

Rev. Linda Simmons
Thriving Together
Sunday, October 29

I am facilitating a class called, *A Year to Live* in which we take on the concept that we have a year to live. It meets once a month for a year and in it we have set the task of facing ourselves and our lives and what we have so far received from life and what we want from the rest of our lives, which bring up everything in between.

I have been reading the book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande to keep my heart open for the class, keep me strong and humble, remind me that though I have faced my own cancer, I am 57 not 80 and have yet a lot of courage to make room for about mortality.

In this book, Gawande writes about autonomy or what he calls *free action* and how we all want this in our lives and want to keep it but that we want more than this. He says that the “amount of freedom you have in your life is not the measure of the worth of your life.”¹

Though we all want freedom what we want more than this, Gawande writes after hundreds of interviews with elders, is to have lives of meaning, lives in which we feel that we are contributing to something that matters. We need a sense of purpose.

Now this does not mean that we all have to be opening immigration resource centers or joining the front lines of social justice movements. I know we do a lot of these things in this Unitarian Meeting House, and I like so many of you, feel this matters but this is not all that matters here nor can it be because all of who we are has to be home here and all of who we are cannot be on the front lines all the time.

We have to rest, be nurtured, care for our souls and hearts and minds and each other. We have to know that we are good enough just as we are too, broken and fragile and with barely enough to make it through a day sometimes. And we have to be invited into ways of giving and experiencing meaning that is not only through the front lines of social justice, but also like through pot luck suppers and shawl knitting and singing and listening and offering our love and even our vulnerability too.

I read a definition of spirituality in a palliative care magazine that I really loved. It said that spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity in which persons seek ultimate meaning and purpose through connection with others and the transcendent. In other words, spirituality is part of what gives us a sense of purpose in our lives and it has to be big enough to contain all of us.

All that we are and long for needs room here. This is our place. This is our Meeting House, our church, temple, synagogue, and prayer space. And in some ways, we all still want a

¹ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 140.

miracle to happen when we come here. We all want in some part of ourselves a place to lay our burdens down, a place to be redeemed, a place to come home at last, be forgiven and feel we can start again. That is the grand promise of all religion.

But Unitarianism does not give us the freedom from ourselves that we so crave because there is no one here who will tell you that you will rise from the dead and be resurrected through Christ on the day of redemption or that you are a child of god and have been intimately known better than you know yourself now and will be always. Not in those terms anyway. For us, it's all so much more complicated and we are all so much more involved.

But that relief, that feeling that we might still be worthy of another chance, another possibility of love, of getting it right, of really giving what we meant to give to so many, of really receiving what we meant to open ourselves to receiving from so many when we had that chance...that sense of relief and openness and possibility and hope that religion promises is a real need. Which is why religion is still so powerful among us.

Our gift as Unitarians to each other is to claim the gifts of relief and openness and possibility and hope without the afterlife and miracles and resurrections and saints. Not an easy task. This gift makes demands of us. We have to do more than believe, we have to discern and reason and doubt and we have to love; we have to consider, we have to forgive, we have to stay awake, we have to let go of our fierce egos without a Christ or a God who realizes that our fierce egos are corroding our hearts and whose wisdom might offer us some relief from time to time but whose exchange rate is too high for so many us.

We don't believe in an outside force that redeems us, that forgives us, or anyone else, that relieves us of ourselves. It remains ours to carry. And if we promised if only you believed in such and such your burden would disappear, you would scoff and walk out that door. But, we all still want our burdens to be laid down. We are all so tired of lugging them around.

Here is what we do give here, the promise that if you come, that if you show up and keep showing up and open your heart, you will see what hurts in you and find the love and courage around you to offer it up to another in some way, at some supper or auction or meeting or shoveling of a neighbor's snowy driveway and you will feel that person's acceptance surround you and know that they too have suffered in similar ways and that you are not alone or misshapen or crazy or the only one who let your child cry through the night, more than once. You will find the capacity to be human together, to embrace your humanity together, to own your humanity together, to go on in your humanity together.

We can only thrive here together my friends. There is no unifying god who will save us. Only you and I can save one another. Only you and I can show up and give what is needed in this congregation. Only you and I can make the meaning we need so desperately to be whole right here inside the cauldron of our sacred humanity.

If there is not something you need here, then create it. If there is not something you are receiving here, then give it. If there is not a kind of hope you are feel encircled by here, then offer it to another and watch it grow.

We are all we have and it is enough because our faith, our religion has the good news that you are enough, that you are forgiven, that you loved beyond belief, that there is no god that ever condemned you, that none of us are born with sins that are original to our natures as human beings and that we are all belong on this planet and in this meeting house, synagogue, temple, prayer space. This is our space and we need to claim it as ours.

If you want more love, then give more love. If you want more hope, then give more hope. If you need more care, then give more care. That is how we are redeemed here. That is how we make miracles happen here. That is our deepest form of social justice here. That is the good news of our faith. That is the transcendence that holds us in the night when the winds come off the sea and shake us from our peace.

You all know that I look around in my life for examples of what I speak of often as I write so in closing, I would like to lift up Diane and Bob Lehman who as we know will both be going to St. Mary's, Diane to accept a fulltime position as music director and Bob to support and continue to be her biggest fan and cheerleader and whose last Sunday is next week Nov. 5th. I tell you both that my heart and ministry has been moved and changed because of who you both are and the way you show up in this Meeting House community. Diane, the way you accompany someone on the piano while they sing: I hear you following them, letting them lead, slowing down to let them find their way. You offer people a music ministry and it is beautiful, powerful and full of forgiveness and possibility. Thank you for your incredible artistry and compassion.

And Bob, you have devoted over 30 years to this congregation, building and musical legacy. You have given so much of who you are, your art, your love, your humor, your resources, your time, your honesty. You have taught me how to remain balanced and thoughtful in my expression of myself and reminded me to take myself lightly. Thank you.

Together you have both taught us so much about what it is to show up, to give and to receive, to love to be loved, to open ours hearts. This is what religion is. It comes from the word religio, to bind, and you have helped bind us one to another. We all love you both.

It is hard to be a Unitarian Universalist because to be loved, saved and to participate in making miracles still happen takes something that we understood a long time ago, it takes each other and that is messy, tiring, involves a hundred conversations, and more vulnerability than is ever easy. Do it anyway. We are worth saving.

Here's to you my friends. Here's to us. May we go on in love.

Amen.