"Life Beyond Death"

A Sermon in Two Part
by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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PART I

In his famous poem, John Donne tells us that no one is an island, but that we are all connected, each "a piece of the continent." And because of this connection, when the church bell tolls to announce a death, Donne writes, "send not to know/ for whom the bell tolls/ it tolls for thee."

Recognizing how one death impacts the fabric of life to which we are all connected makes a good framework for why we spend the time today to reflect on some of those who have died this past year. In looking at some lives, we'll also be reflecting on the whole of life. Of course there is no way we can ever acknowledge every death and so today's sermon reflects the art of the curator to select particular pieces to tell a larger story. And the story I wish to tell today is that in a real sense our lives continue beyond our death. In this sense, celebrating Memorial Day and remembering those who have died is not just about the past . . . it is also about how our present moment responds to the stories and events of the past. How does remembering change our experience of living?

As you may know, Memorial Day first began as "Decoration Day" one hundred and fifty years ago in 1868. The celebration started as a day to decorate the graves of Union soldiers who had fought in the Civil War. In our Time for All Ages we learned how this practice expanded after World War I to include all soldiers who died in war. All of these soldiers paid a high cost—perhaps too high of a cost—to live in service of a country, an ideal, a commitment. While we cannot bring back the dead or stop the wars that have already been fought, in remembering their deaths, we also bring to mind why they died. And we are challenged to consider: for what we would risk our life? for what do we live?

In the past year, a 32-year-old woman died in a war that began long ago. On August 12, 2017, Heather Heyer died in Charlottesville, Virginia protesting the white supremacists that had rallied together there. Heyer's childhood friend, Felicia Correa, told reporters, "She died for a reason. I don't see any difference in her or a soldier who died in war. She, in a sense, died for her country. She was there standing up for what was right." Another longtime friend, Justin Marks, shared that he and Heather debated whether to attend the rally. In the end, she felt she had to go. Fighting against racial injustice was the right thing to do for Heather. And for this commitment she died.

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For those who died in school shootings this year, they did not think they were taking a risk by attending school. And yet, according to Everytown Research, there have been 88 instances of a firearm discharging a live round on school campuses in the last year [46 June-Dec, 2017; 42 in 2018 to date]. While many of these did not involve injury, some of these we are very familiar with—the death of 17 in Parkland, Florida in February and the death of 10 in Santa Fe, Texas just nine days ago. Such deaths are senseless and tragic. And yet, a fierce group of students from Parkland have become activists against gun violence so that their friends and teachers will not have died in vain. Some of us followed their call and joined in the March for our Lives. As a religious tradition that affirms the value of each life, showing up to stand against such senseless death feels right.

Unfortunately, no one can guarantee the length of a life. But, the death of students—5-year olds or 15-year olds—feels way too soon. For most of us, the ideal life is a long life: a life that moves through many stages, experiences different kinds of work, and knows love. Indeed, for some, this *is* the life they have. Singer, actor, and minister Della Reese was one of those.

Born in 1931, Della Reese grew up in Detroit where her mother was a domestic worker and her father a steelworker. Then, at age 13, Mahalia Jackson—the Queen of Gospel—heard her sing at a local church and invited Delloreese to join her gospel-choir tour. After some twists and turns of growing into a young woman, Della Reese saw her own singing star begin to rise. And, in 1959, her biggest hit, "Don't You Know," hit #2 on the Billboard singles chart. You'll hear this sung in a moment.

However, singing success did not stop Della Reese from developing other possibilities. As early as 1968, she appeared on TV as an actor. Then, in 1969-70, she became the first black woman to host a national talk-show, filming nearly 200 episodes with guests such as George Burns, Ike and Tina Turner, Tony Bennett, and Ethel Waters. She would also fill in for Johnny Carson as guest host on "The Tonight Show." However, the TV role you may remember her most for is as the supervising angel in the show, "Touched by An Angel." In 1996-2000, the show placed in the top 10. *And*, while filming the show in Utah, she flew back to California on weekends to lead the congregation she had founded as an ordained minister.

The song you'll hear now was written for Della Reese by songwriter Bobby Worth. It speaks to the delight of falling in love—one of the great pleasures of living. Beyond her death, her music lives.

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Part II

In researching who has died in the last year, actors and musicians were certainly the easiest to identify. Talking with Polly about planning today's music, I know the choir submitted many possible names from many genres of music—some of whom we are honoring today. The list of actors is also long, of course, but I want to linger on June Foray. *Who?!?*

June Foray was considered the first lady of voice talent. You've likely heard her work. She was the voice of Rocky of "Rocky and Bullwinkle" fame—as well as Rocky's nemesis, Natasha. She's the voice behind hundreds of animated characters—including Cindy Lou Who in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." Unknown to many of *us* by name, when director Martin Scorsese was asked who he was most excited to have met at a 2007 Oscar Nominee's luncheon—he answered, "June Foray."

Behind the scenes, Foray not only voiced hundreds of characters, she was a leader in the animated industry and successfully lobbied to have animated films receive their own Oscar. Foray died last July at the age of 99. Just a few years earlier, she reprised the voice of "Rocky" in an animated short of "Rocky and Bullwinkle." In remembering June Foray, I think of all those whose impact on their world may be less visible, but widely impactful. I think of those whose love for their work remains until the end of their days.

Stephen Hawking, who died in March, also exemplified a commitment to his work, to his questions, and to a purposeful life. As a cosmologist, he explained black holes. As an author, he wrote the bestselling, *A Brief History of Time.* As a man, he lived for more than fifty years with the diagnosis of the degenerative neuromuscular disease, ALS. While technology enabled Hawking to remain mobile and communicative, his extraordinary success while living with a horrific disease says something about his innate will. In an opinion piece in *Newsweek* following Hawking's death, our own Stephen Winthrop wrote, "I am one of at least 20,000 Americans currently living with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), just a part of the broader worldwide community mourning the passing of Stephen Hawking. ... He has inspired me to focus on what I can do, rather than what my body can no longer do."

When Hawking was first diagnosed with ALS at 21, he fell into a severe depression, explains his *New York Times* obituary. However, when his deterioration seemed to stabilize, his attitude shifted. Later he recalled, ""When you are faced with the possibility of an early death, it makes you realize that life is worth living and that there are a lot of things you want to do." And he certainly did a lot! In his thoughts and ideas as well as his example of an extraordinary spirit, Hawking's life continues beyond his death.

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Leaving behind a legacy of written words is certainly one way to insure a kind of life beyond death—the kind of legacy that authors leave. This year saw the death of a number of popular authors including Philip Roth, Tom Wolfe, and Sue Grafton. I confess that my reading patterns lean heavily towards nonfiction. And so, I am not personally familiar with the genre of these particular authors. However, I was fascinated to learn about Sue Grafton's alphabet novels. In 1982, she wrote a book called *A is for Alibi* about a female detective, Kinsey Millhone. As Grafton's *L.A. Times* obituary explains, Grafton's series was not only significant for featuring a female protagonist, it was a game changer for the genre of detective novels. Grafton's longtime editor, Marion Wood, wrote, "Unlike so many female characters in the mysteries that preceded her appearance, [Millhone] is not a loyal helpmate or willing employee or second banana. Now, how refreshing is that?"

In the end, Grafton would write 25 books in the series with the titles following the alphabet. Her last book, *Y is for Yesterday*, was published in August last year. After a two-year battle with cancer, Grafton died just months later on December 29. She did not leave a manuscript for her "Z" book. In a Facebook post announcing Grafton's death, her daughter wrote, "The alphabet now ends at Y." This story and this line somewhat stun me. For thirty-five years, Grafton lived and wrote within a framework expecting 26 novels. As her enormous fan base waited for and read each book, they participated in the journey. And then, "the alphabet now ends at Y."

What happens when the end of life is not what you anticipated? When the cancer takes you at "Y"? When the car violently careens into the crowd and demands you sacrifice everything for the cause you believed was right? When the shooter arrives at your child's school? When there may have been yet another act, another song to perform? When turning 100 was only a few months away? When you outlive all expectations of your diagnosis, but still leave dreams unrealized and work unfinished?

We cannot answer these questions. Not really. While there may be statistics of life expectancy, ultimately to do with our life until our particular end arrives is the question we can answer. We may not know the moment or the manner of our death—and it may not fall within the range of our expectations—but we can consider how we will live . . . and how our living may continue beyond our death. We all leave a legacy of some kind. Noone is an island. In our living, we are always connected to others. And in our dying, some part of us remains in the fabric of the living. While this does not lessen the painful loss of death, my hope is that it might help us to live well with awareness of our impact upon the world. None of us may end up with obituaries in the *New York Times*, but all of us still are part of the continent of humankind. May we remember those who have died—honoring the gifts of their lives. And may we be aware of the gifts of life and love that sustain each of us this day.

So may it be. Amen.

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