significant personal transformation that enriched and deepened her life.

Similarly, a woman who lost one of her teen-age sons through suicide began serving as a big sister to motherless children. The excruciating pain she felt as a result of her son's suicide caused her to want to try to heal the hurt of children who had lost their mothers.

It is not comforting to tell a grieving person she will grow from her sorrow. Early in the grief process we should resist making any suggestion that there might be a positive aspect to loss. But it is true that we will not remain the same; we will either be strengthened or weakened by grief.

Grief can even be good in the sense that it can be the road to a new life, not a life we would have chosen had the choice been ours, but a life which we can again love and enjoy.

PART V

THE CRISIS OF DEATH

10

LIVING WITH DEATH

> We love life; we do not fear death, because we understand that life and death are necessary to each other.
>
> Pearl Buck

> Death is not too high a price to pay for having lived. Mountains never die, nor do the seas or rocks or endless sky. Through countless centuries of time, they stay eternal, deathless. Yet they never live! If choice there were, I would not hesitate to choose mortality. Whatever Fate demanded in return for life I'd give, for, never to have seen the fertile plains nor heard the winds nor felt the warm sun on sands beside the salty sea, nor touched the hands of those I love — without these, all the gains of timelessness would not be worth one day of living and of loving; come what may.
>
> Author Unknown

The Denial of Death

From one perspective our lives are tragic because we must all one day die. Whatever we build crumbles; our hopes and dreams eventually end in dust; what we love most, including life itself, we must one day leave behind.

So far as we know we are the only beings aware that we must die, and awareness of death colors and shapes our lives. Samuel Johnson said that the prospect of death wonderfully concentrates the mind. Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, suggests that

> it does much more than that: the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity — activity

> designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of [humankind].[1]

We seek immortality, for example, by creating things which will endure beyond our lives — everything from our own offspring to books and buildings. We try to make a place for ourselves in national history or in the history of some institution. We seek to lengthen our lives through medical research and by taking care of ourselves. Of course many religions have offered followers the hope of escape from death, promising some form of immortality.

We inherited the idea of the immortality of the soul from the ancient Greeks. Plato and Socrates taught that human beings consist of a perishable material body and an eternal spiritual substance, the soul. The soul existed before its temporary incarnation in the body, and it would continue to exist in another form after the death of the body. Thus Socrates could calmly drink the hemlock with the assurance that death merely meant a transformation from one form of existence to another.

Early Hebrew religion had no notion of either immortality or resurrection. The human organism was a psycho-physical unity; death meant the end of the individual. The Israelite's hope that his or her life would extend beyond death was grounded in two things: the continuation of life through one's children, and belief in the immortality of the people, that the nation Israel lived on. The idea that God would resurrect the righteous appears in later Judaism, and after contact with Greek thought in the Hellenistic period the notion of immortality enters Jewish religion.

Informed by the Judaic view of human nature, Christianity at first taught the resurrection of the body, apparently meaning the whole person. In this view the soul is not

inherently immortal; the whole person dies, body and soul, but God will bring the whole person back to life. Then, with the wedding of Christian theology and Greek philosophy early in the Christian era, the idea of the immortality of the disembodied soul entered Christian thinking.

Today, our scientific-empirical turn of mind has led to widespread skepticism about the survival of individual consciousness. Surveys have shown that most religious liberals do not believe in either resurrection or immortality, or for that matter reincarnation. Many do not have the consolation of believing that death is not the end of our individual lives. However, rather than a disadvantage, I will suggest that this belief can bear positive fruit in our lives. I will also suggest several senses in which our lives do continue after death.

The very language we use to speak of death and dying illustrates our effort to deny the reality of death. We employ euphemisms to avoid using any form of the words *death* or *die*. We say, "She passed away," rather than "She died." Conservative Christians say, "He has gone to his eternal reward." Language both expresses existing attitudes and reinforces them, and our language about death fosters its denial.

And of course many funeral practices are designed to disguise and deny the reality of death. Cosmetics make the deceased look as she did in life; the body is buried in dress clothes to convey the appearance of normality; embalming saves us from ever smelling the odors of death and the rot of its finality; and placing the coffin in a hermetically sealed vault feeds the illusion that the body will never decay — as though the appearance of life could actually sustain life.

We also deny the reality of death by hiding the dying. Modern medical technology has done us an immense service

in extending life, but often its application also means that the dying are isolated from family and friends. Instead of spending the last weeks at home, a terminally ill person may lie in a hospital bed surrounded by life-support equipment or almost totally sedated. The result is that few of us ever actually see a person die. We are thus cut off from the reality of death. Fortunately in recent years, thanks in large part to the hospice movement, more terminally ill people have been permitted to return home to die surrounded by their family and friends.

The refusal of many courts to allow life-sustaining equipment to be disconnected from persons deemed to be in a "persistent vegetative state" represents still another example of death-denial.

The only kind of death many people witness is death by violent means on television shows, news accounts, and movies. Death is perceptually linked to violence to such a degree that we may almost convince ourselves that by avoiding violent death, we can avoid death itself. We subconsciously assume that death is not a natural event, but only the result of an accident or of malice. Thus death is associated with horror and evil. It is not experienced as a beautiful, natural end to a life well-lived.

Denial of death is powerfully depicted in Tolstoy's little novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. The novella opens with Ivan's death after a long illness. Ivan's friends and family react to his death either as an unpleasant interruption of their routine, or as a possibility for professional advancement. The friends offer perfunctory expressions of sympathy to the family. They attend the funeral, but they are not thinking about Ivan or the meaning of his death but about their plans for a game of bridge or a meal at a good

restaurant after the funeral. Even in the presence of death, Tolstoy seems to be saying, some will refuse to face it.

The remainder of the novel takes us back through the last years of Ivan's life and also depicts many denials of death. The doctor who treats Ivan never lets on that Ivan may be seriously ill. He brushes aside Ivan's questions about his prognosis, and attends only to his own speculations about the cause of Ivan's illness. As his condition worsens, Ivan's family continues the pretext that he will soon recover. Colleagues who visit refer to the day when he will return to work. No one except a humble servant is honest about his condition. No one except the servant speaks of death or allows Ivan to speak of it. It is as though by not acknowledging it, death will go away. As he slowly realizes that his life is slipping away, Ivan himself repeats the classical syllogism he remembers from grammar school: "All men are mortal; Caius is a man; Caius is mortal." He notes that he never once had thought of it as applying to himself. Caius would die, yes, but not he, Ivan Ilych.[2]

In my experience more and more doctors are being open and honest about the prospects of their terminally ill patients, and that is healthy. It enables the person and the family to prepare both emotionally and in other ways for his or her impending death. Without exception the people I have known who knew they had only a short time to live have been grateful that they had a chance to prepare for their death and have also been able to make the most of their last weeks or months.

From a theological standpoint denial of death is denial of our humanness. To be human is, among other things, to be finite, mortal, limited by death. Acceptance of the reality of death is one aspect of accepting our humanity, and it can be

a part of a profound self-acceptance which is the basis for a more creative and fulfilling life.

Denial of death, however, may add to our fear of death. It is a well-known psychological dynamic that thoughts and fears repressed will sooner or later resurface in exaggerated or neurotic forms. Those of us unduly anxious about death (and in a society having generally unhealthy attitudes toward death, that probably includes most of us) can benefit from opportunities to treat death more openly and matter-of-factly.

Such an opportunity came to me several years ago when I taught a college summer session course on "Death and Dying." The course met daily for six weeks, and I found that talking about some aspect of death or dying each day reduced my anxiety about death. I felt the liberating effect of confronting the reality, not only of death in general, but of my own death. Life became more precious. The grass seemed greener, the trees and flowers more beautiful, and I cherished my time with my family and friends more than usual that summer. I wanted to get everything I could from each precious moment, each day, not because I was afraid of dying, but because by facing death, I had become more conscious of life's loveliness. People who have nearly died often respond this way, too.

A religious community can help us deal with the crisis of death and dying in a number of ways, but surely one of the most important is to help us face the reality of death. The religious community can avoid euphemistic language. It can deal with death and dying in worship services and in discussion groups and workshops. To live with the awareness that we shall die is not morbid. Morbidity has to do with debilitating obsession. A simple healthy awareness of reality, however, is liberating. It straightens out our priorities and values. We will still be somewhat afraid and anxious about our own death and the death of those we love. No one who enjoys life and finds it fulfilling wants it to end. No one who loves wants to be separated from those he or she loves. But, accepting the reality of death can help us overcome unhealthy anxiety and can free us to live more productively.

Perhaps just because we do not take the gift of life for granted, our religious faith can help us face death when it comes, less with a sense of loss than with feelings of gratitude for what we have had. That thought is expressed beautifully in this poem.

> And if he die? He for an hour has been
> Alive, aware of what it is, to be.
> The high, majestic hills, the shining sea,
> He has looked upon, and meadows golden-green,
> The stars in all their glory he has seen.
> Love he has felt. This poor dust that is he
> Has stirred with pulse of inward liberty,
> And touched the extremes of hope, and all
> between. . . .[3]

Death and Meaning

What would life be like without death? Most of us might say it would be wonderful. I did when I first put that question to myself. But would it really? The world would become impossibly overcrowded, which would lead to terrible suffering in the form of hunger, poverty, wars over land and resources, and to many other problems. But beyond such fearful speculation, what would our lives be like without the knowledge that we are mortal? Would we have the same incentives to create things of beauty and enduring worth which will outlive us, things that add greatly to the quality of life? Would we have the incentives to live lives that will be memorable because of our good deeds and worthy influ-

ence were it not for death? Becker is right. The awareness of death is a mainspring of human activity, and that is not necessarily a negative judgment. It has a positive dimension.

In the children's book, *Tuck Everlasting*, the main characters cannot die. After many years they lose their zest for living, and their lives become boring, monotonous, repetitious and without purpose. They want to die but cannot; life without death is hellish.

Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych shows the value of death in another way. After opening the novel with Ivan's funeral, Tolstoy then writes about Ivan's life. Things had come easily to Ivan. He had risen in the legal profession to a judgeship, a post that paid well and was not demanding. He had married well, though his marriage was devoid of real intimacy and love. His relationship with his children was distant and shallow. He had been concerned primarily with pleasure, social status, and propriety.

Ironically, it was his concern for propriety and social status which led to his undoing. While redecorating his apartment in the most proper and elegant manner possible, Ivan fell and hurt his side. The injury would eventually cause his death. At first his injury did not affect his normal routines of work, playing bridge, and other mundane pleasures such as good food and wine. His work is boring to him, but not difficult, and he prides himself that he knows the "right" people and does the "right" things in his leisure. Tolstoy paints a picture of a self-centered man caught up in trivial pursuits, without any larger purpose, a person not so different from people most of us know, a life Tolstoy describes as "most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." [4]

Only when he begins to realize that his life is slipping away does he ask what it was all about. He is depressed then, for he realizes that his life has been empty, without meaning and without love. He sees that his values and his way of living have been false. At one point he sees his life and values reflected in the friends who have come into his room. Tolstoy writes,

> In them he saw himself - all that for which he had lived - and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible deception which had hidden both life and death.[5]

He now recognized that his life was a total failure. Like Mickey Sachs in the movie *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Ivan did not ask what his life amounted to until he was confronted by death. It is precisely the reality of death that invites us more compellingly than does any other human event to deepen our self-understanding and to reach for greater profundity in our grasp of what it means to be human. But we need not wait until it is too late as Ivan did. Recognizing that our lives will some day be over, we may ask, "How shall I live *now* so that when I die I shall not feel that I have lived in vain?" Awareness of death can show us how to value life more highly.

A scene in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* poignantly depicts this point. Emily, a young woman from Grovers' Corners has died in childbirth. She comes back from the grave to relive her twelfth birthday. We see her coming down the stairs on her birthday morning. Her mother greets her lovingly and comments on each gift as she opens the packages. Then from off stage we hear her father calling. Emily is overcome with emotion and says to the Stage Manager:

"I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another."

She breaks down sobbing.

"I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back — up the hill — to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by. Good-by, world. Good-by, Grovers' Corners. . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

Then through her tears she asks the Stage Manager:

"Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute?"

"No," replies the Stage Manager . . . "The saints and poets, maybe — they do some." [6]

We do not have to come back from the grave to realize the preciousness of life and to want, in Kipling's words, "to fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run." Our awareness that death awaits us can be enough to deepen our appreciation of life and to affect the way we live.

Then, when death comes, those of us who have been able to live well and to accomplish what we set out to do will die in peace. Satisfaction with what we have done with our lives makes all the difference in facing death, a point illustrated by this poem of Holderlin's:

A single summer grant me, great power, and
A single autumn for fully ripened song
That, sated with the sweetness of my
Playing, my heart may more willingly die.

The soul that, living, did not attain its divine
Right cannot repose in the nether world.

But once what I am bent on, what is
Holy, my poetry, is accomplished,

Be welcome then, stillness of the shadows' world!
I shall be satisfied though my lyre will not
Accompany me down there. Once I
Lived like the gods, and more is not needed.[7]

Death gives meaning to our lives in that our awareness of it pushes us to make the most of the one life we have been given.

11

BEING HONEST WITH DEATH

Let it not be a death, but completeness.

Rabindranath Tagore

When we are weary and in need of strength,
we remember them.
When we are lost and sick at heart,
we remember them.
When we have joys we yearn to share,
we remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live,
for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.

from Jewish service, *Yom Tov*

Is there not a certain satisfaction in the fact that natural limits are set to the life of the individual, so that at its conclusion it may appear as a work of art?

Albert Einstein

Earlier I referred to the rabbi who said that Unitarian Universalism did not qualify as a viable religion because it did not deal with death. I disagree. I believe liberal religion does deal with death in ways both honest and helpful.

However, whether or not a religious perspective may be said to deal adequately with death depends largely on what one considers to be adequate. Some assume that the only adequate answer to death involves some form of belief in individual survival after death. It surely consoles many, but it is surely also *not* the only form of hope or consolation. In a culture where belief in life after death can no longer be

taken for granted, liberal religion offers other responses to the reality of death. These are bona fide religious responses that are both honest to the critical mind and satisfying to the yearning spirit.

An important element of any honest response to death is the acknowledgement that ultimately, death is a mystery. We do not know and can perhaps never know with certainty what happens after death. We ought to be chary of any religion or philosophy that claims too much. Here as elsewhere the religiously liberal will maintain that the quest for truth is not completed, and that we need to remain open to new discoveries and new possibilities. Whatever else we may say about death or life after death, then, let us begin with the honest affirmation that death is one of life's deepest mysteries.

I suggest three perspectives a liberal faith can affirm which will help us in facing death. First, *death is a natural thing.* In the Garden of Eden story death is seen as a punishment for sin, for when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were condemned to return "to the earth from whence they came." In the New Testament Paul refers to "the sting of death." Our culture in general and conservative Christianity in particular have instilled in many of us the sense that death is evil.

Religious liberals by and large understand human life as a part of nature. We regard human nature not as a composite of natural and supernatural elements, but as the highest product of the natural evolutionary process. All things in nature sooner or later die. We accept that. Seeing ourselves as part of the natural world, we can perhaps accept our own deaths more easily. I find it very satisfying to affirm death

as nature's way of making room for others, to give others a few years of life on this beautiful earth and to allow us the joy of sharing life with our children, grandchildren, and others. As a natural thing, death cannot be evil; it simply is.

The poet expresses this sense of all life as part of the ongoing process of nature in these words:

> The old log in the woods will never be a great
> tree again . . . things never go back — yet
> lying there — covered with moss — it is
> creating new life — which in turn will be
> great and beautiful. . .
>
> The fish eats the insect — the bird the fish —
> the mammal the bird — and — the insect the
> mammal — as each — in a universal rhythm is
> creating new life — for there is no life
> except life which comes from life.
>
> Waters flow where daisies grew —
>
> Trees grow where swans once swam. . . .
>
> All things upon this earth are developing into
> new things — from what is here must come what
> is to be . . . there is no other material . . .
>
> This is the fulfillment of the promise of life —
> nothing can be destroyed — everything is being
> created. . .[8]

The corollary of acceptance of death as a natural thing is a sense of life continuing in the great living whole. Here is a great source of consolation! Shelley expresses this thought beautifully as he writes of his lost friend,

> He is made one with Nature; there is heard
> His voice in all her music, from the moan
> Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird; . . .
> He is a portion of the loveliness
> Which once he made more lovely . . .[9]

Liberal religion also offers hope and consolation in the face of death because it teaches that *life and love are*

stronger than death and hate. Death is not the meaning of life; the meaning of life is the satisfaction and struggle and triumph of living. We do not have to be immortal to find joy and fulfilment: It is enough to live with courage and dignity.

This theme is poignantly illustrated in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea.* The old man, Santiago, a fisherman, has had a string of bad luck. He has caught nothing for 84 days. It is September and soon the waters will be too rough for frequent fishing. On the 85th day, long before sunrise, the old man sets out once again. This time, determined to find fish, he goes beyond the usual fishing waters, farther out into the sea where the water is deeper and the bigger fish live. He sinks his baited lines down deep, that they might attract a large fish, and indeed it is not long before they do. But the fish on his hook is too large for him to pull in. So he lets it pull him and his little boat farther out to sea. When the fish tires, then he will be able to kill it. The great fish pulls the old man and his boat for two days and two nights in a titanic contest of strength and endurance. The old man cannot sleep, for he must be ever alert in the event the fish should take a sudden dive and pull the boat down with him. With the line around his back, Santiago holds it in one hand so he can take up the slack or give the fish more line. The line cuts his hands and his back. He is bleeding and in pain. But he will not give up until he has caught the fish, or it has killed him.

Finally the fish tires, and Santiago is able to drive his harpoon into its heart. He lashes the fish to the side of the boat and begins the long journey home. He has won his prize; he has done the impossible, alone. With only his stamina, will and intelligence, he has overcome the great fish.

His victory is short-lived though; for soon the sharks come. Unable to repel them, Santiago resigns himself to the fact that they will devour his fish. Eventually he reaches shore and ties up his boat with the skeleton of the great marlin lashed to its side. Exhausted, near death, the old man stumbles up to his shack and falls asleep on his bed of old newspapers.

What have we here? Is this a story of victory or of defeat, a tale of triumph or of the futility of life? To me it is a brilliant and moving parable of the human situation. We struggle and sacrifice and give all we have, apparently only to lose it in the end. But in fact we do not lose what is really important. The old man lost his fish, but neither death nor the sharks could take away the satisfaction of his efforts or the triumph of his victory. It does not matter that the old man returned with only a carcass. From a material standpoint, the carcass was worthless, but spiritually it was everything. For it represented the triumph of the human spirit against great odds.

To me the story is a great modern parable of the victory of life over death. The old man will die, but it does not matter because his life has meaning and purpose. He has accomplished what he set out to accomplish. Santiago says it well, "Man is not made for defeat. . . A man can be destroyed, but not defeated." [10]

It is not the material results of life that are important. Not what we accumulate, not what we save, not even the list of achievements we can point to. What counts is the living — the seeking, striving, risking, suffering, the capacity to live our days to the fullest.

And to love. There is a great deal of love in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago loves the sea and he loves the fish. He calls the fish his brother. He does not want to kill it, though he must. His love for nature is deep and sustaining. There is also deep love between the old man and the boy whom he has taught to fish and who cares for Santiago, bringing him food and coffee and bait. And this love, too, sustains them both.

Life and love are stronger than death. As long as the human spirit rises to the challenge of each new day and each new epoch, as long as we pursue worthwhile goals, as long as we strive, struggle, suffer and endure, just so long do we find joy and fulfilment. As long as we give ourselves to each other in love, just so long do we find meaning and satisfaction. In these ways we prove that life is stronger than death.

Finally, liberal religion can offer a kind of immortality: *we are immortal in the sense that who we are and what we do lives on after we die*. Occasionally I am asked to conduct a funeral or memorial service for someone I did not know. In that situation, I always meet with the family before I prepare the service so that I can get a better sense of the person whose life we are commemorating. I ask family members to tell me about him or her. As I listen to them speak of their deceased mother or father or wife or husband, I often have a strong sense that the dead person continues to be a very real and important presence in their lives. After the service I am often told that my words suggested that I knew him or her well, and I sometimes reply, "I did, though I only met her (him) after she (he) died."

Our influence lives on after our death.

Were a star quenched on high
For ages would its light
Still traveling downward from the sky
Shine on our mortal sight.

So, when a good person dies,
For years beyond our strife
The light he or she leaves behind
Shines on our common life.[11]

We experience immortality in the sense that our spirit and our influence live on. And this suggests that the kind of life we live is terribly important. For if we live on through the lives we touch, then the ways we touch the lives of others is what really matters. In a word, it is precisely what we are able to give of ourselves to others that lives on after we die. What we keep dies with our body. A fundamental truth of human existence is that we transcend death insofar as we live in and through each other.

Robert G. Ingersoll wrote,

> Let us believe that pure thoughts, brave words, and generous deeds can never die. Let us believe that a noble self-denying life increases the moral wealth of [humankind], and gives assurance that the future will be grander than the past.

Our giving to one another has a ripple effect, like a stone thrown into the water. The ripples continue to be seen in ever-widening circles long after the stone has dropped from sight. So our lives may continue to influence the world long after we have gone to our graves.

Through organ donation or the donation of our bodies to medical research, modern medical technology offers many of us a tangible way to make our lives count beyond death. The donation of a good organ can save and extend another's life, and the donation of one's body to research may also indirectly help others. Where either of these is a possibility, it becomes an ethical imperative for those who care about others.

The liberal religious community plays an important role in enabling us to live on in memory and influence. It provides opportunities for service to others. In that way our impact on the world is increased. The community also provides ways in which we can be remembered, in a memorial service and also at later times, at a service on Memorial Day weekend, for example. This passage from the Jewish *Yom Tov* service speaks eloquently of the role played by the living in immortalizing the dead:

When we are weary and in need of strength,
we remember them.
When we are lost and sick at heart,
we remember them.
When we have joys we yearn to share,
we remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live,
for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.

"All this is well and good," I can imagine someone saying, "with respect to those who are granted long life. But what about the death of children? What kind of hope or consolation does liberal religion offer to the parents of a dying child, or to the child herself?"

What consolation can any religious teaching give? Even the promise of another life beyond death will not bring back the child nor ease the pain of separation and loss. Some forms of traditional religion add an awful burden by implying that untimely death may be a punishment of God on the parents. Religious liberals find this repugnant.

When a child dies, the liberally religious offer the consolation of caring friends and a faith that a short life is better than no life, and has meaning. These words, written by a grief-stricken father and read at the funeral of his

fifteen-year-old son killed in a shooting accident, express these thoughts.

> Rob, you have had a happy and productive fifteen years. You have added to our lives as we have added to yours . . . Your life has been worth living even though it was shorter than we would have liked. Even in death you have helped at least two others live a better life by donating portions of your body.

The family had donated the boy's heart and liver. And in lieu of flowers they had requested that donations be made to a group lobbying for stricter gun-control legislation. Through these, too, they were able to think of their son's death as not having been in vain.

At whatever age death may come, I find it helpful to think of ourselves, not as totally discreet and separate beings, but as part of a Great Living System or, to change the metaphor, a Great Stream of Life. Earlier I wrote of the new myth of the unity of all things. According to that myth, birth is our emergence onto the surface of the great stream of life and death is our re-emergence back into the whole. Within this context life is the time when we have individual conscious being, and opportunity to enrich the whole. Upon our death, we no longer exist as self-conscious individuals, but we are still a part of the whole.

With a profound sense of both our unity with all things and our continuing presence in the world, Tom, the union organizer in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, memorably says good-by to his family:

> "Maybe . . . a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one — an' then — "
>
> "Then what, Tom?"
>
> "Then it don't matter [if I die]. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where — wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. . . I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' — I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. And when our folks eat the stuff they raise, and live in the houses they build — why, I'll be there. See? . . .[12]

Even the great rationalist Bertrand Russell expresses this idea when he writes:

> An individual human existence should be like a river — small at first, narrowly contained within its banks — then rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. But, gradually, as the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and, in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.

Death is one of the deepest mysteries we human beings face. We cannot say with assurance what lies beyond this life. We can affirm with certainty that those able to live in such a way that their lives count, those who give of themselves in deeds of love, those who act in behalf of justice and mercy, attain a sense of life that knows no death. If we live like that we attain a genuine immortality like that celebrated in these familiar lines of George Eliot's poem:

> Oh, may I join the choir invisible
> Of those immortal dead who live again
> In minds made better by their presence; live
> In pulses stirred to generosity,
> In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
> For miserable aims that end with self,
> In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
> And with their mild persistence urge men's search
> To vaster issues. So to live is heaven:
> To make undying music in the world . . .[13]

The measure of our lives is not the length of our years, not the quantity of life, but the quality of our living. Paradoxically, the better we live the more likely we are to be able to regard death not as an enemy but as "the last stage of life." (Elizabeth Kubler-Ross)

We have come full circle again. We have spoken of a liberal religious understanding of the meaning of life in terms of the contribution we make to the world and in a larger sense to the ongoing evolution of the Great Living System. Our awareness of being part of and contributing to the Great Living System can enable us to accept death with serenity and a sense of completion. Ours is the faith that our lives are not lost or meaningless. We are part of an ongoing, perhaps eternal process. Our faith makes it possible to face death with courage and with thanksgiving for having been given the splendid gift of life.

NOTES

PART I: The Nature and Resources of Liberal Religion

1. "Culture," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. IV, pp. 641-642, cited by John Ruskin Clark, *Highroad to Advance*, ed. Irving R. Murray, Pacific Grove, CA: Boxwood Press, 1976, p. 3.
2. Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, p. 56.
3. There are many excellent books dealing with theology from a feminist perspective. For an especially interesting discussion of the differences between male and female symbolism of deity, see Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
4. Albert Einstein, *Cosmic Religion, with Other Opinions and Aphorisms*, New York: Covici-Friede, 1931. Quoted by Judith Walker-Riggs, "A Cosmic Theology," in *What Unitarian Universalists Believe: Living Principles for a Living Faith*, The Unitarian Universalist Denominational Grants Panel, 1987, p. 74. Emphasis added.
5. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1982, p. 177-8.
6. Alice Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
7. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939, pp. 26-32.

PART II: The Crisis of Meaning and Purpose

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, New York: Vintage Books, 1960, p. 3.
2. Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933, p. 61.
3. Mario Cuomo, quoted by Judy Mann, *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1985, p. B-3.
4. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 38.

SESSION FIVE

THE CRISIS OF DEATH

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Participants should have read **Part V**, (pp. 121-142) before this session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1) Discuss some of the ways we deny death (a) in our society and (b) as Unitarian Universalists.
   - Do you agree that these forms of denial of death actually serve to increase our fear and anxiety about death?
   - Do thinking and talking about death help to alleviate your anxiety about death?
   - In your view would life be better without death?
   - How does death give meaning to life?

2) Discuss some of the ethical issues:
   - What do you think should be done about a person who is brain dead or in a "persistent vegetative state."
   - Should such people be sustained indefinitely by life-support equipment or should the patient be allowed to die?
   - What about assisting terminally ill people to die?
   - How do you feel, for example, about the woman (a UU by the way) who used Dr. Kevorkian's "suicide machine" to die before Alzheimer's Disease incapacitated her further?
   - Should we have the right to terminate our own life if the quality of life is terribly diminished?

3) Chapter 11 suggests three affirmations of a liberal faith about death:
   - Death is a natural thing; it is part of the process of nature.
   - Life is stronger than death; life is good even though we die.
   - We are immortal in the sense that our influence lives on after we die, and that we continue to be part of the eternal evolutionary process of the Great Living System.

   Discuss each of these in terms of

   (a) the degree to which it helps one face the prospect of one's own death, and
   (b) the degree to which it offers consolation in the face of the death of a loved one.
   Do these three affirmations offer an adequate answer to the crisis of death?

   Are there other affirmations that Unitarian Universalists can make that would increase the adequacy of our response to the crisis of death?

4) Is the book wrong in suggesting that most religious liberals do not believe in the traditional concept of life after death, the idea that we survive as conscious individual persons? What do you believe about life after death?

5) The book concludes by repeating a theme found intermittently throughout, that we are part of a single Great Living System that is continually evolving and that what we contribute to that Great Process lives on. How helpful is this theme in giving meaning to life and consolation when death occurs?

CLOSING

Read the poem, bottom of page 137, top of page 138 and the quote by Ingersoll on page 138. Allow a minute of so for silent reflection, then read the quote from *The Grapes of Wrath* that begins on the bottom of page 140. Close with another minute or so of silence.

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For additional reading suggestions, see the "Notes" at the end of the book.

Additional copies of A FAITH FOR ALL SEASONS: Liberal Religion and the Crises of Life may be ordered from:

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