

LIVING YOUR PURPOSE
Rev. Arlin Roy (April 5, 2026)

This sermon is in line with what we do every Sunday, reckoning with mortality. We face that life is finite and ask what should/can we do with that knowledge. We take it into our way of thinking and figure out how we feel and what we will do to reassure ourselves that it is worthwhile getting up in the morning. This might strike some of you as grim, but religion, at its best, helps us recognize the truth about being human.

A couple of things went into my thinking that this is what I need to talk to you about. First, we are shortly going to have a presentation by a hospice social worker who would fit in with any Unitarian Universalist congregation. He began his job as an atheist and during his 32 years of hospice social work changed his mind, in the way that a reasonable person might—with logic, reason, and concern. Second, I watched “The Big C” on Netflix, a show which follows a woman who has been informed that she has terminal, stage 4 cancer. She responds as anyone might, with denial, panic, anger, and impulsive financial and sexual acting out. She is demanding and presumptuous at times, and very loving toward her family and others. She interacts occasionally with people who had died. If the deceased could connect with the living, the finality of death would be diminished, and we could

view death as a transition to another form of life at least somewhat familiar.

However, we can't know for sure.

There is a truth we all share—across theology, politics, culture and temperament. We are going to die. Not someday in the abstract. Not as a philosophical concept. Each of us. Personally. Inevitably. We do not often talk about this truth, except at memorial services and we allude to it in wedding vows, but otherwise it simply sits there, like an ugly, swarthy ogre lurking in the corner, waiting to pounce. Our feelings about death range through emotional extremes of fear, anger (“Do not go gentle into that good night”), hope, resignation, denial, avoidance, acceptance, and back to resignation. Generally, lots of uncomfortable feelings with some calm feelings.

We choose to live in certain ways that make sense to us as a purpose because we are going to die. IF we were immortal, our pursuit of a purpose would be one option among many. But since we must choose and suffer regret, remorse, or painful consequences, we usually want to choose purpose wisely. Purpose is not simply chosen randomly. Life purpose gradually develops at the intersection of a person's skills, temperament, and formative experiences and is either shifted with experience or affirmed through pleasure and praise from others.

I will consider some of the ways others have suggested we can respond to that absolute final end that we all face—death—before suggesting how to decide on a purpose.

It is a fun diversion to criticize our culture as one of lightweight distractions: Hallmark sentimentalities, absurd attention to diets, exercise routines, lightweight movies, gambling, booze, and free-range sex, and gallows humor. Some distractions work for years, such as staying constantly busy. Focusing on career or consumption of experiences or things. Or simply avoid thinking about death at all. Criticizing these pursuits just takes cheap shots. These are normal defenses against terrible fear and often very pleasurable. A subset of psychotherapists has located the fear of dying as an essential part of the unconscious, at least from Freud onward. These psychotherapists tend to criticize our clinging to our identities, defending our worldviews, and seeking greater self-esteem as a failure to face the inevitable. However, without a firm identity and moderate self-esteem nobody can face such a difficult reality as death.

This Sunday is what Christians call Palm Sunday, that celebration of Jesus entering the South gate to Jerusalem astride a donkey, with some of his followers, while Pontius Pilate, the new Roman governor, entered the North gate on a horse, flanked by many soldiers. Palm Sunday is about believing so strongly in your purpose that—regardless of danger—you state your values strongly, plainly. Palm

Sunday is about rebellion against an oppressive status quo in favor of spiritual healing.

Within Unitarian Universalism, we recognize many traditions that inform our rational, scientific beliefs about mortality. Many of us subscribe to something like Erik Erikson's theory of human development that concludes with a stage he called generativity. The desire to nurture and create what will outlast us provides an enduring legacy. Our influence endures in the children we raise and their children, in the students we teach and the students THEY teach, in the movements we strengthen and the kindnesses we risk.

Since religions, as actually practiced, do not fall into pure abstract categories, I will sum up the strategies that are common to several and generally fall into three—often overlapping-- categories. Some schools of thought focus on a promise of continuation in an afterlife, or reincarnation. Dr. Jane Goodall, the eminent anthropologist, said in her “Famous Last Words” interview (Netflix) that her second husband had--weeks after his death—appeared to her and said that he was fine. Other strategies for coping with death encourage the creation of meaning for a legacy and continuation in society, such as Judaism and Unitarian Universalism. Yet a third group of strategies encourages a philosophical acceptance or basic mindfulness, such as Stoicism and Buddhism. If you would

like to discuss specific religions' responses to death, I would be happy to do so, but I figured that for this sermon I would keep it simple.

We become ancestors—inevitably. When we shift the discussion from immortality to love, then we are asking how love can be transcendent. The question shifts from “Is it possible to evade death?” to What do I plant, or nurture, or heal that will grow after me? Maybe it is a tree, a more just social policy, a repaired relationship, or a congregation strengthened for the next generation. We cannot remove the sting in the reality of death, but we can soften our terror through connection. Love cannot make us personally immortal, but it makes our impact larger than our individual lifespan. Every time we courageously give ourselves away in care, compassion, solidarity with the poor and depressed, we affirm our membership in the interconnected web of all being that our Unitarian Universalist principles affirm. In our acknowledgement of membership in the larger web of interconnected being we affirm values that support life itself, and we are not simply isolated beings.

Some of us here believe in some sort of afterlife. Other believe consciousness blends with a great mystery. Others are content not to know. What binds us together is not a uniform certainty but a shared courage to face the hard questions in our search for truth and meaning. We do not claim knowledge we do not have and could not possibly have. We also do not deny hope where it arises.

We stand together in faithful humility before mystery. We do not know what happens after death, but we can know what happens in our lives.

While thinking about this sermon, a memory came back of sitting in this congregation and the minister said, "I want you to know, I don't believe in the same god that you all don't believe in." I had been bored up until then, but this piqued my interest. So, now, maybe I will learn what they believe in. But they didn't say. I will not be so coy.

I believe that a dedication to love is my ultimate purpose.

Love takes many forms, from simply being congenial to stepping up in emergencies—depending on context.

Love is as simple as dedication to the best potential in another person.

Love gently sets limits to unruly, inconsiderate, obnoxious or violent people.

Love can be passionate devotion to another.

Love caretakes the young and the old, the poor and disabled.

Love works to preserve this fragile, overheating world for future generations.

Love guards the rights of others both known and unknown to me personally.

Love does not obsess about my individual legacy overmuch but simply gets on with the task at hand and engages fully with the present moment.

Mystery is inevitable and acceptable.

Consciousness is extinguished in death, in any way that would be comparable to living awareness. If there is a sweet calmness after death it is because that cosmic awareness of a wider perspective and an open-handed generosity was cultivated before death.

We can take the chance to live as the brilliant, outward-facing configurations of stardust—matter that has learned, for a moment, to sing and dance and love. The atoms that compose us were forged in ancient stars and they will continue to join with other atoms long after our names are forgotten, just as we are partially composed of the dinosaurs that walked the earth a million years ago. In that sense, nothing is wasted.

But more importantly, while we are here, we are conscious and can extend our awareness beyond that which was merely given to us to that which is new and fresh. We can choose compassion over cruelty as, with Unitarian minister Theodore Parker and President Abraham Lincoln, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and President Barack Obama we can help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. That is a miracle.

The question mortality presses upon us is the question the poet Mary Oliver asked, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Our answer can encompass the Stoics' saying that attention must be paid to savoring beauty and truth in its brief existence. Mortality does not diminish life's meaning, it intensifies it.

We can encompass the fears, anger, wonderment and hopeful theorizing of the world's major religions.

Our answer can respect our urge to do good and love well now, because that is what we know we have—with urgent desire.

May we now forgive sooner.

May we risk generosity.

May we show up for one another, to lend an ear, to lend a kind word.

May we spend our finite days on infinite-hearted values.

And when death comes—as it will—may it find us not hoarding our talents or energy or thoughts as if hoarding those evanescent traits kept them fresh and new for some indefinite future when they will be needed more than now.

Having given our talents and energy, we fulfilled our purpose.

Given in love.

Given in service.

Given in wonder.

Given in gratitude.

Because we are all mortal and magnificent in our kindness to each other. So
be it.