

## THE ART OF LIVING WITH THE END IN MIND

Sermon delivered by Rev. Barbara Becker  
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Good morning! This morning I wanted to start off by painting a picture of my father. They say that rocket scientists and brain surgeons may know a thing or two. That was certainly true of my dad, who actually *was* a brain surgeon. In addition to having a vocation he was passionate about—one in which he could literally save a life or two every few days—he had a great love of history and of literature, especially the works of America’s beloved philosopher sage Henry David Thoreau. My father would come to Rensselaerville with my mom to see my in-laws, Marvin and Laura Bolotsky, and he’d stroll along the falls at the Huyck Preserve beneath the trees, which to him seemed to be some of the most majestic he had ever seen in all of his years hiking throughout the Northeast.

What I came to appreciate most about my father as I grew older was that he had arrived at a kind of quiet wisdom that came from having made his way through some very difficult times. We all know that life’s most profound lessons come *not* from the moments in which things are running along easily and comfortably, but when we are pushed into life’s rough waters, where we must face our limits, and sometimes even our breaking points. For my father, this point of no return was the loss of his beloved first wife, who died in a tragic accident right before his eyes.

Through the wisdom he gleaned by coming to terms with this deep pain over the years, my father was uniquely set to guide me through questions of love and loss and meaning when I started losing people who were dear in my own life, starting with my earliest childhood friend.

How do we make sense of such difficulties that *all* of us eventually face and come out on the other side, wiser and ready to serve others?

I have learned over the ensuing years, that at some point, when the right amount of time has passed (and that’s different for everyone) we take our first tentative steps towards making peace with life *as it is* rather than clinging to a vision of life *as we would have liked* it to be. Often in such times, we begin (or we double down) on our search for meaning for something larger than ourselves to support us in the hardest of times.

One well-proven way to go “in search of lost time”, which is the theme of this summer’s sermon series, is to do it backwards: To actually start by living with the end in mind.

So what does that mean anyhow, living with the end in mind?

Saints and sages throughout the ages have the most counterintuitive advice for us. Rather than denying our mortality and that of those we love, they say, it is far better to acknowledge it. Instead of running in the opposite direction of death and really hardship of any kind, what if we turned around to face it head on, casting the light of our torch into the shadows for a better look. It’s a paradox to be sure, but *this* is when we can feel most *alive*.

Take my dad’s beloved Thoreau, who went to Walden **not** so much to escape the encroaching industrialization in his bucolic corner of Massachusetts, but rather to face a tragedy in his own life. The catalyst occurred when his dear brother John cut himself while shaving: an everyday act that turned lethal when he developed lockjaw

and died painfully in Henry's arms. *"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, he wrote, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not [and here's the key phrase...], **when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.**"* There it is: A clarion call to live with the end in mind.

So I set off on a journey of my own several years back to take on Death as a teacher of sorts. To immerse myself in what it would actually mean to live with this perspective.

You can sometimes catch glimpses of it in modern times: In the reflections of Steve Jobs, for instance, when he was 50 and just underwent surgery for the pancreatic cancer that would take his life at 56. He told a group of college students in a commencement address that: *"Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent"*. Then he added: *"Sorry to be dramatic, but it is quite true"*.

Going back through time, we hear this call in the sayings of the Stoic philosophers like Marcus Aurelius, who said: *"Let each thing you would do, say, or intend, be like that of a dying person."*

And we see it in every religious tradition, which thrills me as an ordained interfaith minister.

- In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we heard Moses's prayer this morning **"to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."** (Psalm 90:12)

In Ecclesiastes we learn that **"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."** (Eccl. 7:2 ).

- In Islam, the "**remembrance of death**" has been a major theme since the time of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.
- And in India, along the banks of the Ganges in the ancient city of Varanasi, a place my husband, Dave, and I have visited with our sons, you will witness the funeral pyres that burn all through the day and night in the most central part of town. Nearly 300 bodies every single day. To die or be cremated there, many devout **Hindus** believe, is to escape the cycle of rebirth. Coming from our death-shy culture, these very visible open-air funerals can at first be a *shocking* reminder that this is also the fate of our bodies, of our physical selves.
- But some of the most practical suggestions for living with the end in mind come from my personal practice of **Buddhism**. Years ago, I apprenticed to two Zen monks in New York City who train people to be a compassionate presence at the bedside. They assigned me to the hospice floor at Bellevue in New York City, our largest public hospital, where I sat with nearly a thousand people at the end of their lives.

The most useful advice I received from the monks was so simple. They said to me my first week on the job, when I was more than a little apprehensive about walking into the room of my first patient, *"Barbara, you are intimidated because you think you need all the answers to their existential questions of life and death. But if you walk in and that patient is watching Jeopardy!, your job is simply to pull up a chair and watch Jeopardy!*

*together.*" Please don't overlook the transformative power of our presence, they were telling me. We're not there to fix things in others' lives, but rather to meet people where they are. Sometimes this looks like

dwelling in the discomfort. Not hastily wiping away tears. We train ourselves to *remain in the storm* while simultaneously resting in the stillness that underlies it all. This is the heart of mindfulness.

A week ago, I returned from time in Wyoming and Montana with a group called the Zen Peacemakers and Native American elders of the Lakota nation. It's part of a multi-year pilgrimage we are doing together around the Black Hills, visiting sites that are sacred to the Lakota, but also places of deep of pain like the mass grave of the Wounded Knee Massacre.

One day, as we were sitting at the Medicine Wheel 10,000 feet up in the Bighorn Mountains, I got to thinking about these elders who have been so important to me over the past 6 years. And my thoughts turned to wondering exactly how old they were. Surprisingly, it turns out that they range from only 62 to their early 70s. In my book, there's nothing elder age-wise about that *at all*. I mean, we're celebrating the birthday of my father-in-law Marvin here at 94 years young.

But then I learned the harsh reality: Life expectancy on the Pine Ridge Reservation is 52 for women, 48 for men. This is the lowest anywhere in the Western Hemisphere with the exception of Haiti.

A majority of the homes on these reservations have inadequate water, sewage, and electricity. Elderly are found dead of hypothermia in their beds every winter. There's a lack of access to health care, combined with food deserts where you'd be hard pressed to find affordable fruits and vegetables. It's not surprising that you see sky-high rates of diabetes and heart disease.

And, of course, continuous discrimination and ancestral trauma can lead to a hard life of addiction, and high rates of suicide.

**BUT**, here's the thing: if you go with an open mind, a beginner's mind as the Zen say, you may be lucky enough to encounter *a daily spiritual richness that so many in the world we inhabit never get to experience*.

You start to see clearly that many of these elders are warriors of a different kind. In spite of the odds, they are returning to what they call the Red Road. They are following traditional values, and reviving spiritual practices and ceremonies that were outlawed by our country until 1978 (when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed). And they are revitalizing the Lakota language. On the Red Road, those who come out ahead usually aren't the fastest, or have the most material resources, or the best education. They are the deliberate ones who are walking with a quiet reverence in their daily lives, step by step by step.

Their efforts are for the generations that will come after. And to honor those who have come before. The idea of "living with the end in mind" is not foreign to them in the least.

**So where does that leave us? Here are a few lessons I've gleaned from all of these wise people along the way.** Perhaps one of them may speak to you.

1. Let's actually try this one together. Let's take a deep breath. Close your eyes if you are comfortable. **Fill in the blank** with the first thought that comes to your head when you hear this statement: *Before I die, I want to \_\_\_\_*. I have heard marvelous answers to this prompt, from "I want to say I'm sorry to my

brother” to “I want to attend a Taylor Swift concert.” It’s a great question to ask yourself regularly, perhaps even over dinner with those close to you. You may find that what you come up with will help

2. you to realize and reprioritize what’s most important in your life. And have a little fun with it too, because this conversation does not always all need to be serious and heavy!
3. **Bookend your days with a sacred or intentional act**, before the tasks of the day rush in, and then again when you’re going inward at night. Perhaps start and end with a purposeful walk outdoors. Or with a prayer. Or time with your copy of *Walden* or the poetry of Rumi. In the Buddhist Pali canon, we learn that there are 84,000 gates or paths to spiritual understanding. That’s a lot of options. Find one that makes you *happy* and stick with it for a year... or two.
4. Make peace with the fact that all of us will encounter difficult times along the way. Things happen we would never have wished for. Our job is to **acknowledge all of it: the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows**, as the Taoists say. When we brush aside the painful, we are aligning ourselves only with the joy side of things. This is now called “toxic positivity.” See if you can find instead the teacher in the Unexpected, and by all means, be kind to yourself along the way.

Ultimately we must **be of benefit to others**. These times require that we live our lives in such a way that we **serve as pillars of hope**. Take a risk and share your life’s hard-earned lessons with someone who might need it. And when it’s your turn to listen, do so with every fiber of your being, with the ears of the heart. In doing this, we come to see that compassion is not a soft skill but one of the truest ways to help serve others *and* to heal our own hearts.

This, my friends, is how we rebuild lives, rebuild communities.

This is what it means to say: *Love is as strong as death*.

And living with the end in mind is what it means to have the opportunity to touch the face of the divine, right here, right now.

And let us say “Amen”