

**13 April, 2008 ❖ “An Unknown Number of Days”
Rev. Erika Hewitt ❖ Live Oak UU Congregation**

Last March, John and Elizabeth Edwards found themselves at the center of a media blitz – not to discuss John’s political campaign, but to deliver a joint commentary on Elizabeth’s health. In 2004, she had received treatment for breast cancer, but last year her cancer returned and spread into her bones, making her cancer “treatable but not curable.”

In an interview on “60 Minutes,”¹ Katie Couric fixated on Elizabeth’s grim prognosis by crisply noting: “Here you’re staring at possible death...”

Elizabeth replied, “Aren’t we all, though?”

In later interviews, she gently reminded listeners that none of us will escape death. “Anybody at the table gonna live forever?,” Edwards would ask. “Raise your hand if you’re going to live forever. We aren’t. Maybe this conversation about our own mortality allows us to think about how it is we want to use that unknown number of days each of us has.”²

So many of us live with our metaphorical hands in the air: *I’m going to live forever! My days are limitless and unencumbered by the possibility of death!* Perhaps we share Woody Allen’s sentiment: “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don’t want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen. I would rather live on in my apartment.”

But the unyielding truth, however abstract or shrouded in mystery, is that each of us will live for an unknown number of days. How do we bring ourselves, inch by inch, to embrace that elementary but bone-jarring knowledge? What do we *do* with that?

As I see it, sitting down next to our own mortality, and wrapping our arm around its shoulders, demands twin tasks of us: we must reflect on how we shall live, and we must reflect on how we shall die.

That first responsibility, as Elizabeth Edwards suggested, is to “think about how it is we want to use [our] unknown number of days.” *Who am I? What do I love? What is my gift to the family of the earth?*³ These are a few questions that might help us contemplate the experiences and relationships that we exchange our lives for, one day at a time.

This this reflection – how shall we live? – is the matrix for, and subtext of, nearly all that we do as a religious community. “Religion,” says the Rev. Forrest Church,⁴ “is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Just about every sermon I preach, for example, is a lens for viewing our “being alive” and the meaning that we both give to, and take from, that life.

And so... the rest of *this* sermon addresses our having to die: the second demand that our mortality places on us. I'm inviting us to consider our lives' end not for our own sakes, necessarily, nor to satisfy our own need for orderliness.

The responsibility of fully preparing for life's end is one that we take on for the sake of our family and loved ones: those who will mourn our loss most deeply. The fragility of our living calls us to draft plans for how we will each bridge from this life into the unknown: a framework onto which our loved ones can affix meaning and memory; a sense of stability from which they might take peace and comfort after we've gone.

❖ The need for certainty amidst the “merciless, black avalanche” of grief is described in unvarnished truth by Kate Braestrup in her memoir, *Here If You Need Me*. Before she became a Unitarian Universalist minister, Kate was a stay-at-home mom with four young children. Her husband, Drew, was on duty as a state trooper when he was killed by an out-of-control truck. Through her haze of grief, Kate found purpose in the plans that she and Drew had made. She knew that she wanted to bathe and dress Drew's body, to prepare it for cremation. She knew that Drew would not have wanted to be embalmed, and would have opted for “the cheapest possible coffin...the one that will cremate most completely and with the least environmental impact.”⁵ Kate knew that she would be the one who closed his coffin for the last time.

In this excerpt, Kate describes those last moments with Drew, accompanied by her mother and three of Drew's colleagues.⁶ *Note: this excerpt appears on pp 27-29 in Kate's book, and describes the final, tender, wrenching act of preparing Drew's body.*

What granted her the strength to carry through, with her “own hands all the way to the last hard place”? Kate's grace came, in part, from knowing “precisely” what Drew would have wanted, and what he had been prepared to do for her, had she died first. “I had to walk up to that which would hurt me most:,” she writes, “Drew's body without Drew in it...not because it would help me heal...but because it was the authoritative command of an authentic love.”⁷

These words remind me that relationships persist, even when one half of the relationship dies – because when we're connected to someone through a fierce and authentic love, we are still subject to its commands – even when it commands us full-on into the bitter, biting pain of saying good-bye.

❖ It's a myth, I think, that our loved ones will “just know” what to do when it comes time to usher our bodies and our souls through the veil between this world and the next. Conjecture and mourning serve each other poorly. Even today, in a state of cool-headed composure, I don't know what my mom's favorite poem is, my dad's favorite prayer, my brother's favorite charity. I don't know whether they want to be cremated or buried; their organs donated to give life to others or to teach scientists; their last hours on this earth to be spent in silence or surrounded by song and prayer.

How in the world would I begin to speculate on that ultimate tangle of questions, in a cloud of grief, with only my own guesswork to feebly illuminate the way through the darkness?

These questions are not easy ones to broach, of course. It can be painful and awkward, and potentially offensive, to initiate a conversation with *anyone* about death and dying. Tamara Jenkins brought this reality to life in her film “The Savages.” In this brief clip from that movie, two middle-aged siblings attempt to engage in conversation with their elderly father about his end-of-life wishes, having been instructed to do so by his nursing home.⁸

Clip contains awkward conversation between Jon, Wendy, and their father, who finally explodes, “Unplug me!”

Notice that – among the hemming and hawing – euphemisms like “in the event that something should happen...” lead to a dead end (no pun intended). It occurs to me that an unchanging element of spiritual work is its call to name things as they are. As people of faith, we strive to speak the truth about our experiences, our fears, our wishes, and the reality of our human lives. If we’re willing to plumb the depths of “ultimate” questions about our living, then we also ought to be willing to approach the cumbersome matter of our dying.

❖ I’ve listened to this clip a handful of times, and have come to feel deeply for these fictional siblings – for the burden placed upon them by their father’s years of silence on the subject of death. In this imaginary scene, it’s their right to ask questions of him – but it’s also a fair expectation that their father might have considered these questions before they were forced upon him. We have the great power to bestow peace of mind – and peace of heart – when we take it upon ourselves to make decisions far earlier that necessary.

This is the work that we’ll be doing together next Saturday morning, the 19th. On Saturday morning, your Stewardship Committee will host a speaker to guide people through a free workshop on wills, trusts, and estate planning. Following that, your Pastoral Care Associates will host a speaker to guide us through a workshop on end-of-life medical decisions, spiritual care, and emotional healing.

At that workshop, and also this morning, there will also be forms for you to take home – “My Wishes When I Die” – to have on file here in my office.

All of these are opportunities for us to take our dying as seriously as we take our living – and to grant our families and friends the gift of us, and our connecting, “authentic love” even when we have been removed from our relationship with them.

❖ Just imagine: imagine getting your wishes, your plans, all laid out in advance. Or don't imagine – just listen to this excerpt from Garrison Keillor's newest book, *Pontoon*. In this chapter, a woman named Barbara discovers a letter written to her by her mother, Evelyn, who has just died.

In Keillor's book, this passage appears early on. The letter to Barbara contains a few surprises, but very explicit – if unusual – instructions from Evelyn: to lay her out in the green beaded dress from Raoul, and to place her ashes inside of her bowling ball, which should be dropped in to Lake Wobegon to the music of Andy Williams' "Moon River."

So, there's the rub: sometimes, in the wake of death, secrets come to light. Sometimes our survivors are shocked by all that we held private under the covers of our days and nights. But sometimes the wishes made sacred by death are honored. Sometimes the authoritative command of our authentic love connects us beyond the veil of death. Sometimes, our deaths take on as much meaning as our lives.

May it be so for each of us, my friends.

Endnotes

1. The interview aired on March 25, 2007. View the full transcript at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/03/24/60minutes/main2605038.shtml
2. Elizabeth Edwards, speaking at the City Club of Cleveland on March 26, 2007.
3. These are questions provided by Wayne Muller, in his book *How, Then, Shall We Live?: Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*.
4. Dr. Church's writings are available on his website, www.forrestchurch.com.
5. *Here If You Need Me*, pp. 25-26.
6. This passage appears on pp. 28-29.
7. Braestrup, 27.
8. The sound clip is taken from NPR's "Fresh Air" program, which ran on Nov. 27, 2007 and again on Feb. 22, 2008, during an interview with Tamara Jenkins. Actors in the scene (which runs from 29:55 to 31:28) are Philip Seymour Hoffman, Laura Linney, and Philip Bosco. Listen at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16654231.

