

How does the truth of death shape our lives?

Catherine Lake
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A few years ago, when travelling from my home to First U—to you people—my people, our people—then at Oakwood Collegiate, occasionally I'd ride past an old sedan with a bumper sticker that read:

I  Aging + Dying.

I love aging and dying. There's a conversation opener!

I was a little taken aback then grinned and thought Wow—that's bold. Was it meant to be a sardonic thumbing one's nose at death or a clear-eyed and positive view on the inevitable? Perhaps both.

To mark my birthday one year, I took in the ROM exhibit *Death: Life's Great Mystery*. The exhibit was organized around five questions:

What is death?

Do I have to die?

What will happen to my body?

What will happen to my spirit?

How will my death affect others?

In drawing from many human cultures, both ancient and present, visitors were shown that humans have always engaged in ritual for our dead including our hunter-gatherer ancestors as evidenced by the Magdalenian Woman who was interred in a rock shelter that held an "incredible sculptured frieze more than 40 feet long depicting horses, bison, and reindeer."¹ She was laid in a fetal position and is thought to be 17,000 years old.

The exhibit also showed images of how "when a whale dies, its carcass feeds an ocean" and, in opening a box that recreated the putrid smell of death, which was truly nauseating, I learned that some of the components of volatile organic compounds or VOCs emitted during human decomposition are identical to some of the natural ingredients found in commercial perfumes.

Kinda wild eh?

I also learned not to do that again because, for weeks I was snorting coffee grounds trying to get that scent out of my head.

The impressive exhibit and its accompanying book **Beyond Death**¹ included watercolours entitled "Nine Stages of Bodily Decay" from the Japanese Buddhist tradition which encourages practitioners to confront

¹ *Beyond Death Beliefs, Practice, and Material Expression*; Edited by Patrick Ryan Williams, Gary M. Feinman, and Luis Muro Ynonan; BAR Publishing, Oxford, UK; 2022.

the graphic imagery of human decomposition as a means to improve one's meditation on the path to enlightenment.

That's a little tougher than doing Shavasana or the Yoga corpse pose... the purpose of which is, ironically, to bring calm and rejuvenation.

The multitude of ways we have acknowledged death and honoured our dead speaks to the richness and creativity of human culture.

For the Haida Gwaii, their "ancestors continue to play essential roles in the community through mortuary and memorial poles." The poles serve as a beacon to bring the ancestors home and continue to rejuvenate life in the community through the ancestors return."¹

Honouring our ancestors serves to keep us connected to life.

As Toni Morrison said in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech: *"We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."*²

So then, how do we talk about death? Among our families, our friends, our neighbours and here at First U. How do we—us all here—us as an intentional faith community talk about death?

Death is always around us, in the arts, movies, the news cycle, our socials, and it touches our community here—when we use language to lift up our grief during Sunday services, when we hold memorials to honour the dead and to comfort the living, when we place a name card on the memorial wall.

A few weeks ago, when Beth Ann gave her testimony on the ways of ministry between us, she spoke of a young boy in her Religious Education class who needed to talk about his mother who was very ill and dying. With guidance from staff, she provided a caring space in which the child could express his anguish among his peers.

And I thought about other ways we talk about death as part of our community life, outside of Sunday service:

In our journey groups;

"death cafes" that have been held in the past;

and we once had a weekly greeting card ministry before the great upheaval—you know, covid, the move and our time in the wilderness—where we had a table with cards for those going through hard times or for the families of those who've died. Hey—if you want to give to the community—start that up again. It's just an after-service table where others can sign cards of care and support that get sent on. So simple and so meaningful.

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>

And next Sunday, we will honour our dead in our annual service that acknowledges loss and also celebrates our ongoing connection to those who've left us. It is a beautiful service that allows us, as a faith community, to share grief and gratitude. To think and talk about the impact of death on our lives.

And we have our hymns like "Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads" which starts with:

"Where my free spirit onward leads, well, there shall be my way; by my own light illumined I've journeyed night and day; my age, a time-worn cloak I wear as once I wore my youth; I celebrate life's mystery; I celebrate death's truth."³

Death washes us with a multitude of emotions: fear, sorrow, longing, why. And yet in the midst of such bewilderment, it simultaneously forces us to reckon with the essence of the deceased individual, the gifts they shared, and the profound and beautiful memories we may be left with to keep all our days.

The truth is, the sheer physical and metaphysical odds of each one of us being conceived, born, and living, make each one of us a uniquely precious life. There is an unfathomable randomness to us making it here, on earth and as we know, our lineage, like all life, is literally connected to the primordial oceans in which swim the stars.

The ancient story of the Roman goddess Cura addresses our mortality. Cura, whose name means "care," formed the first human from clay at a river and as she was studying her creation, Jupiter sauntered by so she asked him to breathe spirit into the creature.

He does so but then they argue over who gets to name it.

Earth chimed in and said it should have her name because it was made by her body.

Then Earth's son Saturn, the god of Time weighs in to settle the dispute. He decides that:

Since the spirit was granted by Jupiter, he would have it in death;

Earth would receive back the body she gave and

because Cura had been the creator, she would keep her creation as long as it lived.

Finally, it would be called "homo" or human being because it was made from humus -- the earth.

Cura means care in Latin. We are formed by care to care.

³ #324 Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads *Singing the Living Tradition*

How do we show care when we have a loss in this community—that is different from an intimate family or friend death, different from the death of a favourite author, musician, or inspiring leader?

For myself, when one of us dies, no matter how long lived, no matter how peripheral to my close First Unitarian circles, it catches my breath and I experience that sinking deep guttural feeling of loss. And sometimes it is with a sadness that I did not know they were dying -- like Doreen; that I did not reach out to tell them goodbye -- like Margaret; that I did not know enough about them -- like Tony; that I did not get to say I'm sorry and share a hug; like Bruce.

And yet, my memories of these people are in my heart and tucked in my brain for me to draw on. Let me tell you about Doreen. She died just after her 90th birthday. Aging brought many difficulties in her eighties; and she still drove, much to some of our concern. Many years ago, at 173 St Clair, I was delayed after service with a meeting or something and I noticed Doreen sitting in her car—which was running.

The spot was close to the front doors and I was going back and forth and kept seeing her in the idling car. At first, I was fuming about the fumes...But after about 20 minutes I see she is still there, and now, I'm worried. I go outside.

Tap on the window.

Window rolls down.

Hey Doreen—you OK?

"Oh yes," she says, "I'm just charging my I-phone."

This memory cracks me up every time I think of her—and it was way before many elders had cellphones.

I love our elders.

When one of us, one who may be in the periphery of our lives dies, it reminds me that death is always in the periphery.

But sometimes, it also calls into question—who are we to one another? Sometimes, I have grappled with the shock and upset at not knowing how ill one of our people had become. I feel bewildered and disconnected. How could I not have known what was going on in the life of this person I cherished?

And then I trust that whatever they and their family were going through, that they were held with love and support by others in our Toronto First family.

To honour our time with one of ours who died this year, Karen and I took a walk in a park then sat by an enormous willow tree and remembered conversations and connection with her through this community over many years. Before heading home, we hugged that magnificent willow tree long and deep.

Are we all OK here? Feel free to give yourself a little hug.

The culturally universal message—the continuation of life in concert with death—was displayed in *Death: Life's Great Mystery*--the exhibit I spoke of earlier. Through both elaborate ritual and art works: Statues of skeletons reading, riding horses, or dressed up in finery; monuments, pyramids, standing stones, quilts and flags – these human expressions reaffirm our connection to the dead.

In her essay on the “Soul and Vital Force in African Religions and Beyond,”⁴ Kyrah Malika Daniels explores the “sacred arts of death” and writes that,

“Immortality is neither sought nor desired among most African religious communities...” but rather “A life of ... vibrancy and integrity honours the destiny linked with one’s unique soul collective. Righteous living in African-derived traditions includes worship and care for guiding the ancestors and spirits... and leaving a meaningful legacy for the next generation.

“These concepts resonate with the ideologies of life and death still present among many other Indigenous groups all around the world.. ... It is through the cultivation of a vibrant life and divine fortification of the soul(s), the creation of mortuary arts and rituals of balance, that death can be recognized not as an enemy of humankind but as one of many cosmic energies...”¹

Anthropologists have also found ancient cultures in South America that paired sexual expression with death rituals as a way of affirming life in the face of death.

Not something I’m advocating for here at First U Toronto...just sayin’

But this fact reminded me of last year’s television series—*Dying for Sex*—a comedy-drama which is based on the real life quest of Molly to have an orgasm with another person before she dies.

Near the end of the series, we hear Molly’s palliative care nurse Amy explain the stages of “active dying” which includes the reality that “eventually there is a breath out that is not followed by a breath in.”

In this segment, the palliative care nurse—whose enthusiasm for the death process is jarring but delightful, explains this:

“Death is not a mystery or a medical disaster. It is a bodily process like giving birth or like going to the bathroom, or coughing—having an orgasm—because your body knows what to do. Your body knows how to die.

⁴ Kyrah Malika Daniels, Emory University; “Soul and Vital Force: Vibrant Life Matters and Mortuary Arts in Africana Religions and Beyond” *Beyond Death* (ibid)

“How cool is that?”⁵

You can You Tube just that segment in which she also enthusiastically explains how some people experience The Rally—a time of clarity and vitality before death.

Recently, I was fortunate to watch a Lake Huron sunset on the edge of a shoreline bouldered and cedared and where some skeletal trees still clutch the ancient limestone and lean into the changing sky. I noticed how the deepening reds and oranges shape the darkness and how the slow darkening brings a twilight vibrancy to the water, the rock, and those stalwart trees—the intricacies of bare branches, twigs, and the glowing bark announced and affirmed. The gathering dark brought depth and beauty, so profoundly different from the glare of the midday sun.

As a younger person, the vastness of the stars, like death, terrified me. As I’ve matured (well, that’s still in progress), this faith, this community has helped me embrace life, and, as sung in the hymn, to celebrate death’s truth.

Death illuminates Life. And our Unitarian Universalist faith reinforces that death teaches us to hold to meaning in our lives.

I deeply appreciate having this community as a place to explore the reality of death while embracing life. I am grateful to know the care in this community and to have had this brief time this morning to talk with you about death.

⁵ Elizabeth Meriwether, Kim Rosenstock; *Dying for Sex*; April 4, 2025; Episode 8
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8a0pUaCGQU>