“Honoring Our Beloved Dead”
Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, November 1, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

Sighing and frightened and full of argument. I wonder why this fragment of a poem has come to me again and again in recent weeks?

Last week, when we joined our partner congregation in worship at Williams Memorial Baptist Church, I had cause to reflect on the beauty and the challenge provided to those preachers in Christian churches whose weekly readings are dictated by the Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of readings from the Christian Scriptures that lay out which texts are to be heard - and by implication, to be preached from - on a continual rotation. The idea is hearing from all parts of the Bible across the three years, guiding the faithful on their journey through the liturgical year.

There is a real gift in that. There is a gift in being asked, again and again, how do you read this now? How is this text sitting with you now? We all know what it’s like when we read a book, or watch a movie, that we loved when we were younger, and it just…hits us different. Or brings us different insights.

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In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we do not have a lectionary. We don't have a shared set of texts that we are required to turn to again and again.

And yet here, once again, when faced with the annual ceremony of Honoring Our Beloved Dead, I turned to our greatest poet and prophet, Mary Oliver. Beloved by seekers and observers across the world, the resonant language of this resplendently talented woman says something in fewer words that feels more true than anything I could craft in many more.

I do not want to be sighing and frightened and full of argument. I do NOT want to end up having simply visited the world.

The opposite of visiting is staying home. Staying inside. Not engaging with the world, that selfsame world that seems, daily, ever more bound and determined to elicit from deep within me … sighing, and fear, and argument.

But if we do not leave our homes, our comfort spaces, if we do not engage with the world and all its beauty… what on earth will we say on the surveys!?

"I think 'so, this is death' and wonder why
I can still see through my eyes. An angel
approaches with a feedback form asking
how I'd rate my life (very good, good,
average, bad, very bad) and I intend to tick
'average' followed by a rant then I recall
your face like a cartoon treasure chest
glowing with gold light, tick 'very good,'
and in the comment box below I write
'nice job.' The angel asks if I enjoyed
my stay and I say 'Oh yes, I'd definitely
come again' and he gives me a soft look
meaning 'that won't be possible but thanks
all the same,' clicks his pen and vanishes."

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Very good. Nice job. Would recommend. Would happily come again.

Not the choices of someone who only visited this world. The choices of someone who allowed themselves to live. To love. And to lose.

In the past week I was granted the great good fortune to have a short visit from a dear friend, the widow of a beloved colleague and friend, a retired UU minister who was a member of my last congregation in York, Pennsylvania. I was honored to officiate his Celebration of Life in the fall of 2024, and to have his beloved wife here for a short visit two years later was a true gift.

His wife, my friend Ellen, is a brilliant spiritual director and teacher in her own right. She is also an artist. During our long catch-up talk, she showed me a photo of a collage she had created earlier this year, one of the very first creative ventures she took after the terrible six-month period in which she lost not only her spouse but also both of her sisters, she who was literally surrounded by that much love on all sides now left with none of it.

Of course she has children and stepchildren and grandchildren and step-grandchildren. She does not lack for a quantity of love but for a quality.

In her artwork, there was a flame, an image of her spouse's hand, a lightning bolt, and an infinity symbol. Between one world and the next, between the love and the loss, the flame still burned. The flame of love. The flame of commitment. The flame of connection. The flame of active engagement in this world, in all that it offers, in its profound beauty and deep ugliness.

The world WILL make us sigh, it will make us fearful, it will make us argumentative. But oh my goodness it can also make us so much more.

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On this day, so close to a very significant election, it is tempting to turn our attention to that alone - to continue to perseverate on who, why, how, where, when.

But there are larger forces at work, and at play, in the world. When you are in the grips of deepest grief, the currents of social movements disappear into meaningless background motions.

When we gather each week, why do we call it worship? What, so many have asked, do Unitarian Universalists worship?

To worship something means to declare that thing of great worth. If we are not mindful and deliberative about what we give our attention to, about what we declare to be of highest worth, then our attention will default to… well. They are calling it the “attention economy” now, are they not? We are pummeled, daily, with indiscriminate and often inaccurate or incomplete information about a thousand different things all happening at once, all demanding our attention. Our phones ding with texts soliciting not just our donations but our outrage.

Dear ones, my outrage exhausts me. Daily. But what is deeper than that, what is more true than that, is grief. Not just for what we have lost and stand to lose in this country - that grief is VERY real. But the grief that is our hard-earned birthright for having truly been married to amazement during our time here. When we take the world into our arms, and love it, and let it break our hearts. Your grief, your outrage, your sighs and your dancing and your arguments and your art, are all ways of checking off box after box on your afterlife report card - very good, very good, very good.

The deepest throes of love have a similar distracting character to the deepest throes of grief, and no wonder. They are the same thing. One is the arrival of a magical mystery, and one is the departure of the same. We didn’t ask for either one of them. Love fills us and warms us and moves us to be our best selves, to work for a world where everyone can have the opportunity to let themselves feel that love as well. Romantic love, familial

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love, love of the world, love of humanity, love of the entire gorgeous and complicated interdependent web.

To love is to know grief. To grieve is to know love. To allow oneself to be married to amazement is a commitment! To allow oneself to look back at the whole spectacular journey of any single life and check off “very good, very good, very good!” is undersigning our names to that commitment, to the satisfaction of a life lived fully here. Fully now.

We cherish our memories and dreams of yesterday. Today of all days we cherish the memories and dreams of all we have lost. We also anticipate, worry about, and fight for the future we want, for ourselves and for all. Today of all days, we honor those whose memories will be a guiding light for us in the days to come.

We are not simply visiting this world.

So may it be.

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