

# *Life, Death, and Everything In-Between*

Rev. Paul Beckel  
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
September 20, 2015

## **WELCOME**

Ahhh...they're still coming in. Make Room!

Make room for the joyous, those hoping to share some good news with a receptive listener.

Make room for the frightened, those who need time to sit and reconsider their place in life.

Make room for the angry, caught between the desire to utilize that energy, and the desire to let it go.

Make room for the hungry. Those whose needs have gone unmet for too long.

Make room. Make room. Make room for the winners, whether they deserved it or not.

Make room for the losers, whether they deserved it or not.

Make room for the great and the small...the agile and the awkward.

Make room for the latecomers, the badgered, the careless, the carefree, and the oblivious. Make way for their rush, their frivolity, their sweetness, their regret.

Make room now in your own soul as Amber unlocks the door with a key made of beauty.

## **PRELUDE**

### **INVOCATION**

#419

### **LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT**

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

### **GATHERING SONG**

*Gather the Spirit*

#347

### **CHILDREN'S FOCUS**

*Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak

### **CHILDREN'S BLESSING**

*When I am Frightened*

#1012

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS**

## **CARE NOTES**

### **SPECIAL MUSIC**

*Lily's Eyes*

## **READINGS**

**Here I am**, by James Broughton (adapted)

Here I am     after seventy summers

Here I am     only more so

                  Having given up gymnastics for crossword puzzles

                  Having survived sins   suicides   and bright ideas

Here I am     still trying to digest the fruits of experience

                  Still letting my mind wander and lust

                  Still eating everything that will give me cancer

Here I am      wondering how to cohabit with the universe  
                    Wondering how to become a mouthpiece for an angel  
Here I am      waiting for an appointment with my foregone conclusion  
                    Expecting to be rowdy at my own funeral  
                    Planning to pick out a snappy new incarnation  
Here I am      in the meantime  
                    Still being me    only more so  
                    Hoping to hoopla all the way to the mortuary

**Nooksack**, by Rick Hermann

On the flood  
of the spring melt,  
this river mothers me,  
works her fingers  
into my bones,  
rocks me.  
Coming cold  
off the glacier,  
she closes  
her flashing eyes  
at night,  
dreamless, cool,  
urgent.  
There are reasons  
to live, she tells me.  
Good reasons  
to stay alive.

**SILENCE (3:00)**

**READINGS**

**On the Mountain**, by Ric Masten

Somewhere about a third of the way up  
He came down the trail  
And caught me unaware  
A poet  
Staff in hand—naked—thin as a whip  
Wild gray hair framing the sun-stained face  
His bright eyes blue holes the sky showing through

When he saw me resting there  
He laughed out loud—“Friend,” he said  
“I have been to the summit and found nothing there!  
Absolutely nothing!”  
Then laughing again he went on down around the bend  
And left me

With my brand-new dayglow backpack  
Ten dollar compass and waterproof boots  
Remembering how I'd sharpened my knife  
Till it shaved the hair on the back of my wrist  
And prepared myself for almost anything  
But this

Still I was young then and it wasn't until I too  
Had run out of places to climb  
That I began to wonder where he was going  
And what he was after  
And the point of his bright laughter

So turning around  
I followed him down  
And if I took you by surprise this morning  
Coming down the path  
Believe me I was only laughing at myself  
Sitting there

I love the cyclical imagery in this poem. And at the same time it reminds me of another poem with an inverse message: that there *is no* coming around again. We can look back but we cannot go back. That's the message conveyed by another one of our local poets in his poem *No Volvere Mas* (never again).

**No Volvere' Mas**, by Leslie DeBrock

I've been to Mexico  
where food and water might be dangerous,  
and the people, generous of heart.  
The Mexico where dogs barked uncertainly,  
"You're not supposed to be here."  
Where it was no one's job to please me.

I breathed the air shared with burros,  
rode busses with people traveling with chickens.  
And I gazed out at the hills  
to know them as best I could.  
And the side roads.  
All the side roads.

And I kept thinking,  
Someday I'll come back to this place  
and learn this road.

But no.  
I travelled the road I was on.  
It took me to its own destination.  
I can only look back to that untaken road

that passed under a grove  
and topped a rise  
and was gone  
from my sight.

## OFFERTORY

### MESSAGE

Last week I spoke about feeling at home, noting that two important dimensions of feeling at home are *people* and *place*. Being at home can be a function of both intellectual familiarity with our people and place, and the gut feeling of *belonging* within a chosen people and place.

Today I'd like to add that there is another dimension through which we can ask the question, "Are you Feeling at Home?" That is the dimension of Time.

So within the grand scheme of life, death and everything in between, are you feeling at home in this moment?

We have to look at the time dimension, I think, because we are always changing and therefore our relationship to home, and our relationship to all-that-is, is also always changing. So even if the people and places around us were to remain stagnant (by some catastrophic miracle) our sense of belonging might still wax or wane over time.

*Do* you feel at home within this particular time that we call "now?"

And by now I mean several things: the now within a particular season, autumn ... the now within this historical period, the 21<sup>st</sup> century (is this when you belong?) ... And the now within a geological era, the Cenozoic, also known as the age of the mammals, is it a good fit for you? How about as a person of your particular age—57, 68, 36, or 17? Does the age fit? Or are other people your age completely different from you?

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As Jane and I were hiking through the woods yesterday I asked myself what it could mean to feel at home within this time period... or to not feel at home.

So first I had to ask, what was the NOW that I was experiencing?

The now, it seemed, hung in gentle limbo between yesterday and tomorrow. That sounds very abstract, but I witnessed this in some very real physical elements. For example I saw many giant tree stumps out of which thin new trees were growing. I love this image which so dramatically wraps together past and future. And I wonder how many cycles there could be of stump / new growth turned to stump and new growth.

And while we walked along trails that were clearly maintained by human beings, I saw evidence that other trails had existed in the past formed by the wild things. And I wondered how, in the future, the trails would be reshaped again by fallen trees, fire, and rushing waters.

One tree that had fallen over the path recently had been cut in cross sections. Someone had counted the rings and marked its age at 143 cycles. And I wondered what it meant that that was

almost exactly when my European ancestors had come to North America. Was that a long time ago? Or not?

I listened to the sound of the forest, which was largely quiet except for light rain on the leaves and a few frogs hopping out of our way. The quiet felt primeval and I'm not sure why that made me feel at home since my home is in the modern era. And then when we heard automobile noise from the road we had driven in on...somehow that made me feel less at home. How can that be?

In these and so many other examples, then, I was yanked back and forth in time. The rain fell and my jacket kept me dry. So I thought about distant ancestors who stayed dry by being covered with hair...and I thought about the children of my children who science fiction writers predict will be covered entirely with suits of plastic.

Yanked back and forth in time, then coming home to an electronic message appearing instantaneously from half way around the world from my son in Indonesia.

Fortunately though the instant message could not be delivered until three days after it was written. It spoke of dengue fever, his 103 degree temperature, and a 2½ hour taxi ride through the rainforest to the hospital.

But then the postscript said "all is well, feeling fine." And I had to wonder what era I'm living in when a deadly tropical illness is not a big deal and it takes three days to receive an instant message.

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How about you? Are you feeling oriented and at home at this point in your life? Do you feel like you belong in this season, this epoch? What might you do to understand this age into which you've been thrown?

How do you feel about life, death, and everything in between?

A couple of decades ago UU Rev Forrest Church wrote what has become an often-quoted definition of religion, he wrote: Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. The human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

We swim in an ocean of realities... many of which may never touch us. But these two are inescapable: *We are* alive. And: we have to die. And while both of these can be sources of anxiety, they can also be anchors for us.

Imagine them perhaps as the ends of a suspension bridge holding up a majestic passage, holding our lives in creative tension, these equally profound anchors to our being.

And we find ourselves in between. In limbo. Like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, each of us probably has sufficient life energy to reflect life's beauty while getting through another day today But there are no guarantees beyond this moment.

Perhaps like Max—at the beginning of today's story—we may have more energy today than we know what to do with ... so much that we get carried away. Or maybe like Max—after he's achieved kingship and enjoyed the wild rumpus—maybe we're a little tuckered out and homesick.

So what then?

Well there's always BUF to come home to. And an insert in your order of service today [copied below] describes twenty-two ways to engage while this little planet makes one more loop around the sun. As you can see we're going to be talking quite a bit this year both about facing the end and living while we can. Not because we're obsessed with death, mind you, but rather because death is simply a part of our lives and because, as stated so well by Carl Jung, "when our inner realities are not made conscious they appear outside as fate."

We're going to talk about some potentially uncomfortable things (including, I didn't fit this in the original list because the dates have not been set, but we're also doing OWL a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum—one for middle schoolers and one for young adults)... We're going to talk about all these very real often challenging realities because, "when our inner realities are not made conscious, they appear outside as fate."

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So if religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, then "religious" questions would include those that call our attention to this dual mystery:

- how in the world did I come to be?
- who did I come to be?
- how shall I proceed?
- how long will I have?
- will I succeed?
- is it all worth it?

Those are some pretty big questions—roaring some terrible roars, gnashing some terrible teeth, and rolling some terrible eyes. It's a good thing we have this lifetime to stare them down. And it's a good thing we have one another.

**SENDING SONG**                      *May Your Life be as a Song*      #1059

### **BENEDICTION**

**As Long as I am 82**, by James Broughton

As long as I keep breathing  
I still have something to go on

As long as I keep eating  
I can still take something in

As long as I keep walking  
I can still put my foot down

As long as I keep talking  
I can still put in a good word

As long as I keep dreaming

I still have some place to go

As long as I keep peeing  
I can still go with the flow

As long as I keep loving  
I am still available to awe

As long as I keep laughing  
I am still in the service of joy.

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BUF Programs referred to in the sermon:

*Life, Death, and Everything in-Between*  
Free Workshops and Small Group Conversations  
More at [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org) as details become available

All year\* *How to Live this Year as if it were Your Last*: A monthly study group on this book begins Oct 13 at 10:30 am. As additional people express interest, new groups will form to meet at other times. Contact Lee Willis ([willilee@comcast.net](mailto:willilee@comcast.net)) or Rick Hermann ([rhermann309@gmail.com](mailto:rhermann309@gmail.com))

Sept 26 *Four Perspectives on Alzheimer's Disease*: Speakers from Compassion and Choices and the Alzheimer's Assn. 3-5:30 pm

Sept 25-26 *Young Adult Retreat*: How to take your passion and turn it into a workshop to share with others. RSVP on Facebook @ "Young Adult Retreat"

Sept 27 *Sunday Forum* with Death Midwife, Ashley Benem, 9:15 a.m.

Oct 2-4 *BUF Retreat: Recess for All Ages*: Fun and reflection Friday thru Sunday at Camp Kirby. RSVP on BUF.org

Oct\* The October Chalice Circles theme is *Our Relationship with Death and Dying*. Chalice Circles run once per month throughout the year. New groups are formed as additional people express interest. All themes for the year are at [www.buf.org/resources](http://www.buf.org/resources). Contact [Anika@buf.org](mailto:Anika@buf.org)

Oct 17 *Intro to UU History, Principles, and Congregational Membership* – Rev Paul Beckel 9:30-noon.

Oct 28 *Being Mortal* – watch the PBS Frontline video then discuss with Rev. Paul Beckel. 6:30 pm following community night dinner.

Nov 8 & 15 *Preparing our Ethical Wills* – beyond our money and our stuff, what advice or inspiration would we like to leave behind for those we love? A Sunday sermon, and follow-up conversation the next week. Paul Beckel with Rae Gilbertson.

Nov 4 *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* —Discussion on this book about the challenges around moving parents into nursing care. Led by Jane Beckel & Mary Jane Brunt.

Nov 11 *The Conversation Starter*: a workshop about expressing our preferences around end-of-life medical treatment. Led by Jane Beckel and Mary Jane Brunt

Dec 17 *Blue Christmas* This vespers service—led by Rev. Tessie Mandeville—will address the reality that holiday times are often emotionally difficult. 7 pm

Jan 20 *How Did "The Conversation" Go?* Following-up on the Nov. 11 session (above) we'll debrief and encourage one another to continue talking with our families about these profound decisions. Led by Jane Beckel & Mary Jane Brunt.

Jan 9 *Preparing your own Memorial Service* – with Rev. Paul Beckel 9:30-11:30 am

Jan 21 *Finding Meaning in our Lives During Critical Times* – Donald Mihalow, 1 pm

Feb 18 *Life Review: How You Got to Where You are Now* – Anastacia Metcalf, 1 pm

Feb\* *Living with a Chronic Illness or Disability*: This will become an ongoing group. Contact Anika@buf.org

Mar\* *Care for our Caregivers*: This will become an ongoing group. Contact Anika@buf.org

March 17 *Getting Unstuck: Clearing Internal Clutter* – Carrie Koehline, 1 pm

April thru May *Faithful Choices: Clinical Ethics and Religious Values*, eight sessions led by Rev Tessie Mandeville

Apr 21 *Recreating Old Passions & Discovering New Ones* – Barbara Gilday, 1 pm

May 19 *Health/Nutrition for the Second Half of Life* – Linda Fels and Sheryl Allen, 1 pm

Note: Most of these events are single workshops; just drop-in, no RSVP required. For the ongoing groups (marked \*) please be in touch with the contact person listed.)

In addition to all of these events, BUF hosts a variety of forums, worship services, and children's programs on Social and Environmental Justice, Personal and Organizational Development, and Unitarian Universalist History and Philosophy. Throughout the mix is music, movement, meditation, socializing and good food. Find updates about all of this at [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)