

**Coming to Terms**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Reading** – from “Dear Gift of Life” by Bradford Smith, Quaker writer and teacher  
“Dear Gift of Life” is a collection of journal entries and poems written by Bradford Smith following the cancer diagnosis that led to the end of his life at the age of 54

No one has reached maturity until he (or she) has learned to face the fact of his (or her) own death and shaped his (or her) way of living accordingly.

Then the true perspective emerges. The preoccupation with material things, with accumulating goods or fame or power, is exposed.

Then each morning seems new and fresh, as indeed it is. Every flower, every leaf, every greeting from a friend, every letter from a distance, every poem and every song strikes with double impact, as if we were sensing it for the first and for the last time.

Once we accept the fact that we shall disappear, we also discover the larger self which relates us to our family and friends, to our neighborhood and community, to nation and humanity, and, indeed, to the whole creation out of which we have sprung. We are a part of all this, too, and death cannot entirely withdraw us from it. To the extent that we have poured ourselves into all these related groups and persons, we live on in them.

**Sermon**

The question is not whether those we love will die. It is when and how.

It is not about whether we will receive a phone call, a text, or learn in a hushed and painful conversation that someone we love has just been diagnosed with a serious illness: for example cancer or Alzheimer’s Disease. It is when and under what circumstances.

The question, then, is how will we, how do we, come to terms with such things, with the realities of illness and death, realities that have or will affect us all, sooner or later.

Now, I need to be clear about two things at the outset.

First, to “come to terms” with a serious diagnosis does not mean coming to like it.

And second, though the phrase “coming to terms” might suggest a sort of negotiation, it is clear that in these sorts of situations the negotiation, if that’s even what it is, is pretty one-sided. The other side – namely mortality – in the end holds all the cards.

To put it another way, though there is often much we can do to recover from a particular illness or to extend life, often good and comfortable life, in the midst of serious illness for ourselves or for someone dear to us... in the end comes, however long or short the winding road... the end. Depending on your theology and beliefs about another life or afterlife, at the very least the end of this mortal life.

My first experience with coming to terms with the serious illness of a loved one that would inevitably end with death was when I was just eight or nine years old. My grandfather (my father's father) had what was back then always called Lou Gehrig's Disease, what we now usually name ALS.

I had observed Grandpa getting weaker and weaker, first needing a cane, then a walker, then spending most of his time in bed, then not even being able to turn the switch of his bedside lamp. But somehow it hadn't occurred to me, given my age at the time, that Grandpa would die, and maybe soon. I certainly knew that everyone dies, but I don't think I let that knowledge sink in when it came to Grandpa.

So I remember vividly a conversation with my mother in our kitchen. I can picture the green linoleum floor, the clothes washer and dryer, the light coming through the windows. Grandpa was in a nearby hospital at the time, and Mom and Dad of course frequently visited. I must have asked when Grandpa would be coming home. Which led Mom to say, in words that struck me like a thunder-bolt, bringing tears to both our eyes, that Grandpa might not come home, might not get better.

All I remember next is that Mom and I hugged as we stood on that green linoleum kitchen floor next to the washer and dryer.

First lesson when it comes to "coming to terms": hugging is important, maybe even primary. Holding on to each other, whether physically or metaphorically, is essential.

A couple of decades or so later my father called to tell me he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and that the cancer had already progressed further than one would have liked.

Well, I was much older and able to ask all sorts of questions to begin to orient myself to this new reality.

So, second lesson. Information is important, knowing more about just what your loved one (or you) faces – some ground to stand on.

Of course hugging was still important too.

And there is a third lesson, maybe a fourth too, also embedded here. We were living for some time with all sorts of uncertainties as Dad had first this treatment, then another; and for most of that time none of us could know how the future (or how long the future) would unfold for him.

So, third lesson in regard to coming to terms with a serious diagnosis is about somehow learning to live with profound uncertainty... which it turns out is a lesson for life in general, since uncertainty (as I noted last Sunday) is one thing we can be certain of. This is not an easy lesson, learning to live – and even to "live beautifully" as the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron puts it – with uncertainty. But it is essential to a full, wakeful life – in the midst of whatever life brings.

The fourth and related lesson has to do with the place of hope. As long as things are uncertain, why not hope? Why not, while doing all you can, carry with you the hope that it will make a difference, extend life, maybe even result in a cure? Because it may well, and meanwhile hope lifts our spirits whatever the eventual outcome.

Hugging, gathering information, learning to live with uncertainty, and a realistic (maybe sometimes even an unrealistic) place for hope.

Also then: Denial is sometimes appropriate, or at least just forgetting for a time that anything is wrong, that anything bad is happening, and just appreciating the moment, the blue sky, the sunrise, a movie, a joke. Reading Dad's journal entries from that period, it is quite clear that he often experienced a deeper appreciation than ever before for the beautiful gifts of life.

Further – yes, yet another lesson – accepting that all sorts of feelings are normal, human, natural: From anger that this is happening to a loved one (or to you), to regrets of one kind or another in regard to how you’ve lived your life up until this point. All normal, human, natural. We can let them be, notice them, then let them pass, as they eventually will.

One more lesson of course. Eventually the need arises to come to terms not just with illness and suffering, but with the mortality of those we love.

So... back to the story of my father. It was while at General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, early summer of 1987, that a phone conversation with Mom and Dad made pretty clear that the cancer had progressed to the point that it was now a matter of keeping Dad comfortable until the end.

I changed my travel plans, left GA early, and went straight to Charlottesville (where Mom and Dad had retired a few years earlier).

Lesson: A time may come when we have to let go of at least one kind of hope, not imagine that things might turn out differently than how they are turning out.

And, lesson: Priorities. Don’t wait to say “I love you.” Don’t put off the visit or the call. We should do these things when, deep down, we know we should. Which might well be... right now.

Two additional personal examples, and then I’m going conclude with poem from Ric Masten.

Some years after our father’s death, the gradual awareness came to my brothers and our families that Mom was having significant memory difficulties. How to come to terms with this, with what could and indeed did become a very long journey with Alzheimer’s Disease?

Some of the same lessons to begin with:

Again information was essential to help us come to terms with the likely progression of the disease, possible treatments, and how to be sure Mom was safe and cared for along the way.

Again, appreciating beautiful moments along the way (which Mom herself had always been good at doing) – a sort of momentary denial, as I noted a moment ago, but really just how we ought to live always anyway. As Bradford Smith wrote in the midst of his own illness, “each morning... new and fresh, as indeed it is. Every flower, every leaf, every greeting from a friend... every poem and every song... as if we were sensing it for the first and for the last time.”

And hugging too, always hugging. Or whatever your New England way of showing affection might be.

Also, as I’ve noted, humor, even the gallows variety allowed.

One more lesson from our Alzheimer’s journey with my mother: Being willing to name what is going on, to name it for oneself and for others. We have learned to talk about cancer pretty forthrightly these days, but we are, I think, only slowly getting better at talking about Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. Shame has somehow become attached to these diseases; but there ought be no more shame for this than for cancer or a broken leg. Alzheimer’s is not some sort of personal failing. And if we name what’s happening, we will allow more folks – friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners – into the circle of concern and support.

A final even more personal example. Some time ago I had what turned out to be only the barest brush with a possible quite serious diagnosis. But there were a few weeks of waiting and testing before I was assured that all was well in regard to this particular

possibility. (And just so you don't worry, I assure you that all is indeed well in regard to this long past incident.)

How did I begin to come to terms with serious possible outcomes during those weeks of waiting? A little denial to be sure. But also, again information. Again hugging.

And I also found myself for a little while beginning to re-orient to a possible shorter life than I had ordinarily imagined, re-orienting priorities should the worst indeed turn out to be the case.

Then all turned out to be much ado about nothing.

But look – I, like you, could die tomorrow... or any time. If there are priorities to re-organize, well, wouldn't now would be a better time than waiting for a diagnosis? Coming to terms, not with a particular diagnosis of a loved one or of oneself, but with the vary nature of life?

*All* the lessons apply, however we number them: hugging, gathering information, learning to live with uncertainty, the appropriate and often helpful place of hoping, accepting the natural place of all our feelings and responses, and in the midst of it all, still and always appreciating the moment, the moment with a sunrise, the moment with someone we love.

Here then, to conclude, is an honest and direct poem that implicitly covers most of this territory. It is by the UU troubadour Ric Masten, who composed our beloved final hymn, "Let it Be a Dance." Ric died several years ago at the end of his long journey with cancer. The poem is "End Line" and is "Dedicated to Jim Fulks" – a friend of Ric's:

I've always been  
a yin/yang – front/back – clear/blur  
up/down – life/death kind of guy  
my own peculiar duality being  
philosopher slash hypochondriac  
win win characteristic  
when you've been diagnosed  
with advanced prostate cancer  
  
finally the hypochondriac  
has more than windmills to tilt with  
the philosopher arming himself  
with exactly the proper petard  
an explosive statement  
found in an e-mail message  
beneath the signature  
of a cancer survivor's name  
a perfect end line wily and wise  
quote: I ask God,  
"How much time do I have before I die?"  
"Enough to make a difference."  
God replies.

So it is. So is it always.