Opening Words – From Maya Angelou

When great trees fall, 
rocks on distant hills shudder, 
lions hunker down 
in tall grasses, 
and even elephants 
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall 
in forests, 
small things recoil into silence, 
their senses 
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die, 
the air around us becomes 
light, rare, sterile. 
We breathe, briefly. 
Our eyes, briefly, 
see with 
a hurtful clarity. 
Our memory, suddenly sharpened, 
examines, 
gnaws on kind words 
unsaid, 
promised walks 
ever taken…

And when great souls die, 
after a period peace blooms, 
slowly and always 
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

Responsive Reading

This morning in this sampling of those who have died over the past year, I turn to
many who lived long and blessed many, and who were often in the public eye long
before their deaths.

I also lift up the pain we feel at deaths of several of those whose lives were cut
short, as they were going about the routines of their day... whose deaths (along with
others) have reverberated throughout our city and nation, vividly challenging us to
continue that work of tearing down strange and foolish walls of separation and division
that too often divide us.

Before our Responsive reading ("Strange and Foolish Walls" – A. Powell
Davies), I ask you to join in a moment of silence for Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Wenjian
Liu, and Rafael Ramos and so many others who died in heart-breaking
circumstances....

Readings

Before our readings, a worship note: Maria Franziska von Trapp, who died in
2014, was the last surviving member of the seven siblings whose family story inspired
the "Sound of Music". She died at age 99, and our choir and Jerry offer a song from the
musical later in the service.

(1) The first reading is from Maya Angelou, poet, essayist, singer, and actress,
who died last May at age 86. It appears in Wouldn't Take Nothing From My Journey
Now, her first book of essays, published in 1993,

Because of the routines we follow, we often forget that life is an
ongoing adventure. We leave our homes for work, acting and even
believing that we will reach our destinations with no unusual event startling
us out of our set expectations. The truth is we know nothing, not where
our cars will fail or when our buses will stall, whether our places of
employment will be there when we arrive, or whether, in fact, we ourselves will arrive whole and alive at the end of our journeys. Life is pure adventure, and the sooner we realize that, the quicker we will be able to treat life as art: to bring all our energies to each encounter, to remain flexible enough to notice and admit when what we expected to happen did not happen. We need to invent new scenarios as frequently as they are needed.

Also from Maya Angelou: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

(2) Gabriel Garcia Marquez died last April at age 87. He was a Columbian writer, journalist, and Nobel Prize Winner in 1982. These two brief excerpts come from Love in the Time of Cholera, novel published in 1985.

“He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.”

“He was still too young to know that the heart’s memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and that thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past.”

“Living with Fidelity – So Great A Cloud of Witnesses – 2014”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

This morning I lift up and begin with Pete Seeger [May 3, 1919 – January 27, 2014], among the many witnesses to Life who died in 2014. Pete, and some of us knew him personally, was a member here at Community since 1992 [9-29-92]. He died last January at age 94, and we celebrated his life a few weeks later, as I believe he would have liked… with a sing-along, led by a wonderful constellation from the folk music community.

Among the gifts he shared, he was a musician, composer, human rights, peace, and environmental activist, a musicologist, and singer. Noteworthy are:

- the Almanac Singers with Woody Guthrie,
- the Weavers that led a folk music revolution,
- the Clearwater sloop and Hudson River clean-up, and
anthems such as “We Shall Overcome,” “Turn, Turn, Turn,” “If I had Hammer,” “Guantanamera,” and “Where Have all the Flowers Gone...”, for which he was the composer, lyricist, collaborator, or performer who led to the song’s popularity.

Called upon to testify at the House Un-American Activities Committees (1955), Pete Seeger pled the First Amendment (Freedom of Speech), was held in contempt, tried and convicted in court, and sentenced to ten one-year terms in prison. Upon appeal, the case was thrown out.

The New York Times Magazine two weeks ago included him in its review of the past year, and Jeff Sharlet reported that Seeger had written “in a tidy script around his banjo” these words: “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.” The larger goal was liberation.

He also points out that Pete was not foremost a performer. That is, he was not much interested in having people hear him sing. Rather his goal was to get us singing... for us to make the music our own... not to remember him, but to remember the songs, the vision, the hope, the challenge... of the hammer of justice, of freedom, of love.

We remember as well his life-partner Toshi, who died just six months before him at age 91. It is hard not to think that music and activism helped contribute to their longevity!

So much more could be said, and I do want to share a few of Pete Seeger’s words – first about his religion and then about life:

I used to think I was irreligious until I found out I was having a lot of fun meeting and talking with a lot of religious people. I had sung with Catholics and Protestants and Jews and Moslems and Buddhists all around the world, and I found out we had a lot in common, so I can’t call myself irreligious anymore....

He reports, “I guess that’s my religion. I walk out of here and I feel like yodeling when I see the sun come up.” He added, “Give me that old time religion.”

Finally from Pete Seeger, "What's it going to take? That's the question. We know we need some big changes, but how are we going to get them? I think it's going to take the courage of people who refuse to stand silently by." [Refuse To Stand Silently By, An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964.]
So great a cloud of witnesses surrounds us throughout our days… kindred spirits, strangers, partners, (antagonists are few I pray), those who like us are curious, and wonderfully created, only slightly lower than the angels according to some.

Each of us as pilgrims on this journey between our birth day and our death day…

This morning in turning to some of the heroes of the human spirit, I return to a traditional text [Hebrews 12:1] that reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside any mistake that weighs upon us, and let us [too] run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

Thanks in abundance to all those whose lives inspire us in our peculiar and difficult times, who in voice and deed showed fidelity to deep values, and who just may give you strength and courage in your own choices.

The list of the well-known, and less well-known, this year as every year, goes on and on: those who in ordinary ways made choices… who were like you and me, characters in a story of hope… who, like you and me, make a difference by the stories we write…. The lives we create….

The small sample this morning is among the many who caught my attention, either along the way, or as I reviewed the past year – each rather different.

Out of so many, there are some that arise because of personal contact or appreciation.

Howard Baker [November 15, 1925 – June 26, 2014], Senator from Tennessee, House Majority Leader, and Chief of Staff for President Reagan, died at age 89…. I grew up about two blocks from his home, and was an older scout leader with his son’s Cub Scout den when I was ten. I don’t recall ever meeting Mr. Baker, and our politics were to be quite different, yet he is to be applauded for his ability to work in bi-partisan fashion in the Senate. He was known as the Great Conciliator.

I should add that during the Watergate scandal and Senate Hearings, it was Baker, ranking Republican, who pressed the question, "What did the President know and when did he know it?"

Then, there is Sherwin Nuland [December 8, 1930 – March 3, 2014], who died at age 83, a surgeon and author. He wrote The Way We Die, about the physiology of the death process… with the insights of a healer, who wrote with heart about living:
The dignity we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives. The art of dying is the art of living.

He concludes, "The honesty and grace of the years of life that are ending is the real measure of how we die."

And those who have seen a loved one die from disease – perhaps drawn out and painful, know, as Nuland puts it, "It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them."

The day-to-day living... Who and what our hearts love shapes us, day-by-day, year-by-year....

Changing moods, I thank Jerry for his postlude selection this morning: Smetana’s “Dance of the Comedians” as we acknowledge the popularity of comedians like Joan Rivers, David Brenner, and Robin Williams.

In one of the year-end listings of celebrity deaths, a photo of Robin Williams [July 21, 1951 – August 11, 2014] who took his own life at age 63, included a quotation from him: “You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it.”

Williams was suffering from bouts of depression, anxiety and increasing paranoia. An autopsy also identified that he had “Lewy body dementia … a progressive degenerative dementia … whose primary feature is cognitive decline, which can lead to hallucinations, as well as varied attention and alertness compared to a person's baseline function.” (Wikipedia) There is no cure, and it is often misdiagnosed as Parkinson’s.

As I ask, from time to time, if you feel life is too much, too hard, too bleak, too overwhelming, I encourage you to reach out to someone – a friend, family member, physician, therapist, co-worker, … to a hotline... to me, or Esther or other staff or church members. A caring presence can make the difference, and many forms of depression are subject to effective treatment.

Also, I would note that in 2014, Bernard Mayes died at age 85.... He was the founder of the first suicide hot-lines in San Francisco in 1961, which have been so effective there and now nationally assisting those in such distress. 1-800-SUICIDE... Got that? 1-800-SUICIDE!... Share it with others... use it yourself....

Robin Williams’ suicide seems not so much a will-full, reasonable choice, but a consequence of a host of inter-related conditions.
On the other hand, Brittany Maynard [November 19, 1984 – November 1, 2014], directed her own death last November, at age 29. After surgery for brain cancer last January removed a stage 2 tumor, she was diagnosed in April with a stage 4 tumor and a projected life expectancy of 6 months. With family surrounding, and having moved to Oregon, which has a Death with Dignity law, she took doctor-prescribed drugs on November 1. On her Facebook page, she had written:

"Goodbye to all my dear friends and family that I love. Today is the day I have chosen to pass away with dignity in the face of my terminal illness, this terrible brain cancer that has taken so much from me … but would have taken so much more. The world is a beautiful place, travel has been my greatest teacher, my close friends and folks are the greatest givers. I even have a ring of support around my bed as I type … Goodbye world. Spread good energy. Pay it forward!"

Thank you, Brittany.

Many of us are blessed with better health, and we may live to a good, active long life. Of two energetic souls was Mae Young [March 12, 1923 – January 14, 2014], who died at age 91. She had a seven-decade career as a professional woman wrestler, including at age 83 taking out the WWE announcer Eric Bischoff in the wrestling ring with her signature move, a bronco buster.

Dodo Cheney [September 1, 1916 – November 23, 2014] died at age 98. She played competitive tennis professionally well into her 80s, winning a record 391 tournaments, most of them after age 55.

Iconic figures died last year like actress Lauren Bacall. And popular singers like Joe Cocker; and politicians and pioneers such as Herman Badillo [August 21, 1929 – December 3, 2014], Bronx Borough President, US Representative and candidate for Mayor of our City.

In terms of idiosyncratic favorites, I forgot to mention Lee Marshall [November 28, 1949 – April 26, 2014), who died at age 64. He was the voice of Tony the Tiger, who thought Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes were…. “Great.”

Among activists who died in the past year, Ruby Dee [October 27, 1922 – June 11, 2014] was age 91. An actress, author, poet, and activist, her acting career spanned seven decades, and she and her husband Ossie Davis separately and together won numerous honors. Her friends included both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. She once declared, “The kind of beauty I want most is the hard-to-get kind that comes from within – strength, courage, dignity.”
Perhaps, you also read about Franklin McCain [January 3, 1941 – January 9, 2014], who died at age 73. He was one of the group known as the Greensboro Four, whose efforts to be served at a whites-only Woolworth’s lunch counter led to a wider sit-in movement in 1960. As expected, they were refused service. So they went back the next day, then the next, and the next… and by the fifth day, over 1000 supporters had gathered. The lunch-counter finally integrated five months later; similar protests spread across 13 states in 55 cities – some successful and some not – contributing dramatically to the growing civil rights movement.

It was at such a protest in Knoxville that my mother along with other Unitarians participated, as they too began to join the struggle. When I asked her why she took part as a white ally, she replied, “It was the right thing…” then she added, “It was being a good Unitarian.” No paralysis by analysis, second-guessing, worrying about what her friends would think….

McCain described how his three friends as college freshman would have late night discussions about big questions, as was common. He said, “a large question kept arising in their late-night sessions: ‘At what point does a moral man act against injustice?’”

And, of course that challenge remains, finding our own steps, actions in this troubled and troubling world. He worked as a chemist and sales rep for Celanese Corporation and was life-long civil rights activist.

“The best feeling of my life,” McCain said in an interview with The Associated Press in 2010, was “sitting on that dumb stool.”

“I felt so relieved,” he continued. “Nothing has ever happened to me before or since that topped that good feeling of … feeling proud of me.”

All this brings me to the poet Galway Kinnell who died at age 87. Among lines of his that I echo are these:

> everything flowers from within, of self blessing;  
> though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness…  
> until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.

Companions of the spirit help us to recover our best selves, when the wounds of life or the initial messages are overwhelming. As the poet Galway Kinnell says, we
sometimes have to recover our own beauty and bloom again from “self-blessing.” The love of others helps us in that.

So great a cloud of witnesses… and one more: Shirley Temple Black [April 23, 1928 – February 10, 2014] … Child movie star with 56 ringlets and chirpy presence…. She began her acting career at age 3, and from ages 7-10, she was the number one box office star across our land, from 1935 to 1938.

Her movie stardom began to wane as she grew older, but in the 1950s and early 1960s, she had success on television.

She later became a diplomat and public servant as a US Ambassador… first to the United Nations, later to Ghana, and then to Czechoslovakia.

In 1972, she had a biopsy for breast cancer, and refused an immediate radical mastectomy, which was the standard procedure if a preliminary pathology/biopsy showed cancer. She declared that she found it objectionable “if lying inert on the operating table and … “someone else had made a decision and taken action in which I had had no voice.” She chose a two-step process popular in Europe.

She was the first celebrity to talk about breast cancer openly and the options open to women. She was an early patient advocate, and she suffered condemnation from the American Cancer Society for her defiance of so-called standard medical advice of the time.

Shirley Temple Black held a news conference three days after her operation, and in an article for McCall’s three months later, she broke another taboo as she discussed her grief. She titled it, “Don’t Sit at Home and Be Afraid.” “It is an amputation,” she wrote. “I face it. That’s how it is.” (NY Times Magazine, 12-28-14)

So great a cloud of witnesses; these are just a few, and you carry your own favorites….

Is there a unifying theme? Who are these witnesses? Despite their varying degrees of success, and their particular talents and skills, they seem to be much like you and me.

And who are we? Who are you?

Are you are a child of a blessed Creation, perhaps yea, even God? At the very least, which is so grand, are you a child of integrity and kindness?
Isn’t that so much of our calling… to be just that – to honor our gifts and potential and to live with integrity? (Thanks to Rev. B. Pescan)

Isn’t that the simple truth? This great a cloud of witnesses includes you, me, all of us.

We belong to each other as we write our stories.

From Galway Kinnell, we learn the art of self-blessing and blessing others by our kindness and courage.

And with Maya Angelou,

… when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always irregularly….
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

Thanks be to those who have lived with fidelity to a few deep things, signing the air with their honor… so great a cloud of witnesses who continue to live in us, just as we hope to live on in others.