

The Souls Last Dance©

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, January 26, 2020

Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." John 21: 18

I want to tell you a story about something that happened to me two summers ago, while on a bus in Spain, but here's the problem...I can't remember if I told you this story before or not! Now, if you are below a certain age, you may remember I told you this story; and if above a certain age – you, like me, probably forgot you heard it! So, at the risk of repeating myself, I'm going to tell it for either the first time – or again.

Two summers ago, I got on a crowded bus in Spain. All the seats were taken. As I stood there, holding the strap, minding my own business a young man and his female companion got up from their seats, motioning for me to sit down. I thought the gesture was nice, but unnecessary, so I smiled, shook my head as if to say “no thanks,” and kept on standing. The young man was kindly insistent. “Abuela,” he said to me, motioning that I should sit down. I did not know what that meant but he was so insistent and so nice that I took up not one, but two seats! I gestured for my husband to sit down alongside me. “Abuelo” he said to him, smiling. It wasn't until I looked up the word “abuela,” that I realized the young man had recognized me as “grandmother,” or “grandmama” and that his culture had taught him to not only respect his elders, but to honor them by giving up his seat.

A part of me was deeply touched by the young man's gesture; and the other part of me – well, annoyed. Grandma I thought? Do I look like someone's grandma? I was wearing a really hip jacket, a kicky skirt, and decidedly non-sensible shoes. My hair's not yet gone fully grey and when I look in the mirror, I don't really see all the wrinkles that others do. Yet, there it was, the bald-faced truth, I am aging – and so are all of you. And yet, much of our life is spent in deep denial of this truth – even up to the very end of our lives. Like death, it's something that happens to all of us, but unlike childhood, young adulthood and middle age, it's the period of life that is least understood and the most

under-resourced. It's the butt of jokes; it's the elephant in the room; it's the truth that most of us don't want to face and if we do, it's faced with perhaps a kind of grim resignation.

Well, all of that may be changing as the boomer generation moved inexorably into being the oldest and most active generation of elders ever. While churches have often attracted and supported the older generations, it's been a part of our shared ministry that seminarians have been least prepared for and congregations have left under-developed. Yet Church is the place where, in our memorial services, we come to hear the full story of a person's life, from birth to death; and mine that life for what gave it meaning. Church is the place where people choose to leave legacy gifts as a way to let their life speak beyond their deaths. And yet, we don't talk about that enough nor do we plan programs around it. So, my hope this morning is to spark an on-going conversation about how, not just UUCA, but how congregations in general can plan for, nurture and develop programs for what I'm calling, the Soul's Last Dance.

This month we've explored the soul from a couple of different perspectives; from Rev. John's stirring sermon from last Sunday about the soul of Dr. King's life and legacy; to our Wheel of Life service and a sermon on 10 Rules for Living. The purpose of each of these sermons was to explore the needs of the soul at different stages of life, both personally and culturally. But just as our bodies make differing demands in each stage of our maturation from infancy to old age, so does our soul.

Soul work, if you remember from the January 5th sermon, is work on the qualities and values which give our lives meaning and purpose. In our earliest years, the qualities of childhood development have been well documented in terms of physical, mental and emotional growth; having the ability to take on more and more independence – until that moment

when we are 18 or in this day and age, maybe more like mid-twenties, when we leave our parents' home and begin adulting for ourselves. Each one of those stages is marked by the question "what gives my life meaning and purpose?" and some of the answers are clearly spelled out for us at each stage. As a child we are expected to grow up to become all those classic Boy Scout traits: "Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent." In adulthood – and for adults of this particular faith tradition, we are invited to engage with our Seven Principles plus One, beginning with affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and concluding with embodying our commitment to uproot and address racism and oppression whenever and wherever we encounter it (which frankly is everywhere...!); we also in adulthood focus on determining and following our vocational career; whether that is in a workplace or on the home front. As we enter Middle Age, roughly from about age 45 to 65, we start to wonder "so what does my life mean" in earnest. By the time you reach old age, the questions are different and the soul's needs shift from what can I do – to who am I – what am I - and what legacy do I wish to leave?

The new book by Dr. Louise Aronson, entitled *Elderhood*, examines America's current understanding and misunderstanding of what it means to be an older person in this culture. Aronson, a physician specializing in Geriatric Medicine, had originally planned to title her book something like: "Old Age," but one of her early readers told her no one would read a book with that title. When people consider the word "old" they associate it with adjectives like: bent over, used up, shriveled, useless. Instead, it was suggested, she might use the word "elder" which when medical students were polled about their associations with that word, wrote down words like "wise, competent, respect, leader, knowledge, and experience". So instead, she opted for "Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine and Reimagining Life."

So - when does old age start? What we know is that as people age, their criteria for the start of old age moves back! On average, adults between the **ages** of 30 and 49 think **old age** begins at 69. People who are currently 50-64 believe **old age** starts at 72. Responders who are 65 and older

say **old age** begins at 74. For those who are 74 or older, old age is maybe – late 80's or 90's – it's all relative! Is the adage "you're only as old as you feel?" then closer to the truth? What Aronson challenges her readers to examine is how we understand and interpret aging, and to counter society's stereotypical jokes and tropes about the elderly so we can explore our own fears and truths about the privilege we are given to live into elderhood.

Let's face it – the reason why there are so many jokes about aging is because humor is a way to relieve tension. **SLIDE**. So – here's a couple of cartoons for you – this one says "I'm not saying we're old, but I don't think we should stay in one place for too long." Or this one, a riff on the Serenity prayer: Grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, the good fortune to run into the ones I do, and the eyesight to tell the difference!" The tension that needs to be relieved is that all of us who remain alive to an old age will be faced with loss; some of it incremental and some of it quite dramatic. We turn to humor because the reality of aging can be hard to embrace. Atwal Guwande's book, *Being Mortal* describes the difference between the aging process in the past and one that we face today. **Slide 1** – since middle age was considered to be around 30; and you were lucky if you lived into your 60's, it looked like this; life was humming along until you reached a catastrophic cliff with death quickly at the bottom. With advances in modern medicine, the last portion of our lives generally look like this: **slide #2** a series of slow, incremental declines, often accompanied by many rallies of health, vigor and vitality, followed by setback after set back until the body is finally overwhelmed and succumbs. If given the choice between the two, I'd probably prefer slide #1 – but with advances in modern medicine – that is increasingly unlikely to happen. That final chapter of life can today become very traumatic for the caregivers and loved ones left behind. So if **slide #2** is most of our fate – the larger, spiritual question that physicians Guwande and Aronson explore but don't really answer is – how do we live well within that reality? How do we tend to what our soul needs in the face of such inevitable decline of all that we hold dear – our agency, our independence, the power of our mind, our respect or status in the larger society; the authority and power

to influence people, places or things; our ability to – as Jesus ruminates – dress ourselves and go wherever we want?

The spiritual answer to this question can be found in one line of the Buddhist Heart Sutra; which is a chanted summation of the heart of Buddha's teachings. The Heart Sutra says that in enlightenment there is "no old age and death - and no end to old age and death." I think what this means is that in striving to become spiritually mature human beings, we are asked to see the end of our lives as part of the endless cycle of life and death. The heart-rendering paradox of this is that each one of us is so utterly unique and yet our common fate is shared by all and is so predictable. How can we learn in the last third of our lives to surrender ourselves – our achievements – our hopes, dreams, desires, personalities, great loves and great regrets - to the Great Unknown? The best thing I think we can do is *not* to rage, rage against the dying of the light, with Dylan Thomas – but try dancing with it instead, holding life and death in an intimate embrace, not tightly, but lightly, moving together in the same pattern.

This is probably the greatest and last spiritual lesson we will ever learn – how to live our lives in such a way as to make our dying easier. Many of us in this room have had an up close and personal experience with someone whom we love who is in the later stages of aging; who is failing, who is "just not what she used to be." But this is part of the message the Buddha brings to us, that if we insist on desiring permanence – we only create more suffering for ourselves.

How can spiritual communities like this one offer us teaching and learning about how to live well into old age? I would hold up two of the most important ways:

First, our spiritual communities can offer us and teach us a more expansive and generous understanding of old age. And second, they are places where we can learn to listen to what our soul needs – and to learn how to practice the lifelong process of dying, one step at a time.

Let's talk first about how we find here at UUCA a more expansive and generous understanding of what it means to age. The first way we can do this is to make UUCA a place where we

proactively counter the ageism that exists in our society. By that I mean to challenge all stereotypes laid upon persons of all ages. When we talk to a child as if they were a pet – we exhibit ageism. When we dismiss the opinions of a teenager and young adult because of "lack of experience," we are expressing our ageism. When we tell a middle-aged person, "oh, but you look so young," we are assuming that looking young is the gold standard by which we should be described. When we talk to an old person as if they were a child – we exhibit ageism. The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism, adopted by this congregation, calls upon us to challenge racism and other oppressions and one of those oppressions is the very common experience of ageism. It's so tempting to want to go to stereotypical tropes about all ages of life; teens are unruly; middle agers will have a crisis; seniors will be forgetful; old persons will be infantilized by age. Instead, what we get to practice as part of a spiritual community is meeting people of all ages for exactly who and where they are. That's part of what I mean when I speak about soul work – keeping an open mind and open heart – and by doing so – you will be amazed before you are halfway through a conversation with them. You will discover another human soul before you – in all its complexities and richness of experience.

This is why UUCA insists on being a multi-generational community. We're not just here for you when your children are born or when you are raising your families; we're not just here for when your teens go through coming of age; we're not just here to marry you or support your singlehood; we're not just here to hold you when your marriage falls apart or your spouse or your parents die – we're here for ALL of it. All ages and stages of life. We all have profound life lessons to each one another. So, for example, before you decide to stay home for the next multigenerational Sunday service – reconsider it. Because maybe, you'll have the experiences that I have, of getting to know generations younger – and older – than I am. As a result, my soul feels fuller – more expansive and more able to cope with both impending grandmotherhood AND old age and death.

The second way this church helps us prepare for the passages of our aging is to be a place where we can learn to practice the arts of dying before we die. As we are granted the privilege of living into old

age, we are also invited to learn how to live with loss. Church is a place where we share our losses and learn about how to grieve and then how to live with the losses of friends and families and ultimately the losses of interests, activities, and abilities.

The spiritual question as all this happens is: To what do we die to before we take our last breath? All our expectations, our needs and preferences, our ideas about ourselves and others; the entirety of our personal identities, attachment to our appearance, habits, and anything that makes us feel separate from others, the familiarity of what it's like to live this human life.¹ I'm not saying that it's easy – or that I personally have got this figured out just yet. It continues to be a work in progress. For me it's a spiritual equivalent to what the Swedes call *dostadning*, a word that means “death cleaning”. **SLIDE** In the book “The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning,” the author Margereta Magunusson, who says she is somewhere between 80 and 100 years of age, encourages people to start getting rid of – or giving away stuff – before you die – so that your family doesn't have to take care of it. Magnusson says that death cleaning is an ongoing process that's never truly finished. “You don't know when you are going to die, so it goes on and on,” **SLIDE- BLANK.**

About twenty years ago, my mother and I did a joint service entitled “the Ministry of Motherhood.” In that service, I interviewed my mom about her life, her philosophy of parenting. My last question to her was: “Mom, you have given me so much wisdom and advice and have well prepared me for how to live my life. But – there's one big question lingering for me – how am I going to prepare for your death?” Here's what she said:

“Chatty – it's like being at a dance. When you're young you spend a lot of time getting ready for the dance, and so you go and the music is exciting, the people fresh and new, the dancing goes on forever. You dance all night and flop in bed feeling satisfied. But when you get older, the music is the same, the dress is uncomfortable, and your feet hurt. You just want to go home and

lay down in your own bed; and fall asleep to the memories of those other times, which you don't want to repeat, but were sweet nevertheless.” When she died, that's pretty much what she did. But I like to think that she danced herself to the end of love.

There are all kinds of ways we dance with our souls throughout our life – and none of it requires two feet, tango lessons or even a sense of rhythm. Dancing with our souls simply means to feel our spirits move; to feel something stirring within us which is both a response to life and a call to that greater rhythm, that evocative melody that is part of a pattern that was created long before we were born and will continue long after we're gone. May we continue to engage in this soul dance every day that we are given, and dance ourselves all the way to the end of love.

¹ Dr. Gail Brenner, Die Before You Die, <https://gailbrenner.com/2018/05/die-before-you-die/>