THIS BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, May 18, 2025

Unitarian Church North

THE SERMON

This morning…

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

"THIS BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY CALLED LIFE"

I want to focus on the SOMEWHAT-CHALLENGING spiritual idea of this life of ours can be seen as being ***"A Beautiful Tragedy"*** -- a memorable phrase which has been rattling around in **my MISTERIAL BRAIN** now for decades. Now I can't remember the exact time, place, or context when I first heard our earthly human existence described in this simple-yet-poignant way…but I think it was one of my WISE-OLD UU ministerial colleague who long ago shared this idea.

In any case…regardless how or where or from whom I got it, I have long thought that ***"This Beautiful Tragedy"*** is a powerful and apt descriptor of ***"these mortal years on earth"*** in which we so remarkably find ourselves living…and I have never been able to get this spiritual idea out of my head!

[THE FOLLOWING PHRASE GOES BACK UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

"Life is a Beautiful Tragedy"

Life on this mortal earth is for us both:

- incredibly **BEAUTIFUL (while we have the amazingly wonderful gift)** and yet…
- unavoidably **TRAGIC (because at some point, when death comes, we must all give it up).**

Life is:

- a gift of stunning and unimaginable worth…but (as you all well know) it is also
- a temporary gift we must all ultimately surrender.

What **a profoundly vexing spiritual situation** we earthly creatures find ourselves in!...granted an impossibly holy/sacred gift, only to realize we must (eventually) surrender it.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF REV. DR. FORREST CHURCH GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church (1948-2009)

"Religion is about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at home with life, we must make our peace with death."

The Rev. Forrest Church -- who served the flagship ***All Soul's Unitarian Church*** in Manhattan for decades, and was a leading Unitarian Universalist author and theologian until his untimely death from cancer at the age of 51 -- famously proclaimed (again and again, in his more-than-20 books, and in sermons from his New York City pulpit) that <u>all of religion</u> (which is also to say that **<u>all the work of our individual spiritual lives</u>**) arises from – and now I quote him – ***[SCOTT GESTURES WITH HIS TWO POLAR HANDS]*** ***"The <u>twin mysteries</u> of <u>finding yourself alive</u>, and <u>realizing you have to die</u>. To be at home with <u>life</u>, we must make our peace with <u>death</u>."***

This to me is **one of the most spiritually insightful things** anyone has ever said about religion and life. And the "starting place" of Rev. Church's affirmation ***"the mystery of finding yourself alive"…***is the **utter amazement** and **spiritual delight** he took from the fact we human beings suddenly find ourselves in the **UNLIKELY MIRACLE OF BEING ALIVE IN THIS CREATION IN THE FIRST PLACE**. I want to quote him now at some length from a famous sermon of his on this subject, because I think it's

spiritually right on…listen to his words about the holy/gracious mystery of just finding yourself alive!

The odds against each one of us being here this morning 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…but [having] the miracle of water itself, in which living organisms can incubate, and [the miracle of having] just enough warmth and light from the sun to establish ideal conditions for life to be nurtured and develop here on earth. [Beyond the amazing miracle of there being life on this planet at all] ***Consider the odds*** [of ***YOU*** even being here this morning]***. 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 YOU 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, the miracle must repeat itself <u>one thousand times</u> – and [going back twenty generations, must repeat itself] <u>one-and-a-quarter-million times</u>. That's right, mathematically speaking [going back just 20 generations, we each have] ***approximately <u>two-and-a-half-million</u> direct ancestors. This remarkable pyramid turns <u>in upon itself</u>, of course, with individual ancestors participating in multiple lines of generations, until we trace ourselves back to when our [ancient] ancestors, the founding people, 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 miracle. And that's only <u>the egg and sperm part</u> of the miracle.***

In other words, dear friends…as Rev. Church points out…**IN THE TIMELESS FLOW OF THIS CREATION, THERE ARE BILLIONS…UPON BILLIONS…UPON BILLIONS OF REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD <u>NOT</u> BE HERE!**

And then Rev. Church expounds further on this gift (this wholly unlikely miracle) of each of us finding ourselves alive in the first place…

Mathematically, OUR DEATH is a simple inevitability; whereas OUR LIFE hinges on an almost infinite sequence of perfect accidents. [and then (GOING BACK 10 GENERATIONS IN HIS OWN STORY) Forrest tells the true story of how (IN 1620) one of his paternal ancestors, an adolescent Pilgrim by the name of John Howland, fell off the Mayflower in the middle of the Atlantic and, against all odds, was saved by the other shipmates throwing him a lifeline…leading to Church's own unlikely birth – as the son of a U.S. Senator from Idaho named Frank Church -- some 10 generations later!]

Think about it…[Church concludes] ***The*** [ancient] ***Universe was pregnant with us when it was born.***

Please watch with me now this short video clip of Dr. Church summarizing this heart-felt conviction of his that (with our birth) we have each been given an absolutely amazing gift with nearly limitless possibilities.

[THE SHORT VIDEO CHIP OF DR. CHURCH IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adxdiQ9fN0w

Even as Rev. Church faced his own tragic death at the age of 51 from cancer, I can tell you he was personally able to fully affirm **the unlikely blessing of his just being alive**. The last time I saw him (just weeks before he died) his body had wasted away until it little more than skin and bones…yet he still carried that warm and radiant smile of his, was fully engaged with his family and friends and his congregation -- and seemed genuinely grateful (he) just to have the chance to hang around creation a bit longer. In his final book ***"Love and Death"*** (COMPLETED JUST WEEKS BEFORE HE WAS OBLIGED TO LEAVE THIS EARTH) he wrote, ***"Every day we live is a miracle, rich with possibility -- even when, right off camera, the boom is about to fall -- To this miracle, we must each do everything in our human power to awaken [in gratitude]. Awakening is like returning after a long journey and seeing the world [for the first time – seeing]***

our loved ones, cherished possessions, and the tasks that are ours to perform – with new [and grateful] eyes."

And then Church went on in quiet appreciation: ***"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…with our thoughts…until there are no thoughts, only the pulse of life…for this fleeting moment…our life becomes <u>a sacrament of praise</u>.***"

So for Rev. Church, life itself was ***"a beautiful tragedy"***…a holy, unlikely blessing, even though we all must someday surrender it.

[PAUSE…]

And thus we spiritually arrive at the (ALL IMPORTANT) **second half** of Rev. Church's theological observation…after acknowledging how amazing and precious the gift of life is…we arrive at the all-important (and unavoidable) realization of its <u>stunningly tragic dimension</u>…the physical truth that – in this mortal universe -- despite the rich tapestry of life that is set so mysteriously before us at birth…we all must someday

die…surrendering (in an instant) everything we know and love. One minute we are participants in this absolutely amazing tapestry of life found on planet earth...and the next minute we are gone.

And this (my dear friends) is indeed <u>the towering reality of earthly existence</u> that every religion <u>must somehow spiritually address</u>. Every religion must somehow "answer" the UNAVOIDABLE REALITY OF DEATH, if it is to properly come to terms with (and find meaning and purpose in) <u>life</u>.

Now…as I'm sure you all understand:

[*THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]*

Many religions "answer" the "tragedy" of physical death with a belief in <u>some sort of continued existence</u> after our bodies die.

As one author puts it:

Whether it is in some peaceful paradise, a hellish land of punishment, or simply a continuation of the soul or essence in

a new live, this <u>continued existence</u> [most religions promise] ***is known as "the afterlife."*** [Most religions] ***have <u>detailed descriptions</u> of what we can expect after death, as well as how our time on earth affects this afterlife.***

In other words, most religions answer death by promising that death <u>is not really final, complete, and total</u>…and that life (in fact) continues past death in some form, pattern, reality or configuration. Many religions promise their believers that because they get to remain as a presence in creation as some sort of discreet, conscious, spiritual entity…death is not totally real….and certainly not final.

For example…many Christians and Muslims ***"answer death"*** by believing that they will have an actual "afterlife" lived out in either heaven or hell -- based on how well or poorly they lived on earth.

And most Buddhists and Hindus similarly ***"answer death"*** by believing that their human souls will be reincarnated (that is, continued on) into another life -- again based on how well or poorly they lived here on earth. And countless other religions

found around the globe similarly promise **some sort of CONTINUED EXISTENCE (SPIRITUAL OR OTHERWISE) FOR THE BELIEVER.**

But most Jews and Unitarian Universalists and humanists (and now I shift this theological discussion closer to home!) most Jews and Unitarian Universalists and humanists tend to ***"answer death"*** **NOT** by imagining themselves as being able to consciously continue on past death as distinct, spiritual entities…but rather **by focusing on how WELL and LOVINGLY they are able to live their lives while here on earth, and putting their hopes for "continued life" based on whatever spiritual and emotional legacies are carried forward as the creation moves on without them.**

Listen to this poem by Ron Tranmer, which I recently used at a memorial service (at the family's request) for a dear relative of mine – Bob Winship -- who led a long and exemplary life:

[PICTURE OF HEADSTONE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCEREEN]



Headstone dates 1928 – 2017

(marking a 89 year lifespan)

I knelt there at the headstone

of one I love…and cried.

Name, with dates of birth and death

were perfectly inscribed.

I pondered these two dates

and how little they both mean

when compared to the tiny dash

that lies there in between.

***The dash** serves as an emblem*

of our time here on the earth,

and although small, it stands for all

our years of life, and worth.

And our worth will be determined

by how we live each day.

*We can fill **our dash** with goodness,*

or waste our life away.

To ourselves, as well as others,

let's be honest, kind and true,

and every day, live the way

we know God wants us to.

May we look for opportunities

to do a worthy deed,

and reach out with compassion

to those who are in need.

For If our hearts are full of love

throughout our journey here,

we'll be loved by all who knew us

and our memory they'll hold dear.

And when we die, these memories

will bring grateful, loving tears,

to all whose lives were touched

by ***the dash between our years.***

[THE FOLLOWING PHRASE IS PROJECTED UPON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

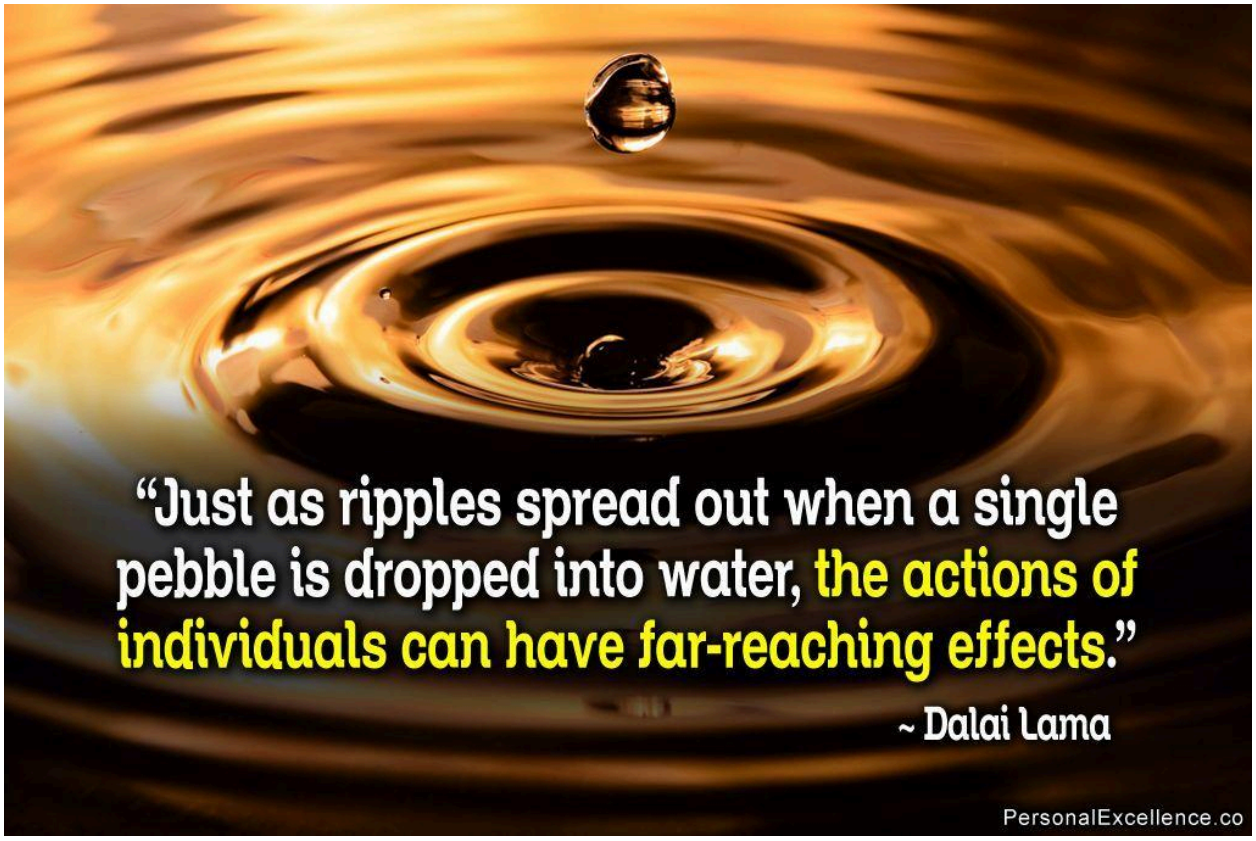
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This sentiment (that we live on in the memories others have of us after we are gone) is what theologians call ***"The lasting immortality of influence,"*** the idea that we mortal human

beings “live on” in this creation -- ***NOT*** in some concrete, embodied, conscious or eternal way as distinct and “definable” souls -- but rather by the NOBLE LEGACIES OF LOVE AND SPIRIT we leave behind in the lives and communities we have touched…in other words ***“It matters how well we live.”***

So…in our UU faith tradition – which is (from start-to-finish) very much focused on the duties and joys we human beings have “right here…and right now” in this worldly life -- death is ultimately answered (and life is made whole and meaningful) by how fully, joyfully, and well you live your life here on earth…and by how actively you lend yourself to life’s beauty, promise, purpose and goodness.

[WATER PICTURE AND QUOTE OF THE 14TH DALAI LAMA IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



The 14th Dalai Lama has written, ***"Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects."***

Let me speak personally for just a moment. As one Unitarian Universalist, I take **real and great comfort** in my long-and-dearly held spiritual belief that **the way I chose to live purposefully and well now on this earth** will (God help me…like the waves from a pebble dropped in still water) ***"ripple out"*** past my

mortal years, and continue to effect the sum total of creation in a life-giving and positive way. The way that Forrest Church affirms this…is by saying that it is THE LOVE WE LIVE OUT IN THIS LIFE (and our love alone) that survives death. I quote him again from his final book ***"Love and Death"***:

About life after death, no one knows. But about <u>THIS</u>, we surely know. There is <u>love after death</u>. Not only do our finest actions <u>invest life with meaning and purpose</u>, but they also <u>live on after us</u>. Two centuries from now, <u>the last tracings of our being</u> will yet express themselves in <u>the little works of love</u> that follow (bead by bead in a luminous catena) extending from our dear ones out into their world and then into the next, strung by our own loving hands. When we ourselves die, <u>the love we have given to others</u> is the one thing <u>death cannot kill</u>. Only our <u>unspent love</u> dies when we die, love unspent because of <u>fear</u>. It is <u>fear</u> that locks love in the prisons of our hearts, there to be buried with us.

[and then Dr. Church ends]

Will my love live on forever? I believe so. And your love [will] too. It will certainly live on after your death, continuing to touch from heart to heart long after you have gone. We know from experience that our indifference, cynicism, and hurt feelings leave* [ONLY] *a little mark. But* [live] *love, and someone, somewhere will remember.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF REV. DR. FORREST CHURCH GOES BACK UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church (1948-2009)

"Religion is about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at home with life, we must make our peace with death."

Let me end this morning by bringing all this just a little closer to home if I can. Despite all my efforts to imagine it otherwise…I am no longer a young man…and I know it! As I approach my 76st birthday this week …my own personal mortality is a little more vivid and real to me than it once was. For the last several years I have lived with the medical knowledge that my body faces both significant kidney and pancreatic issues…and while I am still blessed with overall good health, and am not (as far as I know) staring death in the face…these medical conditions of mine have powerfully reminded me that I most certainly will not live forever. As my friend Rob Stone (who is my age) starkly reminded me over dinner the last time we were together, ***"Scott…we're both now in the 4th Quarter!"*** These days, I am keenly aware that my wonderful, amazing (and yes charmed) life on this planet – this **grand mystery** of being I have hold of for the moment -- will someday come to an end for me.

And a quick aside here…the older I get…and the longer I live… the more my life is occupied with a very real and lively ***"Congregation of Ghosts"***…the beloved "Ghosts" of so many I have known and loved who are now gone forever from this earth. Hardly a day goes by when I am not visited by a memory of one of these spirits. These "Ghosts" don't "haunt" or "trouble" me…they rather live with me (every time I remember them) in a

kind of “holy/joyful remembrance -- much along the lines that Rev. Church imagines when loved ones remember our love and influence. Are any of you similarly “visited’ by such “good ghosts” of friends and loved ones the older you live?...for me, these visitations are terribly common, real and comforting…and they all remind me that my time on earth too will sometime come to an end.

But with all this said, I want to tell you that my life – at this late stage -- has taken on an keen (and not unhappy) spiritual awareness of what Forrest Church powerfully affirmed when he said that life ***“…is all about the twin mysteries of finding yourself alive…and realizing you have to die.”*** There is in my life these days **A QUIET RICHNESS…not the melancholy or existential sadness** one of my dear friends the Rev. Dr. Eugene Pickett described in his later years…but **a quiet richness** that I’m not sure I fully noticed when I was younger (and was not so existentially cognizant about the eventual end of my life). Now well into the seventh decade of my earthly journey, I am now more organically aware of life’s profligate beauty and grace…and the twin reality of its absolute fragility. And so – without any conscious effort or intent:

- I now **savor more fully** my time with family and friends…

- I **take more simple satisfaction** from work, exercise, service, reading, relaxation and sleep…
- I **delight** in the eager and radiant faces of children, and the infinite charm and diversity of everyone I meet…
- nature seems more **vibrant, holy and welcoming** to me…
- and I am **so grateful** – despite the increasing limitations that come with aging -- for what my body and mind can still do…so well.

To me in the 76th year of life, my existence here on earth is a beautiful, tragic, amazing, and holy gift…and I do not resent or begrudge **a single mortal dimension of it.**

For today I am alive…**a sentient and satisfied creature of this earth**…who miraculously finds himself free to LOVE and LIVE and BE and as best I can…and (dare I hope it) leave this world better than I found it…and will have left **my mark of love** upon those I touched.

And I take great comfort – dear friends -- in believing that after I am gone from these familiar earthly haunts, the “ripples” of my temporal human being – the vibrations of my love, decency and care -- will reverberate out, even to the farthest stars. That – for me -- is eternal life enough.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

And though I die,

I for an hour have been alive,

Aware of what it is to be.

The high, majestic hills,

The shining sea,

I have looked upon,

And meadows golden-green.

The stars in all their glory I have seen.

Love I have felt.

This poor dust that is me

Has stirred with pulse of inward liberty

And known extremes of hope, and all between.

Can the small pain of deathbeds,

Can the sting of parting from accustomed haunts of earth

Make me forget the bounty of my birth

or cancel out the grateful wondering

That I have known exultance,

And the worth of being myself,

A song the dark powers sing.

Arthur Davison Ficke