

Sermon: "All Souls" (service leader)

The mystery of death is one of those things that often drives people to church, or to ask theological questions. We wonder about what happens after life, about things like heaven and eternity and reincarnation, or maybe we're convicted about the absence of such things and feel more alone in our grief when we hear pseudo religious platitudes about being in a better place. Either way, these complicated questions rarely stand alone, they're bound up in the poignancy of grief and the loss of someone important.

We, as Unitarian Universalists, are unusual among religious groups because we don't have creeds or doctrines. We as a tradition are more interested in the experience of meaning making than in having clear answers. But in moments of great loss, that can be really hard. I don't have an answer for you about the afterlife and I have no expectation that we all agree. As your minister, I'm more concerned with how you return to life after death has gutted your world. My role isn't to come up with answers to the unknown - can you imagine if a UU minister tried? - my role is to be your companion, however you talk about the mysteries of eternity.

Several years ago a colleague shared a story from her time as a hospital chaplain. One of the people she was visiting had lost one of their dearest loves and was lamenting that she didn't believe in heaven. She was grief stricken and didn't know how to proceed.

My colleague asked her to imagine what she wished for the dear one who had passed. What would be a suitable way to spend eternity. The woman thought for a while and then said she imagined her love in a one person space ship zipping around the galaxy exploring the stars with their cat.

And that scene, that hope and blessing she was sending out into the unknown became a companion to her grief, a way of hold the pain and the loss together with a vision of joy and peace.

Because why not. There are mysteries about death that we cannot answer. Yes, we know that bodies decay and return to the earth, we know that we carry the impact and memory of our beloved with us in our own living, but questions about eternity don't have prove-able answers. We're all trying to make sense of the unknown, so why not imagine the best possible scenario? Why not send our blessings to the dead?

As with all things, I encourage that we treat ourselves with gentleness and clarity. You don't owe anyone your blessing, especially not if they harmed you. You are not obligated to honor the memory of everyone who came before you simply because they were family. This ritual, after all, is for you, it's for connecting with memories of love. You get to choose who you remember in this moment.

Usually during this service we write the name of loved ones on paper leaves and come hang them on branches. We're still going to do that, but I want you to also imagine something beautiful or joyful or peaceful for this beloved soul. Whatever you imagine heaven would be for them, not in the religious sense, but the experiential sense - a scene that they would find blissful, that wraps around your grief with warmth.

I invite you to describe that on the back of the leaf. This will be our act of blessing to those who have departed the living world and entered the realm of ancestry. Kala will play some music while we do this. If you're at home, I invite you to join us - find something to write on and then go place your blessing wherever feels right - maybe on a window sill or next

to a potted plant, amidst your grandmother's favorite earrings, wherever feels right. We'll take our time. Raise your hand if you need more leaves and come hang them on the tree whenever you're ready.