

Reflections on Death and Honouring Lives Well Lived

By Laureen Stokes, Lay Chaplain at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver

I first met Jan (not her real name) in her home. I listened to stories of love, laughter, tears, hardship and adventure. Through her daughter, I got to know a woman who delighted me. This is a part of my role as a lay chaplain – to be present, to observe, to witness, and to listen carefully to what is not said but is felt. I get to know people through the words and recollections of those closest to them – their reflection[s] in the eyes of children, spouses, siblings, close friends. I never meet them in person, but the sense of who they are carries through their loved ones, through their homes, and through the remnants of their lives.

Jan's home over-looked the Bay, strangely lit the day I visited, the haze of forest fire smoke softening the edges and giving the world a strange light. Adorning her walls were glorious paintings that translated me into a different world. Paintings made by her beloved husband. As I listened to her daughter, I learned of a woman who worked for love and forgiveness in the world. Who accepted others and created a place for people to meet and interact – creating community. A woman who never stopped living and learning – taking up African drumming at age 90, and asking Justin Trudeau a few hard questions on her 95 birthday. I really hope that is me at that age!

I learned two very specific things from Jan: that a life filled with gratitude is a good life, one that blesses the people around us. And I learned a deceptively simple lesson about how to live with integrity.

When faced with a dilemma or question, she would consult her “higher Jan.” That was her expression. At that moment she would take a moment to draw on her compassion, love, intelligence, caring and generosity to guide her.

This notion of consulting one's higher self, one's best self, of meditating on one's values and behaving in a way consistent with our inner best self is powerful. It requires a strength of purpose and honest reflection. Above all, one becomes accountable for oneself, for one's own actions. It creates space for us to grow and learn, challenging preconceived ideas and things that others may have told us. It enjoins us to take risks, to be confident in our own judgement. It creates space for compassion for others, and the ability to make friends and build relationships with those that are different.

I met Claire a few months after I met Jan. She was the same age as my brother when she died – a thought that gave me pause and that still sits quietly in my mind, reminding me not to take my family and friends for granted. Our lives are short, no matter how long they are. In the words of her husband, Claire fought cancer for two years. If Jan was a woman who had lived a full and well rounded life, where family and friends grieved her loss but could celebrate her life, Claire's partner was in shock. To know her was harder – it meant listening closely to his words, a gentle recitation of her accomplishments, his pride in her transmitted by his posture and soft smile. She was a woman who had internal strength of purpose – a willingness to take risks to pursue a life of integrity – leaving a career that was stable and well paying for the unknown of self-employment. And then succeeding.

I am in awe of her strength[.]When faced with all the difficulty of cancer treatment, she and her partner still lived as fully as her health permitted: they found moments to go outside for fresh air and took trips when they could.

As an outsider, it seems like Claire had found a life that focused on essentials: close relationships with family and partner; caring for others and seeing their whole being; embracing new experiences whenever possible and continuing to learn and grow; eschewing excessive stuff and seeking out experience in the present.

I first met John through his wife and daughter. John embodied presence. Through him, I learned about being focussed on the moment, about sitting with people, without distraction, accepting the situation as it is, and companions however they are in the moment. Specifically, the impact we make on others when we are here, now, for whatever is. His children recounted stories of acceptance for how things are, without trying to change or strive. The level of presence can be difficult to accept, particularly if we are looking to the future and thinking about what could be, how things could be made better, and what do we have to make those things come true. And John was not like that. He was a gardener, not a gardener that tried to impose form and structure on plants, trying to deny plants their quirks and oddities, but rather judiciously choosing what pruning and weeding was necessary for the plant to thrive. He took that same approach with the small children in his care; allowing them to be themselves without correction; to ask questions and explore their world in the directions that most interested them.

I realized after getting to know John, that this is part of my role: presence and acceptance. To sit with people who have lost loved ones, and to listen to them without judgement. To give them time to introduce this person to me and discover new ways of talking about them. Loss is not easy and it is complicated and messy. It is a gift to have someone sit and listen, to have someone that receives memories and emotions without judgement. To have gentle prompting that brings to mind the best of the person who just passed away.

And then on the day of memorial, to be a force of presence on the stage; to draw the mourners into a space and time where they are present with each other, building acceptance. A space where they can remember in community, with each other. Where they can see how their life has been shaped by the person who has died, and find a way to move forward.

I am a fan of Reddit, and there is a Subreddit called *Shower Thoughts*, where people share their miniature epiphanies that highlight the oddities within the familiar. There are numerous Shower Thoughts that express the same idea: There will be a time when someone will say my name for the last time ever, and that we all experience two deaths: the first when our body ceases to function, and the second when the memory of who we are disappears.

That is what this job is for me – Its creating a tiny little extra loop of remembrance, giving the person who has passed away one tiny additional push towards a longer second life. It is utterly terrifying! My hands are cold and clammy when I first call the family member, and I usually sit quietly in my car breathing deeply – trying not to hyperventilate – before going to introduce myself. John taught me about presence, and I want desperately to be as present and focussed as possible as I sit with family and friends. There is that cliched expression “to hold space”, I know physically what that means – to stand

up in front of a group and ask them to leave their life outside the doors of the sanctuary and be focussed for one hour on this person. To dig deeply and think of the lessons that they are taking forward. To frame their grief in a new way – to speak in the past tense – and to use the best of the person as a guide in the future. Grief is hard work. Loss is permanent, but there are so many rewards when we remember our loved one – the lessons, good and bad, that we have absorbed.

Comment from Ellen Newman, current Chair of the National CUC Lay Chaplaincy Committee and former Lay Chaplain at the Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga: This sharing is beautiful and insightful. It is a humbling, transcendent experience as a Lay Chaplain to witness grief and to hold space. It is at the core of what many Lay Chaplains see as their personal growth and spiritual development in the role. I encourage anyone seeking such to consider serving as a Lay Chaplain.

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