



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Yule/ Winter Solstice Musings: From Darkness to Light

Thirty years ago, it was January 1991.. I had just moved from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Boulder, Colorado, with my fiance who assured me that Boulder was the 'healthiest city in the America...

We had just bought a house and were planning to be married that summer, and Life was opening up. In April, I flew home to Philadelphia to finish off a required weekend seminar for my Masters degree programme in Spiritual Psychology and mom and dad picked me up at the airport on a Thursday night.

As my 3 younger sisters had all moved out from home, I spent a quiet evening with just the three of us..mom, dad, and me. The very next morning, I was jarred awake from a deep sleep by my mother...'Sally, it's Dad!..' She had received a call from my dad's office wondering why he wasn't at work yet. She then heard the radio playing in the bathroom and found my father lying there, on his back on the bathroom floor...he had died suddenly of a massive heart attack. He was 60 years old.....Last year, I turned 60....

It was eight years ago, I faced my own death when I had to unexpectedly undergo urgent open heart surgery. Never before in our lifetime has humanity as a whole faced the fear of death as we have during this covid event.

As the late poet, Mary Oliver, wrote in her poem 'In Blackwater Woods'...Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'

Just like my father, none of us know what day will be our last...I'd like us to try on the Buddhist practice today of Marañāsati or (mindfulness of death, death awareness) Maranasati is a practice of remembering (frequently keeping in mind) that death can strike at anytime and we should practice living with great care with an urgency in every moment.

In his article "Shining the Light of Death on Life"...former Harvard medical school psychology professor and founder of Cambridge Insight Meditation centre in Massachusetts, Larry Rosenberg, writes:

"Our culture does not encourage us to face death while we are still very much alive. This culture is inside us, so without knowing you, I can assume, perhaps safely, that there may be some obstacles, some resistance to taking on a contemplation of this sort. I don't think it can be put any better than in the "Hollywood wisdom" of Woody Allen, who in one of his movies says, "It's not that I'm afraid of dying; it's just that I don't want to be there when it happens!"

Even when we are terrified (at some level) of dying, we usually put this inevitability far ahead of us, in some distant future. This is easier to do when we are younger—"we still have lots of time." We don't really know very much about our relationship to a profoundly obvious and fundamental fact—that we could die at any moment.

However, as we grow older, we begin to realise that we are all companions in old age, sickness and death—seeing this more clearly can help us see how precious each one of us is.

There is no way to be exempt from death. Those we love must also die. Really seeing this can enable us to see everyone more sympathetically. In the words of Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, "Life is impermanent, but that does not mean that it is not worth living. It is precisely because of its impermanence that we value life so dearly."

One thought I find comforting around the topic of death is found in the Law of Thermodynamics- This law supports the theory of eternal life..life everlasting...in Christian terms, resurrection...in Hindu / Buddhist terms, reincarnation

The law of thermodynamics holds that ENERGY cannot be created OR destroyed...it only ever changes form.....the same is true for our life energy...we will all disintegrate at some point, and then be transformed and reconfigured as we continue to participate in the great dance of the cycle of life...

I'm again reminded of a line from that same Mary Oliver poem:

To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go....

As Sufi poet Jelalladin Rumi said, 'Life is a balance between holding on and letting go.' - The famous serenity prayer comes to mind...'God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, to change the things I can, and the courage to know the difference.'

Story: There is an ancient Celtic myth, told traditionally around this Winter solstice time of year....It's about The Holly King and Oak King, twin brothers. ...The Holly King appears as a woodsy version of Santa Clause...he dresses in red, wears a sprig of holly in his tangled hair, and is depicted driving a team of eight stags. The Oak King is portrayed as a fertility god and appears as the Green Man or the Lord of the Forest. The Holly King and the Oak king are personifications of the winter and summer in various folklore and mythological traditions. Their story is one of sibling rivalry as a metaphor for the perpetual dance of struggle, victory, surrender and defeat between the twins. The two kings engage in endless "battle" reflecting the seasonal cycles of the year:

At midsummer, the power changes hands, and The Oak king surrenders to his brother the Holly king once again. The story is a reminder to us that life goes on in the endless cycle of life, death and rebirth.

I know we Unitarians are scientifically-minded, so I'd like to share a scientific story

Of birth and death - which demonstrates that faith, wonder, and the great mystery of life and death are not incompatible with science...Here is a chant by Unitarian Evangelist, Connie Barlow which demonstrates that point. Connie and her husband Michael have been living on the road in their van for the past 11 years, visiting Unitarian churches, schools, colleges, and other places open to hearing her 'Story of the Universe'. Have a listen and chant along :-)

The 'Stardust chant' by Unitarian Evangelist, Connie Barlow: (or words in oos)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TV3psseT4M>

Amen - **Question to ponder:** What in your life do you need to surrender to death for new life to be reborn in you? What will you let go of to make room at this Mataariki, Winter Solstice time for new beginnings? What attitudes, relationships, habits, objects, etc...

C. Sally Mabelle 2021