

**For All That is Our Life**  
Rev. Linda Thomson  
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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I like graveyards. Perhaps because they remind me of family outings we took, as a family – a few times a year. We'd visit two spots, both quite near our home. Equipped with a trowel, and a watering can, along with a few petunias we'd visit the graves of my dad's mom along with her parents, her sister and his infant brother – who died a year before he was born. And then a short drive later we'd visit the graves of mom's great grandparents and grandparents (her mom and dad both lived well into my adulthood) and, in the same cemetery, my paternal grandfather. My parents would tell me about their memories of the people, they'd get soft eyes, and sometime laugh. We'd stop and look at the neighbours, reading name and dates and wondering about their stories too. Of course, we always made the trip on a nice day... the visit wasn't urgent, so we could wait for good weather – no doubt that has helped make the memories of those outings pleasant.

Since then, when I've travelled, I've often found myself wandering through cemeteries. 11 years ago, Gary and I took a trip to New England, following a trail of ancestors I'd only recently found out about. We considered it very good luck when in a town near Lyme Connecticut, a local man, somewhat of a genealogist remembered a very small country graveyard 'down that road, and past the old farm'. After trudging a bit, we found a small plot, maybe 20 x 20 ft, and in it, after pulling aside overgrown vegetation, we found, the grave of one of the many Samuel Gilberts in my family tree.

Other times I've just wandered. Once in old Quebec City I was struck by the number of graves marked with the same death years – strange clusters, until I learned they matched the dates of cholera epidemics.

Some people find my affection for graveyards strange. Maybe it is the historian in me that is attracted to them, I know that they contain stories, many lost to time, that I'd love to hear. And yes, death is quite universally considered a sad thing, but before the death there is a life. Someone once said that when we look at a gravestone, our eyes are drawn to two dates—the date of birth and the date of death. In looking at the dates, I find myself thinking about the life. My great grandmother lived from 1880 until 1976. I've often thought about the changes she experienced, her early life as an 'lady's maid in Somerset, England, her marriage, her move to Canada, the technological changes she saw, including a motor on the sewing machine that was the source of her livelihood, cars, airplanes, moon missions. What a span! But beyond the era in which someone lives – interesting in its own right, what truly tells the story is the life, the little

dash between them. Everything that mattered, everything that shaped a life, happened in that space.

Each of us, can tell you about the date before our own dash, but we don't yet know what is at the end of it. But consider with me, the "dash" of your own life—It is no doubt a fascinating collection of stories, a journey with twists and shifts through many seasons. We often talk about someone's life as it is one thing, but in truth it is a collection of ages and stages. Hinduism frames a life in 4 stages, each with its own task and each with its own question.

In the Student phase, until young adulthood, the focus is on learning, character development, articulating personal values – building a foundation for life. The key question in this stage is 'What do I need to learn?'

In the middle years, the Householder phase, the work has to do with work, livelihood, perhaps family life, and being a contributing member of the community, supporting and encouraging others. "How do I contribute to the world?" becomes the focus question.

Time passes, and in Hindu teaching the next stage is described as the Forest-Dweller stage, when one withdraws from intense worldly responsibilities, seeking to simplify, and focus on mentoring others and reflection. This is the time to ask, "What can I let go of?"

Finally, in the elder years, the Renunciate stage, the focus becomes less on giving and gaining and instead on contemplation, letting go of ego and status. This is the time when we can usefully ask, "What truly matters?"

You may find some resonance in these stages, you might not, but I do think it might be valuable to think about the shift from having and doing towards being and understanding.

From the perspective of age, I can observe those stages playing out in my life and those I've known. Perhaps we should put a series of dashes between people's birth and death dates... But should we? Those of us who are young may still have vivid memories of their first school days. Others of us find it harder to recall the sounds and smells of their first-grade classroom. We change and we grow. I am not the person I was when I was 8 or 9. And yet, I can see the connections between who I was then, and who I am now. Perhaps you can too.

Of course, the very idea of a dash, a straight, dark line between a beginning and an end is quite comical – as if life were that tidy. Most of us are travelling a line that isn't so easy to make out, that isn't, at least a bit, wavering. Some of the dips and curves shouldn't really surprise us. After all, life isn't always predictable. Sometimes the moments that end up shaping us, aren't the ones we had planned or would have chosen. But shape us they do. Losses, and disappointments, new starts, even the

ones we resist, these are all part of our stories – the ones that make us who we are. I thought I had a plan... University, become a teacher, maybe find a mate, maybe have some children... it didn't work that way. I've surprised myself. If you'd told me, in high school, that I'd become a minister, I would have laughed. A LOT. If you'd have told me I'd get married before I started University I would have told you, "No way!" But here we are. I don't think ever, in my wildest dreams, I thought I would have helped to shape a memorial service for my 30-year-old niece, but I've done that too. Our stories are full of cliff-hanger and tragic moments, as well as some sweet ones. We don't know what our particular mix is going to be, but they become part of us.

The dash, the stuff in the middle, that is what really matters. The dates on either end tell us something of the context of the life, but they aren't the most important part. What does your dash, as much of it as you know at this point, tell us about you. What is the essential narrative of who you are? How shall we live our lives? That is truly the essential question. What story would you tell us? What stories will be told about you? Sure, the achievements will be part of the story – the awards, diplomas – they are part of it. But is that truly how we want our life measured?

What I'd like to hear about each of you, the stories I hope we share with one another, now before the final date is filled in, are:

- The people you've made laugh,
- The kindnesses you've shown,
- The relationships you have nurtured,
- The courage with which we faced change,
- The ways we helped others flourish

I want us to share the stories, because we aren't doing this alone. No one lives the dash alone. We need one another.

- Parents and teachers
- Friends and partners
- Children and grandchildren
- Communities of care

One of the things I love about faith communities is that they are one of the few remaining places where young and old and all the ages in between come together. Here in North America, we rarely live in multi-generational households. And, despite the statistic that 40-45% of Canadians in their twenties live in a home with a parent, people are still surprised to see young adults living in a family home. Yet, in earlier times, or

today in some parts of the world a 26-year-old without a partner or family who didn't live home would raise eyebrows. I wonder what is lost when we segment ages as much as we now do. Two years ago, I was with my then 9-year-old grandson, on a Sunday morning in the Hamilton congregation. We were chatting with a long-time member, and she declared she was doing very well, especially considering her age. Now I knew Val was quite elderly, but was surprised when she shared, "I'm 102, you know". The look on Jamie, my grandson's face was priceless. On the way home I asked him, "did you ever think you'd know someone who was 102?" "NEVER" was the response. But what a gift we offer one another when we can gather outside of (and sometimes in) age groupings. I treasure the Sunday mornings here, when, after the service I see people at the "Make and Take" tables that Angela coordinates. Children, elders, teens working side by side on a beautiful craft. It is precious and it is rare.

It has now been nearly 10 months since we were able to begin meeting regularly, here at 473 Oakwood. What you did in the years before that is remarkable. But it was, and you don't need me to tell you this, it was VERY hard. It is tough work strengthening and rebuilding beloved community when you can't sing together, eat together, share deeply together and do crafts together. You managed it though. I can tell you though that from my vantage point I see your collective shoulders coming down, your breathing slowing, and sense the chatter in this room is more animated. There are more activities happening – the calendar is fuller than it was only a few weeks ago. I'm glad that this exquisite multi-generational community is finding its way, so that you, we can meet across the generations. One of the things I love about this, and other similar communities, is we are laboratories for living. Here the young can learn that old isn't the same as obsolete. The old can be reminded of the curiosity of children. Each of us lives in the dash between birth and death, but each one of us can only be at one point along that line at once. Here we can, at least, witness the possibility for other points – for other stages of life.

Buildings are, in themselves, quite inanimate. Some glass, concrete, paint, wood – sure, some are more beautiful than others, but until they are lived into themselves, they don't hold a lot of meaning. We have, and we are, living this space into being. These walls have seen a weddings, the dedication of precious children, a service celebrating the life of a beloved who has died, and today we honoured someone who has grown into young adulthood, here in our congregation! Here I've seen tears, and joy, and hugs, and anger and delight. That is what happens in the dash – the thin line that tells us a bit about a life.

I love graveyards. I love thinking about the stories that are contained in that little dash. The dates at either end mark the boundaries of a life, but they do not reveal its meaning.

The meaning is found:

- In moments of love
- In acts of courage
- In lessons learned
- In connections made
- In lives touched

The dash is still being written for most of us. May we live it fully. May we appreciate each season as it comes. And may we remember, as Unitarian Universalists, that every age, every stage, every chapter of our journey is part of the sacred story of being human.

What will make your dash a story worth telling?