

Life and Death are Woven Fine

I want to welcome everyone to Sugar Season, which kicked off with candy corn a week ago and will end with chocolate bunnies next April. I am Jody Savage, and I am a native of San Diego. Growing up so close to Mexico, I often saw those happy skeleton calacas for El Dia de los Muertos. But I had no idea that they were about the death of fear, and so they made me nervous. As a child, when I passed a shop window with a display of calacas, I would walk faster and try not to look. Today I would like to share two experiences that helped me become less afraid of calacas, and maybe less afraid of death as well.

There's an old saying at the Exploratorium: "If it blows up it's physics, if it stinks it's chemistry, and if it dies it's biology." Several years ago I had the good fortune to be part of a group of scientists and one minister who developed the "Science and Religion" curriculum at First Unitarian. I'm a biologist by trade, so when it came time to teach the Death Class, I was the one for the job.

I wanted to help the children understand that death is not just a single event that happens at the end of life. So we started by talking about a form of death that begins before we are even born. And today we are going to start in the same place. Could everybody please take a look at the back of your hand? Spread out your fingers. Do you see a little webbing between your fingers at the base? Now imagine if that webbing went all the way up to the first joint on each finger.

Think about trying to write a check, or send an email. Before you were born, your fingers were webbed like that. But during your second trimester, your body selectively killed off that webbing in a process called cellular apoptosis.

Presto: Separate fingers.

OK, you can put your hand down.

Then I told the church school class about the time my mother, who was an obstetrics nurse, helped deliver a perfectly healthy baby who was born with a tail. You and I had tails too, back in the day. But most of us didn't need them surgically removed, because our tails dissolved before we were born, courtesy of cellular apoptosis.

Now, you might be thinking, Fine, but what does this have to do with the death at the end of life? This webbing and tail stuff sounds like cellular parlor tricks. After all, we are far more than a bunch of cells glommed together. And that's true: we humans are far more creative AND destructive than anyone could guess by looking at one human cell. And yet, the death we experience at the end of life happens cell by cell, like armies battling over inches of ground.

We talked with the kids in Science and Religion about how we feel about the big death at the end of life, compared with how we feel about things like using a

pumice stone on our feet, or breaking down three week old red blood cells to make room for new ones. Those little deaths don't really bother us, in fact we seldom think about them. Yet we do worry about the death at the end of life.

Now consider this: Your chromosomes have sequences called telomeres that govern cell division. As you age, your telomeres burn down like slow candles, and you become less able to replace damaged cells. This process has a lot to do with aging and death. There are researchers who can stop or reverse the breakdown of telomeres in mice, essentially turning old mice into young ones. And it is quite possible that someday they will be able to do this with people.

When I explained this to the Science and Religion class, I thought I was bringing them good news. But the room became very quiet. "Does that mean people won't die any more?" one of the children asked. Turned out they were not happy about the prospect of their own lives going on and on. The children were imagining a very crowded Earth, and they were worried. Eleven and twelve year olds, grappling with the necessity of their own deaths.

In our culture we tend to assume that the instinct for self-preservation is our strongest urge. But that day, I learned that even schoolchildren have a complex spiritual relationship with death.

This experience helped me realize that we care about all of life and all of death at a very deep level. And that perspective makes the prospect of our individual deaths less frightening.

Even so, when we say that “all are worthy and all are welcome,” we don’t literally mean “all.” Like a Jain with a head cold carefully sweeping insects from her path so she won’t step on them, while her immune system busily slices up viruses, we UUs can happily say that all are worthy, all are welcome, and swallow a couple of antibiotics ten minutes later. I mention this because I gained another new perspective on deaths large and small just over a year ago, when my family home was infested with red poultry mites. These mites are nocturnal blood parasites that are small enough to fit inside skin pores, and choose certain animals (including certain people) as favorite hosts, based on smell. As one of their unfortunate favorites, I can report that when your home has a major infestation, it is like being stuck several times a minute by invisible pins. Plus other sensations, like the buzz in the end of your finger when one of them tucks itself into a pore. And a webby feeling on your face when these arthropods really get going. Although I am a lifelong UU, I found myself wishing there were a special hell just for parasites that start to feed in the moment you drift off to sleep.

An online community has sprung up of people who are most affected by poultry mites. Some who have not been able to control their infestation write about suicidal feelings. I had a different experience. As the mites crawled in my skin, I

felt that I had skipped death altogether and gone directly to decomposition. I had become my own calaca – an older, fatter version of Tim Burton’s Corpse Bride. During those months, life and death were woven very fine.

In October of 2009, an inspector from Alameda County Vector Control took a look at our wood paneling and our carpets, our backyard creek and our chickens, and explained what a paradise our house was for mites. Then he said, “I hope you have deep pockets, because this is going to cost you.” And he was right: when all was said and done, controlling the infestation cost my savings, my home and my marriage.

But the mites also cost me a lot of my fears. They fell one by one. First I had to stop being afraid to sleep in my car. Then I learned not to be afraid to walk into a hotel without a reservation in the middle of the night. And when I found out that chlorinated water kills mites, I overcame my fear of swimming under water.

Since my marriage ended, I have overcome my fear of making new friends. I am regaining the ability to sleep without fear. And along with the joy of reclaiming my skin came the courage to tell this tale.

We each contain multitudes. We have more lives than a cat. The life I lived before the mites is just part of my bigger life.

And as for living with less fear: I am not quite ready to grin at death like a calaca skeleton. But I have learned that each time one of our fears dies, we become more authentically ourselves.

And I wish for each of us real joy interwoven with life's inevitable pain, and real life every day until we die.

Thank you, and blessed be.