

Death and Grieving

We offer blessings for every life, and the end of every life.

Death is the outcome for all living things. We may understand death in purely rational, scientific terms. We may also come to know death in its spiritual dimension.

Unitarian Universalist communities of faith can be places where we quest to find meaning in life's end. Unitarian Universalist Principles affirm that each life has the right to respect and dignity, peace and justice, so that each life has an opportunity for growth and affirmation. Death will come but as much as possible, we want it to be after a well-lived life here on earth.

Unitarian Universalists believe that we are all a part of creation's interdependent web of existence, that each life matters, and that each death matters too. Each of us has one unique life. In our living, we offer something to this world that will never exist again. We mourn what has been lost when any human being dies. And we celebrate the contributions of each life that has been lived. Our community of faith affirms diverse identities and respects families and loving relationships of all kinds. Our ministers lead memorial services and rituals that honor ethnic and cultural values and traditions, and reflect the authentic spiritual and religious inclinations of the person who has died and their loved ones. This respect is shown by using the gender pronouns a person has identified as accurate for them, welcoming all family members, and incorporating inclusive language both religious and secular.

*We offer blessings for all who
are afraid and who grieve.*

Unitarian Universalists do not insist on a unified set of beliefs about what comes after the death of our bodies. No matter what lies in store for our spirits, death is the end of our physical lives. Many approaching death have anxiety and fear about the unknown. Death separates us from those we love. Our sadness and grief are consequences of our love for one another and should not be denied.

We gather in faith communities to receive comfort, information, and support through death and grief. Whether death comes gradually, by illness or old age, or suddenly with no warning, Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities of faith will travel the road with you and your family. We can provide pastoral care through hospital visits, cards and letters, transportation assistance, delivery of meals, and referrals to professional services. Ministers are here for discussions about end-of-life arrangements—and for conversations about needs, wants, and uncertainties.

Unitarian Universalists believe that love is stronger than death, that our lives are touched by others. The living can continue to pass on the love and wisdom of those who have died. We are connected to our ancestors.

We know that not all relationships with those in our lives who are dying or who have died are loving and painless. Our congregations can become chosen families that can help to facilitate healing from trauma, hurt, and loss.

We know that you may curse the world, you may curse God, and you may ask, "Why?" Unitarian Universalists do not believe that there is one clear answer to that question that can be given to you, although we might wish we could. We believe that being in our community will give you the love and support you need as you search for the answers in your own heart and mind. Ours is a community of companionship. We will respect your needs. We will be open to hearing your thoughts and feelings. We will sit with you, talk with you, hug you, cry with you, but mostly listen.

Grief is a natural emotion when one is faced with death. Given the relationship you had with the one who has died and the circumstances of their death—you may also feel anger, relief, exhaustion, confusion, or many emotions all mixed together. Grief may last for a short time or a lifetime. Grief is a creature unto itself. It is individual and particular. It takes its own time.

For some people grief feels like a tide that pulls them under or an emptiness they cannot fill. It is sometimes helpful to engage in rituals and activities that help fill the void. Unitarian Universalist congregations can provide worship, community, connections, and friendships that open the heart and mind and re-connect you to life.

Unitarian Universalism does not lay out a timeline for grieving. And we recognize that some people may have a particularly hard grief process that can benefit from a grief support group or require professional counseling. That is something you can speak with a minister about.

Blessed is the body.

Death, like birth, is the common human experience. While our society has largely removed death from the home, we cannot ignore that death involves decision-making about the body of a loved one. Ministers are able to meet with congregants to discuss end-of-life plans and pre-plan services. Many congregations have programs and workshops in which people discuss how to talk about their end-of-life wishes. We respect each individual's ability to make informed end-of-life decisions.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are locations of both funerals and memorial services. Many have a memorial grove, walk, or columbarium. These places of rest and remembrance can offer great comfort to families. And they are reminders of our ongoing relationship with those whose lives have enriched ours.

Blessed are the rituals.

Our grieving is both a personal emotional experience and a communal experience. Unitarian Universalists recognize that we are called to comfort each other in times of pain and sorrow in many ways. In our communities, there is no demand that any one person express their grief in any one way. We recognize that you may need solitude or a house full of friends. You may want new rituals created to fulfill your individual need or you may find comfort in the rituals of your family, community, or faith of origin.

Some members of Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities incorporate rituals that honor the religious past of their families, like sitting Shiva, having a lively wake, celebrating Home Going, or delivering food to the grieving family. Some may wish to wash the body of a loved one in preparation for a burial. Many Unitarian Universalists light a candle or a chalice in recognition of the death of a loved one in a worship service or memorial service at their congregation.

We cannot escape death. Neither should we dwell too much on its reality. We must live fully while we can, build a legacy of love and compassion, and pass on our wisdom as best we can. Together in Unitarian Universalist faith communities, we can talk about death and grief and support one another in living.

***Blessings to our
Knowings of death.
May all be blessed.***

*May all be held.
Blessings on life's journey.
Amen.*

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For Further Reading

Mark Belletini, *Nothing Gold Can Stay: The Colors of Grief* (Skinner House)

Arlene Churn, *The End is Just the Beginning: Lessons in Grieving for African Americans* (Harmony)

Edward Searle, ed. *Beyond Absence: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations, and Readings on Death and Remembrance* (Skinner House)

Edward Searle, ed. *In Memoriam: A Guide to Modern Funeral and Memorial Services* (Skinner House)

Betsy Hill Williams, Jane Rzepka, Ken Sawyer, and Noreen Kimball, *About Death: A Unitarian Universalist Book for Kids* (uu&me!)

Packs of 25 copies of this pamphlet can be purchased at inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop, uua.org/bookstore