

## To Re-engage Life with an Awareness of Life's Fragility

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Sunday, August 8, 2021, online and on site  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

**Hymns:** 126, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” 8, “Mother Spirit, Father Spirit,” 21 “For the Beauty of the Earth.”

**Piano:** “Hush! Somebody’s Calling My Name” (African American spiritual), “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” (T. A. Dorsey), “Pavane” (M. Ravel), “Back to Life” (G. Allevi), “Nuvole Bianchi” (L. Einaudi)

**Chalice Lighting** (Rev. Dr. David Breeden, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis)

In this time of asking why,  
We light this flame:  
Sign of our searching,  
Sign of our sharing,  
Sign that together we remember.  
Together we ask why --  
In sadness and joy,  
We share the light.

### Readings

The first reading is a poem by the American writer W. S Merwin, who died March 15 of 2019, at the age of 91. This is one of his most famous ones. It is entitled “For the Anniversary of My Death.”

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day  
When the last fires will wave to me  
And the silence will set out  
Tireless traveler  
Like the beam of a lightless star  
Then I will no longer  
Find myself in life as in a strange garment  
Surprised at the earth  
And the love of one woman  
And the shamelessness of men  
As today writing after three days of rain  
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease  
And bowing not knowing to what

In the second reading, Jesus of Nazareth tries to encourage his disciples not to give up or to give in to their anxiety about the future as they join him on the uncertain road ahead in their ministry and mission of teaching and healing. This reading is my adaptation of a well-known passage which appears both in the Gospel of Luke (12:22-32) and the Gospel of Matthew (6:25-34).

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap/ or store away in barns, and yet their Creator feeds them. Can any one of you/ by worrying/ add a single hour to your life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor, spin fabric or sew. Yet I tell you that not even King Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how the Creator clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is gone away, won't you have enough for today?

Oh, you of little faith, I say to you, don't worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' Don't run after these things, but receive the abundance of this day. Live this day as it is and receive all that will be given to you. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble on its own.

## Sermon

The American poet W.S. Merwin wrote that he spent the days of life

Surprised at the earth.../ As today writing after three days of rain  
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease/ And bowing *not knowing to what*.

Merwin began that poem by noting that sometime during the year, every year, a date would pass which would be the anniversary of his death. When he died two years ago, the *New Yorker* magazine said that now we know what that date is: March 15. All of us have a day and a date like that, of course. Merwin's poem reminds us to consider how we will occupy the days that come *before* that one. For me, this year's compelling reminders have included the Covid-19 pandemic, which got me to review the beneficiary designations on my life insurance and retirement programs, and to get in touch again with faraway friends.

One other reminder is more personal. Forty-five years ago, my father passed away suddenly when he was 60—60 years and four months old, to be precise. Earlier this year, I turned 60. Then, four months later, in June I began to outlive him: 60 years and four months. Of course, mortality is not a competition. I've been a lot luckier than he was. My father served overseas during the Second World War. In Europe he saw dead and wounded young men up close--and who knows what kind of devastated landscapes. He came home early from the war with a shrapnel wound in his shoulder. It all had to be traumatic. His later health problems included high blood pressure and addictions to alcohol, prescription meds, and cigarettes. In his late 50s, he lost all his teeth, and the false ones never fit comfortably. So far, I would evaluate my life as more fortunate and probably happier than his had been. Now, each day that I have is one more day than he was able to live. I want to do what I can to stay healthy, but I also want to appreciate every day of life that comes to me. Of course, life is full of uncertainty. Neither life nor death is doled out fairly.

Many years ago, I was at a retreat with a group of people for study and fellowship. The topic was mortality. The keynote speaker was a person I know and admire. She made the statement that “death is a gift.” By facing the reality of death, she said, we can treasure life. I nodded in agreement. It didn’t occur to me that this perspective assumed some kinds of dying but ignored other kinds of dying. That is, it imagined a death in the midst of relative privilege. As an audience of mostly white, mostly professional people, most of us probably also thought of death coming after a long, full and good life. We may have imagined caring hands and loving voices attending to us in our final days. In the discussion time which followed her presentation, another friend rose to object. She said: “Death is not a gift. As the mother of a Black son,” she said, “as a mother who fears her son will be taken from her before his time, I can’t let that stand.”

As she pointed out, for many people death comes too early; too often it comes by violence. In many places, including this country, both poverty and systemic racism make it likely to happen sooner. Neither life nor death is doled out fairly.

Death is not a gift when a parent, or spouse or child loses a loved one without the blessing of goodbyes, caresses, or a comfortable hospice bed. Death is not a gift, she said. I sensed the tension rising among some of us white people in the room as the presenter heard this challenge from the mother of a Black son. Yet the speaker understood the objection and appreciated the correction. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry,” she said. She was sorry to have caused pain by making a statement which did not consider perspectives other than a privileged one. Clearly, if she were to give her talk again, she would have to rewrite it.

Indeed, death often is not a gift, but it is a reality. And like all realities, when we consider it, we have occasion to think about how we will use whatever days of life we might have available to us.

For the past 17 months we have endured a deadly pandemic. It brought fear, uncertainty, stress, and heartbreak. Millions of deaths, even more sick, people without work or enough money or access to familiar places of community and friendship. For families with children, a time of incredible stress. Then, early this year, with rapid success, Covid-19 vaccines came on the scene. In the US, hospital beds were freed up, lockdowns were lifted, and many of us let out a sign of relief. For sure, we saw better days coming.

Now, however, a variant of the virus has brought a new spike of infections and hospitalizations—the more contagious Delta variant. In the poorer nations, which have low vaccination rates, the pandemic still makes ordinary life a deadly risk. In this country, vaccine uncertainty, denial and fear have been stoked by disinformation campaigns through social media.

When I decided on today’s topic over a month ago, I was thinking: After having to avoid normal life for so long, how shall we prepare ourselves to re-engage with life? How might we live in that world we can perceive as the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel? Tragically, the light seems far away yet again. Still, we can consider the question: Given a renewed awareness of the fragility of life, how shall we engage with life again? After so much trauma and hardship, what spiritual insights and commitments might we carry forward into life?

When I was in Minnesota a couple of weeks ago, a friend was driving me from the north to the middle of the state. We saw the hazy sky turn the midday sun red, the result of wildfires in Canada. We smelled the smoke of distant, massive destruction. She said: “It seems almost like the end of the world.” Not just the

fires and the climate chaos, she said, but also the resurgence of the pandemic. Not just that, but the persistence of systemic white dominance and related harms to people of color. Not just those things, but the fact that our democracy remains under threat by denial and lies and even physical violence. It is disheartening and scary. It can feel overwhelming.

However, we're only saying it *feels like* the end of the world. Throughout human history, for countless people the world has been ending, really. It must feel like that now to the people in Afghanistan, caught in the crossfire of Taliban militias and the country's beleaguered armed forces. In countries like Syria, Venezuela, and Russia, the ongoing repression and hardship must seem like the end. This past Friday was the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Today is the date on which Nagasaki was bombed—the buildings and the people. Those two nuclear explosions were the concluding assaults of a World War which had seemed like the end of the world for 6 brutal years. And really, it was the end, for more than 60 million people—military people and civilians.

So, *how do we live* ...amid the bad news, the knowledge of human frailty and cruelty, and the predictions of worse things to come?

Two things occur to me as ways to deal with life now. We can recommit ourselves to the values that have always called us forward. Also, we can be present for each day which comes to us, and appreciate the day as a gift. First, our values call us to bear witness and rage against to the losses of life and health and wellbeing of so many people. At the same time, we are called to celebrate the good news of scientific resourcefulness, devoted public service, and ordinary kindness. We can bear witness to the assaults on freedom, on decency, and on the truth, but we also can find hope in the courage and relentless work of people who seek to protect freedom, practice decency, and defend the truth.

In times of trouble, it is important to remember the values that call us forward. Whether life seems easy or hard, our ethical commitments and religious values make a difference—to us and the world. Such values as human dignity—the worth of every person. Such as inter-dependence and gratitude for the web of life. I know you know these values, but I hope you'll permit me to name a few of them. Values like compassion and generosity. Commitments like personal kindness and systemic equity and fairness. The practice of democracy, the freedom of conscience, the call to mutual respect. Love and courage. We can live by these values; we can celebrate these commitments.

Second, when life is uncertain, let's remember that life comes to us one day at a time. That is how we can live it. We can live with awareness just for each day, and for the moments that fill that day. We can identify the abundance of our own lives in so many ways and give thanks for it. We can be on the lookout for the beauty that still prevails in the world. We can lift up words of praise.

When I think about receiving each day as it comes, I think of words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet and preacher. Two thousand years ago, he recruited ordinary people to join his ministry of teaching and healing. The world was bleak back then, especially for the subjects of the Roman Empire. Democracy was non-existent; brutal force was everything. The overwhelming majority of people lived in grinding poverty. Most of the disciples of Jesus were from those lower classes. Imagine: he told them to leave behind what little security they had—their occupations, families and hometowns. He was taking them on a journey of uncertainty, also known as a journey of faith.

It's understandable that they would get anxious about having enough to eat, or a change of clothing for the rugged roads. But when they feared the lack of supplies for the days ahead, he said to them: Can any of you add even an hour to your life by worrying? Consider the birds of the air. Look at them. They don't store up grain in barns, but they have enough. Consider the flowers of the field. Look at them. They don't spin or sew to adorn themselves, but they are dressed better than a famous king in all his glory. Don't be overwhelmed about what will happen tomorrow. Let tomorrow worry about itself, he said! Each day has enough trouble on its own.

He said, instead of running after things you don't have, recognize the abundance of this day. *Live this* day as it is, and receive all that is given to you. Accept it and give thanks for it. Rather than worry about all the days to come, let's experience each day as it comes. In these trying times, that is what I am trying to do. I try to take some time to pause and recognize the day, receive it and give thanks. I take some time to breathe, and sit, and notice the sensation of my body where I'm sitting. And I pray for my actions and words to be worthy of the gift of this new day.

Given the fragility of life, I seek to engage with life just as it comes, each day as it given to me. The poet W.S. Merwin wrote that he spent the days of life

Surprised at the earth.../ As today writing after three days of rain  
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease/ And bowing not knowing to what.

No matter the hardship or uncertainty we may confront, let us bow to love. Let us recognize love in all sources of compassion and courage, in ourselves and one another. May we remember that we are connected, and we are enough, together. May we receive the abundance of each day. Let us be on the lookout for the beauty that still prevails in the world and lift up words of praise. Amen.