

The Answer is "Everything!"
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
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I love the story we just heard about Helen and her fork and how it gently reminds us that something good is surely coming. Helen is quite the role model, isn't she? This woman, facing death but embracing possibility, and asking to be buried with a fork in her hand, absolutely epitomizes optimism abundance, and faith. As a group, we Unitarian Universalists may not share Helen's theology or her view of the afterlife, but like her, we are hopeful people. And, in our midst, we have so many wonderful role models of strength and graceful, creative aging, too.

These women are what I would call grounded optimists, and most of the time I am one, too - a real dyed-in-the-wool, half-full glass, triple layer-cake kind of gal. That's probably why I ended up becoming a Unitarian Universalist because this liberal faith of ours is essentially an optimistic faith. My message this morning is one of hope and optimism. Of course, it would be irresponsible of me to suggest that life; a truly human life is an either/or proposition. It isn't. Our lives and this world are composed of good news and bad news, controllable and uncontrollable forces, and a perfect life is an oxymoron.

Our human predicament is a little like this infamous lost cat ad found in England and posted on the Internet that I shared a year ago when I preached about living deliberately in a random world...perhaps I was psychic given the pandemic year we've just experienced. It's worth repeating....the ad reads, "Lost cat -- old, mangy, one-eyed, limped, neutered, crippled. Answers to the name: "Lucky." Life can be so like that. One day, it's raining on our parade and the next, we've experienced a moment of splendor and a break in the clouds. It's unpredictable -- triumph and tragedy, joy and sorrow, suffering and renewal, lockdowns and vaccinations.

I haven't always been abundance-minded or able to see or believe in life's silver lining. In 1986, when I was 29, my vivacious lovely mother, Flora, died at age 55. It was heartbreaking and confusing to watch her suffer and deteriorate from a non-operable brain tumor. She had been looking forward to her own third act...becoming an interior decorator and adoring future grandchildren yet to be. Since then, I've come to realize how ill equipped I was, in so many ways, to cope with the magnitude of this loss, the trauma of it.

Despite the many exceptional older women role models I've encountered these past 35 years, the one I lacked was the very one that could enable me to envision my own third act -- my own mother. Over the years, no matter how I tried, I simply could not picture myself as a woman beyond age 55. A friend suggested I have an age progression photo of myself done. I passed on that, but it was tempting. Anything to catch a glimpse of myself, silver-haired and etched with wisdom and a life fully lived; posing with grandchildren at high school graduations.

Then something stunning happened. I was enjoying a glass of wine after conducting a wedding in November 2010 (more than 10 years ago now – wow) It was the last wedding in a long season of weddings during which I had eaten my weight in hors d'oeuvres (again!). My voice was raggedy and hoarse as I shared my weariness with an older guest seated at my table. She looked at me warmly with sparkling blue eyes and said, "You need to take care of yourself, Reverend. You are going to live a long time." I was dumbstruck. "How do you know that?" I asked quietly. "Well, because I do," she replied, her graceful smile framed by shiny silver hair. "Take care of yourself, you're going to live a long time."

This encounter caused me to examine how little confidence I had had in my longevity, and the ways that had impacted my daily wrestle match with life - How controlling I could be, how frantic I felt at time to get things accomplished, to see my children through milestones, to sustain normalcy. I would hold my breath waiting for results from annual physicals and mammograms. At times, I worried that I was cursed and destined to repeat my mother's karma. I had trouble planning for old age because I didn't have any tangible sense of it. Some days it felt like I was just tearing pages off a calendar in some doomsday countdown.

In 2011, I grew tired of this cycle. I made the decision to set a new course and embark on a new road, and I moved home to Pittsburgh. Then, on April 18, 2012 (9 years ago today) I turned 55, the same age as my mother when she passed. How could this be? It made no sense. I feel so young, so full of life. How could she have died at this age? I went to visit her grave on my birthday and read the inscription we had chosen: "Beautiful and Noble spirit" and the tragedy of her early demise took on a new dimension.

Later that day, I was out walking my dog and feeling a familiar malaise again – the old fear, the belief that the future had no shape and was too flimsy to grasp. And the question came to me, somewhat self-pitying, given all my relative blessings, "What can I look forward to?" The toxic chatterbox in my head was

stirring up trouble again. “Nothing,” she sneered. The loop began - I’m not partnered, I’m not sure what will happen in my ministry or career? Really, what can I look forward to?” “Nothing.”

As I ambled along Mifflin Ave, crocuses were popping up through the spring soil, and a different voice (perhaps the voice of the wise wedding guest or the voice of my mother) broke through the gremlin’s drone and said softly, “Everything, Robin. You can look forward to everything, if you choose to. Looking forward is a choice. Being willing to look forward to everything, come what may, is a decision that is open to you now, Robin. The answer is “Everything.”

And it was like the sun had come out in my soul. I believed in that moment that I was *not* my mother, that I *was* going to live a long time and that I had a choice. So I made it -- I would look up, look out, and look forward. We all throw around the idea of epiphanies and revelations - this felt like the real deal. Buddha famously advised: “You must let go of the life you planned in order to embrace the life awaiting you.” That day, my 55th birthday, I loosened my death grip on mortality, and the abundance I had yearned for has come to nestle in the open palm of my hand.

I am healthy, fit and feel more peaceful than I have ever felt. My adult children are healthy and both happily married and engaged in their lives and careers. I have a precious granddaughter. My ministry has flourished and grown. I walk daily through cathedrals of trees and red rock. The answer is “Everything.” Today, I turn 64. It seems like a small miracle to me. Through the dark days of aimlessness, I kept my fork and I’m so glad I did , as there will be cake, not just at birthday parties (although chocolate please, if you’re baking) but in all the quiet moments of grace, bright moments of joy and even in the dim moments of sorrow. The answer is “Everything.”

Our former UU president, Paul Carnes, echoes this view. "Life is so great a blessing," he tells us, "that every tomorrow we project, every time we aspire or dream, every time we set our alarm clock in faith that the sun will set to rise again, we bear witness to our optimism." Every time we keep our fork, in other words, we "practice a resurrection" of sorts as we rise again and again in hopefulness.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that the key to staying healthy and living longer is attitude, essentially deciding you are not old and decrepit (despite any evidence to the contrary). I’m not even sure what it even means to be old anymore. The

humorist Bill Guest says you'll know you're old when, among other things, you wear a nametag as much or yourself as for others and happy hour is a nap. Nevertheless, in an article for the Chicago Sun Times, Alexia Ruiz, quips that those of us lucky enough to grow old (or "older") must contend with miserable stereotypes of what its like: the frailty, the forgetfulness and the early bird specials."

Yet, in aging, as in many things, attitude can make all the difference and has a greater impact on health, happiness, and longevity than the date on our birth certificates. In a study at Harvard, psychologist Ellen Langer found that expectation, not biology, leads many older people to set physical and intellectual limits on themselves. Langer concluded: "They assume they'll fall apart, so they let it happen. They pull the plug on learning, growing, deepening, and connecting. Decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Through her research, Langer learned that men and women over 50 with more positive perceptions of aging, who are more willingness to accept the inevitability of aging (without denial), live nearly 8 years longer than those with negative attitudes. It turns out that faith, meditation, and belonging to a religious community like Beacon can lead to a longer and more fulfilling life, too – so stick around. Langer writes: "The misery myth is one of the most pernicious myths, because when you think the future is really bleak you don't plan. But when you think, 'I'm going to be the coolest 80 year old who launches a line of hip clothing for old people, there is so much possibility."

These findings conjure a memory of an elderly woman I came to admire in a previous ministry named Thelma. She was often known to proclaim, "This has been a perfect day!" It was her trademark phrase, even though she was nearly blind and crippled with arthritis. She used to say that all she needed was "a pinky full of hope." In her case, a gnarled and throbbing pinky...but so much hope, faith and simple gratitude in that one small digit.

Both Helen and Thelma would tell you that there is cake in all of it, all of life, even the hard parts, even this strange and challenging year we've just lived through. And neither of them would fib about death, either because they accept that life is finite. Many forces in Western cultures have conditioned us to be afraid of this, to fear aging. We joke that 50 is the new 35, and although this may be truer than in previous generations, it will not stave off an eventual end time.

We are poised, you and me, between the inevitable and the possible. And there is an alternative to fear and loathing – and it is this - using our finitude as a spur to lean into abundance, and living with courage and optimism, rather than with dread; To drink from a half-full glass; to proceed with what the theologian Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be" in the face of our finitude; to push life out of our inner tombs of pain, fear, preconceived inevitabilities, and disappointment. To answer "Everything" to the question of what life might offer you or teach you.

I stand here, looking out through my web camera, on a beloved congregation of people who have had their share of glories and regrets. Oh, I have too, and I ask myself: Would I live the same life? Do I have a do-over option? No. Will the future be a proverbial bowl of cherries? Unlikely. No, I am not looking forward to creaky limbs, forgetfulness, or gravity. But I am not going to wait until I'm 80 to don my purple hat to go out and have fun with the world. As I approach each birthday, I'm elated to have what the actress Laura Linney calls "the privilege of aging." And in some ways, I've been living this miraculous third act for two, for all the years, the decades, my Mom never got.

How about you? Can you answer "Everything" to some part of the future you have doubted or feared? Will you lean into abundance? None of us knows the future, yet we can only be open to it and bring our inherent UU optimism into that future, if we are not afraid of its ugliness or unpredictability; and if we are not too cynical about its potential. Ironically, the story is often told that when we get to the gates of heaven, St. Peter will ask not what we hope for in the next life but whether we have lived this one to the fullest.

Along with Thelma and Helen, I encourage you to live and age as fully and creatively as possible, fork in one hand, half-full glass in the other, prepared for the worst, yet seeking the best; holding on to what is good without ignoring the heartbreak.

So, keep your fork, even though we struggle some days to get out of bed. Keep your fork, even if you're down to a pinky full of hope, and what is good often feels like its slipping through your fingers. Keep your fork even though optimists like Thelma and Helen and Flora die, too. Keep your fork and live your own "Everything" in this weary, wonderful world.

It has been said that "If a person gives up hope he has entered the gates of Hell, whether he knows it or not, and has left behind his own humanity." Everything is waiting for you. So, keep your fork close at hand, and when people ask, "What's with the fork?" tell them (and yourself): "I'm leaving room for cake!"

Blessed be. Blessed we, and Amen.

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