

Kelly Burk
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Faith and Reason Series

“Today I Live”

I trust you all had a fun Halloween – full of costumes, candy, and haunted places. My Halloween’s aren’t quite as fun as they used to be, but I still get a kick out of handing out candy to trick or treaters – that is, if I can manage to not eat it all first.

It’s nice to see people out and about in the neighborhood. Sometimes I’m tempted to reward only those willing to walk from house to house and withhold from those being driven. But then I would be punishing children for their parent’s choices – that doesn’t seem fair - and I certainly don’t want to become known as the neighborhood grouch.

Although once you hear my message this morning, you may consider me the Earlham campus grouch. Why? Because my topic this morning is death. Or more accurately, life and death.

Traditions vary, but for many Western Christians, Nov. 1st and 2nd (today and tomorrow) are considered All Saints Day, All Soul’s Day, or The Day of the Dead. These days are set aside to remember the dead and to celebrate the lives of those no longer with us. Similar to Halloween, the festivals can be full of food and laughter – especially in Latino cultures.

I chose to speak on this day because it fascinates me how unfamiliar the celebratory approach to death is for many of us living in the U.S. In this part of the world, death tends to be no laughing matter.

To a certain extent, I’m in favor of taking death seriously. The worst visit I ever made while working as a hospital chaplain in a cancer unit happened as I came off of my

lunch hour. After laughing with my colleagues in the cafeteria for close to an hour, I forgot to shift back into chaplain mode before I entered a patient's room.

I opened the door, saw a very sick woman leaning over the edge of her bed vomiting into a pan held by a caring family member, and said lightheartedly "You doin' ok?" The look on their faces was answer enough. I apologized and excused myself as quickly as I could.

Working with death on a daily basis can take a toll. One of the most surprising things I learned as a pastor is how much Funeral Director's laugh when they get the chance. Being entertained while sitting in the front seat of the hearse on the way to the cemetery was an experience I didn't expect initially but grew to appreciate over time.

Death happens every day but most of us distance ourselves from it and seldom talk (much less laugh) about death. We consider it morbid and even bad luck to speak of death. We've created a health care system that prevents death at all costs. And we spend a significant part of our lives thinking that we might be the one exception to the rule that everyone will die.

Perhaps it seems odd, even unreasonable, that I chose to speak about death this morning in front of 18-22 year olds who we hope will not face death anytime soon. Why pick this topic?

Because I believe that accepting and preparing for our eventual death – whatever our age or health - leads us to live our lives more fully here and now. And as far as I can tell, life and death is one subject not covered in the college's curriculum.

Ironically, I waited until my senior year in college to take my first religion course. The course was called *Death and Dying* and much to my surprise it quickly became one

of my favorite classes. I read for the first time Rabbi Harold Kushner's classic book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. And what I learned that semester turned out to be a tremendous gift considering my father died in an accident during his morning jog just three months later.

Unaware of it at the time, my Dad's death forced me to wrestle with the limitations of reason for the first time and led me to pursue a life of faith more earnestly than ever before. I started talking to God, asking questions, opening up my heart, searching for what lies after death.

A second change that happened for me was that I had learned what it means to be mortal. At first this was exhausting. I was suddenly afraid of being near cars and airplanes, roads, and roller coasters – always fearing some kind of an accident. I knew first hand how quickly life could end.

With time, however, the fears became secondary. For the most part, I now feel grateful for the way in which being in touch with mortality has changed my life for the better.

Mortality helps me lead the life I want to live now and not put things off for the future. Mortality encourages me to appreciate beauty, people, complexity, fragility. As theologian Roberta Bondi has written "Mortality is a dreadful thing, but it brings its gifts."

The earth lost a very fine person when Tom Mullen died this past summer. A former Dean of both Earlham College and ESR, he was deeply loved by many in our community.

I only knew Tom during the final decade of his life. In that time, his speaking and teaching life continued to be vibrant despite the fact that his wife died and his lifelong struggle with diabetes left him fragile.

Even so, Tom laughed, cried and loved more deeply than almost anyone I know. He re-married. He traveled the world. He shared his wisdom and encouragement with anyone open to it. When I think about why Tom Mullen was so well-loved, I'm convinced that it was, in part, because he allowed mortality to shape his living.

The concept is nothing earth shattering. In fact, it's a bit of cliché. There's even a country song out by Tim McGraw called "Live like you were dying." But like most things in life, why is something so simple so difficult to live out?

I'm not one who uses the term saint. Only once have I participated in a ritual to honor All Soul's Day. And while I admire the liveliness of Day of the Dead celebrations, I only observe them from a distance.

But I find myself drawn to these traditions - wondering what we can learn from societies that face death head on. What is to be gained by honoring the dead? What lies beyond death? Or, as Roberta Bondi asks, "how does one live under the crushing knowledge of human mortality?"

We can turn to the 23rd Psalm. We can draw strength from those who have gone before us. We can trust in the God who created us. We can honor in ourselves and in others what it is to be fully alive here and now. I appreciate Frederick Buechner's piece entitled "Wishful Thinking." He writes:

"Have you wept at anything during the past year?

Has your heart beat faster at the sight of young beauty?

Have you thought seriously about the fact that someday you are going to die?

More often than not do you really listen when people are speaking to you instead of just waiting for your turn to speak?

Is there anybody you know in whose place, if one of you had to suffer great pain, you would volunteer yourself?

If your answer to all or most of these questions is No, the chances are that you're dead."

We can't know when or how we will die. What we can know is how we are living. So, choose wisely. Love boldly. Forgive easily. Let your mortality inform your living.