

**All Souls Church, Unitarian  
November Covenant Group Theme Guide**

## **Mortality**

1 The eternal world and the mortal world are not parallel, rather they are fused.”

— **John O'Donohue**, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

2 Why fear? The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance. **Zora Neale Hurston**

3 We're all going to die, all of us, what a circus! That alone should make us love each other, but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities, we are eaten up by nothing. **Charles Bukowski**

4 In being with dying, we arrive at a natural crucible of what it means to love and be loved. And we can ask ourselves this: Knowing that death is inevitable, what is most precious today?” **Joan Halifax**

5 Death is both painful to acknowledge and difficult to accept, but it is also the natural and normal outcome of life. Death is the universally shared destiny of everything that lives and is the most powerful teacher of the uncertainty of life and the omnipresence of impermanence.

If we can courageously open ourselves to these truths, we can eventually develop a lasting sense of peace -- and, most importantly, we can be of real assistance to others.

**Margaret Coberly**

6 A human life has seasons much as the earth has seasons, each time with its own particular beauty and power. And gift. By focusing on springtime and summer, we have turned the natural process of life into a process of loss rather than a process of celebration and appreciation. Life is neither linear nor stagnant. It is movement from mystery to mystery. Just as a year includes autumn and winter, life includes death, not as an opposite but as an integral part of the way life is made.” **Rachel Naomi Remen**

7 The only way death is not meaningless is to see yourself as part of something greater: a family, a community, a society. If you don't, mortality is only a horror. But if you do, it

is not. Loyalty, said Royce, “solves the paradox of our ordinary existence by showing us outside of ourselves the cause which is to be served, and inside of ourselves the will which delights to do this service, and which is not thwarted but enriched and expressed in such service.” In more recent times, psychologists have used the term “transcendence” for a version of this idea. Above the level of self-actualization in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, they suggest the existence in people of a transcendent desire to see and help other beings achieve their potential.

— **Atul Gawande, Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End**

8 The one thing scarier than dying is never learning to live. **Mark Nepo**

9 I am living in solitude in a creaky old house. My desk is the old kitchen door, removed when we knocked out a wall fifteen years ago and now propped up on two sawhorses. I am aware of all the people who have been born in this house, quarreled in it, loved in it, eaten in it, died in it. I catch myself wondering who will sit next by my workroom window to watch the river and the road and the line of trees on the skyline. Will my desk become a door again, or will it be firewood? My melancholy at first took me by surprise, but there is a rightness about it. For a little while, I have stopped holding awareness of my mortality at bay; I have invited it to come in and make itself at home.

— **Margaret Guenther, Toward Holy Ground**

**10 Burying, Planting, Resurrecting (excerpt)**

The culmination of one love, one dream, one self, is the anonymous seed of the next. There is very little difference between burying and planting. For often, we need to put dead things to rest, so that new life can grow. And further, the thing put to rest—whether it be a loved one, a dream, or a false way of seeing—becomes the fertilizer for the life about to form. As the well-used thing joins with the earth, the old love fertilizes the new; the broken dream fertilizes the dream yet conceived; the painful way of being that strapped us to the world fertilizes the freer inner stance about to unfold.

This is very helpful when considering the many forms of self we inhabit over a lifetime. One self carries us to the extent of its usefulness and dies. We are then forced to put that once beloved skin to rest, to join it with the ground of spirit from which it came, so it may fertilize the next skin of self that will carry us into tomorrow. There is always grief

for what is lost and always surprise at what is to be born. But much of our pain in living comes from wearing a dead and useless skin, refusing to put it to rest, or from burying such things with the intent of hiding them rather than relinquishing them. For every new way of being, there is a failed attempt mulching beneath the tongue. For every sprig that breaks surface, there is an old stick stirring underground. For every moment of joy sprouting, there is a new moment of struggle taking root. We live, embrace, and put to rest our dearest things, including how we see ourselves, so we can resurrect our lives anew.

— **Mark Nepo, The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have**

11 The best way to honor those we have lost is to make our lives even better. To pursue the dreams that lie deep in our hearts. To invest in people. To never judge. To be a collector of moments. To value our time. To not stress about approval. To always remember who we really are. And to never ever forget truly forget how big we are blessed. **Smitra Malhotra**

## **12 Found, a poem by Frederick Buechner**

Maybe it's all utterly meaningless.

Maybe it's all unutterably meaningful.

If you want to know which,

pay attention to

what it means to be truly human

in a world that half the time

we're in love with

and half the time

scares the hell out of us...

The unexpected sound of your name on somebody's lips.

The good dream.

The strange coincidence.

The moment that brings tears to your eyes.

The person who brings life to your life.

Even the smallest events hold the greatest clues.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

A Is mortality a central spiritual theme in your life? Are you comfortable thinking about or talking about your own death or the death of loved ones?

B Do any of these readings especially resonate with you--whether in agreement or, to your mind, in need of rebuttal? Can you elaborate?

C What beliefs inform your understanding or experience of mortality? What experiences inform your beliefs?

D What is your greatest fear about dying? What does this fear have to do with how you live your life? How do you find comfort?

E How does your experience at All Souls inform your understanding of mortality and how you live out (and take some comfort in this understanding)?

-- by Mary Beth Hatem for All Souls Covenant Groups