Death without Fear
A homily by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
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As long as I live, I will never forget Walker, the convict I met at the Suffolk County Jail when I was a student chaplain nearly fifteen years ago.

There were some pretty tough characters at the jail, and Walker was one of them. A wiry, haggard guy in his 50s, Walker was serving a one-year minimum sentence for illegal possession of a firearm, which he had brandished from his car when another driver cut him off.

Walker had anger issues. His mother was an alcoholic. His father committed suicide. His sister was a Satanist.

And Walker? Walker asked to talk with me because he was afraid.

He was afraid of death.

Not on his own account. He was afraid for his father, whom Walker loved intensely despite all his faults. Walker was afraid his father was burning in hell because he had taken his own life.

Somebody had told Walker that to God, suicide is unforgivable. So Walker asked me, the student chaplain—what did I think?

“If God knows everything,” I said, “then God understands. God understands exactly why someone commits suicide, and so God feels only love and compassion toward that person. I believe no one is ever cut off from God’s grace, no matter what they’ve done.”

Walker looked like a heavy stone had been lifted off his heart. “It’s really good to hear you say that,” he told me. “No one has ever said that to me before.”

One of the greatest gifts of our Universalist heritage is its conviction that no hell awaits us, no matter how terrible our mistakes. If there is a hell, Universalists preached, it is a hell on earth of our own making.

In this way, Universalists banished fear from death.

Of course, many of us are afraid to die.

Perhaps we are plagued by anxiety instilled in childhood by another faith. Perhaps we experienced the lingering death of a loved one. Perhaps we fear leaving unfinished business. Perhaps we fear the unknown.

I don’t know what happens when we die. But I don’t fear it.
I don’t want to suffer. I don’t want to feel intractable pain. But death itself doesn’t frighten me.

I’ve studied near-death experiences and reincarnation enough to wonder if death may be a gateway to wonderful adventure beyond our imagining.

But if it is not, surely it is a peaceful sleep.

My teacher Thich Nhat Hanh insists that it is neither—neither a continuation nor an annihilation.

Birth and death are both illusions, Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, because everything is interconnected. Everything interpenetrates.

When his mother died, Thich Nhat Hanh remembers, he suffered greatly for a long time.

But one night, in the highlands of Vietnam [he recalls], I was sleeping in the hut in my hermitage. I dreamed of my mother. I saw myself sitting with her, and we were having a wonderful talk. She looked young and beautiful, her hair flowing down. It was so pleasant to sit there and talk to her as if she had never died. When I woke up it was about two in the morning, and I felt very strongly that I had never lost my mother. The impression that my mother was still with me was very clear. I understood then that the idea of having lost my mother was just an idea. It was obvious in that moment that my mother is always alive in me.

I opened the door and went outside. The entire hillside was bathed in moonlight. It was a hill covered with tea plants, and my hut was set behind the temple halfway up. Walking slowly in the moonlight through the rows of tea plants, I noticed my mother was still with me. She was the moonlight caressing me as she had done so often, very tenderly, very sweet . . . wonderful! Each time my feet touched the earth I knew my mother was there with me. I knew this body was not mine alone but a living continuation of my mother and father and my grandparents and great-grandparents. Of all my ancestors. These feet that I saw as "my" feet were actually "our" feet. Together my mother and I were leaving footprints in the damp soil.

From that moment on the idea that I had lost my mother no longer existed. All I had to do was look at the palm of my hand, feel the breeze on my face or the earth under my feet to remember that my mother is always with me, available at any time.

Who we are, the Buddha taught, is not limited by our bodies, our minds, even our souls. The self is made up of non-self elements. If we look deeply enough into anything, we see everything: the blade of grass in the milk, the milk in the child, the child in the adult, the adult in the corpse, the corpse in the soil, the soil in the blade of grass.

Nothing is born, really. It just changes.

Nothing dies, really. It just changes.
When beloved ones depart, we miss them terribly. But they are always with us, in the laughter of the living, in our fingerprints, in the dreams we share with one another.

“Pay attention,” says Thich Nhat Hanh. “Pay attention to all the leaves, the flowers, the birds and the dewdrops. If you can stop and look deeply, you will be able to recognize your beloved one manifesting again and again in different forms. You will again embrace the joy of life.”

Amen, Aché, and Blessed Be.

**Benediction**

When conditions are sufficient, we manifest.
When conditions are no longer sufficient, we no longer manifest.
It does not mean that we do not exist.
Like radio waves without a radio, we do not manifest. . . .
Nothing has a separate self, and nothing exists by itself. . . .
[A]ll that has existed, exists, or will exist is interconnected and interdependent. . . .
To really understand this is to be free from fear.
—Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*