

**Life's Mystery and Death's Truth**  
**by Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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This service took shape when Gayle came to me after the Father's Day service and expressed unhappiness with the hymns we sang, especially with #324 ("Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads"). As a widow, she found the first verse distressing: "Where my free spirit onward leads, well, there shall be my way; by my own light illumined I've journeyed night and day; my age, a timeworn cloak I wear as once I wore my youth; I celebrate life's mystery; I celebrate death's truth."

"How does that relate to Father's Day?" she asked. "To Unitarian Universalists, what is death's truth?" I shared my thought process. Many people have fathers who are ill or who are no longer living. For fathers with small children, they are acutely aware of how quickly children grow up. We wear the cloak of youth, and too soon we wear the cloak of age.

"I celebrate life's mystery; I celebrate death's truth" was written by 81-year-old songwriter Alicia S. Carpenter. She is the woman composer who has the largest number of hymns in the hymnal – 10 of them. Only two British men have more hymns included: British Unitarian minister John Andrew Storey, who was born in 1935, and British composer and professor Ralph Vaughn Williams, who was born in 1872 and died in 1958. For additional context, 12 hymns are from the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, 16 are by "Anonymous," and 24 are African American spirituals.

I attempted to contact Alicia S. Carpenter personally by going through the Unitarian Universalist Association staff member who is the liaison to composers and musicians regarding copyright permissions. However, I was not able to make contact with Alicia Carpenter prior to this service. Instead, I came to have a sense of her philosophy by reviewing the lyrics of her other hymns. Here are a few excerpts:

*#6 – Just as Long as I Have Breath*

If they ask what I did well, tell them I said “yes” to life, “yes” to truth, “yes” to love.

*#175 – We Celebrate the Web of Life*

Of ancient dreams we are the sum; our bones link stone to star  
and bind our future worlds to come with worlds that were and are.

*#300 – With Heart and Mind*

With heart and mind and voice and hand may we this time and place transcend to make our  
purpose understood: a mortal search for mortal good, a firm commitment to the goal of justice,  
freedom, peace for all.

*#314 – We Are Children of the Earth*

There is nothing to desire, nothing to desire more than home and hearth and fire, home and  
hearth and fire in a village that we love, village that we love, living side by side in peace,  
evermore in peace.

*#344 -- A Promise through the Ages Rings*

From deep despair and perished things a green shoot always,  
always springs, and something always, always sings.

*#356 – Will You Seek in Far-Off Places?*

Joy and peace are in this hour; here, not in another place. Here in this beloved flower; now, in  
this beloved face. [from text by Walt Whitman]

*#360 – Here We Have Gathered*

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret: but in the shadows, let us not forget: we who now gather  
know each other’s pain; kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain. Sing now in friendship this,  
our hearts’ own song.

*#370 – All People That on Earth Do Dwell*

For we believe that life is good, love doth abide forevermore;  
truth, firmer than a rock hath stood, and shall from age to age endure. [recasting of words by  
William Kethe, who died around 1608]

*#409 – Sleep, My Child*

Traditional beginning of first verse:  
Sleep my child and peace attend thee,  
All through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee,  
All through the night

Alicia Carpenter's adaptation:

Sleep, my child, and peace attend you, all through the night.  
I who love you shall be near you, all through the night.

Alicia Carpenter is a humanist, no doubt. She calls our attention to the here and now and urges care for our planet and all its forms of life. The focus on the here and now instead of the hereafter is characteristic of Unitarian Universalism. What happens after death is speculation. I believe that what happens after death will be a happy surprise, but you can be good Unitarian Universalists and not take my word for it. ;)

What happens after death may be a happy surprise, but learning to live well is the best use of our energy. To live well is to love with wisdom and compassion, neither loving others at our own expense nor loving ourselves at the expense of others. Learning to live well takes a lifetime, no matter how long or short that lifetime may be. Living well does not happen in a vacuum. Living well and loving well happen in the context of multiple communities, including the community of the congregation.

Spiritual practices help us to live well. One spiritual practice is reflecting upon death. Reflecting on death for even five minutes a day can help us to nurture gratitude for being alive and to hone our wisdom and compassion. For me, a day without thinking about death is like a day without sunshine. I do not feel right if I do not think about death each day.

I drive past the place where an accident claimed a life, and I remember the person. I drive past cemeteries, and I think of their loved ones. I drive past a hospital, and I think of tears of joy and tears of sorrow. I see a motionless earthworm or an upside down insect, and my heart catches. I flip the calendar page, notice a date, and remember those who have passed away. I read the newspaper and notice the dead on nearly every page. I think of the dead when I open the trunk of my car or open the door of my kitchen pantry and see my earthquake kits.

The constant daily companionship of death is sometimes depressing, but not always. There is something reassuring about having death in my circle of close acquaintances. Death is a steady and reliable companion in contrast to life, which is uncertain. In difficult economic times, life is even more uncertain, and that is all the more reason to appreciate a steady companion. Reflecting on death daily reminds me that what matters in life is being kind, kinder than necessary, as the bumper sticker says.

Accepting death as a companion does not eliminate the grief and heartache of missing a loved one who has passed away. The heartache is sharp because each one of us is unique. We are each quirky. No one can fill the shoes of anyone else. It can be lonely to be a human being. The death of a loved one reminds us of how lonely we sometimes feel. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long, long way from home."

For me, living well includes developing an awareness of something bigger than my small self and bigger than death. That something is consciousness. It is the perspective of the Witness, of consciousness that notes the arising and passing away of all things. I am a part of that consciousness, you are a part of that consciousness, every sentient being is a part of that

consciousness, every non-sentient thing is a part of that consciousness. This awareness comes and goes. It brings peace and equanimity.

I conclude with words by philosopher Ken Wilber, who describes this consciousness which is bigger than the small self and bigger than death:

“People typically feel trapped by life, trapped by the universe, because they imagine that they are actually *in* the universe, and therefore the universe can squish them like a bug. This is not true. You are not in the universe; the universe is in you.”<sup>1</sup>

“The typical orientation is this: my consciousness is in my body (mostly in my head); my body is in this room; this room is in the surrounding space, the universe itself. That is true from the viewpoint of the ego, but utterly false from the viewpoint of the Self.”

“If I rest as the Witness, the formless I-I, it becomes obvious that, right now, I am not in my body, my body is *IN* my awareness. I am aware of my body, therefore I am not my body. I am the pure Witness in which my body is now arising. I am not in my body, my body is in my consciousness. Therefore *be* consciousness . . . ”

”It is true that the physical matter of your body is inside the matter of the universe. But you are not merely matter or physicality. You are also Consciousness as Such, of which matter is merely the outer skin. The ego adopts the viewpoint of matter, and therefore is constantly trapped by matter – trapped and tortured by the physics of pain.”

“But pain, too, arises in your consciousness, and you can either be in pain, or find pain in you, so that you surround pain, are bigger than pain, transcend pain, as you rest in the vast expanse of pure Emptiness that you deeply and truly are.”

“So what do I see? If I contract as ego, it appears that I am confined in the body, which is confined in the house, which is confined in the large universe around it. But if I rest as the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Simple Feeling of Being: Embracing Your True Nature*, Ken Wilber, Shambhala Publications, 2004, p. 26.

Witness – the vast, open, empty consciousness – it becomes obvious that I am not in the body, the body is in me; I am not in this house, the house is in me; I am not in the universe, the universe is in me. All of them are arising in the vast, open, empty, pure, luminous Space of primordial Consciousness, right now and right now and forever right now. Therefore, *be* Consciousness.”

We do not necessarily have to “celebrate” life’s mystery and death’s truth. That verb may be too strong. However, we do well to at least notice life’s mystery and death’s truth. May death be one among many companions in our lives. May we be kinder than necessary. May it be so!