

# *The Final Gift*

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It has been said that religion, philosophy, virtually all of human culture grows out of our attempt to deal with the two great mysteries of our existence--sex and death. That we were born and that we will die, that we beget children, and they beget children, and that they and we all that lives moves inexorably to an end, that the world existed before we came into it and will exist after we have exited from it--it is this inescapable knowledge which separates us from other living things. This knowledge has caused us to wonder at the meaning and the purpose of our existence on this planet, whether our pain and sorrow, our joy and delight, our evanescent accomplishments and our inevitable failures have any meaning, or are but one more expression of a universe deeply rooted in absurdity. Attempting to answer that question, we have constructed theologies, and philosophies, civilizations and cultures intended to invest our existence with a meaning we suspect may not have any external referent.

Often the answers we have created have served us well for long ages, and we have lived serenely ensorcelled by ancient and unquestioned traditions and patterns. Thus, for unnumbered generations, we lived in close communion with the earth, embedded in her sustaining web of relationship and responsibility. For a thousand years the western world lived in terms of a feudal system which assured every individual a meaningful place in the scheme of things and defined every individual's responsibility and duty. But there come times when the old answers fail to satisfy, the old traditions and habits no longer seems self-evidently right, the old structures crumble under the weight of change and people find themselves forced to re-examine those ancient questions: Who are we; whence have we come; wither are we tending; what does it mean that we are born and that we die, that we give birth to others and then fall away? Is there any point or purpose, or is it all without meaning? And in such times, everything suddenly comes unstuck, and we have to reformulate a sense of who we are and whither we are tending.

Certainly, we are living in such a time. It goes without saying that within the lifetimes of many of us in this room the old mores and traditions governing human sexuality have been challenged and altered profoundly. I remember growing up in a world in which marriage was forever, divorce was considered a sign of moral failure, in which the world "pregnant" was never mentioned in polite company, in which unmarried women who found themselves pregnant were hurried to the altar, in which details of an individual's sexual activities were the most private of concerns. Last Monday evening, I happened to catch a television program--a popular situation comedy on one of the major networks--the plot of which centered around the pregnancy of an unwed woman who had decided to

have a child but not to be married. Broad and suggestive comments about her sexual behavior, and changes in her body triggered the laugh track, as the entire topic of sexuality was represented as comic and laughable. Nor is this an isolated instance. If the television culture is to be believed, sex is no longer a mystery; it is a joke, involving all ages, from pre-pubescent children through the Golden Girls.

At the same time that the mystery of sex has been trivialized, it has also been politicized. Much of the struggle over reproductive rights and gay and lesbian rights is the result of an effort to redefine the meaning of sexuality, to redefine what are acceptable expressions of that sexuality, who we are and what we value in relation to our ability to bear children and our responsibility to them and to the future. In the courts of the land, and in the streets of our cities we are struggling with the meaning of our sexuality, with questions of individual and corporate responsibility, with questions of freedom and responsibility, and what it means to be able to make conscious choices about the future. Behind all of the uproar and debate, behind all the raucous laughter, our culture is struggling toward a new understanding of the mystery and meaning of our own sexuality.

Our understanding of that other great mystery, death, has also begun to unravel over the course of the past few decades. Within the memory of many of us in this room, the hope and expectation that death was not an end, but a passage to another world, to another dimension gave place to the conviction that given time and resources, science would extend human life expectancy until ultimately the only cause of death would be accident or murder. Men and women would live to great age in bodies which were strong and resilient and death would have no dominion. Immortality in heaven would be replaced by virtual immortality on earth, as our knowledge allowed us to conquer illness and the ravages of age.

More recently, we have begun to suspect that this goal is forever beyond our reach. An article in the New York Times reported recently the conclusion of biologists that the extension of life expectancy has come to a stop and that they are being forced to the conclusion that there may be a built-in, biological barrier to longer lives. More importantly, many of us are beginning to suspect that what has been happening in recent years is that it is not our living but dying that is being prolonged. It is true that medical wizardry is able to rescue us from what only a generation or two ago would have been certain death. There are some in this room who would not be here today, but for this kind of medical intervention, and virtually all of us have cause to be grateful for that kind of medical skill and knowledge. But it is also true that this same medical wizardry is able to extend our living into a time when life has no joy, when the world is shrunken to the dimensions of a hospital room, when anticipation is focused on the next medical procedure or the next dose of pain-killer, even into a time when consciousness has departed and the body lives by force of stubborn habit, rather than because there is any realistic hope of recovery. This ability to prolong death, to sustain our bodies through an extended period of dying has forced us to confront once more the ancient mystery of death, the ancient questions about the nature of life and the meaning of death.

The questions come at us from a variety of directions, and they are argued in a variety of forums. Thus, the courts have been asked to permit the removal of life-support systems from people who are terminally ill and in a vegetative state. Legislatures have been asked to redefine the moment of death and to legislate procedures by which individuals may indicate in advance the level of care and the limits of intervention they will accept, should illness incapacitate them and make it impossible for them to participate in reasoned decision-making about their own deaths. Last year there was much discussion in the press about the so-called "suicide machine" which a doctor had devised in order that a terminally ill patient might chose to inject herself with a lethal dose of drugs in order to end her own life at a time and under circumstances of her own choosing. More recently, Derek Humphry has published a slim volume entitled FINAL EXIT, in which, after discussion of the kind of situations which warrant a decision to end one's life, the author provides a table of the kinds and quantities of drugs which might be lethal, and suggestions for how to procure such drugs, how to store them, how to administer them, and ancillary procedures for ensuring a successful outcome.

As you undoubtedly know, there was much surprise when Humphry's so-called "suicide book" zoomed to the top of the best-seller list and stayed there. It took me quite a while to find a copy. Many of the major book stores offered to put me on a waiting list, but so great was the demand they could not promise how soon a copy would be available. Some people suggested, perhaps only half seriously, that it might not be self-deliverance that motivated people to purchase the book so much as it an interest in deliverance for some other difficult person. Some ethicists began to worry that the line between assisted suicide and murder is narrow and hard to draw, and that we, as a society, may be losing our sense of how precious life is.

I must admit that I was not surprised by the fascination with Humphry's book. It seems to me that FINAL EXIT did not create, but was simply responding to a growing concern about how to gain control over our dying, and how to fit death into our understanding of life and its meaning. I was prepared for the public reaction to Humphry's book as a result of an encounter at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, this past June.

Walking into the lobby of the Diplomat Hotel in Hollywood, Florida, I encountered an old friend and colleague. Ralph and I had been seminary students together. After he graduated, Ralph had been called to a church in the Pacific Northwest. I had not seen him since he had left the Chicago area over a quarter century ago. He had served in the parish briefly, and then gone on to pursue a ministry of service in a number of other organizations--among them Planned Parenthood. Here he was, looking not much older than I remembered, passing out stickers and information to the delegates of the assembly. As we saw each other, we hugged for a moment, and then he slapped a sticker on my jacket. It read "Unitarian Universalists for Death With Dignity ." Ralph explained that he now worked for the Hemlock Society in Washington State, and that his major undertaking was Initiative 119. This initiative, if passed by the voters in

November, would make it legal in Washington state to include irreversible coma and persistent vegetative state as a reason to withdraw life-support systems, would permit citizens to indicate in advance that they do not wish to be maintained in a terminal condition by tube feeding and hydration, and most important, would make it legal for a physician to respond affirmatively to a request from a patient for assistance in dying. In short, my friend, Ralph, was spearheading a campaign to legalize an individual's right to end his or her own life when faced with a hopeless, terminal illness.

I asked my friend what kind of support he was receiving from the community at large. He told me that there was opposition from some expected quarters--the right-to-life groups, some fundamentalist churches, some Catholic groups, that medical doctors were about equally divided on the issue, but that there was an amazingly broad spectrum of support throughout the state including many of the Protestant churches. Indeed, he said, polls indicated that were the vote held that day, the initiative would pass overwhelmingly. All across the nation, 60-65% of the people have indicated support for this kind of legislation. People want to get control of the process of dying. They are no longer willing to leave it up to the medical experts; they are less and less satisfied with a system which leads them gradually, step by step into costly, painful, hopeless treatments which prolong their dying at the expense of meaningful living. And then smiling gently, he indicated that he would be happy to have a contribution to help with the costs of passing this ground-breaking proposal in Washington State, and he hoped our churches in other states would organize to support similar legislation.

I wished Ralph well in his efforts and promised I would report his work to you this fall. I believe this is an important undertaking. I would not want to suggest, however, that the passage of the initiative in Washington State will end the debate over the right to die, the right to self-deliverance, the appropriateness of physician-assisted suicide. There are a great many questions raised by the ability to sustain life and to prolong death--questions about what constitutes a meaningful life, about the appropriateness of any individual's decision to die. Doctors worry about what will happen to public confidence in their profession when they are seen not only as healers, but also as purveyors of death. Ethicists worry about what happens once we set foot on the slippery slope of deciding who shall live and who shall die. Theologians are concerned about how we determine what is an acceptable quality of life. It is easier to draw ethical boundaries in terms of service to life. It is harder to draw those boundaries when life is no longer seen as an absolute value. Social activists worry that the dying will be born disproportionately by the poor, and argue that the right to medical treatment for the living is much more important than the right to medically assisted dying. In truth, of course, these are important concerns, but they are strangely irrelevant to what is motivating this concern with dying.

I am convinced that in some ways the public is already ahead of these concerns. What is happening among us, I believe, is that we are being forced to formulate a sense of the meaning of our lives and our deaths in a new conceptual universe.

For increasing numbers of us, this world of our every day experience has no external referent. It is not a place where we prepare for life in another world; it is not a place of expiation for sins committed in a previous life; it is the only world we know or are ever likely to know. Therefore, the meaning of our living and our dying must be found here and now. The effect of this fore-shortening of our expectations is to place a high premium on the quality of this life. Suffering which will be rewarded in heaven might have some point. Suffering which will result in the achievement of some good which matters to us might have some point. But suffering which has no future referent becomes a pointless affront. As a consequence, life ceases to be an absolute value, and becomes subordinate to concerns about quality. It is not living that is good, but living in such a way as to be able, in Kenneth Patton's words, "to make the welcome of the morning a rejoicing." We have begun to learn that life without hope, when, again to quote Patton, "the dog of pain has made the body its kennel" is not a blessing, but a curse, and that it is not a sin or a sign of moral turpitude to want to be rid of such a life.

But there is more to this emerging awareness than simply a concern with the quality of life. If there is no outside referent to our existence, if there is no heaven to which we escape, if there is no abode of the Gods to which we are destined, then this world of sunrise and sunset, of cycling seasons, of storms and rain and clouds and flowers and birds, this world which is home to those we love, this world of aching beauty and indescribable glory, this threatened, fragile world is the locus of all that is sacred and holy. There is no God outside of this existence; all we shall ever know of the divine we encounter in this world, and our allegiance must be to this world, not to some other life beyond this. The larger meaning of our lives is to be found in our rootedness in the web of existence which is this world of here and now, and the larger meaning of our deaths is to be found in the fact that in time we return to the living planet which thrust into being, which sustained our existence, and which, at the end, receives us back to itself. In all our living, we are an expression of Gaia, this living earth, our primary mother. In our dying we return to our source. And our dying is as much a part of the meaning of our existence as our birth, our living, all our accomplishments. Our dying is part of the process by which the living planet sustains its existence, by which new generations emerge, and new possibilities arise, and thus in our dying we make one final gift--the gift of ourselves--to the biosphere, to the living planet from which we emerged and in terms of which we have lived and moved and had our being.

What I see in the growing public concern for control over our dying is a rejection of the assumption that death is an enemy to be struggled against and to be overcome, that death is always a tragic event, that death represents moral failure and results from primordial sin. What I see in the growing public concern for control over our dying is a new acceptance of death as natural and appropriate. It is not a morbid fascination with dying, nor is it an attempt to escape the world and its perplexing and often painful realities. Rather, it is a recognition that death is but "a harder fragment of life," a willing acceptance of death as part of the natural

round. More than this, it represents a growing acceptance of limits within which we must exist if the planet is to survive. We have begun to understand that we live in a universe of limits and that we must find ways to sustain our existence, to find peace and joy and meaning and purpose without breaching the limits, for once the limits have been breached, we do not save ourselves, but we put the entire web of existence at risk. Death is one of those limits. We are beginning to see death as acceptable and appropriate, not as a door into another existence, but as the final gift we give to sustain the integrity of the web.

What I see evolving, as we struggle with the ancient mysteries of sex and death, is a new religious vision--one in which our lives are understood to be part of a larger life, one in which the welfare of the biosphere is a major focus of our concern. What I see evolving is a new religious vision rooted in love of this world and acceptance of her ways; what I see evolving is a willingness to subordinate our fecundity to the well-being of the larger whole; what I see evolving is a willingness to surrender the illusion of immortality, and embrace life knowing that part of the cost is that not all possibilities will be realized, and that in the end we shall die, and that our dying is not punishment but a final gift--a gift to us who have been used up in the living, and a gift we make to those we love, to the community of living things, to the biosphere itself.

This does not mean that there is not sadness and grief at the death of those we love. Nor does it mean that we should not seek to prevent unnecessary death, or premature death. It does mean that as we seek to sustain life, we recognize that our actions are rooted in an understanding that life is not the absolute good, that quality of life and ability to interact meaningfully, to participate in the ongoing dance of being is central to what it means to live. And it does mean that as we seek to sustain life, we recognize that death is not an absolute evil. There may well come a time for each of us when the embrace of death is welcome, and we are glad to be gathered back to the good earth without regret, secure in the conviction that as life was a gift for which we did not ask, death is also a gift to us and to the larger reality. Our reach for control over our dying, is a reflection of a larger quest--a search for way of living and of dying which is rooted in reverence for this world and which allows to make of our lives and our deaths our final gift to the living web of which we are a part.