"Beyond the Horizon

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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"At times like these/ we properly cry." So writes poet Nikki Giovanni as she eulogizes her friend, Maya Angelou, in a poem, the art form they shared.

Doc, as Giovanni called Angelou, has died. "A friend was not/Lost nor did she/Transition she/Died." It can difficult to name death as death. Instead we reach for euphemisms to soften the blow.

The role of euphemisms and gentler phrases is an issue on the T.V. show, "The Good Doctor." The title's namesake is a young autistic man who is a surgical resident. He is brilliant at visualizing the body's anatomy and diagnosing problems. However, his struggle to read or deliver appropriate social cues land him in some trouble. Rather than gentle phrases, he simply states bad news to patients without softening the blow in measured phrases.

"At times like these/ we measure our words/ because we are/ measuring a life." The poet Giovanni, one master of words writing about another, chooses each word carefully. Measured words for the sacred task of honoring a life. And the word she chooses is died.

Perhaps it's easier to say "died" with Angelou. She was 86. She had lived a remarkable life whose writing and activism had touched the world. "We recognize a good life was led," measures Giovanni.

And yet, death does not always arrive after many decades of life lived well. Death will also take the young with so much of life's possibility still left unexplored. There is no certainty about when death will come. Only that it will.

Mortality is inextricable from life. We simply *are* mortal. And so how do we live with this knowledge? Do we protect ourselves from the pain of loss? Never allowing ourselves to get too close, too connected, too vulnerable?

Another poet, Mary Oliver, writes, "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."

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To love what is mortal. I think of blowing bubbles. We dip the wand in the sudsy solution and then blow a fragile bubble into life. We know it will not last. Every bubble breaks. And yet, we watch the shiny surface float for a moment in the air and take delight in its short-lived dance. We know the end will come swiftly and so we watch with wonder during the brief flight.

To love what is mortal means opening ourselves to connect with what will not last. Of course, we expect so little time of a bubble and so much more of a human life. We examine statistics of life expectancy in the U.S. or perhaps take a quiz online. We are aware of the ages at which our grandparents, our parents, our friends or neighbors have died and we forge an expectation. We have a vague sense of 'old' to which a person *should* live. And we are certain that babies and children, young adults, sons and daughters, should never die before their parents. And yet, they do. We know they do.

Such young deaths remind us that we all are mortal. There is no guarantee of life expectancy, of a certain number of days on earth or breaths of air. Knowing this, can we still love what is mortal? To live and love in this world, we simply must.

Oliver says, you must hold this love "against your bones knowing your own life depends on it." We are interconnected beings. We cannot exist without our connections to others. We are born of others; our lives sustained by the care of others. Even the most independent of persons still relies on the living and dying of plants and animals for food, for shelter, for clothing. Our living depends upon the mortality of other beings.

Beyond mere sustenance, so much of what makes life meaningful emerge from our connections to other mortal beings. Laughter among friends. Productive work on a team. Holding the hand of a beloved. Cuddling with a furry pet. Walking through a garden in bloom. We delight in the gifts of life. We feel it in our bones. We know how fiercely we depend upon these gifts that we love to help us feel connected and alive.

And these beings are mortal. I doubt many of us walk around chanting to ourselves this too is mortal. Living with the consciousness of death always in mind would likely be paralyzing. But, I wonder if our awareness of gratitude for the gifts in our life is rooted in this deep—if unconscious—knowledge of mortality. We feel it in our bones.

What then are we to do with this love, this dependence, this knowledge? How do we live knowing that what we love and depend upon will be lost?

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It is easy to be afraid. To run from such knowledge. Black author Walter Mosely writes, "We born dying….But you ask a man an' he talk like he gonna live forevah."

To some, especially the young, death feels impossible. This was brought home to me a few years ago when I rode a roller coaster for the first time in two decades. The thrill of heights and speed that I had relished as a teenager had evaporated. Instead, my muscles all tensed as I stared up at the cars flying by high above. *This is dangerous*, my body shouted at me. The calculation of risk had shifted with years. Intellectually I knew the safety codes and engineering. Yet, at a deeper level I felt resistance to risk that I had not felt at 15.

The risks in life are real. We are not going to live forever. And so we must daily choose what we will and will not risk. We choose every time we drive a car on a freeway and accelerate. We choose when we cross a street, take a hike, sit on a train.

As we age, the calculation of risks may shift and change. With time feeling shorter, perhaps an urge arises to take a greater risk. To try something or to say something before it is too late. Or, perhaps we become more cautious with age—more aware of the fragility of life. Aware that our resiliency is not what it once was, aging may teach us to be more careful to avoid a fall or an injury.

And yet, we do choose risks for this is the price of living as a mortal being. To not risk, to not move into the current of action in the world, would be to forgo living. And there is so much good to living. There are ice cream cones on a summer day, a walk in an autumn forest, the first flowers of spring. There is listening to a child's giggle, falling in love, and spending an hour with an old friend. These are just a few fragments of the delights we can find in living. Joys that beckon us into another day, another risk, into continued faith in the journey of living.

Even so, moving through life is not always easy. Not when we encounter loss. Not when we must let go of one we love. Living as a mortal being, loving and depending upon other mortal beings, means we must wrestle with the possibility of loss. When the time comes, writes Oliver, we must be able "to let it go, to let it go."

So much easier said than done.

I'm not even sure I entirely agree. *Tuesdays with Morrie* author, Mitch Albom, writes, "Death ends a life, not a relationship." Yes, death requires that we let go of a person as alive. But, death doesn't erase the relationship we have with a person. In many ways, the process of mourning a death is about changing how we relate to a person. We no longer can sit across

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the table from them, talk over the phone, and feel their hand in ours. But they do remain with us as we remember them, tell their story to another person, or simply feel our heart ache or pulse quicken as we think of them.

However, I know that sometimes this notion of a person only remaining in our memories and in our hearts is not enough. I know some believe in a place called heaven and others in the reemergence of life in different forms. I don't have any certainty about what happens after death. But I am intrigued by stories of those who have near death experiences. I am left wondering. I have felt the presence of a deceased loved one so palpably that I paused to consider the possibility of spirits that transcend our bodies. But I don't know what comes after death. I don't think any of us really know—although many of us may have our own intimations or hopes. And, of course, as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we vary in our beliefs about the afterlife.

None of us may *know* what happens beyond the horizon of what we know of life, but we do know something about life before death. We know that we are mortal. We know that we depend on others. We know that loss and letting go are part of this mortal life.

It is hard to write an 'upbeat' sermon on the topic of death and dying. So what I have tried to offer instead is a bit of honesty. Death is real. We cannot make it go away, nor make it behave on our terms and timing—much as we sometimes try! But what we can do is choose how to live, how to love, and how to let go. We can practice gratitude for the gift of life wherever life brings us delight. We can consider our choices and our risks as we measure the kind of life we would like to live, the kind of legacy we'd like to leave behind. And we can try to understand the pain of loss as the cost of love. It is easy to let go of what is inconsequential. Letting go of those we most deeply love changes us. We are not the same. And that's okay. Loving always changes us. Choosing to risk love opens us to the pain of loss.

These lessons of love and loss are some of the very deepest we will struggle with in our lives. I write this sermon as a minister, but also as a mother, a daughter, a sibling, a friend, and a partner. I fear for the loss of those I love. I fear my own death. And I acknowledge that I have not personally experienced a close tragic death. I apologize if anything I've said this morning feels as if I just don't get it. I probably don't. But I will always try to bring a compassionate heart and a willingness to listen if you want to share with me what its like for you.

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Where is the hope? The 'upbeat' note? I think it is that we are not alone. We can carry each other. We can sit beside someone and listen. And sometimes, as poet Nikki Giovanni writes, "we properly cry."

The tears of loss, of fear, of heartbreak, of anger, or of any number of emotions in response to death and dying are "proper." Such tears remind us of our value of life, of the importance of love and connections, and of the need to grieve as we learn to let go of life as we have known it.

As mortal beings who love other mortal beings, such tears *are* proper as we measure the gift of life and the pain of loss. And while we may sometimes need space and time in which we weep in solitude, my hope is that no one ever feels entirely alone as they grieve.

May we all have the courage to be present to those who grieve, to the presence of death in our lives.

And, may we all have the hope that even beyond the horizon of what we know of life that *in some way* life and love continue.

So may it be.
Amen.

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