

# Love and Death

Forrest Church

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First, let me express my gratitude to Lee Barker, the Meadville Board, and the entire Meadville Lombard Community. Thank you for hosting me this morning. Thank you for your generous gift of this Honorary Doctorate. And thank you for all you have done to advance the Unitarian Universalist movement through the training, year in and year out, of many of our finest leaders.

I have come, with growing interest and enthusiasm, to be an unabashed admirer of Meadville Lombard. What you have done together in rebuilding this venerable institution and enhancing its prospects for a shining future is nothing less than miraculous. I stand in awe at your accomplishments to date and harbor the rosiest expectations for an ever more significant future.

This General Assembly is a very special occasion for me. Barring some short of miraculous but nonetheless unexpected turn in my health, it will be my last opportunity to celebrate with you the gift of our chosen faith, a faith that has sustained me and powered my ministry for the past three decades and continues to offer me the comfort and inspiration I need during my final months. This morning, I wish to share with you a bit of my recent journey through the valley of the shadow, a tale I tell more fully in my new book, just out this week from Beacon, Love & Death.

Death is central to my definition of religion. *Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.* We are not the animal with advanced language or tools as much as we are the religious animal. Knowing that we must die, we question what life means. The answers we arrive at may not be religious answers, but the questions death forces us to ask are, at heart, religious questions: Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life's purpose? What does this all signify?

Death is not life's goal, only life's terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.

Today, I turn to the dual theme of love and death with a new sense of urgency. This past February, I informed the members of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, whose destiny and mine have been linked for so many years, that my esophageal cancer, first diagnosed and treated in the fall of 2006, had returned with a vengeance and that my time remaining was likely to be numbered in months, not years. I accept that. In gratitude for my life, I even embrace it. Death is one of the two essential hinges on which life as we know it turns.

Looking back, I realize today that I didn't become a minister in any meaningful sense until I conducted my first funeral. Of all the things I am called on to do, none is more important, and none has proved of greater value to me, than the call to be with people at times of loss. When asked at a gathering of colleagues what gives most meaning to my work, I replied that, above all else, it is the constant reminder of death. Death awakens me to life's preciousness and also its fragility.

My father taught me as he lay dying. So have many of the parishioners who have enhanced my understanding of life by sharing their deaths with me. In this regard, ministers are particularly graced. People teach us how to die, and therefore how to live, almost every day. I have found that one can never have too many instructors in this regard.

Among the things my congregants have taught me, often in pastoral counseling sessions, is this. The glass we look through onto the world

is like a lightly stained glass window. Each pane looks out onto some aspect of our life: our vocation and avocations, our spouse or companion if we have one, our parents, our children, our health. At any given time, some of these panes are likely to be rosy and translucent. We can see through them clearly and their tint casts a gentle glow on the prospect we look out on. My wife is happy. My children are doing well. My friends are there for me when I need them. I enjoy my job. And my hobbies invest my free time with meaning. Imagine, however, that one pane in the window that looks out over our life suddenly grows cloudy. What was translucent becomes first opaque and then almost impenetrable. The tendency is to press our nose up against that one frame, desperately trying to see through it. When we do this, we lose all sense of proportion. Our entire world goes black.

How easily this tendency can kick in when we are dying. The once clear pane of our health, which we rarely bothered admiring the view through when all was well with our bodies, goes dark, and we can see nothing beyond our sickness. With our nose pressed up against the one frame we can see nothing through, all our other lights go out. We then invest our life's remaining meaning in what may be impossible, namely beating our sickness. Nothing else matters.

There's nothing wrong with doing what we can to polish up this particular pane when it clouds over. Any number of things—modern medicine, meditation, alternative therapies—we can and should muster as cleaning supplies. What concerns me is this: Even as we do everything in our power to get healthy again, we may obsess so on our sickness that we lose appreciation for all those things in our life that we would dearly pray be returned to us if someone suddenly snatched them away. The lovingkindness of a spouse or partner. The care and concern of a parent or child. The joy of lifelong friends, whose friendship seems to blossom into full flower with the recognition that we may have precious little time to enjoy each other's company.

A few years ago, I came up with a mantra that has served me as well in sickness as it did before in health.

Do what you can.

Want what you have.

Be who you are.

Doing what we can focuses our minds on what is possible, no more, no less, thereby filling each moment with conscious, practicable endeavor. Wanting what we have mutes the pangs of desire, which visits from an imaginary future to cast a shadow on the present, which is real. And being who we are helps us reject the fool's gold of self-delusion. It also demands integrity—being straight with ourselves and one another.

Those who know my mantra sometimes test me with it. “So, Forrest, do you really want cancer.” “I want what I have,” I reply. “To selectively eliminate all pain from our lives may work, for a brief time, for a drunkard or drug addict, but we cannot selectively wish away all that is wrong with us without including all that is right.” Each day that I am sick, I pray for the sun to come up, for people to love me, for manageable tasks that I can still accomplish, for a little extra courage, for reality to blow all the detritus off my plate. In short, I back away from the bedarkened pane of my health to gain a prospect of the whole window I am blessed to look through. The light then dances again in my daughter, Nina's, eyes. I laugh once more at my little foibles. My son, Frank, and I celebrate the Mets' acquisition of an all-star pitcher. I call my dear friends on the phone and talk for an hour about everything under the sun.

Yes, I kvetch at unseemly waits at the chemo center (until I realize how many other folks have cancer and are waiting in line for their treatments also). I fall into a sour humor, when my body wears down and cannot do what I want it to (until I shift gears and tackle something that lies well within my powers, like a moderately difficult sudoku or one of Robin Hobb's splendid fantasy novels, where almost every character is doing worse than I am). I even snap at my wife, Carolyn, when she tries too hard to fatten me up for the kill. But that, too, eventually is good for a laugh. So I do want what I have, even as I do what I can. Pray for the right things, and your prayers will be answered.

Some of you know from personal experience that a scrape with death makes our hearts beat, not only faster but also more insistently. Aware of life's limit and fragility, we truly mean it when we say, "This is the day we are given. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Much of the time, almost inevitably, we drift through our days. Life lives us, the sand unwatched as it runs through our glass. Death threats are wake-up calls. No longer able to take life for granted, we seize the day and receive it as a gift. We unwrap the present and offer up a prayer of heartfelt thanks.

This doesn't always happen, of course. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, before she got lost in the mystic haze, did important studies of how people respond to their own death announcements. Shock. Disbelief. Anger. Bargaining. And then—finally, yet only perhaps—acceptance. The lesson here is simple, yet profound. We cannot embrace our life fully, until we find a way to accept our death.

Don't get me wrong. I am not happy about the prospect of dying. I have things left to do in my life and regret the interruption of all my splendid plans. My acceptance, however, abides in a deeper place. I am free to die, I realized some time ago, because, although I have much ongoing business, I have no unfinished business. I have made peace with myself, with my fellows, and with God.

Until my own journey into the valley of the shadow, never before had I made the connection between unfinished business and a dread of death. Yet, how often in my pastoral counseling had the subject arisen, when talking to survivors who had not been able to make peace with a loved one, often a parent, before he or she died, or listening sympathetically as they mulled over a life of missed chances and lost opportunities. In such cases, their unfinished business stood almost no chance now of completion. They would remain estranged or their dreams remain unrealized until the end of their days.

How often I have counseled dying congregants whose death sentence seemed to mark the bitter end of a long, unsuccessful struggle to make peace with themselves. The opportunity had passed, or so it seemed. At times like that, "If only" are the two saddest words in the English language. "If only I had done this or not done that." "If only I had wrenched myself free from some soul-destroying habit or had had the courage to act in some other life-restoring way when I still

could.” My task on such occasions was to remind them that their story was not over, not yet, that there still was time. And indeed, I’ve witnessed amazing last-minute reconciliations and conversions, truly courageous and successful two-minute drills at life’s close that almost miraculously turned the defeat of death into a victory. But, in each of these cases, when acceptance came, it came hard. And often it didn’t come. There was not world enough or time.

Time and again over the past months, I have tested the sturdiness of my acceptance and found it strong. Without really knowing it, you see, I had taken care of business, in my case by stopping drinking some eight years ago and then by following the spiritual disciplines attendant to faithful recovery. I had conducted a fearless moral inventory, made amends where it was possible and appropriate, recovered my good conscience, made peace with myself, with others, and with God. If I hadn’t, when this apparent death sentence came, I know that I would have been crippled by regret. Never have I been so grateful to have attended to my unfinished business when I still could, while there was yet time.

I had more to learn, however. Smugness, which I was teetering on, is not, I quickly was reminded, a lofty spiritual perch, however pleased I may have been with myself. My wife Carolyn, for one, remains stubbornly unprepared to bathe with me in the calm waters of acceptance. She quite appropriately reminds me, by her very presence and concern, that my death isn’t my own, to do with what I pleased. In short, I may have stumbled upon one of life’s secrets, but it was not time to rest yet. I still have more vital work to accomplish.

Her principal concern, quite appropriately, was for the children. They, too, she reminded me, had their own unfinished business to attend to, business with me. They needed to say things they had not said. Show me things about themselves I had missed. Make a deeper connection with me that would sustain them after I was gone.

Little of this was about me. It was about them. Yet, clearly I had more changing to do, in order to be fully present to their needs. Mere acceptance, you see, was too easy, too selfish. The network of relationships, which binds us, and sometimes entangles us, with each other, has its own moral demands that we cannot meet on our own, only together. So I was confronted with a new batch of unfinished

business to take care of. Much—not all, I’m sure, but much—of that business we, together, were able to attend to. It was difficult, bracing, humbling, yes, and sobering, but finally healing, a healing that touched from soul to soul.

What I’m talking about here, by the way, is salvation. The Latin root, salve, means “health.” The Teutonic cognates health, hale, whole, and holy all share the same root. Being an agnostic about the afterlife, I look for salvation here— not to be saved from life, but to be saved by life, in life, for life.

Such salvation has three dimensions: integrity, or individual wholeness, comes when we make peace with ourselves; reconciliation, or shared wholeness, comes when we make peace with our neighbors, especially with our loved ones; redemption, in the largest sense, comes when we make peace with life and death, with being itself, with God.

All our lives end in the middle of the story. There is ongoing business left unfinished. We leave the stage before discovering how the story will turn out. In the meantime, however, to help ensure a good exit, one thing is fully within our power. We can take care of unfinished business. We can make peace with ourselves, reconcile, where possible, with our loved ones, and free ourselves to say yes to the cosmos, to embrace our lives and deaths, to make peace with God.

To be free to accept death is to be free, period. The courage we need comes before, when we face our own demons or reach out across a great divide to touch hands. It is lifework not death work, but it pays great dividends down the line. So, if you need to, put down that drink. Or pick up the phone. Or take that long postponed trip. You know what your unfinished business is. Don’t wait until it’s too late to begin taking care of it. Death may come as a thief in the night, but it cannot steal from you the love you have given away, the strength you have shown in facing life’s hardships, or the courage you have proved in quelling your inner demons. In taking care of your own unfinished business, and in helping your loved ones take care of theirs, you can liberate yourself and them from suffering that, if you wait too long, may one day become intractable, written in indelible ink, darkening the pages of your book of life.

Above all, by taking care of business you will improve the story you are in. Today's works of love and acts of conscience weave themselves into a plot that will continue long after you are gone, yet be changed for the better by your deeds when you were here. Life may not be immortal, but love is immortal. Its every gesture signs the air with honor. Its witness carries past the grave from heart to heart.

By the way, whenever a trapdoor swings or the roof caves in, don't ask "Why?" Why will get you nowhere. The only question worth asking is "Where do we go from here?" And part of the answer must be "together." Together we kneel. Together we walk, holding each another's hands, holding each another up. Together we do love's work and thereby we are saved.

There's a theological point here, with which I'll close. "What did I do to deserve this?" we ask when things turn against us, forgetting that we did nothing to deserve being placed in the way of trouble and joy in the first place. The odds against each one of us being here this morning to pose such a question are so mind-staggering that they cannot be computed.

We're talking miracles here. Not an unlikely miracle, like God parting the Red Sea for Moses to escape the Egyptians or stopping the sun for Joshua to win a battle, but the miracle of water itself, in which living organisms can incubate, and just enough warmth and light from the sun to establish ideal conditions for life to be nurtured and develop here on earth.

Consider the odds more intimately. Your parents had to couple at precisely the right moment for the one possible sperm to fertilize the one possible egg that would result in your conception. Right then, the odds were still a million to one against your being the answer to the question your biological parents were consciously or unconsciously posing. And that's just the beginning of the miracle. The same unlikely happenstance must repeat itself throughout the generations. Going back ten generations, this miracle must repeat itself one thousand times— one million two hundred fifty thousand times going back only twenty generations. That's right. From the turn of the twelfth century until today, we each have, mathematically speaking, approximately two and a half million direct ancestors. This remarkable pyramid turns in upon itself, of course, with individual

ancestors participating in multiple lines of generation, until we trace ourselves back to when our ur-ancestors, the founding couple, whom each one of us carries in our bones, began the inexorable process that finally gave birth to us all, kith and kin, blood brothers and sisters of the same mighty mystery.

And that's only the egg and sperm part of the miracle. Remember, each of these ancestors had to live to puberty. For those whose bloodline twines through Europe—and there were like tragedies around the globe—not one of your millions of direct forebears died as children during the great plague, for instance, which mowed down half of Europe with its mighty scythe.

There's a new book out on the Mayflower. It's quite a good book, telling a lively, unlikely tale. Five of my direct ancestors happened to be on that tiny boat, which brought the first band of doughty Pilgrims to our shores in 1620. Early in the book, I was brought up short when one of the five—remember I wouldn't be here this morning without the unwitting assistance of all of them—twenty-four-year-old John Howland, an unmarried servant, fell off the Mayflower into the ocean halfway across the Atlantic. Miraculously he caught the rope his fellow Pilgrims threw overboard in their desperate attempt to save him, and he lived. Had John Howland drowned, you might be hearing a better speech this morning, but I, assuredly, would not be delivering it.

During their first winter in America, some fifty of the one hundred and two original Pilgrims died. Among those who succumbed were my ancestors John and Elizabeth Tilley, but not their thirteen-year-old daughter, also named Elizabeth, or her ten-year-old friend Elizabeth Warren. Elizabeth Tilley went on to marry John Howland, establishing my mother's American line; Elizabeth Warren married Richard Church, establishing my father's. These accidents of survival, if nothing compared to the almost infinite odds against our winning billions of crapshoots in the sperm-and-egg stakes, are at least somewhat easier to grasp and existentially more meaningful to ponder.

By the way—and this is truly awesome, so awesome that it makes every salvation story in the world's great scriptures seem trivial in comparison—not only did all our human ancestors survive puberty to

mate at the one and only instant that the requisite egg and sperm might connect to keep our tiny odds for arrival alive, but their prehuman ancestors did the same. Then we have to go back further to our premammalian ancestors; and back from there all the way to the ur-paramecium; and then, beyond that, to the pinball of planets and stars, playing out their agon into diurnal courses, spinning back through time to the big bang itself. Mathematically, our death is a simple inevitability, whereas our life hinges on an almost infinite sequence of perfect accidents. First a visible and then an invisible thread connects every one of us in unbroken line genetically and kinetically to the instant of creation. Think about it. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born.

So what did we do to deserve this, whatever this might happen to be at any given moment in our life's unfolding saga? Please! The odds against our being here to ask that impertinent question beggar reckoning. Which is where the second element (accompanying awe) in the fundamental religious equation kicks into play: humility. Here is my favorite etymology: human, humane, humanitarian, humility, humble, humus. Dust to dust. And in between, erupting into consciousness—into pain and hope and trust and fear and grief and love—the miracle of life.

To this miracle, we must each do everything in our human power to awaken. Awakening is like returning after a long journey and seeing the world—our loved ones, cherished possessions, and the tasks that are ours to perform—with new eyes. Think of little things. Reaching out for the touch of a loved one's hand. Shared laughter. A letter to a lost friend. An undistracted hour of silence, alone, together with our thoughts until there are no thoughts, only the pulse of life itself. Imagine an afternoon spent free from worry about the things we have to do, or an afternoon tackling tasks we have avoided. We may not understand any better than before who we are or why we are here. But for this fleeting moment—the one instant we can bank on—our life becomes a sacrament of praise.

If we follow Jesus' counsel and become again as little children, we may even dance in the ring of eternity. At the very least, by remembering that "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" will play for us one last time and then the earthly strains will cease, we will join the dance of life with more exuberance. How much finer it will be, when our band

is struck, if we have loved the music while it lasted and enjoyed the dance.

Amen. I love you. I thank you. And may God bless us all.