

  
**First Unitarian Church of San José**  
 Sunday, October 2, 2011, 11:00 a.m.

**October Theme:**  
**DEATH**  
**“No Yearning for an Afterlife”:**  
**Unitarian Universalism**  
**and the Big Question of Death**

**An Introduction**

*Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

Friend-of-the-church Ernesto likes to hang out on the steps to the sanctuary or the steps of the office building next door, sometimes with friends; sometimes his overstuffed shopping cart is nearby. He has given me permission to share this story with you:

A few nights ago, as I drive up for a meeting, I find Ernesto on the office steps. It was really hot that day; now his shirt falls open to catch the evening breeze. We call out our usual greetings: “Hola, Ernesto!” “Hi! How you doin’?”

Beside him, I notice a small sunflower from the planter between the two buildings, standing perky, almost defiant, in a half-filled plastic water bottle, its bright yellow face like a spark against the well-worn steps. He tells me it was a gift; I remark on its beauty.

“Yeah, but I have an *orange* flower,” Ernesto says, “*this big*”—he makes a circle with his hands—“that’s *so* beautiful! I talk to it, sing to it, kiss it.” He half-laughs at himself. I imagine Ernesto and the flower conversing through the night in the park across the street. How long can a cut flower thrive in this heat? “I took it to a friend’s house; he put it in water; it came right back to life,” Ernesto marvels. But left in the sun, it wilts again; moved to the shade, he wonders: will it come back once more? I can feel how much he hopes for it.

How we long for the beautiful and joyful and good to last, even though we know that everything must change and that death comes to all the people and creatures and things that we love. This great fact of mortality, writes Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch, is “the horizon, the shape, the shading of our love.” In many ways, we can’t know how to love, or how to live, unless we *incorporate* this fact of death into our minds and hearts.

Yet we live in a culture that urges us to deny death—to keep ourselves busy working, scurrying, shopping, distracting ourselves so that we forget for a while

the limits of life. When a loss comes crashing in—even when the thousand “little deaths” of everyday loss and change wash over us—we can find ourselves at sea.

Our faith asks us to pause and face death squarely. “Religion,” as Forrest Church famously says, “is our human response to being born and having to die.” This month we look at the great fact of death—at its many faces, from our own death to the death of a loved one, from the ominous killing of our planet to the soul-death that is depression—so that we may know how we want to live.

Like the children in our Story for All Ages [*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*], who argue over whether Barney the cat is now in heaven or in the earth, we Unitarian Universalists don’t agree about what happens when we die or about death’s overarching meaning. We get to choose which stories and guides speak to us. Yet when we really listen to each other’s experiences and beliefs, our own become richer, more nuanced, easier to name. So today we hear three different perspectives on death, from members who draw on three different streams of wisdom. Let us open our hearts and minds to them.

We begin with Patrick Smiley, who leads our Dances of Universal Peace and, as a Sufi, draws on the traditions of the mystics.

**Reflection** Between Belief and Experience                      *Patrick Smiley*

Between belief and experience, there is a universe of difference. I have always believed that death is not an end, but just the next step in that great journey that we are all on. But now I know the difference between belief and experience.

Not long after the memorial service for my spouse, Marilynn Carstens, some of my former coworkers from my many years in the space program started inviting me out to lunch. I didn’t feel up to it, but they were persistent, and finally I agreed to a date. When the day arrived, I really didn’t feel like going. But a voice inside me said, “Come on. These guys are your friends. They’re worried about you. Go have lunch with them!”

We met at a cafeteria across the street from our old building. I was surprised to find about twenty of my coworkers waiting for me. I hadn’t seen some of them for five or six years. It felt good to sit with them and eat bad cafeteria food (just like the old days) and talk about old times. I felt as though I had regained a lost part of myself.

I was sitting across from a man named Doug with whom I had worked for about twenty years. We were not close friends. He had worked in another section, and we collaborated only occasionally. Still, we had worked on many of the same shuttle payload missions. Suddenly his cell phone rang. It was my flight director from the days of the interplanetary missions, Jeff. Doug answered, got about as far as “Hi, Jeff, how’re you doing?” when his expression changed to one of surprise.

“Yeah,” Doug said, “he’s right here.” Handing me the phone, he said, “It’s for you!”

Surprise wasn’t quite the word for it. I hadn’t spoken to Jeff since he went to work at Cape Canaveral a few years earlier.

“How are you doing?” Jeff asked. I assumed he had heard about Marilyn’s death.

“OK, I guess, under the circumstances.”

“WHAT circumstances?” he asked.

“I thought you’d heard,” I replied. “I lost Marilyn a few months back. It was pretty sudden and unexpected.”

After a long pause he said, “I knew it was something like that. I had a dream last night that I just couldn’t shake off. I dreamed Marilyn was telling me to call you and tell you everything is going to be all right.”

“OK, but WHY,” I asked, “did you call Doug’s cell phone to get me?” He knew that Doug wasn’t one of my close friends.

“I just had a feeling he’d know how to get in touch with you.”

In the weeks after Marilyn passed away, a number of friends had called or come by to report similar dreams. Dreams in which Marilyn seemed to come to them and tell them to tell me that “everything would be all right.” I had already accepted the essential truth of these messages. But this was Jeff, an Air Force Major who had come to us out of Missile Command. A no-nonsense guy from the intercontinental ballistic missile silos. A guy who, as he had often told me, had been ready to “turn the key” and launch nuclear armed missiles. He was the last person on earth from whom I would have expected to hear this message. It was as though life were saying to me, “In case you still have any doubts ...”

Between belief and experience, there is a universe of difference.

### **Rev. Nancy:**

Many of us who come to Unitarian Universalism have had to wrestle with and sometimes reject the Christianity of our background—and many of us, whether we grew up in a church or not, still wrestle with the conservative, exclusive Christianity that gets the most press in our culture. But those of us who get to go to seminary have the chance to study the Christian tradition in new ways. In fact, we have our own classes here at First Unitarian that open us to new liberal understandings of what was originally called the Way of Jesus. Today minister-in-training Kathleen Bardin brings that fresh experience of UU Christianity to us with her reflection.

**Reflection** Living Legacy

Kathleen Bardin

About a month ago, I had a seizure while sitting on my boyfriend's couch. While I am fine now, the experience reminded me that death is a part of life, crucial to our decisions about how to live. As a Unitarian Universalist Christian, I draw on the living legacy of Jesus when I look at death.

I think we Christians still tell the story of Jesus' death because Jesus made his death itself a part of his ministry. Words from the gospel of Luke spring to my mind: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NRSV). Jesus loved people, friend or foe, and strove for right relationship with his last breath. Whether or not Jesus' death atoned for our sins—a theology that is problematic for many Christians—Jesus made his dying into an act of love for humankind. So one part of Jesus' legacy is this teaching that *how we die is important*. As someone who has witnessed the deaths of family members and who might have died a month ago, I know this to be true from my own experience.

I can't think of Jesus' death without also thinking of the story of his resurrection. In the gospels, Jesus' followers refuse to let him go after his death, deciding to remember and honor him in the ways they live their lives. That is my understanding of what *resurrection* means. Today, Jesus lives in each person who chooses to follow his way of living. So another part of Jesus' legacy is the teaching that *whom we choose to honor in our lives matters*.

Finally, Jesus leaves behind a very human legacy of love that lives on to this day. I believe that's what "eternal life" is. Jesus' death demonstrates that *what we leave behind when we die matters*. I don't know for sure what happens after I die, but I do know that what I do now matters and that the love I leave behind matters most of all.

So, how will you and I prepare ourselves to die in ways that matter? Whom will you and I choose to honor in our own lives? And what legacies will you and I leave behind?

**Rev. Nancy:**

I asked our HUUmanist Group (that's humanist with two U's) to reflect on this question of death, and we got the most wonderful responses. Here's one of them, from former Senior Youth Adviser and active paramedic, Greg Muller.

**Reflection** In the Beginning*Greg Muller*

In the beginning, there was the rule: matter and energy are never created nor destroyed.

Some small eternity later, there were the stars. The lights that shine in our skies are the great smiths of life. These interstellar forges, over eons upon eons fused hydrogen into helium and, as they grew and died, fused helium into carbon and iron, their dying breath flinging matter and energy across their own tiny corners of the universe. “We are star-stuff,” it is said, and in a very real way, over billions of years, the stars died so that we could be here today. Humankind would not be here if not for the traces of carbon and iron in our bodies—the contributions of the stars.

As beautiful and poetic as that may sound, death has a way of making a cruel mockery of it. It doesn’t matter if I believe that the stars gave their lives for the person I did CPR on last month. Or that the carbon and iron in the human body are old beyond counting when it’s contained in the shell of a complete stranger’s miscarriage. All of that cosmic beauty disappears when you watch over the dead and the dying and are unable to do anything for them beyond saying, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

These are times when all the beautiful prose that I can think of doesn’t serve in trying to connect with another human being on the worst day of their life. In dealing with the loss of other people’s loved ones—and my own—I have yet to find any common thread among all of them, save that life is too short, too bittersweet, and often, over too quickly.

And yet, I know that when we die, our star-stuff will live on forever. It will go on to create other people, other life, and someday, other stars—more light in this little corner of a vast universe. Finally, at the end of time, the star-stuff that has made up you, me, and all the countless billions of worlds across our universe will fade away, like all matter and all energy, into nothingness. But until then, we will all share a world with each other—and with all our descendants—in ways we cannot know.

## An Invitation

*Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

“We cannot know ...” These are the words that echo in my mind, especially when I ponder what happens after death. A dispersal of atoms through the universe? A union with the Divine? I allow for both science and Mystery, but I choose to focus on not on the Unknown of the afterlife but on what it means to live knowing that all life is limited. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says, “I don’t care at all what happens to me when I die. That’s why I have a lot of time to care about what is happening to me in the here and now.”

Like Buddhists, we Unitarian Universalists focus our faith not on some promise of reward after we die, but on how we are to live right here and now. What love can we offer—which is also to say, what justice can we make—right here on this earth?

But this here-and-now focus must be grounded in a recognition of life’s limits—of death and loss and change. That’s why I love the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s summary: “No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond, / no belittling of death, / but only longing for what belongs to us / and serving earth, lest we remain unused.”

“No belittling of death”—no shying away from its presence—rather, understanding that it can help teach us how we want to live. This month, we look at the great fact of death—at its many faces, from our own death to the death of a loved one, from the ominous killing of our planet to the soul-death that is depression—so that we may know how we want to live.

And to help us in our explorations, the second of our new monthly journals comes out this Wednesday, focused on this theme. Some of you will see the journal pop up in your in-box; others will get it in the mail; *all* can visit the homepage of our website and with one click open it right up. Print it out if you don’t like to read on the screen; put it somewhere where you can savor it bit by bit. It offers some of the reflections you’ve heard today, and many more. We invite you to read these stories and reflections with compassion and curiosity, asking yourself:

- What are your thoughts on death?
- What has life taught you so far about loss, grief, celebration, and remembrance?
- How does your faith influence how you look at our common fate of “being born and having to die”?
- Where do others’ reflections challenge you to explore and learn?
- What happens to our sense of community when we listen deeply to each other’s thoughts and feelings on the Big Questions of life and death?

Come, let us deepen our living, and live so that our dying matters!