

Through the Valley
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
February 16, 2020

Readings

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

from "Dear Gift of Life: A Man's Encounter with Death" by Bradford Smith

Hill and valley and still water, mountain and canyon and deep are the work of one creation; and why have I been placed in it? And what do I do in it, with such a little while before I am gone? The valley stays, and the hills I climb now, and the still waters run, and I will be laid somewhere beneath them all. Yet in time they, too, will be gathered up in some mighty motion of fire or flood or ice. Therefore all values are shadowed with death, yet they live in beauty. And the shadow, as in painting, is what gives roundness and ripeness to shapes and colors that would otherwise have little beauty at all. Death rims life with the beauty of transiency. It is because beauty is always passing – clouds moving, waters flowing, leaves scattering, youth aging – that it so pierces our hearts. The valley of life is shadowed by death, but this is my valley and I will live at peace with it.

Sermon

There is an old Sufi story about the student of a spiritual master who was sitting in an inn in Baghdad one day. The student overhears a conversation between two men, one of whom is clearly the Angel of Death, who is saying that he has some calls to make in Baghdad during the next few weeks.

Well, the student is terrified, fearing that one of the calls might be for him; so he travels as fast as he can as far away from Baghdad as he can, all the way to Samarkand.

Meanwhile, back in Baghdad the Angel of Death meets the student's master and asks him where this young man might be found. Upon learning that to the best of the master's knowledge he was somewhere in the markets of Baghdad, the Angel of Death is surprised – for he looks at his list and sees that he is meant to collect the student in a few weeks in Samarkand.

(adapted from *Tales of the Dervishes* by Idries Shah)

We can run away from death, the story reminds us, but not forever. So, better than running away might be to accept life as in some measure an extended conversation with death so that we might learn to *face death with life*.

Along these lines, Bradford Smith, whose words we heard earlier, wrote elsewhere “If we cannot speak freely of death, we cannot really speak freely of life.”

And after all, we certainly have many opportunities for conversations about and with death occasioned by losses, by grief, by illness, as well as by the simple and inescapable reality of our mortality: We, too, will die.

Bradford Smith’s own conversations with death came unbidden and at first quite unwelcome when, in his early fifties, this English professor, writer, and Quaker peacemaker, received a serious diagnosis.

Of this he wrote at the time:

The discovery that you have cancer is also the discovery that you are going to die. Not necessarily from this cancer, this operation, for you may still live to die of heart disease or falling down the cellar stairs. But the message now comes home, strange and yet familiar: I too am mortal.

What did this message coming home to him teach him? Here’s what he further wrote:

...No one has reached maturity until he has learned to face the fact of his own death and shaped his 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.

Other fresh insights came to Smith during those months after his diagnosis as he came to realize ever more fully that he would not have many more months at all.

For example, he wrote of newly discovering or realizing how much of life is just plain fun – most often the simple things (driving a car, mowing the lawn, making a meal, making a pun), nothing exotic or always having to be new and different.

And though Smith acknowledged that “the first natural response to death is fear,” he went on:

...death is a certainty we all face. We usually refuse to face it for ourselves until something forces us to. Then, strangely, the response is not fear any longer, but acceptance, even contentment... You can relax, take time to drink in all that is beautiful... Thus, death opens the door to life, to life renewed and experienced as a child experiences it, with the dew still on it. And so comes the next opening – the sense of being part of a universe, of a personal relatedness to all life, all growth, all creativity...

Once given the vision of one’s true place in the life stream, death is no longer complete or final, but an incident. Death is the way – the only way – life renews itself. When the individual has served his purpose as a channel, the flow transfers itself to other channels, but life goes on.

Most certainly including, as he wrote elsewhere, in the lives of those we've loved and who we've inevitably influenced in ways large and small – another realization that clearly helped him arrive at a measure of deeper peace with his situation.

Then, in the reading we heard earlier this morning, Bradford Smith used a reflection on the 23rd Psalm to affirm the reality of life and death as inextricably intertwined: “The valley of life is shadowed with death, but this is my valley and I will live at peace in it.”

Finally, mere weeks from death as it turned out, and quite aware what was soon coming, he wrote in his journal, “Strange that with so few days remaining to me, they are the most leisured and calm I have ever had.”

Now... I share all this from Bradford Smith with a certain sense of awe – because it is hard for me to imagine that measure of contentment if knowing I had only days or weeks or months to live. But this said, I have seen his perspective echoed in the lives of more than one person – in fact many over the years – who knew their life was nearing its end. Not everyone, but many who have arrived at something like Bradford Smith's peace and contentment with, after all, what is.

My own father kept a bit of a journal during the months following his cancer diagnosis, and some of this same spirit comes through. He didn't like what he was facing and going through – he wrote about that – but he also affirmed the ways in which he found himself experiencing life and love more intensely. And he recalled his own mother, my grandmother, on her death bed, saying “Life is lovely.”

So... maybe acceptance and peace often arrives as part of the natural course of things. It seems to me that it may well be that when death nears we are wired or evolved to – eventually anyway – accept it.

I certainly couldn't imagine this at all in my younger years.

So afraid was I of death as a child that I came to my mother more than once in tears to share my fears.

When I was a little older, so awkward was I in the presence of someone grieving, not knowing what to say or do – to the point of avoiding a classmate in college whose boyfriend from high school had been killed in a car accident.

But as the years have accumulated I've come to realize that facing death, even when we are quite well and apparently not close to death, can enrich, enhance, deepen our living.

(And after all, as Walt Whitman wrote, it might well be that “... to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.”)

Of course we know that not everyone meets their impending death or the idea of death with grace and affirmation. Perhaps we're not even sure if grace and affirmation is appropriate in the face of death, at least not in every such circumstance. The familiar words of Dylan Thomas speak to an alternative view:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

So, what is it to be? Acceptance or rage. Or something else.

Well, as Elizabeth Kubler Ross taught us decades ago: we don't have to choose. Indeed, we could say that Dylan Thomas and Bradford Smith were simply expressing two

of the many ways we respond to death and/or grief – different phases of the conversation we might say, as we face death with our lives, each response with its own integrity and appropriateness, neither wrong nor right, and not coming in some sort of measured, even progression.

In any case, why not engage in some of this conversation with death well ahead of the time when we can no longer avoid it in our last weeks or days or hours, or in the last weeks or days or hours of a dear one? Why not choose to face death early on as an opportunity for our soul's growth in what, yes, we might well call wisdom – or simply as an awakening to richer life? We may not, after all, have weeks or days or even hours at the end.

So why *not* learn sooner than later, as Bradford Smith suggested, to with eyes more fully open walk the valley of life which is and always has been shadowed by death... affirming, with Smith, that this is our valley and we can learn to live at peace as we walk through.

And I don't know about you, but for me among the most peaceful places I know are cemeteries. For amidst the headstones I'm reminded that I'm here for just a moment amidst the comings and goings of a tapestry of life far larger than just us, than just now – and so the “just now” comes into clearer focus, infinitely precious.

Again, opening ourselves to the reality of death opening us more fully to life.

All this said, when it comes to our conversations with death, we can and ought to take care of the practical matters: wills, health care proxies, and so on, maybe even planning our own memorial service... then get on with life more richly lived, maybe working on right relationships, making amends, letting go of old grudges because life is short... and then maybe increasingly finding ourselves more able to let go, as Bradford Smith did, into an experience of profound interrelatedness, even, we might say, of transcendence.

None of this is easy work, whether practical or mystical, this lifetime of facing death with our lives, this lifelong conversation renewed every time we lose a dear one and grieve, renewed with the fear that arrives with the hint of a diagnosis, or a near miss on the road... this lifetime learning to walk through the valley.

Yet we can choose to walk, whether up high peaks or into deep valleys, with eyes open... rather than running away to Samarkand... and discovering that this does enrich our lives, does help us to treasure *these* present moments.

Maybe a bit like the feeling near the end of a symphony, when your attention is heightened simply because you know the music is almost over. Each note, each phrase taking on a brighter, more beautiful quality.

Or like watching a sunset, the gradual dying of the light, the bright reds and yellows fading into pastel pinks, the last gentle colors fading altogether. And noticing that though the colors fade and the darkness approaches, the experience of beauty and the experience of the fullness of the moment somehow become more intense.

And, when it comes to our lives, what then? Well, we might wish to heed the wisdom in Thoreau's famous reply to a friend who was visiting him during his last days, the friend inquiring as to what Thoreau thought was next. His response? “One world at a time.”

So... engaging in the conversation with our mortality, facing the fact our own eventual dying, may we grow into ever deeper affirmation of life and love, grow into the wisdom of a life lived always or at least more often with kindness, grace, and courage.

So may it be.