharing who we are, who and what we love, what we value about living, and what legacy we hope to leave our loved ones and our communities.

This gift of finitude—should we be willing to unpack it from the bubble wrap of avoidance and fear—the gift is more life, right now.

This gift is understanding the precious fragility of this life so we can sing more often with the poets and the psalmist: This is the day we have been given: let us rejoice and be glad—like no kidding.

Friends, I'm sorry to tell you, no exception will be made in our case. But we can still get out of this life—not merely having visited this world—but living fully, having the best day possible each day. In the face of being mortal, let us bless the world with the most defiant thing we can: let us love one another, and let all that we do, be done in love. May it be so. AMEN. Shalom.