

## Death's Door

**Rev. Rod Richards**

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

09/10/06

**Opening Words** - (Rainer Maria Rilke, [from Duino Elegies](#))

Why, when this span of life might be fledged away,  
Why *have* to be human, and, shunning Destiny,  
long for Destiny? . . .

Not because happiness really  
exists, that premature profit of imminent loss.  
Not out of curiosity, not just to practice the heart,  
But because being here amounts to so much, because all  
this Here and Now, so fleeting, seems to require us  
and strangely  
concerns us. Us, the most fleeting of all. Just once,  
everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too,  
once. And never again. But this  
having been once, though only once,  
having been once on earth----can it ever be cancelled?

## **Readings**

#1: [Conscientious Objector](#) by Edna St. Vincent Millay

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.  
I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.  
He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the Balkans, many calls to make  
this morning.  
But I will not hold the bridle while he clinches the girth.  
And he may mount by himself: I will not give him a leg up.

Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the fox  
ran.  
With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the black boy hides in the  
swamp.  
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death;  
I am not on his pay-roll.

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.  
Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man's door.  
Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to Death?  
Brother, the password and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through  
me  
Shall you be overcome.

#2: from [After-Thought, included in The River Duddon: a Series of Sonnets](#) by William  
Wordsworth:

I see what was, and is, and will abide;  
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;  
The Form remains, the Function never dies;  
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,  
We [all], who in our morn of youth defied  
The elements, must vanish;--be it so!  
Enough, if something from our hands have power  
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;  
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,  
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,  
We feel that we are greater than we know.

### Sermon

You'll notice there's lots of poetry in the service today. It strikes me that, when we're  
approaching death's door, we need language that is not afraid of contradiction and  
paradox; language that can unashamedly state the way that we feel with no apology;  
language that does not seek to justify, explain or defend, yet words which, through  
their beauty, allow us a greater proximity than any other written or spoken form to  
the nearly unbearable, the almost unimaginable, the stubborn, unrelenting reality of  
death.

Because it's not an easy thing to imagine, is it? Our own deaths?

When I was a kid, one of the questions that used to keep me entertained, right alongside "Would you rather be deaf or blind?" was "If you had a choice, how would you want to die?" (I was a real upbeat child.) How would you want to die? We came up with the answers you might expect. "In my sleep." "I don't care, as long as its fast." There weren't too many kids who said, "I'd like to die after suffering a long and painful illness." (But this conversation spawned many side questions, as we considered things like: "If you jumped off the Empire State Building, would you die of fright before you hit the ground?" And then we would kick around the superstition that when you have a falling dream...have you ever had those?...well, I was told that if you have a falling dream, and you actually hit the ground in the dream, you die. And I believed it...until I started wondering, "How in the heck would anyone *know* that? Who could confirm it?")

But have you thought about that? How death will happen? It's not something you bring up in polite company, but it crosses our minds, doesn't it? And, often the only acceptable way to talk about it is through a grim humor. We often, as I am doing here, try to sidestep its implications with jokes. If we laugh, we won't cry. If we laugh, we won't be as scared. I don't think that's *necessarily* a bad thing...certainly, it is a part of the Dia de los Muertos celebration coming up in October, poking fun at death, and humor is, I believe, a sacred thing...but it might be a bad thing, if we use humor as a way of avoiding the reality of death.

Because, listen, I think that an unacknowledged fear of death, a denial of death, a confused theology and philosophy about what death is, influences so many aspects of our lives in this society.

The subtext of the "age-defying" advertisements for products to keep you young, beyond the healthful or cosmetic appeal, is that somehow we might be able to fool death if we look young enough. "Hmmm, she looks way too young," the Angel of Death says, "I must have the wrong address."

The subtext of the Left Behind series and all this talk of the End of the World and the Rapture is that, for the faithful, they may get to avoid death altogether. "Listen, I tell you a mystery:" writes Paul to the Corinthians (I Cor. 15:51-52), "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." he writes to the Thessalonians (I Thessalonians 4:16-17). "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to

meet the Lord in the air." Straight to the clouds, with no detour to the cemetery. It's an enticing vision.

When President Bush is promising safety and security, he is speaking to a much more primal need than simply keeping a few groups of terrorists at bay. And a surprising awareness and honesty crept into a recent White House Report, which concluded, "Since the September 11 attacks, America is safer, but we are not yet safe."

No. We are not yet safe. We are not yet completely safe. We have never been completely safe. Nor will we ever be completely safe. Not from death; and isn't that a real desire that runs under our talk of *safety, paradise, youthfulness*? Protect me from death?

We should keep that in mind when we are asked to sell our rights to purchase security. We should keep that in mind when we are told that 18-35 is the only demographic that matters, so if we're not that, we should look like that, or act like that...or just keep quiet. We should keep that in mind when we are offered religious doctrines or promises that seem to skip over death altogether to reach paradise...We should remember that *we're all gonna die*.

"So, okay," you say, "we face death...what then?" What do we *do* with the reality? There are so many questions. Will it be painful? Will I be ready? Will I be conscious? Will I know that I'm about to die? Some of you may feel uncomfortably close to death's door. You may have recently experienced the death of someone you love, and suddenly the reality of your own mortality is before you. You may have received discouraging news from your doctor, and you are feeling the need to put some things in order, to prepare, as best you can, for that which remains such a mystery. But even in these cases, when you are looking for specific answers, they are hard to come by. "How long do I have, doctor?" And the doctor shrugs helplessly and says, "Six months, six years, sixteen years, it's really hard to say for sure."

It is hard to say. It is hard to say for all of us. Death can come after a long illness and a steady decline, or it can come in a moment on a regular day out of the clear blue sky, and it can come everywhere in between. This only goes to illuminate the hard fact: we are *all* sentenced to death...only we don't know the day or the hour. How do we live with that?

Is there a Unitarian Universalist way to deal with death?

Well, Unitarian Universalists, who, generally speaking, have a lot to say about a lot of

things, become rather quiet when death comes up. There is the joke about the deceased Unitarian, lying in the open casket in his best suit: all dressed up and nowhere to go. But it is not, necessarily, that we believe that the other side of death is *nowhere* or *nothing*; but we have no *particular* beliefs to which we, as a whole, subscribe concerning what happens upon dying. We are generally content to, [as Iris Dement sings](#), let the mystery be. We are known for being more comfortable with questions than unfounded or unreasonable answers, right? Yet, though we can proudly embrace the mystery, unanswered questions lose a certain appeal in this case. Part of the reason that we like questions is because they lead us forward to learn and discover more about ourselves and this amazing universe in which we find ourselves. Part of the reason we like questions is that they speak of the possibility of new and greater revelations. But the questions surrounding death are a little different. There's not a lot of information forthcoming from those who have experienced death. There are a few rather sardonic tombstone verses: My uncle wants this on his headstone: "I've been where you are; you'll soon be where I am." True enough, but not very informative. Restoration playwright [John Gay](#) wrote from the perspective of a dead man, saying,

"Life is a jest; and all things show it.  
I thought so once, but now I know it."

Again, humor, if a rather grim humor, steps in.

But in classic Unitarian fashion, I suggest that we not move too quickly into speculation about what happens *after* death, and spend some time with what happens in this existence. The reason I would urge us to face our own mortality is because it creates an immediate kinship with all that is mortal. We are no longer imagining ourselves outside the bounds of mortality. Let's face it: it's a lot easier for me to imagine *your* death than my own; but when I accept my own mortality--and when I say *accept*, I don't mean once-and-for-all acceptance, but practicing this awareness--when I practice accepting my own mortality, I am no longer controlled by my buried desire to escape it. That desire to escape my awareness that I will die separates me from others, insulates me from life, and clutters my days with a vain striving for a security that must forever elude me.

A couple Sundays ago, I mentioned that [Pema Chodrin, a Buddhist priest, spoke of our awareness of our own groundlessness](#), our inherent insecurity, as the source of compassion. And again, as we recognize the anniversaries of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, I wonder if we can also recognize that the compassion that emerged in the wake of those experiences was from the understanding that we humans are all in the

same boat. We are, none of us, safe...and yet people feel stronger than ever when they can be there for each other. Because we are not preoccupied with a safety that can never be, we are free to notice, as Rilke says, that:

*being here amounts to so much, because all  
this Here and Now, so fleeting, seems to require us  
and strangely  
concerns us.*

And when we deny life's fleeting nature, we also deny our ability to engage the Here and Now. I think it is important for us to face our own deaths because it allows us to *be present* to those who are dying. And who is that? Everyone, of course. When we run away from death, we run away from reminders of death. Though all of us will die, we run away from those who seem closest to death's door, those who may need us to stand by them, and those can teach us something that only those who are close to death's door can impart. We neglect or ignore or safely hide away the old, the sick, the vulnerable because they remind us that we are mortal. "Let the dead bury the dead," we say, using one of Jesus' more obscure statements (Matthew 8:22). "Life is for the living." But we could just as easily say, "Life is for the dying." It is. Every breath.

Bob Dylan [has a lyric](#) that says "he not busy being born is busy dying." The truth is, we're doing both, aren't we? The truth seems to be, in this universe we find ourselves in, that being born means that we will die. There are lifetimes for everything. But Dylan may have been talking about another kind of death, a spiritual death, the death of never having lived because of our fear. Ironically, maybe, it strikes me that we live fuller lives when we are able to acknowledge, if only in brief moments, the reality that we will one day die. Just as our birth presumes our death, the prospect of our death means that we *are living now*. And, ultimately, what I am talking about is living. When I talk about accepting our death, I don't mean that we passively wait for the door to open. I don't mean that we welcome it. I don't mean that we *like* it. I mean the kind of wide-eyed acceptance that Edna St. Vincent Millay talks about in her poem: *I shall die, but that is all I shall do for Death*. In another poem, entitled "[Dirge Without Music](#)," she lists all of the things that she knows and must accept about death, but there is a refrain of resistance all the way through--resistance, not denial--and the poem ends with the line: "But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

We don't need to collaborate with death. We don't need to approve. We *must* resist the machinations of death that humans have created; we cannot help but cry out against death when it robs us of the physical presence of those we love; we must

admit the sorrow caused by imagining our own end...But to do any of that, we must admit its inevitability.

Remember those childhood questions I talked about earlier? Here's a question I heard someone ask recently: "What would you do if you knew you were going to die?" What would you do if you knew you were going to die? Now usually that has a time element tagged on the end. What would you do if you knew you were going to die *in six months*, or *in two years*, or whatever...but this time, it was just the question: What would you do if you knew you were going to die?

Let's be clear: that's not a hypothetical question! That is a question that all of us must answer. You *are* going to die. What are you going to do? What do you wish to do beforehand? What do you hope will live on after?.....

This sermon is really something of an introduction to classes that will begin in October on all of the many issues that swirl around the reality of our dying. I hope that we can engage practical considerations and community resources, as well as some of the emotional and spiritual issues that arise. I hope, most of all, that it provides an opportunity to honestly and comfortably explore those topics that may feel so out of place in other situations, and that we learn more about how we can be there for each other, in life and death.

Closing Words (Elder Olson, from *Exegesis*)

Nothing is lost; be still; the universe is honest.  
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,  
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:  
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,  
Mountains as pebbles. Be still, be still, I say;  
You were never the water, only a wave;  
Not substance, but a form substance assumed.