

# Kiss the Joy



**He who binds himself to joy  
doth the winged life destroy  
but he who kisses the joy as it flies  
lives in eternity's sunrise.  
- William Blake**

A Sermon by the **Rev. Carolyn Price**  
*Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula*  
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Every year, now for three years on Christmas Eve, a member of the congregation or I have read this poem, written by William Henry Harrison Murray, aloud. Remember:

Ah friends, dear friends,  
as years go on and heads get  
gray, how fast the guests do go!

Touch hands, touch hands  
With those that stay.

Strong hands to weak,  
old hands to young,  
around the season's table  
touch hands.

The false forget, the foe  
forgive, for every guest will  
go and every fire burn low  
and even the house empty stand ...

Forget, forgive, for who may  
say that day may never  
come to host or guest again.

Touch hands.

Now, almost half a year away from Christmas, I want us to remember those words. It has been a year of endings. We have lost four among us, a large number for a community so small. We stand, this summer, at the brink of more likely endings, not by death I dearly hope, but by departure, as several of our young families move from this area for economic and personal reasons. How we will miss them!

We experience endings all of our lives, from the very beginning, when our time in the sheltered, soft darkness of the womb ends. At some point, usually as children or teenagers, but sometimes earlier or later, our inherent trust and faith, which some call “innocence”, ends, as we learn through loss or tragedy that life is neither always fair nor kind.

Relationships end. Schooling ends, sometimes with degrees, sometimes not. When we marry, our days as a single person end – and if we behave ourselves, our ability to sow wild oats comes to a close. And that is nothing compared to the individual freedom that ends if we have children and become parents. At some point, either by choice or circumstance, our ability to work for pay in this world ends. Even for the boyish, beautifully-blue eyed Butch Cassidy, as we learned last week, when veteran actor Paul Newman announced his retirement. Newman has said that at 82, he can no longer perform like he used to. NPR called him the last of a generation of actors, who changed the shape of the art forever, for the better. But even when his acting skills were well intact, his desire to devote all of time to that ended, and he created his company “Newman’s Own” of healthy, usually organic food and drink products. He is unique in this, just as his acting made him a unique icon of his era. Paul Newman and the Newman’s Own Foundation donate all profits taxes for educational and charitable purposes.

They have given over \$220 million to worldwide since 1982, and for most of those years, they did so as the only organization in this country to donate the entirety of its profits in this way. Paul Newman, by the way, Ladies and Gentlemen, is a Unitarian Universalist.

Everything ends. Even the way we know our bodies ends. Our hands grow arthritic and the way we used to open jars ends altogether, usually in some frustration. Our knees give out, and all of sudden stairs take on new height, literally. And, sooner or later, usually sometime at or after middle age, we stop in front of a mirror, and like the card I saw the other day in a shop, take a good look at ourselves and say, “What the hell happened here?”

Endings come because we care – about ourselves and about others, and no one stays the same or lives forever, no matter how much we love them.

As John Lennon wrote, with help from Paul McCartney, when each of them was only was only in their twenties...

There are places I remember ... all my life,  
Though some have changed  
Some forever, not for better  
Some have gone and some remain.  
All these places have their moments  
Of lovers and friends I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life I loved them all.

So how do we live in a world of endings?

When I was young, not yet twenty, and in my first teaching job, we were reading the work of the southern writer, William Faulkner. Now Faulkner, for those who have not read him in a little while, is rather dark, picking up on the tragic side of life, on the worst of human behavior as well as the best. And one of my students wrote in a final exam, in his essay, that what he had learned from a semester's worth of Faulkner, was that life is made up of "layers of grief".

Grief is the way we carry what we have lost, the way we store endings, in our minds, our bodies, in our very souls. Some think that grief is to be avoided, at all costs, because it is painful. And that is true – especially for the first pangs of wild grief that come upon the sudden news of death or loss; that early grief is terrible, as all who have endured it well know. That grief, yes, we wish we could avoid. But we cannot – as I often say at memorials – for if we are to live fully in this world, we will experience love, and to love is to invite loss, for everything changes, everything dies. As the Unitarian Universalist poet, Mary Oliver, tells us:

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

Our lives do depend upon this love, for through it, and only through it, I believe, do we engage with life in all its richness. When we enter into relationships, of all the kinds that are given to us upon this earth, we enter into the beating heart of human existence and become part of that eternal cadence.

This community is one such relationship – for here, across the ages, in this fellowship which bridges the generations, something that is not always possible for us out in the “usual world”, we are encouraged to let go of our own small self, and to join with others in the dance of life and love and learning.

Now, some of us will endure more grave layers of grief than others, losses that come earlier, through traumatic and untimely diseases, disasters, and deaths. And if we are true to life, true to the choice we have to make meaning out of our brief days on this earth, those of us to whom this happens often become what some call “old souls”. We grow “wiser than our years”, though it is usually a wisdom, that, if anyone had asked us, we would gladly have chosen to forego, in order to keep that love, that man or woman

or child, that place or way of being in the world, to keep it against our bones longer, so much longer than we were given the chance to do.

I know there are those among us here today, that even now, given the chance to trade entire years of our own lives for the chance to hold the love we lost against our bones, to hold it longer and closer, to hold it perhaps even still – I know we would have gladly made that trade, gladly shortened our own time on earth. I know we would. If only we could.

As we age – and some of you here know this far better than me – then, no matter how much or how little loss we have endured before then, at some point we become, if for no other reason than the sheer passage of time, and no matter how much we would rather put it off – first-hand witnesses to life’s certain end, as those we have loved, especially those who are older than we are, leave this world in the way that all sentient life must.

One day we become the ones with the gray hair. And then - ready or not - we enter those years when the loss of friends, family and loved ones becomes a part of our regular days, a constant presence in our lives. And going to memorials becomes not unusual, but common place.

Still, almost thirty years after I taught William Faulkner to that young man, knowing what I know now, I wish I could add to what he said, in my response to him as a teacher. I wish I could tell him that, yes, life can be

understood as made up of layers of grief. But that is only because of the layers of joy and love that were there in the beginning, that were there first. Grief is not born of nothing, I would remind him – though by now he probably knows this, too – but comes at the loss of relationship, the loss of the finest human hours we know. I would want to talk with him all these years later about the darkness that Faulkner writes of, where little light penetrates, and I would want him to know how I have learned to believe that such darkness happens most when people are isolated and alone.

And to you, to those of you who were here when I spoke a sermon on Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road” recently, a novel that depicts one of the darkest pictures of human life I have ever read, and the most beautiful, I want to follow up with this - that in that world, despite the outer darkness that permeated the sky, the earth and even darkened the face of the waters, the worst darkness came from the isolation and loneliness of the man and, to a much lesser extent, the boy. It came from the fear and the sorrow that separation breeds. What changes at the end of that story is the lightness of a woman’s voice, and her open arms, as she welcomes the lonely, lost boy into her home, calling him into community, into her heart, and in a real way, back into the living heart of the world.

Everything is relationship, says Starhawk. And our most enduring work, as living, growing human beings is to tend those relationships, to create new ones all our lives, across the generations, so that even when we are obliged to count ourselves among the eldest of all, our friendships remain vibrant and strong, keeping us connected, allowing us to hold love against our bones as if our lives depend upon it, because they do, allowing us to hold love until the very end.

Endings come. All our lives, they come. The most important endings we carry with us in memory and devotion and how we live our lives. Those we have loved best become the saints who lead the way forward for us, as etchings on the heart, comforting us when times are hard, giving us strength for the journey, and courage to go on. When we can no longer hold them against our bones, those we have loved become a part of something deeper than bone, greater than loss, and stronger than death.

Let us close this final morning of the church year by singing a hymn, an old hymn, that gives homage to all those we have loved and lost, and who have made the world, and our world, better by their being. It is a song to all the saints. Their work is now ours to do. May we do it well and long.