

**As Long As I Love**  
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**U.U. Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
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Over the years, I've been honored to walk with many people and their families on their journey toward and across the threshold of death. It is one of the two most holy and profound times in a life that begins and ends in mystery—the other one's at the other end, and it too is full of awe.

The experiences are as widely varied as the people. Sometimes they are tearful and tragic; sometimes there's unabashed laughter; often there's both. The weeks, days, or hours of approaching death may be peaceful, reflective, and full of love; they may be filled with unexpressed resentments and tense silences. Sometimes there is story after story, and sometimes there's the quiet pressure of historic events that are still unresolved. I have seen families and individuals purposefully treat the approach of death as a time for taking up unfinished conversations, for offering and receiving long-postponed forgiveness, for naming a lifelong gratitude.

In the hardest of times, the circumstances of illness or death are so physically or emotionally overwhelming that no conversations of any kind are possible until after the threshold has been crossed.

I've seen this whole spectrum of experience with people of many different religious beliefs. With liberal religious people like Unitarian Universalists, often one of the hardest areas of conversation arises when someone is struck by the inescapable uncertainty of what happens to us after we have died. I have been surprised by the most committed atheists, who hold to their last breath a firmly scientific understanding of life, yet who sometimes quietly say: "I've been thinking a lot lately whether there will be anything . . . *after*." Then they'll usually say: "Don't tell anybody I said that."

Fair warning: I almost always disregard that particular request for secrecy. Of all the things a person nearing death wonders and worries about, this is one that it's really important not to sit with alone. For one thing, it's a pretty safe bet that someone else in your life is wondering or worrying about it, too. For another thing, we depend on each other to give the one single answer to the question of life after death that we can offer with absolute certainty: You will always be alive in my heart.

It is extraordinary to me how powerful it can be for a person nearing the end of life to be surrounded by others who can say to them: I know you, and you are loved, and that will be so as long as I and anyone else who loves you is alive. No matter what they believe, imagine, or hope, people need to hear this from someone. It matters to them.

As for the more ineffable questions about eternal life and immortal souls, I am inclined to ask: “What do *you* think is going to happen? What would you want?” and to let that conversation go on from there. Unitarian Universalism does not have any doctrine about life after death, including the doctrine that there’s no such thing. We don’t have to say you’re going to heaven to meet Jesus and join the choir of angels—but we don’t have to say you’re not, either. I am comfortable supporting almost any vision of life after death, without belaboring the point that I am probably understanding it more metaphorically than the person I’m talking with. In this, I’m on the side of the poet Wendell Berry, who says: “Be careful not to say anything too final. Whatever is unsure is possible, and life is bigger than flesh. . . . Why settle for some know-it-all’s despair, when the dead may dance to the fiddle hereafter, for all anyone knows?”

What we do know, and what we need to be reminded of, is what Sandy shared in the opening words, which I wrote some years ago: “We are each others’ immortality. . . . We carry each other back from the threshold of life and death. Some part of those we loved who have died is gone forever, but some part is ours to have and to hold and to make real in the world.”

In the months after my late wife Jessie Garner died, a number of her friends and loved ones realized that during the last year of her progressive illness, she had had separate conversations with each of us about what she wished and hoped for us after she died. As one of our dearest friends put it: “She looked across the threshold with us, into the world after her.” It turned out to be a gift for all of us in our grieving times. There would be moments when I might have had to think: I wonder what Jessie would have thought about this; what would she have wanted? And I would realize that I already knew, because we had talked about some possibility like the one that had suddenly become real. It was a gift for our young daughter, too. Her whole adult community of love knew what her mother wanted for her—including the woman who became her new mother, and who built a new parental relationship with her that deeply respected the one which had gone before.

It is a powerful gift to someone who is facing the possibility, even the likelihood of their own death if we can encourage and allow them to be honest with us—not to make them pretend that they don’t know what might be coming; not to make them hold their fears and hopes and wishes and feelings alone, thinking they need to protect us from what’s on their mind and heart. It takes courage all around, but it can give us all comfort, healing, and hope.

This is true about another hard conversation, too. Surgeon and journalist Atul Gawande has recently written a beautiful book called *Being Mortal*, about the ways in which modern medicine and contemporary Western ideas about the end of life affect our experience of aging, illness, and death. It’s an often painful exploration, because so often he discovers that the very gifts of modern medicine for saving and prolonging life can actually increase our suffering around life’s end.

One of his most striking observations is how rarely we have conversations with our loved ones or our medical providers about the real issues that many if not most of us are likely to face around

the end of life. He notes that we often have some ideas, sometimes pretty vague; we say things like “I don’t want to be a burden,” or “I don’t want to be hooked up to a bunch of machines,” but we often don’t know what it takes to make those choices real and possible. And very often, he says, we don’t have the conversations that will help us make more informed choices, and avoid being at cross-purposes with our loved ones until it’s too late, when we’ve already become enmeshed in what he describes as “the seemingly unstoppable momentum of medical treatment.”

The benefits of those conversations can be very real. Gawande cites research done with terminal cancer patients, finding that those who have detailed conversations about end-of-life goals with their physicians and families had fewer Emergency Room or Intensive Care Unit visits, stopped chemotherapy sooner, entered hospice care earlier, experienced less suffering at the end of their lives—and lived 25 percent longer than patients who did not have those conversations.

Just talking openly about goals for the end of life appears to improve the experience. What’s more, it improves it for the families as well; there is also research showing that the financial and emotional well-being of families who had such conversations with their loved ones and physicians was measurably better than that of families who did not.

We don’t have to wait until it seems like death may be imminent to look across the threshold with people we love. We can do it any time. And yet we don’t. If it’s so beneficial to talk about care at the end of life; if it’s so potentially healing and comforting to talk about what we imagine and what we hope for after our death, why don’t we do it more often?

For one thing, our culture simply does not like the reality of death. We don’t want to talk about it. We invent zombies, ghosts, and vampires; we dress up in scary costumes; we go to horror movies and haunted houses that are all rife with gruesome death, but when it comes to the real thing we are squeamish. Actually, I think much of the entertainment we build around the subject is really a rather literal form of whistling past the graveyard.

I think we also often believe somehow that talking about these things gives death too much of a hold on us, and takes our attention away from life. In this I think we’ve lost ground from our less sophisticated ancestors, the ones who created the festivals of the dead. They understood and accepted that along with birth, breathing, and eating, death is one of a very few life experiences that every single human being who has ever lived or ever will live on the face of the earth has in common. These loved ones of ours can testify to this.

Inevitably, after all the conversations we have or don’t have, whether we have looked across the threshold or not, each of us arrives at a time when we turn away from that threshold of life and death and walk back toward life, leaving behind someone we love. Leaving them behind, and yet somehow bringing them along. Where are they now, these precious beloveds? How are they with us still? What can we do to make them welcome, to keep their presence real in the world?

Traditional religious and cultural festivals like the Feast of All Souls, *Dia de los Muertos*, or the Pagan *Samhain* that gave us Halloween are one way. A feast of special foods shared with the dead, a ritual of honor and remembrance, a time set aside to both to acknowledge our loss and to celebrate their life; these can encourage us to welcome them into our hearts as we do today, and to keep them part of the present reality of our lives. The Jewish custom of the *Jahrzeit* is another way: a candle lit on the anniversary of death to acknowledge the grief that never completely passes and to honor the light and warmth their life has given us.

Even if there's no particular day or time set aside, there are intentional ways we can be each other's immortality. Telling stories is one; taking on work or commitments that have been important to our loved ones is another. I think of a man named George Edgerton, who was a central figure in the justice ministries of the Walnut Creek congregation. George was very excited about the 2012 Justice General Assembly, which openly confronted anti-immigrant laws in Phoenix, Arizona. He was a big part of the effort that gave us a delegation of more than 50 people that year. When George died suddenly in the Spring before that General Assembly, we had pins made with his picture on them, and all of us wore them the whole time we were in Phoenix. Without a doubt, he was there, standing on the side of love with us. And now he's here, too. There are many ways; perhaps you have your own.

Sometimes, the presence of these loved ones of ours is even more intimate, more internal and real. We can find ourselves in their company suddenly and unexpectedly. We hear the sound of our father's voice when we lift our own in song. We feel our sister's delight in nature when we notice a rabbit that stops and stares at us as we walk in the woods. We adopt our friend's good sense of timing as we tell an old joke the way they always did. We see our grandmother in the lift of an eyebrow on our own face in the mirror—or on our own grandchild's face.

In moments like that, suddenly they are *right here*. In those moments, in this moment, we know: No one we have truly loved is ever wholly lost to us. And we know that in our turn, we too will never be lost.

As long as I see, you see. As long as I hear, you hear. As long as I breathe, you live. As long as I love.

As long as we love.