Death Be Not Proud, Part 1
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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Last June, on the Sunday before I took leave for vacation, I distributed a small insert in the order of service with the title: “Burning Questions/Burning Issues”—asking you to share with me what you’d like addressed in up-coming services. We’re a diverse bunch of people, and the responses, unsurprisingly, ran the gamut: from prayer to human rights, to qualities a person needs to possess in order to be good. One person, while praising my beautifully drafted/scripted sermons, wished I’d speak spontaneously more often. I even had one person ask: “should I wear brown shoes with a blue suit?” Well, not exactly being Beau Brummel myself, *How should I know?* But I appreciate the question, but have to tell you: there’s just some things I don’t know the answer to.

Now I shouldn’t have been surprised, but then again I was, that quite a number of you wrote the word DEATH. You wanted me to speak about death and dying, its psychological and spiritual aspects, and about whether there may be a Unitarian approach to this final chapter, to the last words in the story which is our life among family, friends, and with this one mortal frame, this body of ours. One person wrote down, if I interpreted your handwriting correctly, that this is something we rarely talk about.

For some time, I’ve thought about this question, this request, and the reality which looms behind it. As well, it’s a question, a reality that often gnaws away at me, that troubles my mind and burdens my heart. For once a upon a time, I possessed a kind of faithful certainty, a deeply-grounded belief in eternal life; that is, a non-metaphorical understanding that upon my death a new life without end would begin; and that my SELF, my consciousness, memories, knowledge, emotions would be carried over across the threshold of death to be continued eternally in an embodied ME. Like leaving one room behind and simply walking into another. And more than that, not only would I exist in some way as an embodied person, but I would be greeted by family members and friends who had died before me, in a kind of glorious unending reunion. *There* I would continue to live and learn with all the departed dead, especially those great and fascinating people from history who I had always wanted to meet—can you imagine? (A kind of heavenly school in session forever!)

It was a powerful story, a belief that took away a mountain of fear about death for those like me who believed it—not all the fear and dread to be sure—but a lot of it. And the deeply held certainty of it was attested to by those in whose loving care I grew to manhood—both my family and community. A cloud of witnesses—that's what I grew up in—it seemed totally natural to me like the air I breathed and the water I drank; and there was something about the non-metaphorical materiality of it that I savoured. No longer believing that, on the one hand has left a ragged, gaping hole in me….and on the other? Well here we are…

Now I've shared this with you not to be confessional, but to make a point—that religions and religious beliefs, and at times, philosophy and arts as well, are tasked with a job to do, with some very heavy lifting—and that is to help us make some sense of that ultimate limit, that boundary experience all of us have and will confront—and it is ***death***: our own and the death of those we know and love—to help us face the inevitability of death, to enable us to mourn the death of others, and to provide some measure of consolation and hope in the face of the inexorable approach of death and in the aftermath of its devastating work upon us.

What we fear the most is the unknown; and since we don't know what happens once we're dead—that unknown, the terror of it, has just been unacceptable to us throughout history—and so we have created religions, philosophies and arts to blunt or overcome the sting of death.

So what we've embarked upon is a sermon in two parts: in this, the first, we explore diverse religious and philosophical understandings about death. Next week, we continue our journey—the challenge of life's end, by looking at other approaches and resources, including those from our own Unitarian tradition; resources we can draw from to better appreciate, prepare for and make some peace with death—our own, and the death of those we know and love.

One more thing—I hope you don't feel that all this is too morbid a topic for the approaching holiday season. Truth is, behind the glitter and festivities, the buying and giving of gifts, we are deep in autumn; days are short, vast is the darkness of night, and winter draws nigh. Since autumn is frequently used as a symbol in literature for old age, the time before death—it seems a fitting time, if ever there is one, for us to talk about it.

In your order of service, there are ten readings. They represent what I see as four basic and enduring ways humans wrestle and respond to death. (**I. Death as Implacable)** The first and last readings present death as relentless and inevitable; it cannot be appeased or entreated. Ultimately, it is unknowable; as such, it grips the human mind and heart with terror.

I: Alone of gods Death has no love of gifts,
Libation helps not, nor sacrifice
He has no altar, and hears no hymns;
From him alone Persuasion stands apart. (Aeschylus, 5th century BC)

And 2500 years later, consider the following lines:

IX: …Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.
The mind blanks at the glare…

…at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

"This is a special way of being afraid/No trick dispels," Larkin writes. From the ancient world to the present, who hasn't, at one time or another, been gripped by this special kind of horror? Or is it just Aeschylus, Larkin and me? I appreciate Larkin's honesty. Though grim the comfort, it helps for me to know that even here, in those predawn hours where I lay there and stare into the unknown, I am not alone with my fear and dread of death. Comfort too, to know that Larkin's is not the last word, by any means. In the following lines of the poem, Larkin refers dismissively to what he calls the "tricks" of religion and philosophy; what he sees as the let's-pretend-we-never-die fantasy of religion on the one hand, and on the other, the bluff, the dodge of philosophy that says that death is nothing to fear because once life is extinguished one can no longer suffer because the person no longer exists. Let's turn now to both: religion and philosophy.

(Philosophy and the good death)—Readings four and eight.

IV: Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is all privation of sense-experience. Hence a correct knowledge of the fact of death makes the mortality of life a matter of contentment, not by adding a limitless time to life but by removing the longing for immortality. (Epicurus 3rd century BC)

VIII: Boswell asked Hume whether the thought of annihilation terrified him, to which Hume replied, "Not in the least; no more than the thought that I had not been, as Lucretius observes." (David Hume, 18th century)

Once upon a time, one of philosophy's essential roles was to describe the "good life," and it was a commonplace that philosophy provided the wisdom necessary to confront death—to approach dying and death with tranquility of mind, not fear of annihilation. "Death is nothing to us," said Epicurus, because he believed, as did David Hume 2000 years later, that death is the end of all sense experience, thoughts, fears, etc. To put it succinctly, "When death is, I am not; when I am, death is not." Therefore, philosophers have urged us to see that it is useless to worry about death, and the only way to attain tranquility of soul is by removing the anxious fear of annihilation and the longing for an afterlife.

This clear eyed, steadfast attitude cultivated through a life of contemplating and overcoming our horror of death, stands in stark contrast to our present age: gripped with the fear of death, the prospect of pain and meaningless suffering. In the face of our desire for evasion and escape from this fear—expressed in consumption and magical forms of salvation and promises of immortality—the ideal of a philosophical death can have sobering power. According Montaigne, the great 16th century French essayist, "He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave."

If blank terror is one response to death, and philosophy encourages us to prepare for and not run away from death, religions and religious imagination provide two enduring, powerful alternatives: (**II. Religious naturalism—death as natural)** one sees death as a grievous, but acceptable moment in the Great Transcending Mystery of Nature. The other religious alternative **(III. Religious supernaturalism—death as unnatural and to be overcome)** sees death as a curse, an enemy that will be defeated by an even greater, supernatural power that grants eternal life.

(**II. Religious naturalism—death as natural)** Consider the second, third, fifth and ninth readings in the order of service—passages that sweep from China and the Middle East to North America, and that range, again, over 2500 years:

II: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life. (Deut. 30:19)

III: Tzu-Lu asked: 'What sort of thing is death?' This was the Master's reply: 'Death and life are the decree of Heaven…Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead? (Confucius, 5th century BC)

V: After Zhuangzi's wife died, Hui Tzu visited him to offer his condolences. He found him sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing, 'You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old.' When Hui Tzu suggested that this was perhaps a little disrespectful, Zhuangzi protested, saying,

"When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. Now she's lying peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped." (Zhuangzi, 3rd century BC)

IX: a young boy of the tribe died and his grieving father sought out the shaman for help. The shaman told the father, "This boy seems to be dead, yet he is not really, for we shall keep his soul among our people, and through this our children and the children of their children will become wakan [holy]." The shaman then addressed the soul of the child: "Behold O soul! Where you dwell upon this earth will be a sacred place; this center will cause the people to be as wakan as you are. Our grandchildren will now walk the path of life with pure hearts, and with firm step!" And to the parents: "We shall gain great knowledge from this soul which has here been purified. Be good to it and love it, for it is wakan." (as told by Black Elk, 20th century)

These passages are expressions of religious naturalism—an encounter with death that is striking in its realism—there is grief, mourning, the seeking out of consolation, a frank recognition that death marks a boundary past which ordinary human knowledge fails; these are the facts of mortality—death as part of a natural process marks the inevitable end to life in this world and is a fate common to all creatures: as we say "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Contrary to popular notions that religions came into being to offer 'pie-in-the-sky', in both East and West, almost universally the major religious traditions did not in their origins have a belief that there was an embodied, eternal self continuing after death in heaven or hell where compensation is made for the miseries and inequalities of life. Rather, the emphasis is on the positive worth of this life: choose life, know about the living, understand fate, we will now walk the path of life. This is the resounding message of religious naturalism. In the Hebrew Scriptures, belief in a life with God after death scarcely appears. In pre-Buddhist India, that is for over 1500 years, even the gods are not depicted as immortal but have to work hard to keep death at bay.

(In fact, is precisely the Buddhist affirmation of reincarnated states of existence after death that accounts for its success when it was introduced in Japan in the fifth century. Shinto, the native Japanese religious tradition, had no conception of a meaningful life after death. Buddhism arrives with elaborate post mortal beliefs and death rituals—and the deep seated human fear of death and the unknown is met with the assurance that life continues. To this day, it is said that Japanese are born Shinto and die Buddhist.)

Nevertheless, this realistic naturalism is also *religious*: it is “the decree of heaven” that sets the terms of our fate and calls us to an ethical life and the path of holiness; the process of existence, Zhuangzi tells us, takes place in a “jumble of wonder and mystery.” Black Elk relates how a shaman consoles grieving parents with the affirmation that their child who died has not disappeared entirely. Rather, he continues to appear, he will live on, in them, their descendents and the community, especially and if, the child is remembered in on-going ritual and ethical living.

These readings present us with a deeply religious view and way of life—one that was and is profoundly satisfying, bracing, consoling for many—but, obviously not for all. Which brings us to the second religious account of dying and death—one whose visionary imagination is *supernatural*, rather than the naturalistic encounter and understanding we have just been talking about.

(III. Religious supernaturalism—death as unnatural and to be overcome) Let's turn back now to the readings in the order of service: the sixth and seventh:

VI: "Principle XIII. The resurrection of the dead, and we have already explained it… [this is] one of the principles of Moses, our teacher, and there is no religion or attachment to the Jewish religion, for one who does not believe this." (Maimonides, 12th century)

VII: Death, be not proud, though some have callèd thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me….
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die. (John Donne)

Clearly, here we have entered into what for many of us may be familiar territory: conventional Judeo/Christian and Islamic understandings about human nature, the firm belief that death is something to be contested and overthrown by supernatural force, the resurrection of that which is immortal in us—call it embodied spirit or soul—and its ultimate destiny: an eternal life in a state of woe or blessing.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the belief in life beyond death achieved by divine intervention developed in the 2nd century BC and was taught by the Jewish sect we call the Pharisees. It's important, I think, to remember that Jesus and his teachings were actually very close to those of the Pharisees, and that Paul of the Bible was a Pharisee before he became Christianity's first great missionary and theologian. Now the Pharisees interpreted scripture to read that God would continue our lives and relationship with him in such a way that required a reconstitution of the body and breath of a person—that is, the resurrection of the dead. This interpretation was further developed by subsequent Jews and early Christians like Paul who were influenced by some classical Greek schools of thought that taught that our mortal bodies housed an immortal soul; and that death released that immortal part of us (which of course they believed was the really important and meaningful part of us) to be rejoined to the divine source from where we came.

Among early Christians the belief in life after death became a non-negotiable article of faith attested by scriptural accounts of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples in a recognizable form—a resurrected being, with a heavenly body they could see and with whom they could converse and share their thoughts, doubts and emotions. This is the enduring promise and manifest strength of orthodox Christianity—that as God resurrected Jesus, so too will the dead be resurrected. In the words of the 17th century Anglican priest and poet John Donne: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die." There's a 20th century version of this affirmation, written by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, that I want to share:

And death shall have no dominion…
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

While I can no longer affirm with the faith which once possessed me, that "One short sleep past, we wake eternally," and "they shall rise again," and though there are times, still (and there will be others I am sure), when I wake, with Phillip Larkin (reading X), in the predawn gloom in the grip of that uncanny terror of death: I want, in spite of everything, simply to affirm that "though they go mad, they shall be sane…though lovers be lost, love shall not"—that *here, if not elsewhere,* "death shall have no dominion." Do you know what I'm saying?

As well, because of what I lost and what I still want to simply to faithfully affirm—I cannot even begin to share Larkin's dismissive attitude toward religion, what he called: That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die. First of all we have seen that it isn’t true—religious naturalism affirms the fact of death; its imminence and inevitability is a call to life and to life’s deeply moral dimension. Nor can or will I disparage religion’s supernatural alternative. I may no longer believe it (though it pains me); and I abominate the way that threats of eternal punishment are used to terrorize and to coerce obedience and behavior; but here, we can and must assert our Universalist heritage—one that goes back to the origins of Christianity—and its belief that what is true ***all the way down***, what will have the last word, is ***love***.

Though lovers be lost love shall not/And death shall have no dominion.