

Unknown and Unknowable
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, December 9, 2018

I have a confession and a disclaimer. Even in this season that celebrates a birth, I will be talking openly about the reality of death. Even in this season that is relentless in its demand for light and joy, I will be talking about finding a way through the dark hours of our being, of entering the realm of the unknown and making peace with what may be ultimately unknowable.

So, here's the confession. Christmas is not my favorite holiday. This has not always been the case. In fact, as a young adult when I was raising two children, I loved everything about Christmas – shopping for and wrapping the perfect gifts, decorating not one tree for the house, but three trees, listening to and singing the familiar Christmas carols, attending all the parties and pageants, cooking and baking all the traditional treats and goodies, the Christmas Eve candlelight service, the festive meals, the opening of presents, and the playing of games. I loved everything about Christmas.

It all changed 30 years ago on December 18, 7 days before Christmas and 15 days before my 34th birthday, when my father died. He had been struggling with prostate cancer that had spread to his bones. With his immune system weakened by chemotherapy and radiation, he contracted pneumonia, which he chose not to treat. This was before the days of advance directives for healthcare, so it was a courageous decision on his part, one that my mother lovingly supported, though it would have been helpful if they had shared that decision with me and my siblings in advance of what to us, was an unexpected death – but that's another sermon for another day. Short version – talk to your family about your wishes for your end of life health care. It will be a gift to them.

My father's death turned out to be an initiation for me, an initiation into realities previously unknown, at least to me at that time. One of those realities is that there is a certain cruel edge to our collective American cultural expression of the traditional winter holidays. I'm not talking about the inherent cruelty of the consumerism that drives so much of our holiday attention. That's another sermon for another day. What I'm talking about is how a singular focus on joy and light and happiness brings into sharp relief the depth of pain and sorrow that is also a part of life, and so, inevitably a part of the winter season. I still have vivid memories of going to the mall with my two sons, who were 10 and 11 at the time, to shop for funeral clothes – at Christmas.

Never before had I felt so lonely and isolated, alone in an experience that was seemingly at odds with everyone around me. It all culminated in the boy's aisle of the Payless Shoe Store when the three of us were on the floor surrounded by shoe boxes. I remember saying to my then 11-year-old, "You are not wearing athletic shoes to your grandfather's funeral." You can imagine how well that went. Knowing what I know today, I would have let the kid wear athletic shoes, but then, my family and the one I married into, were very much concerned with appearances. The compromise that day was cowboy boots.

My father's death was an initiation into realities previously unknown by me. The first of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths is that of suffering. Everyone suffers. Even at Christmastime. Maybe especially at Christmastime. My awareness is heightened at this time of year to make room in my life for remembrance of all those who are no longer part of my holiday observances – and, to remind my gathered community of faith to do the same. One thing I have discovered about this gathered community of faith, the Unitarian Universalist Society here in Coralville, is that during the holiday season, your Pastoral Care Associates make a concerted effort

to reach out to every member who has experienced the death of someone close during the past year. For this, I am grateful.

While my father's death was an initiation into things previously unknown to me, it was an initiation into the mysteries of the world, questions, the answers to which may be ultimately unanswerable, at least by our human minds. Different Buddhist traditions list anywhere from 10 to 14 "unknowables" – a set of questions commonly posed by philosophers that the Buddha refused to answer.

That death and suffering come even in this season that we have set aside for light and joy and celebration gives rise to three questions for me, the answers to which are ultimately unknowable.

The first question is: What happens to us when we die? Religions of the world answer this question in different ways. UU minister, the Rev. Joanne Giannino wrote a short liturgical play titled "The Afterlife Boutique." The protagonist arrives in the "otherworld" and is presented with an array of choices for how they wish to spend eternity and is invited to try them on. Everything from bodily resurrection into an otherworldly heaven to reincarnation into another lifetime on earth to total annihilation of the body and consciousness to reabsorption into the earth and re-emergence as a new life form.

When the protagonist rejects all of these, one more choice is offered. No one knows what happens after death, an afterlife that holds the question open. And the protagonist answers, "Yes, I like that one." It's as Henry David Thoreau once said, "One life at a time, thank you." I say that there is truth in the sentiment that the presence of death makes life more sweet, or as the poet Mary Oliver asks, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

In those first few years after my father's death, the pain of his loss was so deeply associated with Christmas, that I sought escape. Have you ever tried to escape Christmas? Let me tell you, it is darn near impossible, but my little nuclear family and I found a way. We went skiing on Christmas Day. It was great. The slopes were less crowded. There were no Christmas decorations, no piped-in Christmas Carols, no one telling us to have a Merry Christmas or a Happy Holiday – just the beauty of evergreen trees, white snow, blue sky, and crisp mountain air.

The mistake we made was in telling all our friends how we spent Christmas. Over the years, the slopes became more crowded on Christmas Day. It was as if we weren't the only ones who needed to escape Christmas. And we would often see our friends who admitted they were there to avoid forced participation with family members they would rather not see.

My father's death initiated me into the mystery that is family, families of origin, families that raised us, families of choice – and how those families shaped us – by their presence or their absence, shaped us into the people we would become. How is it that some of us are born into families of wealth and privilege while others are born into families that struggle for their very survival? How is it that some of us are born to parents with an innate ability to nurture and care while others are born to parents who are callous or even abusive? How is that we get the siblings that we get or don't get?

While the mystery of the circumstances of our birth is ultimately unknowable, I again find comfort in the words of the poet Mary Oliver, who says, "You do not have to be good. . . You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

For me, love itself is one of the great mysteries of our existence. That we have the capacity to love is unfathomable, truly, that even though we are hard-wired for self-preservation, that we can extend ourselves for the well-being of another is something of a miracle. And yet, love, real as it is, cannot protect us from hardship and loss. To love is to risk having one's heart broken.

My father's death initiated me into the mystery of why it is that bad things happen to good people. Again, different religions answer this question in different ways. Is it karma, the law of cause and effect, and the accumulated effects over a lifetime or many lifetimes? Or is our fate in the hands of a deity who responds to petitions of piety and prayer? Or is it simply the random nature of the universe? The Rabbi Lawrence Kushner spent a whole book titled When Bad Things Happen to Good People, attempting to answer the philosophical problem of theodicy, that is, the existence of evil in the face of an all-knowing and all-powerful God. Kushner wrote the book after the death of his 14-year-old son. His conclusion was that God does his best and is always present with us in our times of suffering.

For myself, I remain agnostic about all of these questions, an intellectual position that says these questions are ultimately beyond human knowing, a position, which in itself is unproven and maybe unprovable. What I know for sure is that we are all here now, together, and that in itself is good.

Christmas may not be my favorite holiday, but I do cherish these holy days of winter, like the poet Rilke who says:

I love the dark hours of my being.
My mind deepens into them.
There I can find, as in old letters,

the days of my life, already lived,
and held like a legend, and understood.

Then the knowing comes: I can open
to another life that's wide and timeless.

May there be a wideness in our celebrations this season, making room in our hearts
for the mysteries of birth and death, light and dark, and the ever-unfolding miracle
of life.

Amen and Blessed Be