

Dying to the Self

We have been exploring the theme of death this month. Over the last three Sundays, we have explored transitioning with grace, the reality that death is difficult to face, and that longevity has its place. When Rev. Erik offered me the opportunity to weave worship this morning, with death as the monthly theme, the first thing that came to mind was the Prayer of St. Francis. I first learned this prayer from Eknath Easwaran, a Hindu meditation teacher. He taught a style of meditation where you focus your mind on an inspirational spiritual passage from one of the world's great scriptures or mystics. By focusing the mind on the spiritual passage, you quiet the mind, allowing you to access deeper levels of consciousness. I chose to memorize the Prayer of St. Francis. How many of you are familiar with this prayer?

Here is the version of the prayer as I first learned it:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
Where there is sadness, joy
Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek,
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love
For it is in giving, that we receive,

It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned
It is in dying to the self, that we are born to eternal life.

It is in dying to the self, that we are born to eternal life.

What does it mean to die to the self? After all, self-preservation is built into our reptilian brain. Staying alive is at the core of our human 'operating system.' A healthy sense of self is important to our functioning in this world. On the other hand, being self-ish is rarely viewed as a positive attribute. We exist in a culture where radical individualism is praised. John Steinbeck observed:

"It has always seemed strange to me... the things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling, are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest, are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second."

Even within our Unitarian Universalist congregations I have often seen an attitude of 'what's in it for me?' I have heard it said that it is spelled UU, but it is pronounced Me-Me. After all, one of our seven principles is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Unitarian Universalism is sometimes described as a religion where you can believe whatever you want. I believe we have a tendency to over-emphasize the 'free' and overlook the word responsible. Response-able. Are we grounded enough in our beliefs to publicly share how we make meaning of our lives?

The Greek myth of Narcissus speaks to the danger of being overly focused on the self. In the Roman poet Ovid's retelling of the myth, Narcissus is the son of a river god and a nymph. [Tiresias](#), the seer, told his parents that the child "would live to an old age if it did not look at itself." Many nymphs and girls fell in love with him but he rejected them. One of these nymphs, [Echo](#), was so distraught over this rejection that she withdrew into a lonely spot and faded until all that was left was a plaintive whisper. The goddess [Nemesis](#) heard the rejected girls prayers for vengeance and arranged for Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection. He stayed watching his reflection and let himself die.

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What is this 'self?' The Vedic sage Adi Shankara, in ninth century India, described the three primary layers of the self: 1.) the physical realm, encompassing our environment, our energetic body, and our physical body; 2.) the subtle realm containing our mind, intellect, and ego; and 3.) the causal realm, which includes our personal soul, our collective soul, and our spirit.

We are in this physical body, breathing in, breathing out. Put your hand on your heart and feel the breathing in and out. We have physical needs for food, water and safety. Our physical body is constantly changing. We are each made up of trillions of cells, over two hundred major types. Each of us began as a single egg cell that multiplied by dividing to form skin cells and bone cells and liver cells and brain cells and blood cells and nerve cells. In

this moment, millions of your cells are dying. Not to worry, you won't miss them. Far from being strictly harmful, scientists have found that cell death, when carefully controlled, is critical to life as we know it. Without it, you wouldn't have your fingers and toes or the proper brain cell connections to be able to read the words in your order of service. Death of the physical self is an inescapable reality. In the words of Forrest Church: "Religion is our response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." But this sermon is not about dying to the physical self.

Within this body, we also have our mind, in which thoughts are constantly arising. If you have practiced meditation, or some other practice to quiet the mind, you quickly realize how hard it is to get the mind to stop thinking. Within the mind, we have a psychological construct called the ego, where we get our sense of identity. We have needs for emotional security and connection.

We also have a soul and spirit. We have a desire to experience wholeness and unity. Our tendency to over-identify with our ego gets in the way of connecting with the soul and the spirit. I'm betting that we all agree that we have a body and a mind. How many of you believe we also have a soul or a spirit? [about half ...] It is in dying to the ego, that allows you to connect more deeply to the spiritual self. EGO is also an acronym for Edging God Out.

The life of St. Francis is a model of transcending the egoic self. Although he lived 800 years ago, his legacy continues today. Born Giovanni Franchesco di Pietro di Bernardone, in Assisi, Italy, he grew up in relative

affluence. Francis dreamed of glory as a chivalrous knight. As a young man, he twice experienced the horrors of war. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant, and Francis was quite the party animal, known as the “King of Feasts.” At the age of 27, he had a vision and heard the call to “imitate Christ,” and began living a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. From his deeply spiritual life arose the Franciscan order, which seeks to live his lifestyle even today. Francis saw every living thing as a beautiful gift from God. He called the sun, the moon and all the creatures of the earth his brothers and sisters. Francis saw the unity of all things.

The cover of today’s order of service shows St. Francis preaching to the creatures. Francis took literally the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus commanded the apostles to preach to all creatures. His sermon to the birds exemplifies Francis’ radical simplicity. The image of St Francis preaching to the creatures reminds me of Snow White, another loving presence, singing to a gathering of animals. Both of them cultivating connections with the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Francis saw the entire physical world as something from which he could begin the journey to experience the **Author** of beauty. For Francis, nature was a series of footprints that lead you to God. Dying to the ego enabled Francis to experience the unity of creation.

Six hundred years later, Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, known fondly to some as Saint Ralph, expanded on this idea in his essay ‘Nature.’ Emerson proposed the radical concept that nature, not just the Bible, was a primary means for understanding the nature of God.

There is a wonderful story about St. Francis and the sultan. Francis went off to the Fifth Crusade in Egypt with the radical aim of convincing the Saracens that they were wrong. He was venturing into a war zone and easily could have been killed. He was willing to die in his efforts to promote peace. Francis knew that longevity had its place. He used the Word, rather than the sword, but the sultan refused to convert. Francis was willing to be a martyr, authenticating his commitment to God. But Francis' hosts were won over by his genuine desire to promote peace and understanding, to overcome hatred with love. The sultan weighted Francis down with gifts, and granted him and his friars safe passage to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the contested Holy Land. I admire St. Francis as a great soul, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

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Who do we think we are? Struggling with identity was the subject of one of my favorite Moody Blues songs. More of a musical dialogue between a person, their inner voice, and the Establishment:

[First Man:] I think, I think I am, therefore I am, I think.

[Establishment:] Of course you are my bright little star,

I've miles

And miles

Of files

Pretty files of your forefather's fruit
and now to suit our
great computer,
Your magnetic ink.

[First Man:] I'm more than that, I know I am, at least, I think I must be.

[Inner Man:] There you go man, keep as cool as you can.

Face piles
And piles
Of trials
With smiles.
It riles them to believe
that you perceive
the web they weave
And keep on thinking free.

We are a complex combination of identities that we both inherited and voluntarily chose. We are defined by our family of origin, by significant and insignificant others. There is a story of the grandmother in the park with her two grandchildren. A friend comes by and asks her the ages of her grandchildren. She replies "The doctor is two and the lawyer is four." Our identities may include being a sibling, a parent, a partner, a co-worker, a friend, a lover, a relative, a fill-in-the-blank.

In our discussion last month about this theme of death, some people shared about aspects of themselves that needed to die in order for them to live more meaning-full lives. To be more fully alive. In the words of the Taoist sage Lao Tsu “When I let go of who I am, I become who I might be.” Sometimes dying to the ego self means leaving behind identities and expectations that we were given by our family or our culture. And sometimes letting go of unfulfilled dreams.

Rather defining our self in terms of what we do, our opening hymn provides glimpses of the potential within our spiritual self:

We are our grandmother’s prayers and our grandfathers dreaming,
We are the breath of our ancestors, we are the spirit of God,
We are mothers of courage and fathers of time,
We are daughters of dust and the sons of great visions
We’re sisters of mercy and brothers of love
We are lovers of life and the builders of nations
We’re seekers of truth and keepers of faith
We are makers of peace and the wisdom of ages

A lyric from one of our hymns last week said that ‘As we live, so shall we die.’ A benefit of loosening our attachment to the egoic self is being more ready for our own death. In the many deaths that I have witnessed as a hospice chaplain, the people who were most at peace were those who had a healthy sense of self, loving relationships with the significant people in their life and a sense of connectedness to the Ultimate.

On Wednesdays at lunchtime, a group of us meet for an hour to explore the teachings of different mystics. One of the mystics was St. Francis of Assisi, who is said to have begun the history of Italian mysticism. One of my learnings from this exploration is the latitude we have as Unitarian Universalists to transform the teachings of these saints and sages into terms that help us live meaning-full lives.

In that spirit, what I hear from the life and prayer of St. Francis is that love is never diminished by giving it away. It is the ultimate renewable resource. It is in the giving of ourselves, it is in serving others, that we in turn receive. From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this we live. We gather together in this place to learn how to love better. It is in learning to forgive others that we learn to forgive ourselves. It is in transforming our hard-wired tendency to be self-ish and becoming self-less, that we realize our wholeness, our unity with all of creation. As you consider how you want to live this wild and precious life, so that it will prove worth dying for, I offer the wisdom of Howard Thurman, which has been described as my gospel, or good news. "Do not ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive."

May it be so.

Blessed be.