

Looking Ahead

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered October 12, 2014

A collection of shoes. This was the operative feature in one of my family's favorite movies. A collection of shoes. The movie is *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, and I haven't decided if it's a kids movie, a grown-up movie, a family movie, a comedy, a philosophical movie, a spiritual journey movie, or all of these at once. It starts out being about an eccentric and magical toy shop owner, Mr. Magorium, who is, or at least claims to be, 243 years old. He's played by Dustin Hoffman, if you need that for building your mental image. His toy shop is magical, at least to those who believe in it. It's just a regular toy shop to the ones who don't believe it, usually the adults.

While Mr. Magorium is 243 years old and seems to be in perfectly good health, he's decided that he's in fact come to the end of his life, and the movie starts with the arrival of the accountant that he's called to "put his affairs in order." So where do the shoes come in? The shoes, it turns out, mark his life and its end. Here's how he describes it to his store manager:

"I'm leaving. [he says] Not the store, the world. You see these shoes? I found these in a tiny shop in Tuscany and fell in love with them so entirely, I bought enough to last my whole life. These are my last pair."

We catch glimpses of this ever more tattered pair of shoes as the movie goes on. While we only see this last pair, it brings me to imagine the ritual he may have faced. Shoes are usually something that we see and experience every day, although we might not explicitly think about them very much. Each morning when he'd put on his shoes, he may have reflected on how much he still liked them and noticed how that current pair may have been getting worn around the edges. More wearing down of the heel, a crack in the side, a broken shoelace. Every time he puts on his shoes, he's reminded of his finite life.

The transition between pairs of shoes would carry even more meaning, when he decides to retire a pair and start with a fresh pair from his remaining stock. I wonder how much he pauses each time. I wonder what he thought with the last one.

Mortality and death are something that culturally we're not very good at talking about. In fact, I'd say we're pretty rotten at it. We've developed a legion of euphemisms to avoid even saying the word death, died, or dying. I bet you could come up with a slew of them yourself:

Gone to a better place
passed away
came to an end
out of her misery or pain
gave up the ghost
or that they didn't make it (one that I hope children never have to hear, as it's just too confusing)

Or some of the more humor-laden ones:

kicked the bucket

left the building

or a couple of new favorites of mine: metabolically challenged or immortality challenged.

And not only do we have trouble even saying words that refer to our own mortality, but many try to avoid the conversations entirely. How often do you hear mortality discussed reasonably and seriously in our popular culture, at least in a context that's not motivated by fear or discomfort. Not very often.

I can't claim that's not my response sometimes, too. The first time I encountered our reading today from Robert Fulghum, my first thought was "that's weird and a bit creepy."

[pause] So often, I think there's an element of fear underlying conversations about dying. It can be a scary thing, both to imagine losing those we love and to consider our own mortality. Sometimes this might be connected with the manner of dying or the exoticness and otherness of it – I'm thinking in particular of the Ebola scares going on right now. While they are definitely scary, our fear can also get blown out of proportion.

Talking about mortality can be frightening, and then that gets smothered by humor that might be trying to escape it, smothered by discomfort and avoidance, where even if folks might talk about it, they might avoid a level of depth or engagement thinking about mortality. It's not necessarily a comfortable thing!

EMT doctor Matthew O'Reilly shares about his own experiences with those he was caring for who were about to die.¹ When he first began serving as an EMT, he was faced with people for whom death was immanent who would ask him whether they were about to die. He was afraid of what his answer might do to them, afraid that the truth would be so frightening that it might cause them to die, and so he lied to them, trying to give them artificial hope rather than bringing them a sense of doom. But that all changed one day. He had shown up at the scene of a motorcycle accident, and after assessing the cyclist, he saw that there was nothing that could save him. The cyclist asked him THE QUESTION. Am I going to die. In that moment, for no reason that he can explain, Dr. O'Reilly decided to tell him the truth. Yes, you're going to die.

What happened next surprised him to the core. Instead of panicking, the reaction that Dr. O'Reilly had anticipated, the cyclist laid back with an expression of peace and acceptance. Since that time, Dr. O'Reilly decided to answer truthfully whenever asked this question, and nearly everyone has shared this response. Peace and acceptance. Not panic and fear, but peace.

This is definitely not what we see from Hollywood or in our popular culture, or perhaps in many of our own imaginations of what those moments might be like. And it is an admittedly small slice of possibility – based on his interactions with those for whom death is immanent. But to

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/matthew_o_reilly_am_i_dying_the_honest_answer

me it means that a shift is possible – that it is possible for each of us to consider our own mortality in ways that don't feel frightening.

One of the ways that we can do this is with rituals for ourselves.

Let me take a minute to define what I mean by ritual – because rituals can mean all sorts of different things for every single one of us.

By ritual I mean an action that has two characteristics. First, it is an action that is intentional. And second, it is either something that we repeat at some sort of regular interval, like a particular way that we greet the morning each day, or it is something that is common to many people and therefore is repeated across persons. This would be something like a wedding ceremony, that unless you are involved with them professionally, they are something that folks typically don't attend or participate in too very frequently.

Rituals are actions that are intentional and repeated, either regularly for an individual or repeated across many persons.

UU minister Robert Fulghum – and yes, he's the same Robert Fulghum of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* – Fulghum says about rituals that they “do not always involve words, occasions, officials, or even an audience. Rituals are often silent, solitary, and self-contained. The most powerful rites of passage are reflective – when you look back on your life again and again, paying attention to the rivers you have crossed and the gates you have opened and walked through, the thresholds you have passed over. Remembering, as human beings have remembered for thousands of years.”

The story that we heard just a few minutes ago about Fulghum's ritual of visiting his own gravesite comes at the end of his book on many different kinds of rituals from across our lifespans. But what I didn't mention earlier is that the writing of this book is what inspired this particular ritual for Fulghum. He says, “This book [on rituals] has engendered a new ritual of my own. From time to time, I pay my respects at my own final resting place.”² And we heard about not only the actions that he took but also the reflection that they inspired. How it helps him to relativize the importance of things, untwisting snarls in his mind and soul, of his view from that place into the cosmos and feeling where he was in that order. The first time I encountered his description of this ritual, I admit that I was creeped out. But then I remembered the moment when I had realized that I was in a place where I wanted some of my own ashes to be. I was hiking in Muir Woods outside San Francisco with my family, and we were making our way down a winding trail through a grove of giant redwood trees. Some of the largest in this grove were more than a thousand years old. They had been standing there in that place since before the Middle Ages. Just to think of the things they had heard and felt in the air during all that time. I realized that I wanted some of my own ashes put into the ground right under one of these great trees – it didn't matter to me which one – just one of them so

² Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives*, page 258.

that maybe a little of me might be absorbed by one of these long-standing trees and become part of it. And with this realization, I guess I share a little of Fulghum's ritual because now I want to go back there, I want to go back and see them again for this very reason. It doesn't have to be that particular grove, but I definitely want to go and visit the giant redwood forests in northern California with this in mind.

What are some of the rituals that you have or that you might be able to do that might make it a little easier to reflect on some aspect of your own life's end?

There are some examples in religious contexts. In a particular branch of Buddhism, there's a meditation practice of imagining the moment of one's death and practicing both the energy and light colors at that time and also practicing a sense of peace and acceptance, very much like the peace and acceptance that Dr. O'Reilly described.

One doesn't need a particular religious context to imagine the place of your death, though. I think many of us may have done this already, at least in some sense. During my hospital chaplaincy, I attended a hospice workshop with folks from a variety of different medical contexts – other chaplains, nurses, social workers, a couple of doctors. At one point, we were all asked to imagine the place of our death – first our ideal place, then our worst case scenario. While the point of the exercise at that time was to demonstrate that amongst these medical professionals, very few of us named the hospital as the ideal place for our death – the workshop facilitators were trying to make a point for home hospice care. Instead, one of my takeaways was that not a single one of us had trouble with the visualization – it seemed that we had all imagined this before – particularly the best case scenario, often right down to many of the details. And when we described them to each other, it wasn't with a sense of doom but rather hopeful energy.

Making plans and recording our wishes is another ritual – one that is in the reach of every one of us. My *Intentional Conclusions* project is being made available for the first time today. It's a workbook and a collection of resources to help guide reflection about what our wishes might be, a place to record them, and a place to record other helpful information for our loved ones. I'm calling this a ritual intentionally today. When this project was solidifying, I struggled with what to call it. This was partially because I needed to find something unique that I could have the web address for, but also that I wanted it to be accurate and meaningful. After going back and forth between many names and polling a number of people, I settled on the name "Intentional Conclusions." Particularly the word intentional. These thoughts and wishes don't happen by accident – they are intentional. Sharing them is intentional too. And because we're sharing them with others, particularly in the context of a religious community – this makes them a ritual.

I can't begin to tell you how great it's felt to hear folks' response to this project. Like Dr. O'Reilly, at first I was afraid of meeting discomfort or avoidance, or even bad jokes to cover up uncomfortable feelings. But that's not what happened. Nearly forty people came to a forum

we had last winter on Advance Healthcare Directives – I hope we have another one this winter or spring too – and folks picked up all 100 of the Five Wishes³ forms that we had, as well as a lot of our state-specific advance directive forms. I haven't heard discomfort – I've heard empowerment.

Some of the words and phrases in advance directives, or in other forms of our wishes, they can be difficult to read. Making choices about these can be deeply emotional, and talking with our loved ones about them even more so. They are weighty words and weighty decisions, but the weightier something is for us, the more powerful it can be. It is empowering to be able to do this.

And it can also be comforting. Another cultural phenomena of a communal ritual is the bucket list. While it's uncertain where the term in its current usage of a list of things to do before one dies came from, it did exist prior to the movie by that name where Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman set out to complete their own lists together.

A Philadelphia couple took a hopeful route with a bucket list of their own this summer.⁴ During her pregnancy, Jenna Gassew and Dan Haley found out that their unborn baby had a rare defect that meant he'd only be able to live a couple of hours after birth. To help cope with this, they began a ritual of their own. Together, they created a bucket list for their baby – named Shane when he was born – and they spent the summer working on Shane's bucket list. They thought about many places they had enjoyed going as children that Shane wouldn't experience, and they took him there before he was born. "The Flyers, the Phillies, Zac Brown Band, New York City, Lancaster, The Franklin Institute, Linvilla Orchards, [and many other places.] ...They made a special trip to Geno's Steaks, where they got to eat at the restaurant's only inside table with owner Geno Vento." Not only did they find tremendous support through sharing this journey, but when they posted pictures of their few hours after Shane was born, you don't see pain and fear in their eyes, you see joy.

Rituals help add depth and meaning. They add intention and attention to what we're doing. They connect us with others who may be engaging in the same actions. Rituals can help us cope with difficult challenges and give us places to talk about them. They are both powerful and empowering. We ask big questions here, and we challenge each other to ask them and find our answers to them. One of these is looking at our own lives and lifespans. May we find ways to engage with these questions, today and in the life of our community. May it be so.

³ *Five Wishes* is a universal advance directive form, recognized in many states, including DE, PA, NJ, and MD. We have more at the church now, and it is also available at <http://www.agingwithdignity.org/>

⁴ <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Expectant-Parents-Will-Soon-Welcome-Baby-Boy-Not-Expected-to-Survive-Birth-Shane-Prayers--278250401.html>