

## **DEATH AND LIVING**

**By Bruce Andrews**

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan**

**October 30, 2011**

Much has been discussed and written about death and dying. So I have consciously chosen to consider death and living. It seems to me that, on the whole, one has far more influence on how one lives than on how one dies or, for that matter, on what happens after death. These subjects, of course, have been sources of agreement, disagreement, and agreement to disagree throughout the ages between people of different spiritual leanings and even among people with similar spiritual leanings.

Rev. Tess Baumberger, of the Unity Church of North Easton, MA, in her paper "Universalist Thoughts on Afterlife", notes that,

"At some point in human evolution, people in various places around the world noticed that some essential part of us remains the same despite changes in our bodies. This is the "I," spirit or the soul – the enduring part of our selves. The next thought may have been that this part might continue to exist after its most dramatic change – death."

Early Universalists became split "about how this all worked" for them. Regarding this split in their congregations, Rev. Baumberger goes on to say,

"The split fell more or less along these lines. Some Universalists, led by a man named Hosea Ballou, became known as the "Ultra-Universalists." They believed that when we die, our souls go straight to heaven and that there is no future punishment for any wrong we do during our lives. Hosea Ballou said that we are punished in this life for our wrongdoings. We create our own hells here on earth.

The other group became known as the "Restorationists." Ultra-Universalism ran counter to their notions of divine justice. They [the Restorationists] saw, as we do today, that some people create hells on earth that others have to inhabit, while they seem to live on without any ill effects. The Restorationists believed such souls need to make some restitution after death, before their souls could be restored to a state of grace. For some, that might take a long time, but ultimately all would enjoy heavenly communion.

Unfortunately, the debate in the "Restorationist Controversy" became very heated. Some Ultra-Universalists were snide toward the Restorationists. At one point, the Restorationists split off and formed their own religion. That lasted 10 years before the Universalist [factions] came back together, deciding to live with their differences.

One man in my previous congregation told me about attending a funeral service at a Christian church. During that service, the preacher asked, "If there is no heaven, no afterlife, what is the point of this life?" This was a question more orthodox Christians asked our Universalist ancestors. Specifically, they asked why anyone would want to be good in this life if we would all end up in heaven anyway. What's the incentive?

The Universalists replied that the reason we do good in this life is because it is the right thing to do. What meaning do our lives have if we do not devote ourselves to being good and kind to one another? Lives lived without that commitment are pretty superficial. They do not satisfy our souls.

What's more, by being good to one another we create a world where each human soul can realize its potential for goodness. We can do this in small ways. By practicing kindness to those around us, we create an environment where they can flourish.

We can also take larger actions to create a world where each human soul can realize its potential for goodness. We do this by resisting powers and structures of injustice, intolerance, violence and greed and by building powers and structures of justice, tolerance, peace, and generosity. This enhances our world and the meaning of our lives, no matter what happens after death.

A final gem from Universalist history is that death need not be a scary thing. Those of us who grew up assailed by fire and brimstone may find Universalist notions of the afterlife comforting. They allow us to live without fear and with acceptance. They allow us to go into the mystery of the afterlife with courage and hope. So may it be."

As I read those last four paragraphs, I began to recognize thinking similar to my own. I began to more closely examine how I have come to my beliefs about death and living. I began to ask myself, "Who has influenced me in my thinking?" "What experiences have I had in regard to these issues?" I certainly won't recount them all now. See how easy it is? You are already experiencing my practice of kindness toward you.

In regard to death, I, like anyone, have experienced death in different forms and at different times in my life. Some of these include an awareness of death through stories about my Uncle Bob who was a bomber pilot in World War II and about my maternal grandfather both of whom died before I was born. Our puppy, Whitey, died when I was about 9. My paternal grandfather died when I was 14. Pres. Kennedy was assassinated when I was 19. The Vietnam War required me to consider whether others would die by my hand.

The Vietnam War also introduced me to death in some of its most violent forms during my 24th and 25th years of life. Just before Jo and I were married, my buddy, who was to be my best man, died of cancer at age 26. My younger sister died by her own hand after a 20 year struggle with Cushing's Syndrome and depression when she was 35 and I was 38. I am now 67 and, since the early 1990s, my mother, father, and father-in-law have all died. Currently, it seems to me that cancer, which I have come to call the "C" Monster, war, and hunger are visiting death upon way too many people of all ages.

This seems like a significant list and, yet, I know it is by no means exhaustive regarding death's presence during my life nor would it necessarily be so for another person. It doesn't explicitly address whether death is too soon, too late, seemingly fair or unfair, or too sudden, or whatever. It does clearly demonstrate that death is a fact of life with which every person needs to deal in some fashion.

How does one deal with death? "Let me count the ways" and "it depends" – on a myriad of factors. Some of those factors are the circumstances of the death, one's spiritual beliefs, one's developmental stage, maturity, previous experiences with death, one's support system, one's having faced death personally, etc. The list is almost infinite. It is such that each individual must evolve their own way to deal with death. No one else can prescribe nor judge an individual's response to death since we are all unique beings experiencing uniquely each circumstance. This applies not only to the fact of death having occurred but also to the possibility of its occurrence. Each of us has a choice in the matter in that we can choose to let our response to death run us or we can choose to run our response to death– or maybe a bit of both.

Here are three examples of such choices. My Aunt was a Christian Scientist who lived her life in a kind and generous manner. I am quite sure that she knew her shortcomings and yet believed that she would most likely be admitted to heaven. It was not that she lived life in fear of death. It was that she believed that if one behaved one's self, they would gain the rewards after death accordingly.

My Mom was a very pragmatic person who dealt with reality as it presented itself to her. Growing up poor can do that to a person. She too was a kind and generous person who believed that one needed knowledge of Christianity as it is so pervasive in our society and literature. The struggles of daily life in the moment took most of her energy while concerns about the future, let alone an afterlife, received little of what energy remained. Her spirituality was action-oriented and expressed in life through her relationships with all people. She treated humanity as her family and all children were her own.

My Dad never fully came to terms with the pain he experienced regarding his younger brother's death in WWII or his mother's death. His mother was also a Christian Scientist and refused treatment for a gall bladder infection which led to her death. Also, for a long time, he blamed himself for my younger sister's death because he thought his genes contributed to it. He essentially became a "Born-Again Atheist". Towards the end of his life we asked him what he would have us do with his remains. He agreed that the cremation was the reasonable route to take. When we asked where he would like to have his ashes placed, he said something to this effect, "Take the damn things and throw them in a dumpster. We all end up as compost anyhow." He didn't believe in fire and brimstone, but he certainly had a lot of fire in his personality. He too was a kind and generous person. He had no use for traditional church dogma. His spirituality was expressed in his love of family, children, and golf.

Finally, all three of these wonderful people shared at least one imperative quality that helped them through pain and helped them to more completely experience joy. They unselfishly shared this quality with every one they knew. What was the quality? It was a great sense of humor. They were able to laugh at themselves and with others.

At this point, I can almost hear my Dad saying from wherever he's composting, "Alright, Boy!" [He always called me 'Boy'.] "Now that you've flapped your chin about us, let's hear more than chin music about you and your beliefs."

This brings me to my current articulation or speculation of what I believe about death and living. I say "speculation" because living keeps presenting me with new data to consider. I often used to say, "Birth is the beginning of life, death is the end, and life is everything in between." I had those all connected yet somehow separate. Being born is a beginning. Life is the living. Death is the ending of it all – except for the composting. I do believe we "live on" through the effects we have on other people's lives. An afterlife and reincarnation still seem to escape me, although I certainly would not presume to negate their value for others.

I need to note here that, as I completed and re-read one of my earlier paragraphs listing examples of death's presence in my life, I had an "Aha" experience. It became clearer to me that death is not separate from living. Death is a part of living! Death and living are not separate and, it would seem, cannot be separated. They are separate, sort of, at opposite ends of a continuum and, simultaneously, they are both present along the whole continuum. I knew that. Some of my younger friends would call that a, "Well, Duh!" experience. It reminds me of at least a paraphrase of one line from a musical, "I can see clearly now the [fog] is gone".

Death is ever present. It's all around us. We cannot escape reminders of its presence. Neither can we escape that emotional punch in the gut or the heart that comes when death actually occurs. As we all know, that punch is stronger and sharper as death becomes a greater possibility or an actuality affecting people we love. We experience the pain of grief and mourn the loss. Individually and with support we can weave together the torn fabric of our lives and move on with living if we allow and even actively assist it to happen. We need to do it in our own way and at our own rate, but we need to do it or we become stuck in the past. We have a choice. I should add that we have a choice "for the most part." Death and life can both deliver blows from which, for a variety of reasons, some people never recover or never recover completely – through no fault of their own. The blow was just too great. On the other hand, humans have an amazing resilience leading some people to recover completely while one is held in wonder at how they did so.

When we do move on with living, it allows us to once again see that life, just like death, is also ever present. It is all around us. We cannot escape reminders of its presence. Just as we experience and engage with the pain of death, we can experience and engage with the joy of life. Both are part of living the human experience. If we were to have one and not the other, it would be like trying to truly experience black without white, dark without light, liberal without conservative, rest without exhaustion, winning without losing, full without empty, etc. One cannot fully appreciate one without the other. So why not know yourself completely in relationship with both death and life? It seems that this would allow a person to respect and learn from both the negatives and the positives about death and living. This could result in living more completely through an entire experience rather than a partial experience as a member of the communities of this earth.

As Rev. Tess Baumberger says, "So may it be."