

**Renewal of the Spirit**  
**By the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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How does renewal of the spirit happen in the context of death – death of a loved one, the death of a stranger, the death of a dream, the death of a world view? The heart of this morning’s service will be the poetry shared by congregation member and poet Bruce Williams. He shares profound experiences and insights relating to the death of his wife, Ellen, through spare, evocative imagery.

Bruce will bring you poetry. I bring you a short prose meditation on renewal of the spirit in the context of death. I believe that what connects his poetry and my prose is the first of the six Sources of Unitarian Universalism: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.

Death and I have what feels like a special relationship. I realized that during the summer of 2004, when I worked as a student chaplain at UC-Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. Student chaplain work such as this is a required part of ministerial formation. There were five of us, all seminarians: one Catholic, two Lutheran, one Baptist, and one Unitarian Universalist. We took turns being “on call” to be present with seriously ill or dying patients. Over the course of the summer, the other chaplains happened to be present when one or two people died. I happened to be present when seven or eight people died.

I understand this in terms of healing. Some people have a gift for healing, for channeling energy through themselves in a way that supports positive change. There may be another kind of healing – channeling energy through oneself in a kind of “jump start” to enable someone whose spirit is ready for release to *actually* release. This is not something I do consciously, nor is it about me.

Renewal of the spirit does not come upon demand, but it comes. This kind of release is more than release from pain, release from suffering. Sometimes I feel the briefest sensation of the

“more” that it is. I felt it this week regarding Evelyn’s passing. I was home, resting, after having visited her in the hospital. I felt brief pressure on my chest, then release, surprise, delight.

“That’s Evelyn,” I said to myself. “Should I look at the clock to see what time it is? No, because people who are inclined to believe me *will* believe whether or not the minutes match. For people who are not inclined to believe me, minutes that match will not matter.

For me, renewal of the spirit in the context of death is linked to my intuition that what happens after death is a delightful surprise or a surprising delight. This matters because many, many, many people die in ways that are horrible reminders of how cruel we human beings can be to one another. Soldiers and civilians killed in wars, people killed because of racial or ethnic prejudice, people who die from lack of health care, gay people who kill themselves rather than endure more harassment by bigots.

My belief in the delightful surprise following death does not let me off the hook to work toward changing oppressive social and cultural realities. I live in the paradox of feeling the imperative to improve social and cultural conditions in order to reduce suffering and also feeling that our beings cannot be reduced to flesh and blood, bodies and bone. Spirit finds ways to renew itself. It has been doing that long before we were born, and it will go on doing that long after we are gone. Raymond John Baughan put it this way, using a metaphor from fishing:

“Into a pool of sky, I cast a question’s hook  
to feel life strike and tremble there;  
and suddenly I was aware a love for life  
had fished me first and holds me here.”

May mystery and wonder accompany us all the days of our lives. May direct experience surprise us and delight us. May it be so!

Yesterday I had the privilege of presenting a Unitarian Universalist perspective on peace at the Ahmadiyyah Muslim mosque in Chino. This was a panel presentation of women for women. Six women from this congregation were present, which was terrific. Speakers were asked to talk about what their holy book said about peace. Put yourself in my shoes. What does the Unitarian Universalist holy book say about peace?

We have no single holy book. We look to no single person as our authority, I said. Our religious tradition is distinguished by its reliance upon six Sources of wisdom: 1) direct experience of mystery and wonder (mysticism), 2) words and deeds of social justice activists (called prophetic women and men), 3) wisdom from the world's religions, 4) Jewish and Christian teachings, in particular, for Unitarianism and Universalism emerged out of liberal Christianity, and Christianity emerged out of Judaism, 5) humanist teachings (the sciences, art, literature), and 6) spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions.

Within each of the six Sources are found spiritually immature people, as well as spiritually mature people. Spiritually immature people do not emphasize peace or labor for it. Spiritually mature people do emphasize peace and work for it. During the question and answer period, a woman said, "Say more about having the words and deeds of social justice activists as a Source of your tradition."

First, I said, it's not obvious or easy to know what "justice" means in a given situation. We need to pause, center, and privilege the most marginalized people. Second, we look to social justice activists for inspiration because progress comes in baby steps. Encouragement matters as much or more than progress. We encourage each other, one step at a time. Encouragement brings renewal of the spirit.

In the new book, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century*, seminary president Rebecca Parker writes, "The mission of progressive faith is to embrace the beauty of diversity and the diversity of beauty; to resist the crucifying powers by ministries of solidarity; to love one another and this earth as paradise, here and now." Embracing the beauty of diversity and the diversity of beauty brings renewal of the spirit. Ministries of solidarity bring

renewal of the spirit. Loving one another and this earth as paradise, here and now, brings renewal of the spirit.

Those ways of renewing the spirit are easier to speak about than it is to speak about direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. The ineffable is called ineffable for a reason. Yet it is worth it to stumble and mumble and try to express the ineffable in service of encouragement, in service of renewal of spirit, especially in the tender times when someone close to us dies.

The heart of this morning's service is member Bruce Williams sharing his poetry with us. The illness and death of his wife, Ellen,