

Words to Enrich the Spirit:

You can think of death bitterly or with resignation, as a tragic interruption of your life, and take every possible measure to postpone it. Or, more realistically, you can think of life as an interruption of an eternity of personal nonexistence, and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the living, ever-surprising world around us (Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness*).

Today's Parable:

It has been said that when the wife of the great Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu passed away, Chuang Tzu was found that evening sitting outside his home drumming on a pot and singing. A Confucian friend stopped by to console him and was taken aback at his somewhat celebratory disposition. His Confucian friend thought such behavior utterly improper and disrespectful.

“When she first died, do you suppose that I was not able to feel the loss? I peered back into her beginnings. There was a time before there was a life, not only was there no life, there was a time when there was no shape....now once more altered, she has gone over into death. This is to be companion to spring and autumn, summer and winter in the procession of the four seasons...I with my sobbing knew no better than to bewail her. The thought came to me that I was being uncomprehending toward destiny...so I stopped (Chuang Tzu, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*).”

Lau Tzu said, '...death and birth are one thing, and right and wrong are one thing. Free [yourself] from the chains and irons [of duality] (Chuang Tzu, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, p41)'

“If I think my life good, then I must think my death good....Peacefully we die, calmly we awake (The Book of Chuang Tzu, p54).”

Sermon:

“There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw

[Death] standing in the crowd and he came to her and said, "Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?" That was not a threatening gesture, she said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra (John O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra)."

The inevitability of our own death. We all must die. There's something now called the death-positive movement – a movement that encourages people to embrace the thought of death, to speak openly about it. There are death cafes where people meet to discuss death. A group meets irregularly here in Roswell at Amy's Place on Sloan Street. (Go to deathcafe.com to find out about upcoming meetings.) Death positives also host "FUN-erals – celebratory events, a funeral that is held prior to one's own death where your friends gather and celebrate. A FUN-eral often comes complete with a casket, usually a cardboard, green burial casket upon which people can draw or write lovely notes, etc. Many death positives use the WeCroak app which sends five daily reminders that we are all slated to die.

The inevitability of our own death. We all must die...or must we? People have been cryogenically frozen with the hope that they might be revived in the future when currently undeveloped technology is discovered.

Writer Allison Arieff, writes that "There are now people who refer to themselves as "longevity entrepreneurs," who see death not as a problem but rather as something to be eliminated. Instead of pursuing a good death, why die at all? Beneath the surface of this quest for eternal life seems to be an unwillingness on the part of its proponents to imagine the world without themselves in it (Allison Arieff, NY Times, 08/18/2018)." It reminds me of the song by blues great Albert King: "Everybody Wants To Go To Heaven, But Nobody Wants To Die."

From the *Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu Song of the Lord*, we find Arjuna, a warrior, a member of the Kshatriya caste hesitant as he stares across a battlefield. He is hesitant because on the other side, he sees some of his very own family members, cousins and friends. Unbeknownst to him, his charioteer is none other than Lord Krishna, avatar of the great Hindu god Vishnu. Lord Krishna consults with the hesitant Arjuna and shows him the bigger picture of life and death.

For that which is born, death is certain and for that which is dead, birth is certain. You should not grieve over the unavoidable...The Supreme Self which dwells in all bodies, can never be slain....Weapons cut it not; fire burns it not; water wets it not; the wind does not wither it. Eternal, universal, unchanging, immovable, the Self is the same

forever...Dwelling in all bodies, the Self can never be slain. Therefore you should not grieve for any creature. (Bhagavad Gita 2.27, 30, 23)

Still, reading this can be troubling and perplexing for us westerners.

Joseph Campbell, in his book *Myths to Live By*, attempts to put this in context for us. He says that for many in the east, this existence, this life, this death; can, at times, be likened to a game, or play of sorts. The point being that there is the play itself, yet there is a time before the play begins and after the play ends...and there are both future and past plays...and they inform each other. Joseph Campbell writes:

Since you came to birth in this world at this time, in this place, and with this particular destiny, it was this indeed that you wanted and required for your own ultimate illumination. That was a great big wonderful thing that you thereupon brought to pass: not the "you," of course, that you now suppose yourself to be, but the "you" that was already there before you were born and which even now is keeping your heart beating and your lungs breathing and doing for you all those complicated things that are your life. You are not now to lose your nerve! Go on through with it and play your own game all the way (Joseph Campbell, *Myths To Live By*, p125)!"

Maybe Shakespeare studied eastern philosophy. Maybe he was on to something when he wrote:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts
(William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VII)

I love this morning's "Words to Enrich the Spirit" by Barbara Ehrenreich:

You can think of death bitterly or with resignation, as a tragic interruption of your life, and take every possible measure to postpone it. Or, more realistically, you can think of life as an interruption of an eternity of personal nonexistence, and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the living, ever-surprising world around us (Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness*).

Wow! May that should re-orient us all! We UUs reject the Calvinist doctrine of predestination – the idea that you've been pre-selected either for eternal life or eternal damnation and

everlasting hellfire. We reject that, yet looking at this from another angle Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us that, in a way, we've been pre-selected to life, that we've been saved!....saved from an eternity of nonexistence and been given an opportunity to live this thing called a life. Life as a blessing. Life as a Gift.

Two years ago, Chris Algren gave me a book of this name: *Life as a Gift – Inspiration of the Soon Departed*. This book was written by the president of Belmont University and his wife after losing their daughter's fiancé at the World Trade Center on September 11. Chris was the Dean of Nursing at Belmont.

The authors visited patients in hospice - the soon departed - who shared their deepest longings, deepest joys, deepest sorrows of their final days. The authors concluded their book with a test, what they called "The Ultimate Living and Dying Test"our final final exam.

What's on the test? Everything is on the test.

How long do you have to complete the test? All the time you have; but time will expire, you just won't know when. What resources can you use to complete the test? Anything that's at your disposal. It's an open book, open notes, open neighbor test. In fact, those who seem to perform the best share and compare notes with their neighbors.

But when you get right down to it, there are only two questions on the test "1) How should we live? 2) How can we be prepared for the absolute certainty of our death? (Bob and Judy Fisher, *Life As A Gift*, p207)."

I believe these can even be further distilled into one question: How should we live knowing the absolute certainty of our death? If we remind ourselves of this question daily; actually multiple times per day, how might we live our lives differently?

When I pray, and I do have a prayerful life, sometimes my prayer life causes me to think I'm the worst kind of horse (if you can remember the parable from a few weeks ago), because my prayer life has fits and starts, we have a love/hate relationship; but anyway, sometimes in my prayer life I slip in "may today be a good day to die" as a reminder that my existence in this realm, in this form, although always changing, may end at any time. With this understanding, how will I choose to live my life differently today? How will I choose to live this moment?

Have we thought deeply enough about the Buddhist idea of impermanence? Just what are the implications of impermanence – at least the impermanence in this realm of conceptual existence in which we live – with and I and a me and a you and a them...and so on and so forth.

The idea of impermanence of all things – that eventually we will be separated from everything and everyone we know and love; to be held by our parents, to be loved by our partners, to hug and kiss our children, to share ourselves with our congregations and our friends; “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under the sun (Ecclesiastes 3:1);” Yet seasons come and go like the wind – the impermanence of all this, the realization that the seasons of all these will end is absolutely shocking and terrifying.

What are you to do with your life and the impermanence of all things?

Well....Dive in! Eat it up! All of it! “Eat the Music (Kate Bush).” “Drink all your passion and be a disgrace (Rumi, *Community of the Spirit*).” “Don’t leave leftovers. *Seize the Day* (Saul Bellow). *Say It Loud* (James Brown).

Whitman writes in the *Song of Myself*:

You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout,
and laughingly dash with your hair (Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, Part 46)

Now, let us sing our song...together. “This is our song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace, with hopes and dreams for your land and for mine (John Andrew Story, *Singing in the Living Tradition*, 159).”

If we want somebody to live (and love), then we must also want them to die. It goes with the territory. It’s a package deal. Whitman again says, “Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it (Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*)!” As Chuang Tzu says, “If I think my life good, then I must think my death good....Peacefully we die, calmly we awake (The Book of Chuang Tzu, p54).”