

“The Ones We Carry”
A Homily by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, October 25, 2026

My first encounter with death was an experience I felt more than I deeply remember. I was just over two years old, with very little life experience to understand the words, “Your Grandpa Bob died.” He was 72 years old.

I hardly remember the news of it, though the experience of missing him and longing to know him more is a grief I still carry to this day. The stories of our connection, between my grandpa and me, are of me bouncing around with him in his favourite red La-Z-Boy chair, wearing his wash-worn Tasmanian Devil sweatshirt that he was also buried in.

There’s a story of the weeks after; how as a little boy I claimed to see my Grandpa Bob there in our house. My dad was both spooked and comforted by this, with how I had somehow seen his father after his death, pointing and motioning to where I saw him standing. The grief of losing someone too soon, or someone you wished you had more time to know, is real grief. Grief over the loss of ancestral connections, of fully knowing our histories and our pasts.

Over the last week, with my husband Connor and I getting to visit with my brother Ryan, we spent our first Canadian Thanksgiving at the Royal Ontario Museum, where they have spectacular exhibits on civilizations and natural history. A thought that’s been haunting me ever since, looking at the many items, garments, and even bodies of those living thousands of years before, is the wonder of what survives us.

In the grand scale of time, if we were to compress the entirety of the Earth’s history into just 24 hours, we human beings have been here for mere seconds before midnight.¹ And yet we’ve had an outsized impact on this planet, with the development of our modern lives and our changing climate.

When I view the articles and belongings of those of ancient days, I admit some pessimism. These are the fortunate and the wealthy who could afford lavish tombs. Those whose stories we still try to tell and piece together, rather than those whose stories are lost to time. Despite their best attempts, some tombs remain buried and lost for centuries. What was at one point a tomb or a family altar of remembrance grows cold in only a few generations.²

Now, in our increasingly plastic and industrial world today, we may yet succeed, unfortunately, in leaving relics of our time that will well outlast us. Trash bags, plastic cups, glass, and even PFAS. On the scale of deep geologic time, the Earth and life itself will well outlast us. That’s not a permission slip to pollute, but it’s an honest irony facing our species.

¹ “[3 Seconds](#),” *The Thinking Republic*.

² As is the case with [this](#) ancient Egyptian tomb of the married couple Kha and Merit.

It makes me wonder, though, about the many lives and untold stories of countless generations across these 300,000 years of modern humanity.³ *Who or what, in the end, will be remembered?*

I'm no stranger to grief. In my family and throughout my life, we've had hard goodbyes and deaths, both those that were expected and those that came too soon. In my line of work, death and dying are faithful companions, especially not just in journeying with people in their grief, but also in sharing a communal grief over losses of connection and relationship.

While I'm no stranger to it, there's a truth in how I notice my perspective around life and death starting to shift. Something about being 30 years old. Of having a parent that just turned seventy on Tuesday. Of having yet another separate death and recent loss for our family. Somehow the veneer of my perceived invincibility of youth might be starting to wear away.

There's an interesting paradox about death and life. How life itself seems simultaneously full and fragile. Full in the richness of our experiences and all the connection and joy that we hope not to squander. Fragile in how none of us knows how long we or our loved ones will have left.

Fullness and fragility; grief and hope; these are things that run side-by-side. Grief itself is more of a mosaic than a prescribed timeline. It's not something to master; not something to be solved, so much as something to be lived and experienced. We experience grief deeply and differently in each time and moment.

Richard Wagamese's words on gratitude and grief ring true to me. How "Missing someone is feeling a piece of your heart gone astray. Sure, it keeps beating, and sure, you keep breathing, but there's a gap in the rhythm of it..."⁴ He reframes grief not as this static or frozen thing, but rather this thing that moves in us. This gift of their presence and life calls us to share this gift with others. To keep experiencing life and to savour each moment.

There's a time and a season for still or quiet grief, don't get me wrong. There's a time to sit, to be still, and to feel the depths of loss. Though, in truth, I don't think we're meant to stay there. Ultimately, what our grief is about is love and the sharing of this love in this mystical baton pass from generation to generation.

Grief is often described as "love with no place to go."⁵ While there's truth in those words, I find that grief itself is so much more. As Catherine's sermon⁶ explored with you last Sunday, with the layers and dimensions of grief in community, grief is also the quiet care we offer one another and the beings beside us. It moved between us not as this loud or

³ "[Homo sapiens](#)," *Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History*.

⁴ *Embers*, Richard Wagamese, pg. 171.

⁵ A [quote](#) by Jamie Anderson.

⁶ "[How does the truth of death shape our lives?](#)", a sermon by Catherine Lake, preached Sunday, Oct. 18th, 2026 at *FirstU*.

imposing force but as this soft-spoken and gentle voice, binding us together, bidding us to slow down and pay attention. There's a universality to grief: there is no home which grief has not visited, nor person who has never known or will never know the pains of loss and suffering.⁷ Instead, I find that grief, that love itself does have somewhere to go. Like love and living, memory, too, is this baton pass we play with future generations.

Perhaps, like me, you know what it is to not know an ancestor of blood or spirit you wished you had. Perhaps you, too, wonder in the end what or who will be remembered when our time in the sun is done.

Who knows if I truly saw my Grandpa Bob that day. What I do know is I still feel those waves and ripples of connection with him, even in the ways where this is felt memory rather than static memory. I may not deeply know him, but I carry him with me still.

In the end, I must believe that our time here matters. That the love and care we share with our fellow humans being sends ripples that travel in directions of past and future as much as the present. Tombs may grow cold. Names may one day be lost. Our trash may outlast and outlive us all. But love is the relic that keeps on moving, carried hand to hand for generations after.

As you find yourself at this time of the year when the Veil is said to be at its thinnest. As you spend time with the memories and moments with your beloved ones who have traveled onward in mystery... This is the great gift of our lives: that we receive life as a gift we can never fully repay. That a true gift must always keep on moving.⁸

May you remember these gentle ripples. May you sense your inheritance from those who have gone before. May you see your role in the making and sharing of these ripples with those who will come after.

Pass your gift on.

Amen.

⁷ This is a reference to a Buddhist story from the *Therīgāthā* in the Buddhist Pāḷi Canon of Kṛśā Gautamī. [“The Mustard Seed”](#), from *Buddha, The Gospel*, by Paul Carus, Chicago, *The Open Court Publishing Company*, 1894.

⁸ [The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World](#), by Lewis Hyde, one of my favourite books of all time.