

## "Know Your Rites"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, March 20, 2011

I'm so proud of y'all for coming. It's Lent, so I know our topics have been heavy lately; I'm sure you didn't bound out of bed excited to hear about our rites of passage around death. But here you are! Maybe you had no idea that was the topic. Good for you! Coming to church just because that's what you do on Sunday. Maybe you knew, and although you were reluctant, came anyway out of duty...fantastic! Or maybe you are one of the odd ones like me, who actually like to talk about death.

One of my favorite movies of all time is a little cult classic that came out the year before I was born, called *Harold and Maude*. Have you seen it? Harold is obsessed with death. So much so that he regularly stages elaborate fake suicides, attends funerals, and drives a hearse, all much to the dismay of his socialite mother. At one of the funeral services he attends for a total stranger, Harold meets Maude, a seventy-nine year old woman who shares Harold's hobby of attending funerals. He is entranced by her quirky outlook on life, which is bright and excessively carefree in contrast with his own morbidity. The pair form a bond, and Maude slowly shows Harold the pleasures of art and music, and teaches him how to "[make] the most of his time on earth."

This movie has always intrigued me. Mainly because of my affection for Maude's character: someone who celebrates this life in full acknowledgment of her own mortality. For a long time I believed funerals were the only place one could really learn about death, because there seemed to be no place else where it was appropriate to talk about it. As a chaplain and a minister, I received a crash course on death, learning through doing, being with families as they were with those they loved who were dying. Each experience was unique. Some were quite tragic; I was the chaplain at a major university hospital, assigned to the Emergency Room and Neonatal Intensive Care. So I have been with people who have died from birth to over one-hundred.

Today I want to tell you about a woman whose death deeply impacted me for many reasons. It is a sad story, but if you will just hang with me for a moment, I believe there is a profound lesson to be learned from her story; one that honors this woman's

life that was, in fact, taken tragically too soon. She was my age at the time, in her thirties. How she prepared for her own death was extraordinary. She had been suffering for a long time, and had come close to death on multiple occasions. The doctors called me to be with her family as they struggled with the ups and downs of the last few days. When I arrived, I met the dying woman's sister (in her forties) and young daughter. After spending some time with them, both of them told me with confidence that they felt she was hanging on for something. She could not speak. She was heavily medicated to help ease the pain. She had tried every treatment available at the time. There was nothing else that could be done for her.

This family knew for several years that she was going to die, and they tackled it head on. She wrote letters to her daughter, for her to open on her birthday every year until she turned twenty-one, and then another to open if she married, and another if she had children of her own, and then one letter for every decade until she was sixty. She had a Do Not Resuscitate order in place, and had made it very clear to her sister, who was designated to make medical decisions, that no drastic measures be taken after her decline. This family had a lot of conversations and had done a lot of work; they took full advantage of knowing that her death was imminent. In all of this planning, everything was handled as best it could be, they assured me, and it broke their hearts to see her struggling.

I asked, quite innocently, whether or not this extremely mature thirteen year-old had told her mother that she had done enough, and that it was okay for her to go? They both looked at one another and began to cry ... and both said no. I told her daughter that it might help, if she believed it to be true, to let her dying mother know that it was okay for her to go, that she would be taken care of, that she loved her and that she didn't want her to suffer anymore. They agreed that this was the right thing to do, we prayed together, and then went back into the room. Her daughter told her that she loved her, that she was grateful for all of the work that she had done to make sure that she would be safe; she told her how happy she was that she had all those letters that would never replace having her there, but that it would be enough. She promised that she would go to college, work hard, and would strive to make her proud.

All the while alarms were ringing, as her mother's oxygen levels dropped and her heart rate began to slow. She was letting go even as her daughter was speaking. We stood in awe as the numbers dropped lower and lower. And then her daughter said, "Mama, I don't want you to suffer anymore. It's okay to let go. I'm going to be okay. You've been so strong, and it's okay to rest now." We saw her take her last breath, her daughter and sister crying and holding her hands. After a few minutes, the nurse and doctor rushed in at a completely different pace. Instinctively, her sister and daughter backed away and let them do what they do. They flipped off machines, wrote a note in the chart, paused long enough to say that they were sorry, and then stepped out.

Then her daughter turned to me and said, "Can I touch her?" "Of course you can," I said. I lowered the rail from the side of the bed, and she climbed beside the woman who gave her life, and held her one last time. I understand that this story would have been better if she had beaten this disease, or if she had not had leukemia in the first place. There is beauty in this sadness; I hope that you can see it. Beauty that they had prepared, and so she had no regrets. There was beauty that her family was together and were open about their love for one another. Beauty that the family was clear about her mother's wishes and did not have to question medical decisions. And beauty that there was a legacy of letters prepared for the daughter, to guide her through her life to come.

And I too received a gift from this woman's death. Her careful preparation changed forever my awareness of the kind of impact we can make, if we all took the time to prepare for our own deaths. Even though the story is sad, I come away feeling better about life, not worse. If I were not a minister, I would probably be a memorial service junkie, like Maude in *Harold and Maude*, attending memorial services as a hobby. At All Souls, our memorial services are a celebration of life – we honor the complexities of life and death, and offer hope in lifting up the example of a life well lived. No matter what your ideas or opinions about what happens in the afterlife, we celebrate how life lives on eternally through love, in the memories and hearts of those whose lives they have touched.

If you have never been to a memorial service held here, let me tell you that the next time you hear of one, I invite you to come, so that you can know our rites regarding

the death of someone connected to this congregation. I leave each memorial service more aware of my own limited time on this earth, inspired to take hold of the life I have yet to live, more present, more intentional, more clear about what is important, grateful for this day. What you may not know is that before the memorial service, if the person has been cremated, most often there is a small family internment in the memorial garden. In that service, we spread some of the ashes at the base of this evergreen tree that you can see out of the window. The evergreen stays green through each season, and because it is visible through our sanctuary window, reminds us of all those who have come before us and have touched our lives, and even made our lives possible.

In a sense, it reminds us every Sunday (if you know the story) that we are held accountable for what we do in here. By our covenant that we say together in worship, by the outside world visible through the clear glass windows, and also by that (often referred-to) mighty cloud of witnesses symbolized by the evergreen tree – those whose lives, and hopes, and vision we carry with us in our hearts. At the conclusion of each memorial service, following the pronouncement, the minister descends from the pulpit and turns to face the window, and this evergreen tree, in silence until the church bell tolls. It is the only time in the ceremony that our ministers turn their backs to the congregation. It is a symbolic gesture that recognizes that we will continue to carry that life with us, into this sanctuary of hope.

Walking intentionally with and through the death of someone we love is one of the most difficult things we will ever have to do. And we will all have to do it. And each death and burial we attend is in fact a rehearsal for our own. This is the coursework and the preparation, living every day with our death as a real possibility helps us to appreciate today. There is nothing quite like being at the bedside of someone who is dying. It is a holy moment; one that no matter how prepared we think we are for a loved one's death, still carries with it a surprising sense of finality. It can also be a holy moment that is also filled with rage, or confusion, or denial. Death can also become a battleground: between family members, between families' desire and the policies of the hospital, between well-intentioned voices trying to speak for unnamed intentions.

It is important to have someone there who can look out for your family in the face of your death, or for you in the face of a loved one's death, to help navigate that space.

We live in a death-denying culture. If you don't have someone present who can help you walk through the death of someone you love, who understands what is possible, you may leave feeling more empty because you didn't know how it could have been until long after it's over. I have heard similar stories surrounding birth. For some reason, we are more open to having conversations about birth, and including our own desires into the mix of the medical machine. There are classes to take, and books to read, and even though nothing can teach you how to give birth, preparing can give you choices that you may not have had otherwise. Just like birth, death is personal. It is a unique experience, and we may in fact not know how we will bump up against our culture until it happens. Although sometimes you will get lucky and be assigned a nurse, or a doctor, or a funeral home worker who will make space for multiple ways to handle someone who has died, for the most part, if you want something other than the mechanical, it helps to have someone there to support you.

So in understanding your rights (r-i-g-h-t-s) regarding death, the first is that as a member of this church, you have a right to have a minister present when facing the death of a loved one or your own death. And that lends itself to your first responsibility – because with rights comes responsibility – your first responsibility is to let us know how we can better serve you and your family if we are well-informed about your wishes. This is really a win-win for everyone: when you have these difficult conversations *before* they become necessary, WRITE THEM DOWN, and give the church a copy. We can more easily assist in making sure, when the time comes, that we are not guessing about what you would want. I know that it's not easy to have these conversations, but it is much easier now than in the middle of a crisis. Just think, if we all took responsibility as though our own death was imminent? Because in fact, it is.

It seems that no matter how many compelling stories people hear from me or Oprah, some people still don't ever want to talk about their own death. Those of us who are more willing to talk about death, who are curious and want as much information as possible, mostly become ministers, or music directors, funeral home directors, morticians...oh, and members of our life decisions committee. If you are one of these realistic few who think of death as a life stage that can be anticipated and planned for, then you are special! And Life Decisions needs you! This is a committee of the church

that volunteers to give out end-of-life related paperwork, and sometimes help walk our members through the process of filling it out. They share resources, and gather the submitted forms to keep on file for the ministers to reference. The committee is made up of people who are honest and open about the reality of our mortality; people who want to make death the least traumatic as possible for our family.

What kinds of things need to be talked about now? No matter what your age? I believe we have a responsibility to discuss with our family:

1. Who we want to make care decisions for us when we can't.
2. What kind of medical treatment we want, or do not want. And be specific! The resources from life decisions can walk you through specific medical procedures.
3. It is important to name how comfortable we want to be – how we would want to be treated and cared for given certain circumstances.
4. We should talk about whom we would like to have notified upon our death: creating a list of family members, friends, or organizations.
5. And anything else specific you want your loved ones to know, if something were to happen to you.
6. If we *really* want to be on top of the game, we would also handle any financial issues well in advance, whether that's insurance, a will, or a trust.
7. And we get BONUS points in my book for keeping online passwords and important information like real estate documents, titles, taxes, and account information somewhere safe and accessible to someone you trust.

If you haven't had someone close to you die who has not handled all these things, I invite you to ask around. My guess is that you have already heard a story about taxes, and court, and belongings, and drama surrounding death, all because these things were not written down. Today in Emerson Hall, our resident minister Barbara Prose and member Sue Ames are staffing a table for Life Decisions, where you can sign up to help or pick up a packet that will help you get started on your own paperwork. Please take the time, if you haven't already, to make having these conversations a priority.

May we honor our life by being more intentional about issues concerning our own death. At the conclusion of our memorial services, the last words spoken to the congregation are to “honor the life of [the one who has died] by living more fully, more joyously, and more compassionately, in whatever number of days ahead are still ours to claim.

May it be so.