

THE GOOD DEATH

July 10, 2011

In February of 1994 I was scheduled to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association. This is our credentialing body, and anyone who wishes to be accredited as a likely candidate for serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation must pass their scrutiny. Like all the other seminarians I knew I read intensively in the reading list, considered all my faults and shortcomings and despaired, and looked toward the event with anticipation and terror.

And then I received a telephone call telling me that the cancer with which my father was living had accelerated its damage. I, along with my four siblings, was advised that his days were few. I called UUA headquarters and told the student adviser of the situation, and that I doubted that I could make the appointment with that august body. She reassured me that I could meet with them at their next gathering in August. I packed my bags, including my black clergy garb, for my father had asked me to preside at his memorial service. I drove the 100 miles south to Pontiac, Illinois, and checked into a motel. My siblings arrived, my daughters arrived, and we all gathered at the hospice to which he had been moved.

The summer before I had helped him hoe his garden, pick green beans, and gather some bright flowers with which he bordered his garden. The stomach cancer was affecting what he could eat, but he delighted in giving his beautiful vegetables to his neighbors and friends.

In November, my daughter Tina and I joined him for Thanksgiving dinner. Although he did not eat much, he invited us to accompany him as he played 3 holes of golf on the course across the creek from his home. He smiled with pleasure when a passing golfer complimented him on his hole in one in the senior tournament last August.

In January he moved to an assisted living apartment; two weeks later the hospital, a few days later, hospice. When my brothers arrived they hatched a plan—one last supper together. They asked the staff if they could take him out for, a few hours, and they agreed. My sister and I cooked dinner at his home, my brothers half-carried him to the car, and we shared a wonderful evening together. He could no longer eat, but sat at the head of the table as we ate, bantered, and enjoyed this last evening as a family. He lived another week.

A cousin drove his favorite brother from Missouri to say good-bye. His friends from Rotary dropped by to visit, and told me that he had published their monthly newsletter just two weeks earlier. Members of the church that he served as trustee for many years came to visit, as did the minister. Neighbors, friends, more relatives came to visit.

The nurses told me that, although he was not eating, he was receiving water, but refusing pain medication. I was distressed, for I feared he was trying to tough it out. I told him, in my best ministerial persona, that it was really all right to take pain medication. In a mildly exasperated tone, he told me, “Well, if it hurt, Nan, I would take it!”

He continued to fade slowly as the disease took its toll. One morning, as it became clear that time was short, I told him that his brother was going to have to leave the next day. He replied, “Well, that's okay. I'm tired of listening to his same old stories over and over again.”

This was so completely out of character that my sister and I barely made it out of the room before bursting into laughter. He died later that day, with four of his five children by his bedside, the other having gone out to bring back coffee. He was 84. He had loved one woman intensely, married her and helped rear five children. He served his church and community, and was greatly respected there. It was a good death—a very good death.

It came at the end of a good life—not without challenges, but a good life. It gave opportunity for loving leave-taking, for him to be affirmed by his friends and family that he was valued and loved, and that he would be missed. He was ready to go. His beloved companion, my mother, died five years earlier, his work was done, his children were functioning adults, mostly happy and reasonably successful. He was a careful man, and had set up a trust for us, along with a list of just where each piece of the antique furniture he had repaired and refinished would go. It was time to say good-bye.

This then, is The Good Death; the one that, once we acknowledge that we are inescapably mortal, wish for. Once we accept that we, like all other beings, will come to an end, we must face our own death. Many of us, as we reach maturity, no longer fear death; however, many of us confess that we do fear dying. Some of us have seen loved ones suffer Traumatic or Not-Good deaths, and we shudder to think that such a fate lies in store. Unfortunately, we cannot just *order up* the death we want. We, most of us, must accept the death we get. However, we can hope for a Good Death.

The death of Freddie the Leaf also illustrates a Good Death, and makes explicit a feature I'd like to emphasize. Daniel, the wise leaf, explains to Freddie that giving shade was “part of his purpose.” And when Freddie asks, “What's a purpose?”, Daniel answered,

“A reason for being....To make things more pleasant for others is a reason for being. To make shade for old people who come to escape the heat of their homes is a reason for being. To provide a cool place for children to come and play. To fan with our leaves the picnickers who come to eat on checkered tablecloths. These are all reasons for being.”

We, who are human, also need a reason for being—ininitely more complex than Freddie's, for we are much more complex creatures. And it is easier for us to leave this world if we think and feel that we have fulfilled our reason for being. Biology tells us that one reason for being is to reproduce, to pass on our genes. Psychology, tells us one reason for being is to become the best person we can be. Religion tells us that this is all well and good, but part of our reason for being is to help others. Because humans are extremely complex creatures each one of us will find a different combination of reasons that gives our life meaning. If we near the end of our life, and feel we have not had fulfilled our purpose, it will be very difficult to let go and experience a good death.

Freddie also teaches us about the cycle of life. In the bright sun of summer, he gives shade. As cold winds begin to blow, he and his friends turn different colors, and wise Daniel explains that it is because they are each different. Then as winter winds begin to “push and pull at their stems”, the leaves begin to worry, for some of them had fallen to the ground.

Daniel explains that all of them would “change their home” or “die.”

He tells them, "Everything dies. No matter how big or small, how weak or strong. We first do our job. We experience the sun and the moon, the wind and the rain. We learn to dance and to laugh. Then we die."

Freddie does not like this idea, and thinks perhaps HE won't die. He is afraid, for he does not know what is down there. Daniel reassures him that these are natural changes, that the tree will not die, for Life continues. And when he was all alone and the wind came for him he floated gently down into the snow that cushioned the ground. He did not know that his future was to help make the soil richer and the tree stronger. "Most of all, he did not know that there, asleep in the tree and the ground, were already plans for new leaves in the Spring."

The cycle of life claims humans as well as leaves, the people we love as well as the birds and beasts of the field, and, yes, the body we inhabit as well as that of other people. But if we can embrace the idea that we are a part of the ultimate recycling plan, we may be able to move toward a Good Death.

W.S. Merwin, author of *For the Anniversary of My Death*, reminds us that every year we pass the date that we will die. What a strange idea! One of those days, in the hopefully distant future, one of those common, ordinary days that we live through without marking its presence, one of those days we will die. We will cease to hear the wren and the falling rain.

Merwin reminds us that death is a part of life, that we need not fear it. His closing line is "And bowing not knowing to what." I take this to mean that Merwin thinks that there is something worth bowing to, although he cannot name it. He senses that there is something transcendent, that is, larger than him, that is worth reverence. He discovered and embraced Buddhism as a mature writer, and devoted himself to environmentalism for many years. He does not name the "what" as "God"; rather it remains a mystery.

When we are able to envision ourselves as a part of a larger whole, whether that whole is a tree or the earth or the cosmos, we know that the death of our body is not the end of life, of meaning, of the larger whole. A part of us continues, in the larger fabric of Life with a capital L.

Dick Gilbert reminds us that Life has limits, and that we will be more content if we embrace them. "There are," he says, "times when life seems without limits--

Boundless, an ever ascending journey, a rising chorus,
A giant crescendo.
We know these are the interim times,
For life's inevitabilities crowd upon us.
There is suffering—spiritual and physical--

And there is death—life's great reminder that we are finite.
We are creatures who live within limits."

Gilbert suggests that it is within a community of faith that one can learn to embrace the limits of life. He recommends that "we press against those limits/By living and loving to the full." However, learning to embrace them is part of what it is to live.

We want always to live life to the fullest; knowing that it is finite, know that there are limits. We want to live a life of meaning, to fulfill our purpose in life. We want to recognize that there is a master cycle of life, and that we are a part of it. We want to bow to the great mystery of Life, to celebrate that we are a part of a larger whole. And we need our community of faith to hold us as we both push against and embrace the limits of life.

If we can do this, we have the possibility of experiencing the Good Death; for we will not fight against its inevitability, nor feel cheated, nor curse God. We will live life fully, completely, until we cease to be.

Let us now take time to remember those we love who died a Good Death. As Beth plays soft music, let us speak their names.

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My friend Margaret died a Good Death also.

She was a member of our church in Muskegon, a poet, a singer, and a self proclaimed dyke. She grew up in a Catholic household, and never fit in that culture. She told the story of being forced to wear a dress, (she who always wore pants) to her first communion. She comforted herself by wearing her favorite, old, holy underwear under the fluffy white in which she was encased—which then slid slowly down as she stood with hands folded during the ceremony. She did not think religion was for her. Until she found us.

She sang in the choir, her baritone voice enriching the mix. She wrote poetry constantly, and brought me a new poem every Sunday. We stood by Margaret when she had a stroke that forced her to stop driving. We helped her to her appointments when she was diagnosed with cancer. Margaret, who was of Irish background, decided she wanted a wake before she died. The assisted living facility in which she was then living allowed us to use their largest room, and her many friends brought goodies to share, consisting of food and poetry and music. And somebody supplied her with a special Irish liquid to drink. It was a glorious night.

Margaret continued writing poetry up to the time she died. When she could no longer hold a pen, I took dictation from her. She grew and deepened, finding new ways to express herself. Margaret did have pain; however the hospice controlled it well. She died a Good Death.

We cannot just decide that we will have a Good Death, for we are not able to program Life as we do computers. However, we can live in ways that make it more likely.

May we, and all we love, be blessed with a Good Death, at a great old age.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.