

**When Health Challenges Are Chronic**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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A few weeks ago, I stood at this pulpit and said that I must have been born without the gene for hero worship. Some of you have challenged me on that. Is it really true, you asked, that you are not inspired by others? You may not want to precisely emulate any particular person, but surely you admire at least some facets of some people? Well, if you put it that way . . . yes, I do. I admire people who live a life of richness, connection with others, and deeply felt meaning even as they live with chronic illness or terminal illness.

One of those people was professor Randy Pausch, whose “Last Lecture” at Carnegie Mellon University became an Internet hit and was turned into a book. Randy Pausch died of pancreatic cancer this week at age 47. His obituary in *The Los Angeles Times* was misleading in one detail. According to the Times, “Some [people] are drawn to valedictories like the one Pausch gave because they offer a spiritual way to grapple with mortality that isn’t religious.”<sup>1</sup> Randy Pausch was a member of the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His world view *was* religious. It was Unitarian Universalist.

A few months ago, not long before he died, I paid tribute to Unitarian Universalist poet and troubadour Ric Masten. This morning, a few months before he is likely to die, I pay tribute to Forrest Church. The Rev. Forrest Church has served All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City for over 30 years. Recently, cancer of the esophagus has returned with a vengeance, and he is preparing to die. Last month, Beacon Press published his last book, *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*. In remarks delivered last month at General Assembly, he repeated his signature theme: “Death is central to my definition of religion. Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Professor Delivered a Moving ‘Last Lecture’” by Valerie J. Nelson, *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2008, page B10.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2008/commonthreads/115714.shtml>.

I think about death fairly often -- at least several times each week. I do not mean death in the abstract, and I do not mean other people's death. I mean my own death, which will come one day. The visual reminder of the certainty of my death is this trusty, ancient "earthquake kit." I have carried this earthquake kit in the trunk of my car for at least 20 years. During my eight years of living in Florida, I called it my "hurricane kit." Now that I am back in California, it is an earthquake kit again. Every time I open the trunk of my car, I see it. Not all earthquakes are deadly, of course. Yet each time I see this bright blue (OK, dingy blue) vinyl carryon bag, I remember that life is precious, and life's quality is guaranteed to no one. One comedian put it this way: "Life is a sexually transmitted condition which ends in death."

In my experience and in my observation, human beings are often more "together" in a crisis than we are in chronically stressful situations. Our bodies, after all, are well adapted to respond by fleeing or fighting, even though the physiological "flight or fight" response is counterproductive in the face of the more frequent chronic stressors which surround us or unfold inside us. In a similar manner, I suspect that many of us are more philosophical at the prospect of our own *death* than we are at the prospect of chronic *illness* which may impact our lives, especially when chronic illness brings chronic pain or disability.

According to the SeniorNet.org website, "The fact is that almost half of Americans of all ages have some chronic medical condition, and among seniors, the proportion is more than half: [Among seniors], Arthritis affects 32 million. High blood pressure is a problem for 22.5 million. Allergies affect 20 million. Some 16 million have diabetes. Heart disease afflicts 14 million. More than 5 million have asthma.<sup>3</sup> Just a few more statistics: A report from The Center for an Aging Society at Georgetown University notes that nearly 20 percent of all adults have two or more chronic conditions; but the proportion [of adults having two or more chronic conditions] is substantially higher -- 52 percent -- among the population age 65 and older).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.seniornet.org/php/default.php?PageID=5542>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://ihcrp.georgetown.edu/agingsociety/pubhtml/multiple/multiple.html>.

There is something to be said by crossing each bridge as we come to it, but there is also something to be said by mentally, emotionally, and physically preparing to cross bridges that we are likely to encounter. Most of us will not lose forever the use of all our limbs in a catastrophic car accident, as happened to a friend of mine last fall, but if we are “able bodied,” it is no exaggeration to say that we are “temporarily able bodied.” There is value in imagining ourselves as something other than able bodied. There is value in imagining where we might find sources of strength, comfort, and meaning under those circumstances. This is a very individual process. I will share my process in hopes of quickening your interest in starting or continuing your own process.

In my personal world view, things do not happen “for a reason.” Tragedy, pain, and disability do not happen “for a reason,” and neither do success, achievement, and good fortune. I try not to focus on the “why” of what happens – Why me? Why them? Why him? Why her? Why us? I credit psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl for this. His entire family except for his sister died in the brutal camps. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes, “The death rate in the week between Christmas, 1944, and New Year’s, 1945, increased in camp beyond all previous experience. In his opinion [the opinion of the chief doctor of the concentration camp], the explanation for this increase did not lie in the harder working conditions or the deterioration of our food supplies or a change of weather or new epidemics. It was simply that the majority of the prisoners had lived in the naïve hope that they would be home again by Christmas. As the time drew near and there was no encouraging news, the prisoners lost courage and disappointment overcame them. This had a dangerous influence on their powers of resistance and a great number of them died.”<sup>5</sup>

Frankl quotes Nietzsche (“He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.”) and continues (in the gendered language of his day), “We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us . . .* Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. ‘Life’ does not mean something vague, but something very real and

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<sup>5</sup> *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (fourth edition), Viktor E. Frankl, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, p. 84.

concrete, just as life's tasks are very real and concrete. They form man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual . . . When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task . . . His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden."<sup>6</sup>

As individuals, we are precious and unique. If personal growth and self-actualization are to mean anything at all, personal growth and self-actualization are within reach during times of tragedy, pain, and suffering, as well as during times of success, achievement, and happiness. May we have access to a fraction of Viktor Frankl's insights in our tough times. Yet given the emphasis in our culture to achieve, excel, surmount, and surpass, we must have a counterweight, a countervailing impulse in our consciousness, as well. Yes, it is important to have a "why" to live for, and we come together in Unitarian Universalist congregations to help find the "why," but we also need to cut ourselves some slack if our sense of "why" falters during times of chronic or terminal poor health.

In this, my role model is Ram Dass (author of *Be Here Now*). A few years ago, he had a stroke. Somewhere along the line after he attained partial recovery, I heard him talk about the stroke episode. As I recall, Ram Dass said he had worked long and hard in a process of spiritual development to attain some degree of equanimity about death. As the stroke episode unfolded, he thought he was dying. Despite all his spiritual preparation, he felt confused and afraid. This squared with one of the major lessons I learned during my chaplaincy training. Under stress of any kind, we tend to regress emotionally. When we have health problems, our bodies and our brains often do not work quite right.

The way I integrate the profound insights of Viktor Frankl and the stroke experience of Ram Dass is to announce this to the world (starting with you) and to announce it (more importantly) to myself: Yes, I *will* focus on having a "why" to live for, but I reserve the right to regress under stress. Moreover, I reserve the right to be confused and scared when I die. Furthermore, since it is possible that I will be too "out of it" when I am near death to take care of any unfinished business, I will take care of unfinished business to the best of my ability each day.

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<sup>6</sup> *Man's Search for Meaning*, pages 85 and 86.

I will not let the sun go down on my wrath, whenever possible, and I will make amends for my misdeeds, whenever possible. I will not worry about being in excruciating pain at the end of my life, for as the recent “Palliative Care” seminar at Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center made clear, sedatives and doctors willing to prescribe them are available to ensure that if I do not want to “rage, rage against the dying of the light” in the words of Dylan Thomas, I can sleep, sleep into the blessed dark – a darkness which, itself, may open into light.

I am grateful to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its computer technology because I will be able to find others in whatever health challenge boat I may find myself. It is not that misery loves company, but rather that feelings of loneliness or isolation will be hard to sustain, at least as a middle class white woman who can afford to own a computer. The SeniorNet.org website that I referenced earlier elaborates on the following topics in the “chronic illness” part of its website: Understand that you are not alone, become the captain of your medical team, learn about your condition, join a support group, work at being as healthy as possible, try complementary therapies, make your own treatment decisions, rethink your limitations, maintain a sense of humor, and work at being optimistic.<sup>7</sup>

The “Serenity Prayer” by Reinhold Niebuhr goes this way in its complete, unabridged, original form:

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.seniornet.org/php/default.php?PageID=5541>.

Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.  
Amen.”<sup>8</sup>

The theistic, Christian assumption underlying the Serenity Prayer is not an assumption I share. Yet for decades I have repeated this mantra during airplane takeoffs and landings: “Thy will, not mine, be done, in this, as in all things, now and always.” How can a non-theist like me say (or pray) such a thing? I say the mantra to remind myself that I am not in control of the airplane, nor am I in control of one hundred million billion other things in life. I say the mantra to remind myself that life is precarious, and its quality is guaranteed to no one. I say the mantra to remind myself to take care of any unfinished business as soon as possible.

The Rev. Forrest Church also has a mantra. It served him well in times of health, and he writes that it is serving him well during this time of illness. His mantra is “Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are.”<sup>9</sup> Randy Pausch had a mantra: “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” May we support each other in finding the “why” of our lives so that we need not worry too much about the “how” of our lives. May we reserve the right to regress. May we take up our unfinished business, today and always. May it be so!

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<sup>8</sup> See [http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity\\_prayer/](http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity_prayer/)

<sup>9</sup> p. 4.