

“Living and Dying with Intention”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Readings

selection from “Awakenings,” by Forrest Church in [A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism](#)

“If religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, Unitarian Universalism might best be described as a life-affirming rather than death-defying faith. Yet to affirm life, we must also face death, and struggle to make sense of both...It happens when we awaken to the fact that life is not a given—not something to be taken for granted, or transcended after death—but a gift, undeserved and unexpected, holy, awesome, and mysterious...

Each of us, of course, must assume the responsibility for awakening. Others may be responsible for our being born, but what we make of our lives, how deeply and intensively we live, is our responsibility, and ours alone. Having accepted life as a gift for ourselves, we are then charged to revere the presence of this same gift in others.”

Rainer Maria Rilke as translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy in [A Year with Rilke](#):

“Our effort, I suggest, can be dedicated to this: to assume the unity of Life and Death and let it be progressively demonstrated to us. So long as we stand in opposition to Death we will disfigure it. Believe me, my dear Countess, Death is our friend, our closest friend, perhaps the only friend who can never be misled by our ploys and vacillations. And I do not mean that in the sentimental, romantic sense of distrusting or renouncing life. Death is our friend precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here, that is natural, that is love...Life always says Yes and No simultaneously. Death (I implore you to believe) is the true Yeasayer. It stands before eternity and says only: Yes.”

Sermon

During the summer of 2010, I was living in Chicago and working at an area hospital as a chaplain-in-training. Working in a hospital, of course, matters of life and death were all around me and were at the heart of the issues, both medical and spiritual, faced by the patients I talked to each day. Any of us who have experienced the death of a loved one or faced our own mortality up close knows how clearly and sharply death can put life into focus.

This happened for me in a surprising way that summer - not just in talking with patients in the hospital rooms where I was a chaplain but in my own family. I was spending the summer in my uncle's apartment just a few blocks away from my parent's home, the home I grew up in. One evening I received a panicked call from my mother. My father who had been having some minor health issues had become extremely weak and disoriented and my mother had called 9-1-1. My now-husband, Jared, and I arrived at their home just after the EMTs. My mother was upset and worried and my father was still confused. I rode with him in the ambulance for the short ride to the local hospital, which thankfully, was just a few blocks away.

I had felt the mortality of loved ones before - two of my aunts and my grandfather had all struggled with treating cancer and then died within a couple years of one another.

That evening, though, facing the fragility and mortality of my own father felt different. And, I could tell that both he and my mother were frightened.

Thankfully, after running some tests and keeping him overnight, the medical staff determined that they needed to make some adjustments to his medication and he would be fine.

That episode coupled with my time as a hospital chaplain that summer brought some key things into focus in my life. As a discerning seminary student who had not yet decided upon a set path for my ministry, it made clearer my calling to serve in a pastoral role that would keep me close to these fundamental issues of life and death - to life's ultimate concerns. And, this was the first step to me traveling down the path towards ordination as a minister. This experience of facing the fragility of life and the closeness of death also brought into focus my relationship with my partner. Our relationship was

already very serious, and the steadfastness and compassion with which he made himself present to my family in this time of need sealed the deal. We were engaged just a couple months later.

After this summer of being brought closer to death, I was able to live my life with more intention.

Our worship theme for the month of January is Intention. And, we ask ourselves, what does it mean to be a people of intention?

It is no coincidence that this theme lines up with the start of a new year. In the new year, we often take pause to make some assessment of our lives. To determine how we might begin again and make adjustments to our lives to more fully and more intentionally align with our values and our wishes for ourselves.

And, this isn't just about making resolutions to impossible self-improvement schemes. Living with intention requires an awareness, a thoughtfulness, and a humility about our lives and our place in the grand scheme of it all.

Often, it is coming to grips with the reality that our lives and the lives of those we love will come to an end that can bring the clarity at the heart of intention.

Atul Gawande is a surgeon and now author whose work, [Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End](#) thrust into our cultural consciousness issues of life, death, and the role of medicine in promoting holistic well-being, particularly at the end of life. In this book and in essays and interviews, Gawande shares the wisdom he developed over his many years as a surgeon. Prompted, in part, by his own father's illness and death, Gawande began to wonder whether the medical field was really making people's lives better particularly at the end of their lives. And so, he began to look more closely at how patients were being treated in long-term care facilities, in hospice care, and in those moments of end-of-life decision-making.

After much research, Gawande came up with five questions that he thinks ought to be part of any conversation with someone with a serious illness who is facing the last days of their life.¹

¹ "Atul Gawande's 5 Questions to Ask at Life's End" - <http://www.nextavenue.org/atul-gawandes-5-questions-ask-lifes-end/>

1. What is your understanding of where you are and of your illness?
2. What are your fears or worries for the future?
3. What are your goals and priorities?
4. What outcomes are unacceptable to you? What are you willing to sacrifice and not?

And, finally,

5. What would a good day look like?

All of these questions recognize our human agency and dignity and the truth that there is much more to ensuring health and well-being than seeking medical treatment and intervention right up through the end.

The last question, in particular, is one that I find especially transformative.

What would a good day look like?

Not a perfect day. But, a day that still feels good even with all of the challenges and conditions that are now out of one's control, particularly when faced with a debilitating illness.

An example Gawande shares is of Peg, the woman who was his daughter's piano teacher when she was 13 years old. Peg had faced two distinct phases of living with cancer. First, she discovered she had a rare form of soft-tissue cancer in her pelvis. Her treatment involved chemotherapy, radiation, and a surgery that removed a third of her pelvis and then reconstructed it with metal. For months afterwards, she dealt with complications and had to let go of many beloved activities in her life like cycling, yoga, walking her Shetland sheepdog with her husband, and teaching her students. Eventually, she recovered and returned to teaching. A year and a half later, she was found to have a leukemia-like malignancy caused by her treatment. She went back on chemotherapy and kept teaching. But, then she began to postpone the lessons and returned to the hospital. The leukemia treatment had stopped working and her original cancer had come back. Peg was miserable. Dr. Gawande and her husband convinced her to try hospice.

A few days later, Gawande received a surprising call from Peg. She said that she'd like to resume teaching his daughter. Peg had had a conversation with her hospice nurse about what a good day would look like now. And that meant teaching. So, they worked

on a way for Peg to be able to do that. The hospice team set up her hospital bed on the first floor. They put a portable commode at the bedside. They gave her medication to control her pain. And, they figured out the exact amount of pain medication she would need to take before each lesson to make her comfortable enough to teach but not groggy. Peg lived for six weeks after going on hospice. Two final concerts in Peg's living room featured her current and former students gathered around her playing Brahms, Chopin, and Beethoven for their adored teacher.²

When we ask, "what does a good day look like?," we recognize the ultimate paradox that we are living even while we are dying.

We also recognize that, as Annie Dillard writes, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." And, this is true right up until the end.

A day is just a day and yet in the minute details of a day is where we can find evidence of our intentions to live our values, pursue our passions, and focus on what is ultimately important.

And, this question, what does a good day look like? is one we can ask ourselves at any and all stages of life.

As we ask this question we acknowledge that our choices are never limitless. There are many factors that might diminish our ability to really make all of our wildest dreams a reality. But, I think that this is where the beauty is. Recognizing that in our lives as they exist now, we can still set an intention for how we want to live.

It's also true that sometimes we just have a bad day. Or several bad days. Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we face challenges and sorrows out of our control. Yet, having that clarity of what we want our days to look like, I believe, can be life changing.

So, what if you asked yourself this today? What does a good day look like for you? What does a good day look like given the responsibilities and obligations you have? What does a good day look like given your physical and mental health in this moment? What does a good day look like for you, and not for anyone else?

What intentions can you set and what choices can you make **now** to make that good day a reality?

² Atul Gawande, Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, pp. 245-249.

Living with intention means recognizing the truth of our immortality even while opening ourselves to the possibilities inherent in living.

Nina Riggs was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer at the age of 37. A lover of literature, a published poet, and the great-great-great-granddaughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Riggs turned to writing in the last two years of her life to chronicle her journey towards death, which in her estimation, still included a whole lot of living. Her book which was published this past June, just a few months after her death, is called The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying.

Like Forrest Church and Rainer Maria Rilke, Riggs saw death and life as inextricably intertwined. She writes, “Death sits near each one of us at every turn. Sometimes we are too aware, but mostly we push it away. Sometimes it looks exactly like life.”³

It is in this awareness of the closeness of death even in life that the beauty of Riggs’ reflections emerge. She goes on living her life as a mother, wife, daughter, chemo patient, and writer - noticing wonder and finding joy even when the realities of life’s transience were clearly evident.

I close with this brief, final chapter of Riggs’ memoir. She mentions Freddy and Benny, who are her sons, and John, her husband, and also the French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne.

She writes: [Joan reads from printed copy. Reading not included for printing because of copyright restrictions.]

“We’re making our way like this, though: We are breathless, but we love the days. They are promises. They are the only way to walk from one night to the other.”⁴

May you, too, love the days.

May you live each one as if it were a promise.

May you feel the grand “yes” of death in life, and life in death, journeying on in this fragile and precious gift of a life,

³ Nina Riggs, The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying, p. 197

⁴ Ibid., pp. 304-6.

with intention.