

# FAMOUS LAST WORDS

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH

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Just yesterday, Roberta Case once again reprised her workshop so wonderfully named Planning Your Exit Strategy. In it she brings together a panel of people who deal with memorials, funerals and burials, even long-term care insurance. My part has to do with planning your memorial service. And my main message is about the importance of having one, of marking the passage of a life. There are some who while they are living are humbugs about memorials. "Just stick me in the ground and be done with it," they say. "I'll be dead and won't know the difference."

But I always tell folks that even if you don't think you want a memorial, give your family permission to do something in your memory. A memorial is not really about you any way, and it's certainly not *for* you. Those who you leave behind need a way to begin their grieving, to begin the process of moving on without you while carrying your memory with them. To deny them a memorial service is to deny them a powerful way to come together, mark a passing, and move toward healing..

Life is precious to us, and the human lives of those closest to us, all the more. Death has such meaning for how we live our lives. In a modern world that has become so secularized, we have lost many of the rituals and ceremonies that remind us of to stop, to pay attention to the brief and precious time we have been granted.

Poet Mary Oliver speaks of a Summer Day when her life becomes shot through with a sense of the Holy, while she walks through a field, briefly holds a grasshopper. A simple day that becomes a prayer even as she tells us:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Perhaps it was a sense of wildness and preciousness that infused Roberta's workshop yesterday with so much laughter. My part came early and I slipped away to do some work in my office. But I was able to dip back in nearer the end, and as I came down the stairs to the Bachelor Room, I was greeted by laughter. There they had been all morning, talking about dying and they were laughing. Even as everyone was considering serious topics, it was bringing them to life.

I'm not sure if Roberta thinks of her workshop as being especially spiritual, for it provides so very much important practical information. But in my book, anything that brings us more alive is spiritual.

Life is so precious and the life force throughout all of nature is so powerful. Barb Pitney told me this week about an intrepid blackberry plant. Now that may not sound all that surprising until I mention that it was growing in the all but sunless new barn Barb and Ron are building for their two new horses. The dug down in the soil, covered it with layers of sand, built the barn above it, and there in the corner, in the dark, Barb found a blackberry shoot that had pushed its way up through unwelcoming rock and soil and out into the air. Unlikely conditions for life, but enough to make a try. Barb was simply in awe at the strength of its push to live.

Tell me what will you do with your one wild and precious life?

You seem to be hearing a lot about Rev. Forrest Church this fall. That's for many reasons. I heard him give two powerful talks at General Assembly this past June. Talks that were all the more powerful and poignant because Forrest has terminal cancer and will not be with us terribly much longer. So, you're about to hear more from Forrest this Sunday and likely next.

Forrest said that he has come to accept his death and is mostly at peace. But he fully acknowledges that acceptance is not our standard first response to our troubles.

I quote him at some length.

"What did I do to deserve this?" we ask when things turn against us, forgetting that we did nothing to deserve being placed in the way of trouble and joy in the first place. The odds against each one of us being here this morning to pose such a question are so mind-staggering that they cannot be computed.

"We're talking miracles here. Not an unlikely miracle, like God parting the Red Sea for Moses to escape the Egyptians or stopping the sun for Joshua to win a battle, but the miracle of water itself, in which living organisms can incubate, and just enough warmth and light from the sun to establish ideal conditions for life to be nurtured and developed here on earth.

"Consider the odds more intimately. Your parents had to couple at precisely the right moment for the one possible sperm to fertilize the one possible egg that would result in your conception.... And that's just the beginning of the miracle. The same unlikely happenstance must repeat itself throughout the generations. Going back ten generations, this miracle must repeat itself one thousand times – one million two hundred fifty thousand times going back only twenty generations. That's right. From the turn of the twelfth century until today, we each have mathematically speaking, approximately two and a half million direct ancestors....

"And that's only the egg and sperm part of the miracle. Remember each of these ancestors had to live to puberty. For those whose bloodlines twine through Europe – and there are like tragedies around the globe – not one of your millions of direct forbears died as children during the great plague, for instance, which mowed down half of Europe with its mighty scythe....

"By the way – and this is truly awesome, so awesome that it makes every salvation story in the world's great scriptures seem trivial in comparison – not only did all our human ancestors survive puberty to mate at the one and only instant that the requisite egg and sperm might connect to keep our tiny odds for arrival alive, but their pre-human ancestors did the same. Then we have to go back further to our pre-mammalian ancestors; and back from there all the way to the ur-paramecium; and then beyond that, to the pinball of planets and stars, ... spinning back through time to the big bang itself.

"Mathematically, our death is a simple inevitability, whereas our life hinges on an almost infinite sequence of perfect accidents. First a visible and then an invisible thread connect every one of us in unbroken line genetically and kinetically to the instant of creation. Think about it. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born."

Mick's friend who is gravely ill put it this way, "All that time before I was alive—there was one absolute truth in the universe. I was going to be born." And knowing this gave the living of his life meaning, but it is not so comforting as he faces the inevitability of his death.

Today, as we do at this time of the year, we embrace a confluence of religious expression noting the nearness of death and the passing of those we have loved. Day of the Dead symbols come from Mexico, the culture nearest us geographically, but so foreign in other ways. Yet the traditions go back millennia to the Gaels in ancient Britain who marked this dying time of the year by wearing masks to placate the spirits who they imagined could again briefly walk the earth. Then came the layers of Roman and Catholic traditions atop the native British ones. And these traditions were brought to Mexico where they were layered into and onto Aztec celebrations to honor the ancestors.

Today, in a culture that tries to deny or avoid death, we look to ancient peoples and ancient celebrations to honor our own ancestors and acknowledge our own precious lives. Even as we create our own ritual, we know that we stand on the shoulders of many human religious traditions.

We honor those in our lives who have died. Those who have passed from this community in this year.

And those who have graced the world for better or worse. Political leaders Benazir Bhutto, Suharto, and Jesse Helms. Journalists Tim Russert, and Dith Pran. Writers William F. Buckley and Alexander Solzhenitzen. Musicians Oscar Peterson, Isaac Hayes, Bo Diddly and Ike Turner. Michael DeBakey, inventor of the artificial heart. Explorer Edmund Hillary. Actors and entertainers Paul Newman, Cyd Charisse, George Carlin, Charlton Heston and Evel Knievel. Chess champion Bobby Fisher and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

We must think, too, of the millions of those who are mostly anonymous to us. The soldiers, the civilian and the insurgents who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and in conflict throughout the world.

Life is incredibly precious to us, and that is why we honor our dead, for they, too, have lived.

What we have, here and now, is all we can know for certain. The universe was pregnant with us when we were born. In our lived reality, the only absolute truth has been that we would be born, although it took so many combinations and accidents that we might well call it miraculous. Perhaps all we can say about what happens after we die is that we return to the earth in one way or another and we become once again part of that which the universe is pregnant with.

Another thing I learned in Planning Your Exit Strategy yesterday is that I really can be buried and have a tree planted over me. I really can become a tree. There is a natural burial movement that is making that option increasingly available in this country. Now I know theoretically that what I have been will become a part of the eco-system again, but something about knowing that I can help grow something as concrete as a tree is a great comfort to me.

The dead are indeed not under the earth. They are in the rustling trees, they are in the groaning woods. They are in the wailing child, they are with us in this crowd. The dead have a pact with the living and we have a pact with them. They live on with us in more than memory, they are in truth all about us. And we must remember them. It is ours to honor their memory, take it into our lives. Gather together in joy and in sorrow, and make something of our own one wild and precious life.

Amen.

May it be so.