

“Memento Mori”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
February 22, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

The first funeral that I assisted with was held in October, 2020. Her name was Janet, and she was a member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland, where I served as the intern minister. The first funeral that I did on my own, as the minister of the UU Congregation of York, Pennsylvania, was in June of 2022. Her name was Irene, and she'd been a longtime member of the congregation though ill health, and covid, had kept her from the building for quite some time. In 2020 and 2021, every funeral that I did was a Zoom service. My internship supervisor, the Rev. Dr. Carl Gregg, and I did our best to make them fulfilling and meaningful experiences, but it was hard. When you have lost someone you love, you want to be around other people who loved them. You want to hear the stories, hear the sobs and the laughter both, you want to hold the box of tissues and light the candles and sing the songs and look at the pictures and name the specific size and shape of the ache that person's loss has left within you.

“You can't beat [death](#) but

You can beat death in life, sometimes.

And the more often you learn to do it,

The more light there will be.
Your life is your life.
Know it while you have it.
You are marvelous
The gods wait to delight
In you.”

Know your life while you have it.

I have a long document that I keep adding to, full of suggestions for readings for Celebrations of Life. When I was talking with Devon about his ideas for this service, and when we both met with Heidi to talk about her passion for this work, I shared that document with them both. Our readings today both came from that document, and they found their way into that document from every Celebration of Life I have ever helped plan, from colleagues sharing suggestions, from funerals that I have personally attended, and simply from things that I have read that I have loved, that made me think “I might like to have that read in my memory someday, after I’m gone.”

I love that Unitarian Universalism does tend to use the phrase “Celebration of Life” more often than funeral or memorial service, or sometimes in conjunction with those terms. Every funeral rite, every ritual that we humans engage in when a loved one dies, each one of them

serves the living. As our readings (and Heidi's reflection) make clear, there are as many approaches to death and dying as there are people. We have shared rituals, and we have rituals that we create specifically for ourselves or our loved ones. Every time I meet with someone to plan out the way we will celebrate the life of their loved one, I am privileged and honored to hear the most wonderful stories.

A modern ritual that has transcended many faith traditions and cultures is the photo slideshow. Sometimes they are done during the church service itself - that's often the way we do it here, because in a Celebration of Life it can really help to view and witness images from across the entire lifespan, to get a sense of the span of their time here. Sometimes, the slideshows may be running on a loop before or after the service, or at the repast, or even shared through group chats and online posts for all those who couldn't be physically present to say farewell. For me, those slideshows are amazing to witness. I am often the one person in the room who really didn't know the person who died - sometimes not at all, sometimes not very well, and since I've only been a minister for five years, even if it's someone I knew, I usually hadn't known them for very long. The slideshow tells me the story of their life.

But it's not just the slideshow itself - if I reviewed those images quietly by myself in my office, I would get a sense

of the shape and scope of the life contained within them...but nothing compares to seeing the images along with people who knew and loved the person so much better, for so much longer, than I ever could have. Hearing the laughter, the snatches of conversation, the quiet sniffles, the stirrings in the seats - it is all a powerful testament to the life of the one who is gone.

Again: there is no greater honor I am granted in this work, to bear witness to these stories, to hold the space where the stories can be told, where grief and love can flow like water, like tears, like bubbling laughter. (~5:10)

“And you’ll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time. You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they’ll be comforted to know your energy’s still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you’re just less orderly.”

Now my professional opinion of Aaron Freeman’s [essay](#) is that while it is beautiful, I have a *few* arguments I would

like to make in favor of faith. It is a comfort to me and to many to think of every physical element of my body returning to the world which birthed it. And it is so vital that we make room for rituals and reassurances for everyone, no matter what their own belief structure, no matter their faith or lack thereof - after all my faith, OUR faith, honors the inherent dignity and worthiness of each human life. That's why we want to celebrate them when they are over. Whatever you might personally believe happens to your spirit when you die, we do know what happens to the body. We can make our decisions with what to do with our mortal remains according to our understanding of the larger world and our place within it.

Not a bit of you is gone. You're just less orderly. Your body has rejoined the materials from whence it came. Your spirit has broken into the thousand shining pieces of love and memory and warmth and vitality that live on in the memories and the stories of all you were, while you were here. Whether you believe the gods wait to delight in you, or the universe takes your substance back into itself, or any one of a thousand other things - give some thought to how you might like your life to be celebrated. Talk with your loved ones about what your wishes are. It's hard to talk about death, which is strange, since it is the most universal part of human experience. If you aren't sure where to start, you can start with me - remember that you

can always schedule a time to talk about your wishes. Part of my honor and privilege in this work is also to keep the records of these kinds of wishes, to store them so that whoever is the minister here when your time comes will have a place to start. Considering what you want to happen to you - both corporeally and spiritually - when you die, *before* you die, is one of the greatest gifts you can give to those who will eventually mourn you. It is a gift of love and light.

“And the more often you learn to do it,
The more light there will be.”