

2009.02.22 Love and Death

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UCV

Some time last week I was walking across Oak Street when I looked up at that big sign of ours at the corner of Oak and 49th and at the title of today's service; there it was in white letters on a field of black: "Love and Death." I can't remember whether my heart sank or leapt up to my throat, but in either visceral case, in the middle of the road, I thought, "Steven, what have you got yourself into?" *Love and Death*: to talk about it presumes a lot, and yet, isn't it inevitable that from time to time we consider the reality within these two words; the very foundations of our life, and the abiding work of this congregation? Here I agree with Forrest Church, the Unitarian Universalist minister of All Souls in New York City. He said that "religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." Within this realm, of living and dying, what we love is what remains; the rest, the poet Ezra Pound said, is dross.

Now it is said that to be "philosophical" about something is to face what comes calmly, without irrational anxiety; and the paradigm of a thing to be "philosophical" about is death. In cultures both East and West, broadly speaking, philosophers have had three concerns: figuring out how the world hangs together, how our beliefs can be justified, and how to live. Indeed, many of them have asserted that by learning how to die we learn how to live. But it's really hard to find a consistent message here. Socrates calmly drank the cup of hemlock believing that whether it is dreamless slumber or migration of the soul, death was nothing to be feared. By contrast, the great 20th century Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said, that as a child he was unmoved when shown the most harrowing pictures of hell, for nothing appeared quite so horrible to him as nothingness itself.

Michel de Montaigne trained for the end by keeping death "continually present, not merely in my imagination, but in my mouth." Whereas, Spinoza went to the opposite extreme declaring that a "free man thinks least of all of death." Democritus sought to postpone his death by ordering piles of hot loaves of bread to be brought to his house and then inhaling their wonderful, redolent smells. For his part, Woody Allen said the "key thing is to not think of death as an end, but as a more effective way to cut down on your expenses." But then I'm not sure whether this mental exercise did him much good; because in another setting he said: "so I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Actually, make that I "run through the valley of the shadow of death"—in order to get OUT of the valley of the shadow of death more quickly"; which is probably more like it.

Terror, indifference, avoidance, stoicism, humour, freshly baked bread—myriad are the human paths we walk (or run), innumerable the emotions and thoughts we carry with us on our way through life towards our death.

The decision to share my thoughts with you today on love and death was not just some arbitrary whim. Recently, two Unitarians, both given untimely death sentences due to cancer, have shared their thoughts and feeling to an extraordinarily wide audience through media of lectures, interviews, sermons and books. Rev. Forrest Church has served the All Souls Unitarian for thirty years. He's been battling esophageal cancer for the past two years, and is now within months of his death. Professor Randy Pausch of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, died last summer, after several years of valiant struggle with pancreatic cancer. Pausch was invited to deliver his university's traditional "Last Lecture," an honour usually reserved for retiring senior faculty. The hypothetical situation is the lecturer knows she or he is going to die; that being the case, what would be the last lecture they would share with others. For Pausch, the situation was not hypothetical; it was real and imminent. Pausch's "Last Lecture," available on YouTube, has been seen

by over 10 million people. A subsequent book of the same title has been on the best seller's list for months. While Church has given sermons on the topic to numerous gatherings of UUs and been interviewed widely on American public radio and television.

Truth be told, I am not usually a consumer of guys' self-help, inspirational lit. I think about death, dying and the meaning of life enough as it is. But there was something different here for me this time. Perhaps, it's because I'm 54, which locates me right between the ages of Church (60) who's in his last months, and Pausch who died at the age of 47. Like Church, I grew up in the Rocky Mountain States. Pausch and I went to the same university and read the *World Book Encyclopedia* a lot when we were kids. Both were family men. And they were/are Unitarian Universalists with something to say on a subject that just isn't ordinary for middle-aged guys to be talking about and sharing with others. To be sure there were big differences between us, but the similarities and the subject they were wrestling with exercised an unusual pull on me.

There are several reasons both of these men were able to reach such wide audiences. Both are thoughtful, articulate men talking frankly about a near-taboo subject. Once they received their diagnoses, both fought fiercely to stay healthy, alive, and ever alert to breakthroughs, research, and treatments that may have helped them to beat the prognosis, and death itself, for as long as possible. In their very distinct ways, they both faced death with a determination to fight and with an amazing, inspiring absence of bitterness and remorse.

In the opening words of his lecture, Pausch tells his audience, "if I am not morose enough for you, I am sorry to disappoint. But I choose not to be an object of pity." (Pausch, "Last Lecture," YouTube) This lecture, he said, is not about death, it is about life. And then he proceeds to talk about how he has achieved many of his childhood dreams; he recognizes the many people in his life who helped him to realize those dreams; and throughout, by word and example, he exhorts the audience to cultivate a sense of wonder and gratitude, to tell the truth, to apologize sincerely when they mess up, to have fun, and to be practitioners of the art of the possible. His mantra, he tells us, is "brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something." (Pausch and Zaslow, *The Last Lecture*, 51-2)

It's not that he's just a simplistic happy warrior; he admits that he doesn't like what's happening, "this stinks" he says, and he admits to crying a lot in the shower and in his wife's arms. And though in the lecture, Pausch doesn't talk a lot explicitly about love; it's clear through his reminiscences that he loves and deeply appreciates the many people who played key roles in contributing to a life in which he was encouraged and given the skills to succeed in dreaming big and achieving many of his goals.

"All children," he writes, "need a fabric of people in their lives who love them." And for Pausch that meant not only parents, but an amazing and colourful cast of mentors who he cites by name and example. Finally, he tells his audience that the lecture was not really for them at all; it was for his children, a legacy he wanted to pass on to them so that they would "develop a joy for life and a great urge to follow their own dreams." My "dreams for my kids are very exact," he writes, "I want them to find their *own* path to fulfillment." (Pausch and Zaslow, 198) And here, I think, is another reason for the phenomenal numbers of people who have viewed this lecture and read his valedictory book. "The Last Lecture" is not laden with appeals to scripture, doctrine, sectarian paths or speculations about life after death, hell or heaven. In an interview with the *UU World*, Pausch said that he became a UU because it appeals to reason and thought more than dogma; and that his own congregation expressed their faith through the quality of support they extended to the Pausch family in their time of need. (*UU World*, 25 July, 2008)

Randy Pausch's "Last Lecture" is a testament to the power of human imagination and will, and the crucial role of adult mentors in the lives of young people. Mentors, from parents to teachers to Dutch uncles create

what Pausch calls that “fabric of people” who love. They are the ones who express that love in a living commitment—born of trust and affection—a commitment to encourage those we love and care for to dream and find a meaningful path through life.

Though his language is more explicitly religious, Rev. Forrest Church would understand and appreciate what Randy Pausch was trying to accomplish in his “Last Lecture.” Pausch was trying to tell his surviving, young children that the greatest of all truths is that love never dies; that every act of love that we perform in this life is carried on—through our immediate families, through friends and strangers—centuries from now in ways we cannot imagine, that love carries on. Church writes: “I know that love is immortal...and passed on into another life, not named with our name, not signed by our signature, but initiated by us and carried on through our heirs, [and through] the dependent web of being of which we’re a part; this network of neighbors and lovers and strangers, *the love carries*, and that’s the work of religion. The work of religion is to make sure the love carries more strongly and further” than the division, indifference and hate that separate us. (“love is immortal...,” see “Profile: Reverend Forrest Church,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, October 3, 2008: hereafter R&E)

Now Church is upfront about the fact that he has no idea about what happens after we die: resurrection, transmigration, reincarnation, the bare blessed return of our elements to the earth and air; he doesn’t know. And so, for this reason, he says, “I go with Henry David Thoreau who, when he was asked about the afterlife, said, “Madam, I prefer to take one life at a time.” (“Madam...” R&E). But what a lifetime it is! Church invites us to consider the one life we know:

“For us to be here in the first place, for us to earn the privilege of dying, more than a billion billion events took place,” he writes. “All our ancestors lived to puberty, coupled and gave birth....Take it all the way back to the beginning...[genetically, chemically]and what does it mean? Astoundingly, unbelievably, it means that...the universe was pregnant with us when it was born....Having spent billions of years in gestation, present in all that preceded us—fully admitting the pain and difficulty involved in actually being alive, able to feel and suffer, grieve and die—we can only respond with awe and gratitude”....“and to live in such a way that our lives will prove to be worth dying for.” (“for us to be here...” see Church, “Love and Death,” A sermon preached at All Souls Church on Feb. 3, 2008, hereafter LAD; “and to live...” R&E)

I think that a life worth dying for isn’t about some great string of worldly achievement or heroic deeds; I think it’s about knowing that since we must die, we try to take care of the unfinished business of life, do what good we can, and ask questions about what life means. We live the questions. “The universe pregnant with us when it was born...what’s that about, and how do I fit in?” Final answers may well escape or elude us—but by living the questions, and by acting on what we believe and feel may be the answers, we discover and create meaning where we can—a life worth living.

So think with me for a minute: if we were all in the womb of the universe when it gave birth; if we realized, truly realized that everyone else too has run a billion, billion obstacles and is the product of billions of events and accidents, how could/should that knowledge affect the way we treat others? “I hope it means,” Church writes, “that we will treat others as being as unpredictable, unexpectable, and amazing as we are.” (LAD) We emerged against almost impossible odds to walk here beside one another on this planet. We are more than neighbors. We are kin; family, thrown into the world, thrown together, struggling for meaning; all of us in the middle of stories, dealing with on-going business, rejoicing as best we can for the good and for the love we can discover, experience and share.

It is with good reason, then, that the “ancients remind us never to judge a person’s life a success or failure until it is over.”(LD) I didn’t know my father was going to die a sudden accidental death just a couple of weeks after I took my three young sons to visit him and attend a county rodeo. He lived in a small mountain town in Utah. For most of my life, he and I were estranged. We had a lot of “unfinished business” to deal

with. We postponed it; put it off. The whole story could have ended very badly: full of regrets, if only. But a beautiful thing happened when our children were born and growing up. In his way, my father turned into a supportive, entertaining, loving grandfather. He was still the "town character," but my little guys didn't care; they loved him. And in those few years that proved to be his last, our relationship was changed and achieved a kind of redemption.

We are never closer than when we ponder the great mystery that beats at the heart of our shared being. "Break your life into a million pieces," Church writes, and then "ask yourself what of any real value might endure after you are gone. The pieces that remain will each carry love's signature. Without love, we are left only with the aching hollow of regret, that haunting emptiness where love might have been." (LAD) The love that might have been during all the years of estrangement between Glenn and me—I have to tell you—they were just swallowed up; dust to dust. What abides, what I remember, is the clumsy, sincere affection he expressed for three little boys in the few times they met, and that last evening together at the rodeo. And that's all I need. It seems like a miracle to me. I wish that Glenn knew that as he lay dying. I would have said: no regrets. Look back and go forward in peace. I think Forrest Church got it right when he said that "the one thing that can never be taken from this world, even by death, is the love we have given," shared, expressed and felt before we die. (LD)

Now more often than I like to admit, I agree with Woody Allen when he said that: "it's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens." There's a lot of life in us yet, even if today we draw our last sacred breath.

Time to grieve, time to comfort. Time to console, time to share another's pain. Time to apologize, time to forgive. Time to wonder, time to rejoice.

Whether we walk, or run, through the valley of the shadow of death, it's dappled with light and love. Life after death? "Madam, I prefer to take one life at a time," said Thoreau. *Love after death?* Surely we know *that* endures, abides, and can redeem. May we let our light and love so shine that it will light the path ahead for ourselves and those who follow.