

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
A Sermon by
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall

Sunday November 1, 2009

“Taking the World in Our Arms”

Readings:

“When Death Comes,” by Mary Oliver.

See http://www.panhala.net/Archive/When_Death_Comes.html

“Sum,” by David Eagleman

See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/books/excerpt-sum.html>

Sermon:

Over the past few years, I have discovered that I am a little bit of what you might call a “Halloween Person.” The hat didn’t give me away, did it?

I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed Halloween until I married someone who is slightly less into it than I was.

And in our household, the inverse is also true. After marrying someone who insisted on having Halloween candy on hand even when we lived in a student neighborhood with hardly any children, my husband Ben discovered that he develops a minor curmudgeon streak on October 31, which urges him to turn off the lights and head for the hills when dusk rolls around.

Fortunately, realizing that he was heading down the road of Halloween Grinchdom, Ben reversed course this year. Inspired by many of our Montpelier neighbors, with Halloween-decorated homes, like many of you, we carved our pumpkin yesterday – and had fun greeting the intrepid trick-or-treaters, whom not even the rain could keep away.

So as a Halloween person, then, it is perhaps no surprise that I have always wanted to preach on this holiday – and I thank you for being the first congregation to give me that chance.

As fun as it was to wear a witch’s hat along with my robe this morning, I should say that my desire to offer you an All Hallow’s Eve sermon has less to do with my interest in the customs of our modern-day Halloween and more to do with the ancient earth-centered tradition that underlies it.

As some of you already know – and as our 4th and 5th graders learned from Sherri last Sunday, Halloween has its roots in the centuries-old Celtic observance of Samhain, which in Gaelic loosely means “Summer’s End” and which falls on the first of November.

This festival was at once a celebration of the end of the harvest time and also an acknowledgment that the “dark half” of the year was beginning. Following Christianity’s arrival to the British Isles, and the ensuing forced conversion of the Gaelic peoples, the Samhain traditions mingled with the Christian observance of All Saints and All Souls Days.

That religious history, that mingling and melding and appropriating of traditions - could be a sermon in and of itself. But we will have to leave that to another day. Because what I want to focus on this morning is an aspect of Samhain that speaks to me here in late autumn, amid the fallen leaves and the expanding darkness, here on the first day of November when we turn our clocks back and welcome longer nights.

You see, the ancient practitioners of Samhain—and many neo-pagans today—believe that the veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead becomes thinner at this time of year.

And it is said that, during this time, through the especially-porous divide between the worlds, the spirits of the dead to return. So along with the harvest, Samhain – like the Mexican observance of Day of the Dead or el Dia de Los Muertos - is a time to honor the ancestors and commemorate the departed.

Some of our sister UU congregations celebrate the Day of the Dead today by inviting worshippers to bring photos of loved ones now gone and building altars of honor and remembrance.

Here in Montpelier, I’ve learned that we have our own opportunity to honor our loved ones who have died during a special service after Christmas – when all gathered are invited to say the names of the friends and family members they have lost, whom they want to lift up in memory and hope.

So today, we will forgo building an altar; we will do our commemorating in a few months. But even so, I believe we can still, like the ancient Celts honor Samhain.

We can still recognize and honor this time of the thinning veil, this time when summer’s abundant life ends giving way to winter’s dormancy, this time when death, always present, somehow creeps in a little closer.

On this day, and in this season, the curtain lifts, and it reveals to us an ever-present truth, which we often like to forget. We are reminded that we live, as the old psalm says, in the valley of the shadow of death.

We are always living in the shadow of death.

The late Rev. Dr. Forrest Church called this our dual human reality of living and having to die. One of Forrest's final books - which he wrote when he knew he would not recover from the cancer he was battling- was titled *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Shadow*.

So this is what I want to do with the time we have today – I want us to ask: How are we to live in this shadow?

Now, before we go deeper into this spiritual valley, I want to acknowledge that this is not easy territory to traverse. Maybe you are thinking, “Thanks, Mara – that’s really depressing. Isn’t it enough that we have to turn our clocks back and that it’s going to get dark at 4 in the afternoon for the next four months?”

And I would grant you that. But if you are feeling reluctant to take this brief journey with me this morning, I ask you to hang in there a little longer. Because my aim is not to leave you depressed or down. In some ways, quite the opposite.

This may seem paradoxical – but consider this: What if we take this day which reveals the closeness of death, not as a depressant, but rather as a invitation – an invitation to embrace and appreciate the life we are given.

This day, “summer’s end,” shows us the curtain that will eventually fall on all of our mortal lives, but what if, at the same time, it points out the path that still lies before us. None of us can choose how many days comprise that road, but what can choose is how we will live each one of them.

There’s something about the shadow of death, I think, that brings the preciousness of life into greater relief. Remembering that we must eventually die helps us also remember to live—to create the best lives we possibly can in the time we have.

I bet that most of you have had a brush with death – that you have felt its presence creep near at one time or another. Some of you are living with it right now. The shadow of death falls unbidden and unwelcome, doesn’t it? Often, it arrives when we feel least prepared for it. It takes us by surprise and it comes in many forms:

Receiving a scary diagnosis. Waiting for the test results. Hearing the doctor's words. Answering the phone. Holding the hand of a loved one who is passing over.

As some of you know, I had one of these brushes with death when I was twelve and diagnosed with a serious blood disorder. Like anyone battling a life-threatening disease, I lived for several long month in the darkness of the shadow.

I experienced all of the terror and suffering that the closeness of death brings with it. And yet, strangely enough, there were moments during my illness when I felt inexplicably and unusually alive. I remember one such afternoon quite clearly.

It was a Autumn day – warm and sunny like yesterday morning, only a little bit crisper. Because of my illness, I had been out of school, which also meant giving up the field hockey team that I loved. That afternoon, the father of my friend and fellow teammate Christine called to see if I wanted to go watch the game.

Once we got the doctor's approval, Christine's dad picked me up and off we went, stopping first for Philly soft pretzels at a road side stand. The game was at a school in a leafy suburb of Philadelphia, so our ride from the city took us through woodsy, windy roads. When we arrived at the field, my surprised friends ran over and surrounded me in a massive huddle.

I don't remember who won that afternoon- us or the other team- but I do remember this:

The excited butterflies that flew up in my stomach when I realized I could actually go to the game; the amazing taste of the Philly pretzel; the dappled afternoon sunlight coming through the trees, the brightness of the orange, red, and yellow leaves; the clear and fire-tinged smell of the autumn air; the sounds of my friends laughter, the sight of them running across the field to greet me.

And finally, wrapped up in all of this was the joy – the pure joy – of being alive. And, also, amazement. Amazement at the extraordinary beauty of that ordinary day.

The poet Mary Oliver writes:¹

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

¹ Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," in Garrison Keillor, ed. *Good Poems for Hard Times* (New York: Viking, 2005), 281-2.

*When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have 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.

I first heard that poem many autumns later in the sanctuary of All Souls Church in Washington, DC, where I was listening to the minister, my now colleague Rob Hardies, preach the first in a two-part series on love and death. I had been in remission for nearly fifteen years and was now a grown-up living the life of a young professional. By then, my childhood brush with death had receded to what felt like the distant past.

But when Rob opened his sermon by reading the poem “When Death Comes,” that afternoon field hockey game—and really my entire illness—came back in a rush. Rob went on to preach a sermon inspired by Mary’s words, a sermon which called all of us to live our lives as deeply and intentionally as possible. Here is a bit of what he said:

“I believe that the most healthy understanding of death is one that turns us back toward our lives and encourages us to be more than visitors in this world. But rather active members of it. To be able to say, as William Ellery Channing did, “I am a living member of the great family of all souls” and to feel all the vitality that that phrase implies.”²

To live as an active member of this world, in all our vitality, says Rob Hardies. To be a living member of the great family of all souls, says our great Unitarian forbearer, Channing. To be the bridegroom taking the world in our arms, says Mary Oliver.

That is the message I want to leave us all with today—and I am indebted to those preachers and that poet who surely say it as well as I ever could.

And that would surely be enough for today. But, if you can hang on just a bit longer, there is one last stop we need to make on our journey together this morning. There is just one more lesson I think we need to add to our spiritual pack before we head for home.

Which begins with this. Yes, there is nothing like a brush with death to remind us to embrace life.

² You can view or listen to Rob Hardies’ sermon at:
<http://www.all-souls.org/sermons/20031109.htm>.

But so often, when the sense of death's urgency recedes and the scent of its closeness fades – developments for which we are understandably and sanely grateful – we can paradoxically lose that feeling of deep aliveness which stands out when we fall under death's shadow.

Another colleague, the Reverend Ed Lynn, reflects on this in a sermon he wrote after a car accident that almost took his life.³ A tree fell on his car while he was in it – and he emerged entirely unscathed.

In a related sermon on spiritual gratitude, which like Rob Hardies' is worth reading in its entirety, Ed Lynn observes that, in its immediate aftermath, his accident imbued him with a heightened appreciation for life and a sense of vitality.

But he also notes that this appreciation faded along with the immediacy of the day when the tree crushed his car.

Lynn suggests that we all need practices to keep us in touch with our gratitude for being alive. It could be as simple as waking up each morning and remembering to say "thank you."

As Ed puts it, "*None of us wants to experience a life-threatening illness or an accident to shock us into a powerful appreciation of life. The significance of spiritual gratitude is that it is experienced because life is sacred, precious, and holy, not because of . . . any one life incident. Today and during the week, amidst the business and busyness of our work, our families, our concerns, and our chores, we need to remember how fortunate we are to be here, to be alive.*"⁴

How fortunate we are to be alive. How blessed is our Earthly existence.

And this is where I think our David Eagleman reading comes in, late in the game, close to the final inning. In Eagleman's imagining of the afterlife, we have to take all of our life experiences in clumps. After a while, it becomes a drag doesn't it. Hour after hour of boredom. Day after day of staring into the fridge and working buttons and zippers.

Finally, as Eagleman says, you wonder what it would be like to reshuffle the order of events. "*In this part of the afterlife,*" he writes, "*you imagine something analogous to your earthly life, and the thought is blissful: a life where episodes are split into tiny swallowable pieces, where moments do not endure, where one experiences the joy of jumping from one event to the next, like a child hopping from spot to spot on the burning sand.*"⁵

³ The entire text of Ed Lynn's sermon is available at: <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2009/11/lynn.html>.

⁴ Ed Lynn, see above.

⁵ David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, (New York: Random House, 2009), 4.

My friends, let us remember the blissful blessing of our earthly existence. Let us remember the amazing gift of each and every day – a day which will include the mundane, yes, and unfortunately, perhaps the painful – but also if we seek it, the extraordinary, the amazing, and the beautiful.

Our days are ours, Mary Oliver reminds us, to make of them something particular and real, something worthy of this wonderful world, for as long as we have them.

In closing, I will leave you with an excerpt of another poem of Mary Oliver's.

When I get caught up in the nitty gritty of the day-to-day and find myself losing touch with my appreciation for life, I sometimes ask myself its final question as a practice in spiritual gratitude.

The poem is called 'The Summer Day,'⁶ which seems strangely fitting for us here, on the day whose name means "Summer's End."

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
[But] I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

My friends, let us go forth and live our wild and precious lives, in the spirit of love and with gratitude for its blessings.

Amen.

⁶ See <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>.