

Preparation for Death

We have all had a brush with death – a serious illness, loss of a favorite grandpa, a dying parent. Death is part of life. From the day we are born, we deal with the eventuality of our death. Only humans have an awareness of death and subsequently live with anxiety about death. Some believe that one reason for religion is to help deal with the fear of death, by forming beliefs about the meaning of life and the possibility of an afterlife. John Buehrens, UU minister, says, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

Many people who do not believe in an existence after death tend instead to emphasize how we live in the memories of those who loved us or as a legacy of contributions to the world. But religions all over the world describe some sort of afterlife, some existence after death. In animistic religions, a person’s spirit joins other spirits in the natural world. The idea of reincarnation provides another view, a physical rebirth on earth that may continue in a cycle. Other religions believe in an afterlife where a person lives on in some way, perhaps as a spirit or a resurrected body, perhaps in heaven or hell or on a restored Earth. The variety of these views suggests that the question of what happens after our death is indeed compelling.

Although most people may have a personal sense of what they think will happen when they die, there is simply no way of knowing. It is a mystery. Gordon B. McKeeman, former UU minister, asks, “How does one address a mystery? Cautiously – let us go cautiously, then, to the end of our certainty, to the boundary of all we know.” This mystery invites us to consider its possibilities, and also invites us to allow the mystery to illuminate our lives now. Sogyal Rinpoche suggests, “In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.”

Although we can’t know for sure what happens after death, we do have control over how we live. We know that we are mortal; however, we often live as though there would never be an end. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says, “It’s only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth – that we have no way of knowing when our time is up – that we will begin to love each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had.”

The most beautiful Americans I’ve been around are people who are almost dead. They’re not busy being lost in their identities, rich, poor, fat, smart, needy, Buddhist, the adult child of an alcoholic. Those things aren’t too important when you’re dying and you’re whittled down to an essential level of being. If we carry our identities a little more lightly before death, so much the better. That’s what the dying teach the living. *Dale Borghum, director of the Living/Dying Project*

I would like to believe when I die that I have given myself away like a tree that sows seeds every spring and never counts the loss, because it is not loss, it is adding to future life. It is the tree’s way of being. Strongly rooted perhaps, but spilling out its treasure on the wind. *May Sarton*

Death is not life’s goal, only life’s terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go. *Forrest Church*

We want to live like trees, sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air, dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding. *Adrienne Rich*

Your life feels different on you, once you greet death and understand your heart's position. You wear your life like a garment from the mission bundle sale ever after – lightly because you realize you never paid nothing for it, cherishing because you know you won't ever come by such a bargain again. *Louise Erdrich, a quote from a character in her novel Love Medicine*

A spiritual approach to death, whatever one's particular orientation – religious or not – has incalculable value, making the transition smoother, easier, even blissful ... death and dying can be filled with dignity, grace, and a sense of happiness. *David Carter, hospice chaplain*

To live in this world
you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.
Mary Oliver

Questions to Ponder

1. What is your view of what happens when you die?
2. Think about a time in your childhood when you experienced the death of someone. What memories do you have from that time?
3. As an adult, what experiences have you had with death and dying?
4. What does it mean to be dying and have our identities “whittled down to an essential level of being,” as Dale Borglum says above? What might that look like for you?
5. If you had 2 months left to live, what would you do tomorrow?
6. Watch one of these videos. The *Search* info below will help you find them on the internet. The children's book *Cry, Heart, but Never Break* by Glenn Ringtved. There are several videos on YouTube, but the reading by Rachel Tilda Wolf shows the pictures well. (3 minutes).
Search: YouTube “Cry Heart But Never Break” Ringtved Wolf

A Ted talk by Stephen Cave, “The Four Stories We Tell Ourselves about Death.” (15 minutes)
Search: Ted Talks Stephen Cave Four Stories Death

Words of the Day

Think of a phrase that describes how you view your own death. This is difficult. You might see death as an end or a beginning, as a natural process or a bitter departure from loved ones, as a step toward meeting those who have passed away or a joining with cosmic consciousness. There are many possibilities. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: “I view my death as”