

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 1 November 2009

Gracias a la Vida

The Reverend Victoria Safford

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
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### Readings from members and friends for the Day of the Dead

*these selections are excerpted from longer pieces of writing sent in the month of October*

Dear Sister Brian was my advisor in college and remained a valued mentor/friend. My husband and I were able to sit with her in meditation and prayer, just days before her passing. On an earlier visit a year or two ago, when she was already quite weakened by Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, we visited her at the nursing home. In true Benedictine fashion, to extend hospitality to us, she led us on a tour of the facility, her vibrant pace now reduced to a slow but determined shuffle. She wanted to share with us the beauty and holiness of this place. As she was looking a bit fatigued, we asked, "Would you like to return to your room, Sister?" Her voice was so frail she barely whispered her reply: "Whatever is best for all of us."

Even in her weakened state, her thoughts were of consensus and a plan that worked for all of us. Though she may have used different language to speak about it, she shared Peter Mayer's credo, "Everything is holy now."

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I've faced multiple losses this summer. Two close college friends died together in a plane crash on May 3rd. My cousin successfully, and unbeknownst to me, drank herself to death in July. These three individuals were in their 40s. At the other end of the continuum, I buried my beloved grandma on August 26th. She was almost 93 years old and ready to meet Jesus. I'm sure He and the holy trinity are enjoying her amazing fresh-baked bread and doughnuts as I type.

I've given a lot of thought to the impact of the deaths - and, more importantly, the lives - of my friends, cousin and grandma, as well as everyone else whom I've lost in life, whether through time, distance, divorce, apathy, conflict, death . . . I prefer to think about all the *presences*, the not-losses, and my appreciation for them and our relationships is dramatically heightened by the losses. Which, of course, is the duality, the tension of living a mortal life. Or at least I think that it is.

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Last year I wrote a poem in memory of my dear dog Lily who died at age 5. It was titled "Impermanence" I was looking for it, and then realized, ironically, I had lost it to my laptop robbery this past spring. It was about the various things Lily had consumed or deconstructed over her young years: watches, hairbrushes, soap, shoes, loaves of bread. It concluded something like "... these lessons I embraced, dear one, but was it necessary that you leave too?"

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I wanted to write something about my father, who passed away almost 5 years ago:

He was the gentlest, kindest person I have ever known. I knew without a doubt, every day, that he loved me deeply. And that is an amazing thing to grow up with, knowing you are cherished. I

miss him terribly. I continue to strive to be more like him in the way that I interact with others and see the world.

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My mother, Patsy, was the most resilient person I've ever known. She had an innate sense for when things were going wrong and was there to hold us all in her arms when it did. She would listen to our 'sour grapes' but somehow along the way the conversation always took a positive turn: an understanding of a loss, an apology that needed to be given, how best to rebuild and move on. I watched her do the same in her own life many times. She usually talked things through with my father or friends, but sometimes she spoke quietly to herself while she cooked dinner for the six of us (this was a sign that dinner that night might be better at my friend's across the street). I have a quote in my kitchen: "Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out." It sums up a vital skill I learned from my mom, Patsy.

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When my mother turned seventy-five, she had a party to celebrate her birthday. This seemed unusual, because she didn't really like to be the center of attention. Less than two months later, my mom died. We didn't know she had cancer at the time of her party, but she did. She gathered us round and took in our love. That was such a gift to us and her. I ended up reading what I wrote for my mom's birthday at her funeral. I have always been grateful that she got to hear it before she died.

I took that lesson and decided that I shouldn't wait until someone dies to tell share how I feel. I began writing for my loved ones. The first piece I wrote after my mom's death was for my Uncle Frank and Aunt Ann. I sent it off in the mail to them. My aunt called told me she cried when she read it. My uncle interrupted her to say, "You cried. I'm the one that cried."

I did not hear much from my cousins Joe and Bar when I sent them their story. I thought maybe I embarrassed them. I didn't mind not hearing. I wasn't doing it for me.

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In the absolutely sublime and deafening silence that followed my mother's death when I was eleven years old, I simultaneously experienced all of these things: the ax blow from within – slicing my heart open; all the cells in my being and body exploded as my universe imploded and part of my soul left my body; something evil smiled while God (and all that was good) left the room; I tightened every muscle I could find in my body as if to keep from experiencing what I felt in that moment...

What I have learned since is that grief is perhaps the greatest teacher we can have. I believe that the gifts I have received from my mother's death are just what I needed to fulfill my purpose on this planet over my lifetime. I have complete forgiveness to my mother for dying, and I know that I did not cause her illness or her death.

I have learned that death is a Veil between the worlds, and that by moving the Veil aside just right, you can glimpse eternal life. I have learned to have regular conversations with my mother. I don't fear death at all, and no longer have difficulties opening my heart.

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Not long after my father's death, the son of one of his closest friends told me this story. My mother had become frail and quite debilitated due to the inexorable ravages of Alzheimer's disease. My father meanwhile was still strong and vigorous. One day on a walk with a group of friends, my father and mother had fallen far behind the rest as they walked arm in arm, mom's steps small and tentative. "What is Wendell doing back there?", inquired the man who told me the story. His father looked back and replied thoughtfully, "He is showing us how to be a man."

My parents had their human frailties. Ours was far (really, really far) from a perfect family. As the Day of the Dead approaches, (and the anniversaries of their deaths), I am especially reminded of the unconditional love and true devotion my parents showed to each other and to us.

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My daughter-in-law's mother died recently of lung cancer at the age of 63. She told me a few months ago that she wished she hadn't spent so much of her life keeping a perfect house. She said realized too late there was more to life than having a clean kitchen floor. I am so grateful I learned that lesson from my own mother a very long time ago. Thank you, Mother. After 22 years, I still miss you every day.

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My friend Bud died alone on her kitchen floor amidst her animals. Nobody found her until three days later, when her church friends called and called. I knew that someone had come to me that night, woke me up and hugged me, but I didn't realize it was her until I received the news several days later. There were other signs that she sent me to let me know of her presence for a few weeks after her death. Six years later, I think of Bud often. I realize now that she was probably a prescription drug addict. I also have learned from attending support groups for mental illness for myself that I can hear so many of her struggles repeated in those rooms. I regret not recognizing her mental illness when she was alive. I would have tried to be much more compassionate and forgiving.

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My brother-in-law and I have been friends for over forty years. We went to undergraduate together. He was a teacher and a voracious reader. A recent visit made it clear that he has left us. He is restless, repetitive, wanders, doesn't read any more. His early-onset Alzheimer's has left him physically present, but just about everything that made him *him* is gone. It's a different kind of mourning, yet mourning nonetheless. I am thankful for his life.

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My parents were/are self-sufficient and taught us to be so as well — to be strong — not to need to ask for help from others. When my father was dying, one of the biggest changes was watching my mother learn to receive gifts — gifts of assistance and gifts of food and gifts of love. We watched Mom learn that it is OK to ask for help and to recognize that there are many in our circles who are waiting, hoping that there is some way to help and that it is a gift to them when you reach out for help from them. There was also a change in all of our relationships. My parents never really had needs of us, or even requests. They very much believed in letting us live

our own lives without interference from them. This experience changed that and though it was difficult, it was also beautiful. We were re-forged as a family. Our relationships evolved as we moved through the life cycle of my father's disease.

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When in my twenties, I had a disturbing dream that I was with my father, who was driving the car and gestured to the glove compartment which contained a handgun. "If it gets that bad," he said, "Please shoot me." About ten years later he was suffering greatly on dialysis after a heart surgery. I was in California, when my mother put my father on the phone after finding him on the floor with his gun in hand. "Well I guess we're taking a vote," he said sardonically. I couldn't say okay, but later I wished we hadn't hung on to him so long.

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My brother Terry lived almost of his adult life in a sheltered environment due to schizophrenia, and he probably never thought of himself as a teacher, but he taught us several memorable lessons during his last days about how one might live and die.

One lesson was "**Take things as they come.**" From the beginning of his diagnosis of throat cancer, he calmly accepted the inevitable progression of events. Initially he hoped to live until his 59<sup>th</sup> birthday, and after that, perhaps until Twins baseball spring training began. Fan that he was, he died after the Twins' opening game of the season.

When asked about his life ending, he would say, "**It is what it is...**" And then later, when he made his own choices about treatment and palliative care, he said, "**The bus stops here.**" His brightness and clarity helped us accept and support his wishes.

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Through the 17 months that Elaine lived with cancer, from the initial diagnosis through the final days of her life, Elaine made a choice. Elaine chose to be grateful.

She wasn't grateful for getting cancer, and she spent a lot of effort trying to rid herself of this disease because she very much wanted to keep on living. And it wasn't as though she had been sleep walking through her life before, and that cancer had somehow woken her up; she was always and already a noticer of beauty, a lover of people and trees. But what was remarkable, is that she decided to continue to be grateful even now when there were so many reasons for self pity.

In October of last year, after 10 months of treatments and tests and tests and really no positive medical news, Elaine filled out a health survey for the Mayo Clinic. For the question about how she felt physically and emotionally, she checked the box "better now than 1 year ago", a year ago when she did not yet know she had cancer.

During those last months, she felt great weariness and fear and sadness. But she never spent time feeling sorry for herself. She really didn't.

So now in these hard days, I try to look for beauty, and I spend time with people and trees. And though I am not as good at this as Elaine, I try to limit the time I spend feeling sorry for myself, and instead remember all that I have to be grateful for, which includes all the love and appreciation that is stored up in my heart from my years with my darling Elaine.

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*From a young man remembering an old friend:*

Just over four years ago I was preparing for a year-long stay in Irkutsk, Russia and was quite terrified, so I stopped by my friend Beryle's. We chatted while doing yard work, but all was not regular. Much would change in the year I was embarking on and we could feel her soul growing tired. Each smile was a little brighter, we walked a little slower and when we hugged before I left we couldn't hold back the tears at this goodbye.

In Irkutsk, her picture sat at my bedside. Later that winter when she left this life as boldly as she had lived, I meditated by her image and slowly reminisced about all she had shared with me: the comfort of sitting next to Beryle, the laughter accompanying any good ol' family supper, the ease of her peaceful and loving nature, would all live on for eternity. This woman is my grandma.

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Beryl Pemberton was strong and beautiful and a good friend to the end. She led me to this church. I am eternally grateful to her. She showed all of us how to age beautifully, and listen with an open heart.

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Last Sunday I sat down to play a bit on the piano in the Social Hall, which was a gift from Marilyn Rogers, and I couldn't help but feel my fondness for her, and gratitude. Her spirit lives on through her gifts of song, and in her children and grandchildren.

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*from a grown man remembering his father:*

I told my father I loved him but once, late of a day in the evening of his life, he in the hospital and I in my 39<sup>th</sup> year.

We were told he was dying. Of my sister, Mother and I, I said I would tell him what he already knew.

Pulling the hanging drape on its rail around the bed woke him. Reaching out to him seemed so inadequate. I did what I did as a child. I crawled into bed with him. My turn to hold him now. His stroke rendered us both speechless. The few words I did manage to say, and our tears together, happened at the end his life and affirmed our love for each other.

When I left his room, my sister said, "That took along time." And it had. Thirty-nine years. *Gracias a la vida.*

## Gracias a la vida

How is it, when is it, that grief is transformed into gratitude? So many of you wrote this year of sorrow that somehow gave way to, or made way for, something else, for songs of love and laughter, hymns of praise for life itself, for lessons learned, something salvaged from the ashes, some sparkling thing that would be enough to go on. To me, this is the stuff of miracle, that we go on; the stuff of ordinary life is miracle.

Grief, when it is new, and even when it's not, is like a stone in the center of your being; a dead stone in your belly; a lead casing round your heart; the wall of darkness in front of your eyes, in the back of your mind; it's a rock caught in your throat.

Like all emotions it is intensely physical; it can make you sick, make you crazy, or paralyze you, and yet it is bewilderingly invisible – so much so that in many places, including here not so very long ago, people would wear black: an armband or a ribbon or “widow's weeds” from head to toe, not just as a sign of respect for the dead, not just as a nod to social convention, but so people would know, so people could *see*.

*I am different than I was.*

*I have been undone.*

*I am not myself because a part of me – brother, sister, lover, parent, neighbor, child, a friend – is gone.*

*Approach with tenderness, with sympathy, therefore.*

*Embrace me.*

*Understand that I feel as if I may shatter like glass if you or even a breath of wind touches me, but embrace me anyway.*

*I am in the process of deciding whether I can love life again, whether I hate or trust or believe in God.*

*Everything is changing.*

*Handle with exquisite care.*

That's partly why they all wore black, or white in other cultures, or poppies for veterans or carnations for mothers – so people would know. It was a sign that everybody understood. Often the tradition held that you would wear your armband or your black hat band, your black clothes, until you felt ready to remove them, until you felt some shifting within. This might take months, or the rest of your life. You weren't expected to be “over it,” to cheer up after one or two days of paid or unpaid bereavement leave. Mourning was an acknowledged condition. Now, unless you look very, very closely, the grief of other people is invisible, and your own sorrow, which feels so ragged, so haggard, so glaringly obvious, can't be seen, can't be known unless you speak it. It's a loss in our culture, I think, the loss of visible mourning.

Grief is a wild fire, consuming every idea, every feeling, every normal view from every normal window, all your familiar routines and gestures left in ruins.

It is a black ocean to drown in.

It's the thing one of you wrote about, the thing that siphoned the very air out of the lungs of a small boy: "On the day my mother died something evil smiled while God (and all that was good) left the room. I tightened every muscle..." It clenches you against gladness.

It is silent, it is screaming, it is dull, and sharp. So sharp, that it may be the one thing left reminding you that though all is lost, you yourself are still alive. Someone told me not too long ago, "My pain was my salvation." *I've got pain like an arrow*, sings the old spiritual. That awareness is a sign of life.

One person wrote about the death of his father: *I told my father I loved him but once, late of a day in the evening of his life, he in the hospital and I in my 39<sup>th</sup> year. I did what I did as a child. I crawled into bed with him... His stroke rendered us both speechless. The few words I did manage to say, and our tears together, happened at the end his life and affirmed our love for each other. It had taken thirty-nine years. Gracias a la vida.*

Somehow, not every time, not with every loss, but more often than not, I think, grief becomes gratitude in time, gratitude for the life lived, for the person you loved, for lessons learned, for life itself. This week, four different people said the same thing to me, on hearing on Thursday that Char Menzel had died so suddenly, so unexpectedly. One under her breath, three right out loud, said: *Carpe diem*. Seize the day. (The words are so trite on a refrigerator magnet, so urgent when they form in your mouth.) *Love this life* – which Char herself so absolutely did. *Live this life*.

By some mysterious, magical alchemy, grief can become gratitude, and further: gratitude, so often, if given full rein, if cultivated, called up, mustered and nourished, gratitude in turn turns to generosity, to generous life, and wisdom, kindness and gladness, effective, enacted gladness. The motion from the broken heart to the grateful heart is already a kind of miracle, especially since grief remains always, it doesn't go away. The change occurs in spite of that, so that part of you stays sad all your life (you are in perpetual, permanent mourning, when someone whom you love has died), yet also, in time and at the same time, there is this thankfulness- and then like a chemical reaction, gratitude gives way to, makes way for, love. It is not mere affection, this love, but the great love known to the Christians as *caritas*, in the Latin – deep care, charity, benevolence for those you know and those you don't; it's a way of being, a spiritual orientation. And the other love, which comes out too, is *eros*, in the Greek: a passion for life that can't be quenched or tempered or even, really, civilized (*eros*, hence, "erotic" – wild, boundless, embodied): love for this Life, regardless. Love is larger than death, and thus do we go on. This is the story of our lives.

I knew a woman once who gave me a great gift shortly before she died of cancer, a gift that has proved to be a burden and a blessing all at once. She was beautiful, 55 years old, with two young, grown-up sons, one of whom had been estranged from her, and now, because she'd worked so hard and willed it so deeply, was not. She was an artist, a pianist, classically trained and strangely powerful when she played, compelling (she was a reserved person normally). She'd given up her concert career, without regret, to raise her family; in her early forties she'd found the strength and help she needed to leave an abusive marriage; she became an excellent accountant (and a very fine church treasurer); she ran for office once and didn't win and didn't

mind; she stood for causes, worked for causes, that she didn't need to stand for, but she did it anyway, led the way. She was a strong, intelligent, vital, beautiful, joyful, humble, fairly private, public person. When she was diagnosed with cervical cancer, the disease hit her body like a freight train, and she died just a few months later.

I remember sitting with her one day. Her hair was gone, her skin transparent, she was so weak from cancer and from treatments she could barely talk. Her eyes were huge in her face. We sat in her living room, her beautiful, orderly living room, which had been transformed into the chaos of a hospice, with her piano pushed away by a hospital bed. She looked right at me and said in a whisper, "Why is this happening to me?" (She was not a self-pitying person. I doubt she had ever asked or even thought to ask this question ever before.) I was new in my work then, but I think I must have known even then that some questions are best answered, and most honestly answered, with silence, because I can't remember saying anything that day. I had nothing to say. That question, from that person, who spoke it and did not back down – she kept on looking at me with her huge eyes- that was a gift, a burden and a blessing, for a young minister (for a young woman), that I have carried ever since and turned over in my mind so many times. *Why you?* Why any of us, suffering, or dying, or mourning? Almost always there's no answer, or if there is, the answer is a question even harder to resolve: *why not you*, or me? I don't believe that we are singled out for any reason. The real question is, what will we make of this life, what will we say to this life, that is at once so beautiful and so painful? How are we going to love life and each other, knowing what we know, about mortality and grief and loss? How will we love this life, and each other? That's a question to build your whole religion on.

I now believe that this woman knew all this already. She had worked it out. I think she asked me that terrible question so that I, also, would take the time to work it out, so that I would not avoid it or neglect it, but meet it face to face, as every person must do, and certainly every minister. I carry the blessing and the burden of that question still: *Why you? Why not? What will we say to this life?*

A few days after that meeting, Fran called and asked if I would come again and this time she had a different question. She asked me to take the piano music out of the bench and off her shelves, and give it to our music director, who was himself a pianist. She asked if he could maybe choose one or two things, and come over and play for her, on her piano. And he did that a couple of weeks later; in fact we came with the whole choir from that church, forty people, sitting on the bed and the floor and spilling into the kitchen. (It reminds me of a time when members of our choir here, the women's ensemble, went and sang for a member who was dying, and for his wife.) He played all afternoon, all her music, and at the end of it she said, "Oh –this was the most perfect day." She was so grateful, radiant, smiling, and it was clear, this really was her most perfect day, not her most-perfect-day-with-cancer, but the best day of her life so far, in a life filled with some beautiful days. She had been brave enough, and broken hearted enough, to ask the most terrible question, to speak it out loud, and she'd been generous enough to answer it.

*Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto -  
Thank you to life, which has given me so much.  
It gave me laughter and it gave me longing.  
With them I distinguish happiness and pain—*

*The two materials from which my songs are formed...*

*Gracias a la vida, which has given me so much.*

[note: Violetta Parra's poem, Gracias a la vida, was read earlier in the service as a meditation.]

For all of the beloved dead, remembered on these altars this morning, for all those remembered quietly in love, *gracias a la vida*.

John of the Cross, Christian mystic from 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, wrote somewhere:

*And I saw the river  
over which every soul must pass  
to reach the kingdom of heaven  
and the name of that river was suffering:-  
and I saw the boat which carries souls across the river  
and the name of that boat was love.*

Between this known shore where we live and the far side of the river of death, *the water is wide, we cannot cross over, neither have we wings to fly...* but for thousands of years, we have searched for bridges, ways to connect, ways to remember. Halloween, Samhain, the Day of the Dead, All Souls and All Saints – these are all living vestiges of an ancient, universal prayer, and sometimes that prayer is a wail of sorrow, and sometimes it's just wondering, as all the scientists and mystics do and as they've always done, wonder about the mysteries of matter and spirit. Sometimes that prayer is a defiant hymn to life. A poet writes,

*Re-member us,  
You who are living,  
Restore us, renew us.  
Speak for our silence.  
Continue our work.  
Bless the breath of life.  
Sing of the hidden patterns.  
Weave the web of peace.*

[Judith Anderson]