

## Playing After Dark

A sermon delivered by the Rev Dr Ellis Johnson  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills, Wellesley, MA,  
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In Mary Gordon's novel, *Final Payments*, Isabel Moore begins making breakfast the morning after the funeral for her father whom she had been caring for 11 years. She says: "I hadn't shopped for days, since before the wake, and I had hardly been home enough even to open the refrigerator door. When I did, I was greeted by the defeating stench of rotting food. I tried to find the source of the odor; I smelt the milk and looked carefully at the hardening yellow block of cheddar. Then I bent down and opened the vegetable bin. The site of the broccoli liquefying at the bottom made me want to run away and set a match to the whole house. As I lifted up the cold slime, I could hardly endure the horror against my hands. I began shaking the clog of leaves into the garbage bin frantically, but I could not get them off my fingers. I began to cry. The phone rang, 'Isabel? It's Liz. What's wrong, dear? Is it your father?' 'No, it's the broccoli,' I said, and then I began to laugh. I could hear Liz laugh in relief on the other end. 'There's this broccoli in the vegetable bin, rotting. You have no idea how it defeated me!' 'I do,' said Liz. 'Of course I do.'

And, "of course," we do too, don't we? Because the rotting broccoli is symbolic of all the deaths that threatened to defeat us and rob us of the joy of living. If it isn't it isn't the death of the Love of our life, it's the discarded baby shoes from that box in the attic, or an anger-wadded letter in the wastebasket, or a violated marriage vow. For the rotting broccoli is symbolic of all that dies in us and around us and threatens to rob us of our vitality.

"But at least we have our health!" Until we don't and we begin to wonder if we're single handedly putting our [M]ohs<sup>1</sup> surgeon's children through college. And we're almost afraid to answer the phone for fear it will bring the heartbreaking reality of another dear friend who has died. Since midsummer I have grieved the loss of three of the dearest of friends as well as several colleagues. I know that my advanced age figures into that, but I also know that loss and grief are not strangers to any one of us. It's when we're younger, we can convince ourselves that we're the exception to the rule that, "No one is going to get out of here alive." Oh, intellectually, we know that we're mortal, but we know it in the same way we know Climate Change is inevitable - it's out there in an "unknown-future" category. "Maybe if I eat more kale, I can keep it at bay. But when you start joining in memorial celebrations for dear friends who are your age or a little younger, it's hard to avoid that pesky John Donne with his annoying warning, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Recently, I had a call from a colleague whom I hadn't heard from in years, telling me of the passing of yet another colleague, and he said "Ellis, we're dropping like flies." It took him a while to tell me that he was calling on his way to his first round of chemo, and the prospects weren't encouraging. We talked about his illness and his feelings about it and after expressing my love and concern, I was desperate for a benediction as he approached his destination. Knowing that we are

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<sup>1</sup> Mohs Surgery has proven to be cost-effective in treating Basal and Squamous Skin Cell Carcinoma. Patients experience little scarring and a high cure rate. Developed by Fredric E. Mohs in the 1930s.

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both Celtics fans, I said, “Just remember, Ralph, that in the NBA, the most important things happen in the last two minutes of the fourth quarter. We may be in the last two minutes of the fourth quarter, but we've still got game.” Now, I know that I was preaching to myself as much as to Ralph, and I know how simplistic that analogy is.

But I do believe that there are some gifts that come with aging as we come to grips with the limits of life and brush up against something that hints at a mysterious dimension of life and love that transcends those limits. And in those moments, life is measured by depth and not by length or duration.

When I was growing up in southwestern Kentucky, as the long, hot, summer days arrived, we would “wolf down” supper to get back outside to play. Yes, we had been playing most of the day, between mowing lawns at paper routes, but this was a bonus time. All the kids in the neighborhood showed up for the running games with which we would begin; “kick-the-can” and hide-and-seek.” But as the light began to fade and we were embraced by a velvet darkness signaling a different rhythm to things, the games would slow down. We would eventually gather on a stone wall and underneath and oversized maple tree to tease and joke until our talk, too, slowed down. The talk turned soft and with it we shaped our fantasies – fantasies of what we would be some day, and what we would do and where and how and with whom.

We would wait for the voices of parent’s calling through screen doors for us to come in. We routinely resisted the first call and the second, waiting for that edge in our parent’s voice and the use of one’s first and middle name, that we knew meant business. But in the meantime, there was a special feeling; a certain point that gentled and lowered the barriers between boys and girls; older and younger; poor and even poorer; bright and not-so-bright, as we shyly spoke together of wondrous things. And in that religion-saturated culture, we even attempted to speak of our version of “Ultimate reality.”

Needless to say, my theology has changed radically from those days; but what I have kept from those smudge-faced, scratchy-legged, barefoot buddy gatherings is a longing for a “tent of meeting” where we meet one another at the deepest level. A need for church as a place where we let down our defenses and dare to share who we are and what we dream with one another. A place where we dare to speak our truth and really listen to the other’s truth.

And if you will forgive one commercial, I believe that Mark’s leadership provides us with a unique opportunity to be that church. His authenticity and vulnerability invites us to relationships of richness and depth that are the antidotes to despair and cynicism. Even if you’re nowhere near the last 2 minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, your time is much too important to waste in shallowness.

I have always remembered with gratitude the times from those Kentucky summers, but I don't think I fully appreciated them until years later when I went through a John Updike period and read that Updike said that the great artists of all stripes are those who “almost definitely keep playing after dark.” Isn't that an inviting image?

The ones who keep playing after dark, where the eye of the heart can see, are the ones who create something that helps us break free of our “rutted realities” and touch one another in our Deepest

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places. As with musicians, poets, and painters, so with these artists of life like you; Fantasy is the dancing partner of faith; Imagination is the beginning of transformation.

So, if I could have a re-do with my friend who called on his way to chemo, I think I would lose the basketball analogy and say instead, "Let's just make sure that we keep playing after dark until we can't resist any longer the call to come home."

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For Whom the Bell Tolls

by

John Donne

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thine own  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Each man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.