

Being Mortal
Rev. Hannah Petrie
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Our worship theme of the month is transformation, a perfect choice for the month Easter falls in this year. Unlike Christians, most UUs don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus after he died, we believe that Jesus was a great prophet who came to teach us how to live. And we believe in transformation as a force of our universe and the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part; we believe in the cycles of life and death that define our lives. At Springtime, now that the roses are blooming after Winter is done, we are most keenly reminded of the potential for life to return after death, for life to transform, once again.

And so thinking of the transformation theme, I have chosen to home in on death as an unarguable force of transformation. But we don't like to think about death. I don't like to think about it. What the last 10 or so years of my life may be like, or how it might be for my parents, or anyone else I love.

But living by knowledge of our death is one of the wisest ways we can live, for as the saying goes, the only things we can really count on in life are death and taxes.

We have to pay our taxes every year once we start working, but we only die once. For many, you only live and die once. I imagine reincarnation, but I believe more that, regardless, in this body, I shall only live once.

It's not that death should haunt us as we live, it should teach us. Death is the ultimate lesson of equanimity that Buddhism teaches – death is neither good nor bad, death just is. This equanimity can give us courage as we seek to prepare for death.

It's almost an inverse kind of Easter, what I'm speaking of. Rather than put faith in resurrection after death, I'm asking us to put faith in considering death well before we die. Specifically, in his excellent book, "Being Mortal" Atul Gawande MD, asks us to think with intention about the quality of our lives toward the very end, the last 10 – 15 or so years before we die. Or, if we should be so unfortunate to die from a terminal illness, the last months or weeks.

Many of us, I'm sure, have already been forced to think of these things whether you wanted to or not, perhaps as you've supported parents or other relatives in their transition to their last domicile, wherever that may be, or if you've lost a loved one to illness.

What if, regardless of our ages, we started thinking about death now, either for ourselves or for others. This book will help you make decisions about what's most important, which is why it's relevant to our lives now, because it may transform our

notions of what's important now, if we think long and hard about what will be important later. This book guides us to these insights.

It's often not longevity or even autonomy, but quality of life that allows us to die with dignity more than anything else. And we may be surprised by what the research shows actual quality of life is. It turns out to be deeply interwoven and imbedded with our common humanity, and the bonds we develop, of mutual loyalty, trust, and caring.

Quality of life has nothing to do with safety and the dictates of our current state of medicalization that so commonly define many people's endgame in the nursing homes and other institutions where people go to die.

It has much more to do with a life worth living, where there are simple but important features of autonomy and community. For example, just being able to lock your door is a hugely important feature of autonomy, even if you are not completely autonomous.

Some of the best stories in this book are about visionaries who transform your typical old folks' homes with a totally unexpected element: hundreds of parakeets, dogs, and cats, for example. Or children, who come to be tutored or looked after in an afterschool program. The element introduced is a transformative catalyst that can take away depression at the end of life and improve health in numerous ways.

Here is a lengthy excerpt of the book that helps explain this.

"In 1908, a Harvard philosopher named Josiah Royce wrote a book with the title, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. Royce was not concerned with the trials of aging. But he was concerned with a puzzle that is fundamental to anyone contemplating his or her mortality. Royce wanted to understand why simply existing – why being merely housed and fed and safe and alive – seems empty and meaningless to us. What more is it that we need in order to feel that life is worthwhile?

The answer, he believed, is that we all seek a cause beyond ourselves. This was, to him, an intrinsic human need. The cause could be large (family, country, principle) or small (a building project, the care of a pet). The important thing was that, in ascribing value to the cause and seeing it as worth making sacrifices for, we give our lives meaning.

Royce called this dedication to a cause beyond oneself loyalty In fact, he argued, human beings *need* loyalty. It does not necessarily produce happiness, and can even be painful, but we all require devotion to something more than ourselves for our lives to be endurable . . .

The only way death is not meaningless is to see yourself as part of something greater: a family, a community, a society. If you don't, mortality is only a horror.

But if you do, it is not. Loyalty, said Royce, 'solves the paradox of our ordinary existence by showing us outside of ourselves the cause which is to be served, and inside of ourselves the will which delights to do this service, and which is not thwarted but enriched and expressed in such service.'

As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures – companionship, everyday routines, the taste of good food, the warmth of sunlight on our faces. We become less interested in the rewards of achieving and accumulating, and more interested in the awards of simply being . . .

With the animals and children and plants Bill Thomas helped usher into Chase Memorial Nursing Home, a program he called the Eden Alternative, he provided a small opening for residents to express loyalty – a limited but real opportunity for them to grab on to something beyond mere existence. And they took it hungrily . . .

Thomas[said], 'You see people come alive. You see them begin to interact with the world, you see them begin to love and to care and to laugh. It blows your mind.'"

What this book got me thinking about, beyond the obvious dilemma of avoiding a depressed and medicalized end to my life or those of my loved ones, is, if in the end, the accumulating and the achieving don't really matter, why should they matter so much now? What if I put most of my energy into service of this loyalty Royce spoke of now, when I have the most choice in life?

Could this be the secret to living well, and ensuring the legacy for which we all wish?

There are some of you whom I've met just since September, who I know understand exactly what I'm talking about. I have seen this loyalty in action here, as part of what this church does, in caring for one another. In some ways, it blows my mind and reminds me I have a lot to learn before I can achieve or engage that kind of loyalty. But as a minister, as someone in a caring profession, I do get to regularly experience glimpses of it.

It is a wisdom born of experience, born of the lessons and trials we go through as we learn, often painfully, that selfishness brings little but misery to our lives. Some people never learn the blessing that sacrifice and loyalty can bring to us.

Again, this book really makes you think about what's important in life, whether we are mid-way through life or more than that. It has so much to do with relationship in our lives, and human interaction. Very simple things. We come into this world absolutely dependent on human relationship. But we have quite mistakenly assumed we don't need it as much when we're old. We are so wrong about that, and I see it a social justice, human rights issue, because much suffering has come of it. Our modern world is plagued with mechanisms that value technology and efficiency over human care, that value money and profits over what human beings actually need to live and die with dignity at the end.

Gawande writes,

“The problem with medicine and the institutions it has spawned for the care of the sick and the old is not that they have had an incorrect view of what makes life significant. The problem is that they have had no view at all. Medicine’s focus is narrow. Medical professionals concentrate on repair of health, not sustenance of the soul. Yet – and this is the painful paradox – we have decided that they should be the ones who largely define how we live in our waning days. For more than half a century now, we have treated the trials of sickness, aging, and mortality as medical concerns. It’s been an experiment in social engineering, putting our fates in the hands of people valued more for their technical prowess than for their understanding of human needs.

That experiment has failed. If safety and protection were all we sought in life, perhaps we could conclude differently. But because we seek a life of worth and purpose, and yet are routinely denied the conditions that might make it possible, there is no other way to see what modern society has done.”

So, in a way, this is one of those sermons that afflicts the comfortable. We don’t want to think about death, or the end of our lives, but we may discover that to do so can bring us peace of mind. To confront our demons now may be able to bring us the wisdom that knows it matters how we live, and that our commitments and loyalties are what matter the most. In other words, it’s never too early to start working on your worldly salvation.

Nor is it ever too early to think about things like end of life care, advance directives, our wills. I need to do these things too, as much as I’d rather focus on the achieving and accumulating instead. As your religious leader, it’s part of my job to encourage you to do things you don’t want to do, but may actually improve your quality of life and that of your loved ones.

It’s true that many things will always be out of our control – factors that influence how we live and how we will die. But knowledge is power – it’s a cardinal liberal religious value. If we know, we may act, and our acting and making our wishes known can make all the difference.

No, religious liberals don’t believe so much in human resurrection. But we have great faith in worldly salvation, by being intentional about how we live and die.

May we find the equanimity of death to be of comfort and courage to us, that it’s not good or bad, it just is. In this way may it become our teacher, guiding us as soon as we are still and quiet enough to listen, so we can hear its wise message. May it be so.

