

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Last Sunday afternoon, September 11, 2011, our sanctuary was blessed with the presence of Montgomery County neighbors from diverse faith traditions. Even though the occasion honored the memory of the death and destruction of September 11, 2001...the day when the twin towers fell in NYC, the day when the Pentagon walls were breached in Virginia, the day when a group of passengers, strangers to one another, brought down a plane in a Pennsylvania field, sacrificing their lives to save others- even though sad memories and shared grief, brought us together...

Last Sunday became a celebration of life...a renewal of possibility, across religious difference.

Death and Life are woven fine.

Whether church, mosque, synagogue, or congregation- religious institutions are sacred places where rituals of joy and sorrow find a home. Where we become bread- life to one another.

Fear of death is a universal of the human condition. Being human is a life-long experience of paradox. We alone among species are both animal and symbolic creatures. We are both outside of nature (reflecting on its beauty and its cruelty) and we are hopelessly, helplessly, part of it. It's no wonder we need both science and religion to help us understand and accept our utter vulnerability...the paradoxical state that is human nature.

And so knowing what we know, we fear death.

Ironically, fear of death resides alongside a feeling deep in our gut, that we just might be immortal...the person next to us might die at any moment, but we don't believe that we will. We repress our fear of death by the stories we tell ourselves and by our cultural myths.

There is no question that fear of death moves and motivates us. It can move us to acts of heroism, it can motivate us to devoting ourselves to finding a cure for cancer, it can move us to a puritanical lifestyle in the hopes that if we are good and quiet, we will be spared.

Fear of death can motivate us to fight against evil, it can move us toward religions that promise eternal life. It can move us to create poetry and music and art. It can even move us toward love...and pro-creation.

When you lose a child or a brother or a partner, often we feel the urge to create new life.

Life and Death are woven fine.

Philosopher, William James, said that the world is a theater for heroism...that to live with the knowledge that we will die, calls us to acts of heroism. Heroism doesn't just occur on a battlefield or in an emergency room, it occurs time and again in hospital and hospice rooms where men and women, and yes, children too, face their dying with courage and grace.

Acts of heroism occur when care-givers provide needed companionship and comfort to loved ones.

The closeness of death and its accompanying fear gives the living opportunity for heroic acts...and can open us to go even further. We humans long to live lives of ultimate significance. We want our having lived to make a difference.

Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, held that faith develops out of dread. And many of us have experienced awe and wonder and a deeply religious sense of gratitude as we have attended death. The animal side of our human nature seeing the dissolution of the body, feeds ever more strongly, the power of the symbolic half of what it means to be human. We struggle to put death into a framework of meaning.

The tragedy of September 11th, the moments that followed our corporate witness of dissolution of bodies...in that moment, we felt a powerful connection to life. It was a feeling of a different magnitude than when we attend to the death of a single person. It was a moment of dread and paradox that we shared.

My personal spiritual guide, writer, Annie Dillard wrote in her fine book, "For the Time Being"..."The religious idea sooner or later challenges the notion of the individual."

In a brief moment following the tragedy of 9/11, all of America shared the religious idea...the knowing, that we are all in this together. That life going forward, is a corporate enterprise...that we are all one.

And then it was gone...and we fell back into our individualism...back into our fear and our aloneness.

And in the face of such fear...fear of terrorists, fear of bombs, fear of holocaust, fear of death...in the face of such fear...we withdraw.

We lose confidence in any saving grace. We find ourselves wanting to fight or flight. And we draw the circle of our life smaller, we hide, we become cautious...suspicious...afraid.

We lose the ability to distinguish between reality and artifice...between truth and lies.

There is now, living in New Your City, a church –sanctioned hermit. Theresa Mancuso, who wrote recently. “the thing we desperately need is to face the way it is.”

But how very difficult that is...to face the way it is.

It seems that politicians are among those who find it most difficult. We need to face the common hazards of life, face them together...it doesn't help when people pretend there is no need for social security, or unemployment benefits, or medicare or medicade...it doesn't help when politicians suggest that a 30 year old without health care should die, or that HPV vaccinations do more harm than good....or that sex education in the schools will promote promiscuity.

Annie Dillard again, “the closer we grow to death, the more closely we follow the news. Year after year, without ever reckoning the hours I wasted last week or last year, I read the morning paper. I buy into the noise of the news that lulls me and silences me...as the dark expands.

“The blue light of television flickers on the cave wall. If the fellow crawls out of the cave, what does he see? Not the sun itself, but night, and two thousand visible stars. Once, I tried to converse with him, the fellow who crawled out of his blue-lit cave to the real world. He had looked into this matter of God. He had to shout to make himself heard: “how do stand the wind out here?”

"I don't. Not for long. I drive a schoolkids' car pool. I shouted back. I don't stand the wind...I read Consumer Reports every month!"

It seemed unlikely that he heard. The wind blew into his face. He turned and faced the lee. "I don't know how long he stayed out. A little at a time does for me, a little every day."

By facing the wind, Dillard means facing reality...and she can only take a little at a time.

I know what she means. Yesterday we hosted a memorial service for a 34 year old mother of a one year old. Amy had grown up in my church in Tennessee. I knew her parents well. Amy worked for the State Department and has been living in Virginia...so when they needed a space for the memorial- her parents called me. I have never seen so many infants and toddlers at a memorial service....it was the kind of facing of reality that comes hard.

And yet...there is such beauty in a life...such amazing grace.

Facing reality, isn't only about confronting our fear of death...it is also about embracing life fully.

How much do we lose when we withdraw from life.

Do you know the Biblical story of Jonah and the Whale? Jonah was a prophet called to bring the message of God to Israel and he was pretty successful...until, God told him to go to Nineveh to bring the message to peoples outside of Israel. Well, Jonah was afraid of the Assyrians...and didn't want to go...so instead he booked passage on a ship to Tarsus...a completely different direction...On the ship...Jonah retreated to the hold...he hid himself curled up there...hiding from God.

And there came a great unrest upon the waters...a storm which threatened to sink the ship....and all the sailors, prayed to their pagan Gods...but still the waters roiled...and finally they dragged Jonah on deck and insisted that he petition his powerful, one God...and still the sea was angry...and they, knowing that Jonah was the cause, threw him overboard...and the sea subsided...and the sailors were saved...and God also saved Jonah though he was swallowed into the belly of the whale...where Jonah prayed for forgiveness...and God heard his prayers and the whale spit Jonah onto dry land....

And Jonah, fearful of God, went on to Nineveh and preached the word of God. And the people repented and God forgave them...and none were lost. And Jonah was angry...had his preaching been in vain?

No, Jonah now faced a new reality...his God was not a fearful, angry God, but a god of kindness and mercy. His was a God who valued life...the life of all people...not just those of Israel.

And Jonah found it hard to face this new reality...even though it was oriented toward life.

The power of life is no less awesome and wondrous than the power of death. Facing life with a trusting heart...allowing life in all its' sacred to enter our heart...that too can be overwhelming.

Annie Dillard tells this ancient Jewish story: "when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, other men tie a rope to his leg, so that if he dies they can haul him out without going in themselves. So says the Zohar. For when the high priest recites the holy name and the blessing, the divine bends down and smites him.

Being in the present of holiness...fully in the presence of Life...can be blinding and cause great awe and trembling. But this is what is required of us. To face reality...to face the web of life and death and life.

This too takes a hero's courage. To bring a child into the world, to exchange wedding vows, to speak the truth in love, to save a life, to feel compassion for the children who are starving in Somalia....

The religious idea sooner or later challenges the notion of the individual.

I am reading a novel set in Korea in the 1920's and 30s...it is a time of political and cultural change. The family of the story is caught in the throes of these changes...and they are at great risk.

One day without warning, military police arrive at their home and the young adult daughter is arrested and thrown into prison...it is winter...there is no bed, just a pallet on the cold stone floor, she is the only woman, so she is isolated with no one to talk to except her interrogator....

Days and weeks and months pass, she does not know her fate...she begins to withdraw from life...her awareness of everything around her shrinks...in her fear, she cannot face her reality. The only thing that keeps her alive, is that her mother walks miles everyday in the cold and the snow to bring her a meal...her only meal of the day.

And at the bottom of the container, under the food...her mothers places a small note – written on thin parchment...the note of encouragement, the prayer, or the quote...keeps the young prisoner connected to life...after eating the food, she also chews and swallows the note her mother brought to keep her oriented to life rather than to death.

This is the point...faith brings us toward life. Whatever we believe or don't believe, about God, whatever we fear, however we try to hide....our liberal faith calls us toward life....

It also takes a hero's courage to face the fullness, the richness, the expansive possibilities that life holds.

Unitarian Universalism, without denying the power of death, also lifts up the power of abundant life. Life comes at us with incredible force and complexity. Don't turn away...don't settle for just a little bit of life...don't give up ...or go it alone...

Annie Dillard quotes Teilhard de Chardin..."plunge into matter, Teilhard said, Plunge into God. By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.

"Only by living completely in the world can one learn to believe." (D. Bonhoffer)

The world and human endeavor catch and hold everyone alive but a handful of hoboes, nuns, and monks. For life is all there is....

And we live in all we seek.

We are the bread.

Amen/Blessed Be.

