

Life Lessons
The Rev. Constance A. St.Hilaire
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Did you hear a new note? When we sing hymns, we often hear someone singing notes not in the melody. They are harmonizing. We specially hear this when we sing the Christmas hymn, *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

But today I want to talk about another kind of harmony: about what happens when we die and on the way there. Many of us have been facing the issue of illness and death this year. Rather than pretend it is not on our minds, it is important that we think and talk about it openly.

Openness on an issue helps us to displace fear. Fear usually causes us to be quiet, to go inward, lest someone around us notices. Yet it weighs on our minds, affects how we act, what we hear when others speak to us, and how we talk to those we love. We rejoice when our health improves but we know that each one of us will face the day when a loved one is no longer here or when we ourselves begin to leave this earthly home. As they say, life is a terminal condition and none of us gets out of it alive.

Most of us have our own idea of what happens when we die. Indeed, many religions seem to center their very essence around how we go on living in some way after we die. None of us can prove what happens when we die, since no one has come back to tell us, but it is still important to have some idea of what we **believe** happens because it informs how we live our lives, it helps us to cope with our own death and that of loved ones, and it can give us hope and comfort.

Each Sunday we say our Affirmation of Faith. It is our covenant, our agreement about why we are here.

Like many things we know by rote memorization, we often do not think about what we are saying. That's the down side of ritual. But the upside is sometimes what we are saying suddenly stands out and we think about the words in a new way. Let's look at ours:

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest of truth is its sacrament
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace
To seek knowledge in freedom
To serve humanity in fellowship
**To the end that all souls shall grow
Into harmony with the Divine -
Thus do we covenant together.**

The last few lines of our covenant explain why we are here and why we think the other ideas in our covenant are so important.

What do we mean by growing into harmony with the Divine? Partly, it is about striving to be better people - by doing all the things we listed in the previous lines.

The word harmony comes from the Greek *harmonia*, meaning a joint, an agreement, a concord, and it derives from the verb *harmozo* meaning to fit together or to join. This is very much like the Latin word *religio* which means a linking back and from which we get the word *religion*.

When we sing in harmony the sounds are pleasant, and they join to make a unified sound in spite of the reality that they are more than one note at a time.

We know from the Big Bang that we all come from the One. This is what we mean by the Divine, the existence that created our existence. Some people call it God, the Great Spirit, the Force, or Energy. Ralph Waldo Emerson and many early Unitarians called the divine One, the All, the Oversoul.

So what does it mean to join with the One when we die?

For some, it means we leave behind our individuality and we are truly one with the All. We come from the One and we return to the One. We come from the Great Spirit and we return to that Spirit, perhaps to go into other parts of creation or to stay in the immortal creative presence.

But the part that comforts most people is the idea of the harmony: the idea that we stay ourselves, that we sing separate notes that fill the chord of the Divine Hymn, while becoming part of the symphonic presence of the Divine.

I recall Carl Sagan, that Unitarian Universalist scientist of the people, who once spoke of the symphonic hum of the universe which scientists listen to on their elaborate radio equipment. Perhaps this is the sound of all creation. Perhaps this is the sound we will add our harmonies to.

It may **not** really be a musical production, but **instead** the idea that we will all get along, that together we can find purpose and meaning: This can be an example that we can all live with in this life until we harmonize again in the Spirit.

As I have been experiencing my own illness and impending death, I have been blessed with having many friends who were fellow students. In 2010, when I had the melanoma on my scalp, I found my pastoral community supportive and loving and their prayerful messages on Facebook helped me to continue school in spite of not knowing if the cancer was in my system.

Now they are still there. Now they are ministers. I have been telling them about my life as well as my current experience of cancer and its treatment to help them provide better pastoral care to their church members. In the process, I have found that my life's lessons can help others to look at their own experience of life in a new way.

Some of the things I have learned are that sacrifice is not about co-dependency. Many of us do things for others that cost us in some way. We do it out of love, out of commitment to a cause, out of the recognition that we need each other. We often get the love back from someone else, and thus the circle of life spins its web, interdependently.

The Miracle Ring: A Lesson in Non-Attachment

In 1989 my housemate Marjorie gave me a beautiful ring for my birthday. It had been a pin so the soldering of the setting was soft, being gold. The year I turned 50, I lost it while working at the church summer fair. Skip had planned a big party for me, so I decided not to say anything to anyone. We had a great time. The next day I scoured the parking lot and the church building, but to no avail. Nothing to do but wear another ring.

At the end of that week a couple who had bought Skip's last sailboat came to the Cape. The morning they were leaving, the woman bent down in the garage and said, "What is this?" There was the setting of seventeen garnets. One day I was driving a blind woman and when I got home the setting was gone again. The next day I found it in the door pocket of her Subaru. This July one evening as I got off the sofa I noticed it missing again. I checked the bathroom, my bedroom, and then found it on the floor of the kitchen.

One of my friends had once asked how can I stand constantly losing this thing?

When my VISTA roommate and I returned east after serving in Wichita, REA Express lost most of my things I'd had shipped, including all my winter clothes and my books. Then I got a call from my roommate. Her former boyfriend had been killed in an automobile accident. Suddenly the things meant nothing. Clothes can be replaced. The ideas of Emerson and Thoreau were already in my head.

I was willing to say goodbye for good to the ring that July evening. But it's a miracle ring. Maybe if I were more attached to it it would not keep turning up. The Buddhists would like my non-attachment.

Community Organizing : No Ego

When I was a child, both my parents worked in the same factory and I was taken care of by my grandmother then some neighbors. One of the things I learned early on is that there is no one way to do something. My mother may cook or make a bed a certain way, but someone else has a different idea. They all seem to work just fine. So I learned not to be controlling.

This was a good trait to have as a community organizer. The way I look at it, it is the people whom we are organizing that have a stake in the outcome, not me. They are the ones that are facing the consequences of promoting whatever changes they seek. Often there is a price to pay, either physical or social or financial. I get to go home and be the middle-class well-educated white person with privilege, even if I am working at poverty wages. So I advise but do not control. This takes a lack of ego: it is about the result, not about me.

Unconditional Love

My friends Lee Davis and Asdis Hodgson, who had been friends with Skip and me before he died, kept that friendship after Skip died. This does not always happen. My mother was abandoned by her “couples” friends when my father died. Some people feel a threat to their own future.

After I was in the hospital, Lee and Asdis took me in. I cooked for them and generally acted as a daughter with no parental issues. They loved me as I was. I loved them as they were. And to this day I thank God for that complete unconditional love. They supported me through losing 50 pounds on Weight Watchers, taking care of Skip’s cousin John who was dying of pancreatic cancer and then later his daughter who had a rare form of muscular dystrophy.

They supported me through divinity school as I became a minister. Asdis developed Alzheimer’s and is now in a nursing home. I take Lee to see her and I help her to eat. I have had a number of “parents” in my life, but they are special. I always thank him for his love. And for teaching me how to give it, for it is mutual.

Gratitude

In all of this is an underlying gratitude for all the positive people, the caring people, the knowledgeable people who are helping me live as well as possible as I go through this. I just keep telling people what I need and I get it. “Ask and ye shall receive.” All the support I get from local people, my college friends, my far-flung friends, my Facebook friends, my church friends, my Lions friends, my ministerial friends hold me in a peaceful place. I am not sad about this state of my health and I hope that others will not respond to me in that way, either. I am so blessed. I keep telling people that there are many good sides of this bad. The things most important are that:

- (1) I will not run out of money before I die. This gives me peace and joy.
- (2) It has brought me closer to my friends. This gives me love.
- (3) I will not get Alzheimer’s. This is a consolation.
- (4) It spurs me to focus on what I most want. This means I can take care of myself.
- (5) I can provide pastoral care on the level of experience. This means I am still relevant.

My Comfort Theory

Chaplains speak of the five aspects of a human being: the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social. Back in the 90's, when I was exploring a logo for the Healthsigns Center where I do much of my ministry, I used this with the symbol of the starfish, which has five arms, any of which can generate a whole new starfish.

We try to balance these five aspects, to feel comfortable in them all the time, but the truth is, most of the time we are out of balance. We trade the comforts of the physical in order to have an intellectual experience we need, such as going to college on a shoestring. Or something happens at work that we think is less than above board and we put up with it because we need the the money for physical comfort. We try to nurture our spirituality but there never seems to be enough down time from the work or the social life. We love the people around us but they can be so demanding: is it love or duty?

When I was in school, I just wanted to keep going and graduate, so when the school's health insurance would not pay for a PET scan, it was just as well, because there was no acceptable treatment at the time. The meds I am on now were not developed until 2012. Two years ago, knowing there was something wrong inside me, I opted to leave a chaplaincy at Beverly Hospital and come home to the Cape.

If I'd gone to Florida for an internship, as I planned, I would not have the loving people around me that I do now. And my dermatologist had told me that if I went to Florida it would kill me. He's rather excitable and would like me to wear gloves in the summer!

Now I have a balanced life and want to keep it that way. I feel comfortable that I am not overemphasizing one aspect over another. The physical is important, of course, when I am ill, but it is only one aspect of who I am. I do not intend to give up the rest to it.

In fact, after attending a forum by the Cape Cod Hospital on quality of life and end-of-life issues, I have started organizing to have retired ministers talk to people at churches and senior centers to encourage them to talk with their families about what they want at the end of their lives, rather than the children often having to make a quick decision not knowing what the parent wanted.

Intention: A Choice

The most important lesson of my life came at the age of seven. I was raised Catholic and went to a Catholic School. When it was time for our First Communion, it was also time for our first Confession. Little Sister Jeanne took us next door to our St. Francis of Assisi Church and in the vestibule reminded us: "Sin is in the intention." Because of the way I think, I immediately knew that I was in control of my soul. My conscience would lead me. I could assess the rules and live by them. I could choose to love, to be a grace to the world. **She gave me my sense of self that day.**

I do not want to pretend that all I have ever done was never hurtful to anyone. But I have not purposely hurt someone. As a white, straight, educated person I automatically have privileges that undermine those of others. But many of my generation spent our youth fighting either the Vietnam War or the War on Poverty. Now we must start again to bring justice to the world. As Kent Keith says in his Paradoxical Commandments, "What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight."

Maybe this time we will do without war references. I recently heard a researcher from the University of Michigan who studied how people reference their actions in regard to cancer. Those who use violent terms such as fight and battle see cancer as the enemy and opt only for the medical attack. Those who refuse to use violent language, as I do, and prefer to use terms such as treatment, are more apt to take personal action to make themselves better. Indeed, I must manage all aspects of my own care, juggling how much medicine I can take and what to eat, when to sleep, and how to maintain the activities that fulfill me.

Every day I say my Gratitude meditation. It is a physical and verbal one:

I am grateful for my feelings. (Right fist on chest with left hand behind it.)

I am grateful for my body. (Left hand palm up, with right fist lying inside.)

I am grateful for my mind. (Hands touch at the tips and palms, making the shape of a flame.)

I am grateful for my spirit. (Hands open up with small fingers touching, like a dove.)

I am grateful for my world. (Hands and arms spread apart to welcome the world.)

In this life we can begin the harmony of the universe's song by supporting one another in time of illness and grief. We can listen to one another's fears and pain and doubt and anger. No matter how many years we have on this earth our time is indeed very short - too short to waste it in hiding our feelings.

Let us be open to each other about life's scary times. Let us join in harmony now, when the loving sounds of another can help us to cope with life's hurts. Let us sing a song of love:

Please join together, rising in body or spirit, to sing hymn number 1008 in the teal hymnal, "When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place."