

Farewell Secular Readings — General Selections

Out of Solitude

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief or bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

Henri Nouwen

From **Julius Caesar**

Cowards die many times before their death;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

William Shakespeare

Tell him that we shall all bear his memory in the most precious part of our hearts, and that the world shall bow their heads to it, as our loves do. Tell him that the most skeptical of us has faith enough in the high things that nature puts into our heads, to think that all who are of one accord in mind and heart, are journeying to one and the same place, and shall unite somehow or other again face to face, mutually conscious, mutually delighted. Tell him he is only before us on the road, as he was in everything else, and that we are coming after him.

Leigh Hunt, from a letter on the death of John Keats

Have courage for the great sorrows in life, and patience for the small ones;
and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.

Victor Hugo

When you come to the edge of all that you have known, there will be two possibilities awaiting you: There will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly.

A Turtle Creek Chorale member.
After goodbye: an AIDS story, a PBS, 1995 and 1996.

From **The Apology of Socrates**

There is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain...Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this?...Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death.

Plato, Translation by B. Jowett

From **The Mysterious Tao**

The six cardinal points, reaching into infinity, are ever included in Tao. An autumn spikelet, in all its minuteness, must carry Tao within itself. There is nothing on earth which does not rise and fall, but it never perishes altogether. The Yin and the Yang, and the four seasons, keep to their proper order. Apparently destroyed, yet really existing; the material gone, the immaterial left—such is the law of creation, which passeth all understanding. This is called the root, whence a glimpse may be obtained of God.

Musings of a Chinese Mystic by Chuang Tzu

From **The Book of Margins**

It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death...To approach this Silence, it is necessary to journey into the desert. You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself voiceless. You become silence. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.

Edmond Jabes

Secular Farewell Readings for a Spouse

Tell him that we shall all bear his memory in the most precious part of our hearts, and that the world shall bow their heads to it, as our loves do. Tell him that the most skeptical of us has faith enough in the high things that nature puts into our heads, to think that all who are of one accord in mind and heart, are journeying to one and the same place, and shall unite somehow or other again face to face, mutually conscious, mutually delighted. Tell him he is only before us on the road, as he was in everything else, and that we are coming after him.
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Victor Hugo

From Romeo and Juliet

Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And we will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.—
And every tongue that
But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence.

William Shakespeare

From The Dead

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived itself, was dissolving and dwindling.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and father westward softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill... His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

James Joyce

Secular Funeral Reading for a Child

Untitled

Suffering – no matter how multiplied – is always individual. “Pain is the most individualizing thing on the earth,” Edith Hamilton has written.

“It is true that it is the great common bond as well, but that realization comes only when it is over. To suffer is to be alone. To watch another suffer is to know the barrier that shuts each of us away by himself. Only individuals can suffer.

Suffering is certainly individual, but at the same time it is a universal experience. There are even certain familiar stages in suffering, and familiar, if not identical, steps in coming to terms with it., as in the healing of illness – as, in fact, in coming to terms with death itself. To see these steps in another’s life can be illuminating and perhaps even helpful.

What I am saying is not simply the old Puritan truism that “suffering teaches.” If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to be vulnerable., All these and other factors combined, if the circumstances are right, can teach and can lead to rebirth.

But there is no simple formula, or swift way out, no comfort or easy acceptance of suffering.

“There is no question,” as Katherine Mansfield wrote, “of getting beyond it” – “The little boat enters the dark fearful gulf and our only cry is to escape – ‘put me on land again.’ But it’s useless. Nobody listens. The shadowy figure rows on. One ought to sit still and uncover one’s eyes.”

...Courage is a first step, but simply to bear the blow bravely is not enough. Stoicism is courageous, but it is only a halfway house on the long road. It is a shield, permissible for a short time only. In the end, one has to discard shields and remain open and vulnerable.

Otherwise, scar tissue will seal off the wound and no growth will follow. To grow, to be reborn, one must remain vulnerable – open to love but also hideously open to the possibility of more suffering.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh 16 years after the kidnapping and murder of her infant son.

Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits.

Mary Wollstonecraft

Secular Funeral Readings for an Unexpected Death

Human existence is girt round with mystery: the narrow region of our experience is a small island in the midst of a boundless sea. To add to the mystery, the domain of our earthly existence is not only an island of infinite space, but also in infinite time. The past and the future are alike shrouded from us: we neither know the origin of anything which is, nor its final destination.

John Stuart Mill

Have courage for the great sorrows in life, and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.

Victor Hugo

There is nothing more terrible than the recent death of a one beloved. During the 49 days of ritual observance and their retreat to a mountain temple with the other mourners, every fiber of emotion is wrung when in these marrow and solitary surroundings are celebrated the masses for the dead. Yet those days glide swiftly and, on the last, desolation is again our portion as we collect our belongings and disperse silently on our several ways to return to the saddened house.

We do not willingly forget the beloved, but days go by and, as the proverb, "Those departed become strangers and remote." The shock subsides. We must laugh and be trivial. The body is buried on a lonely and far-off mountain, and is visited only on ritual days. Before long, memorial stone is overgrown with moss and heaped with dead leaves, and only faithful visitors are the night-wind and the moon... The grass in spring overgrowing may rouse emotion. It may be sad to hear that the ancient pine-tree of a thousand years has fallen in the great storm and is now cut up for firewood. And then the ancient graveyard becomes a ploughed field, and its place knows it no more.

Anonymous, Translated from Japanese by Ryukichi Kurata

When One Takes His Own Life

Our friend died at his own battlefield. He was killed in action fighting a civil war. He fought against adversities that were as real to him as his casket is real to us. They were powerful adversaries. They took toll of his energies and endurance. They exhausted the last vestiges of his courage and his strength. At last these adversaries overwhelmed him. And it appeared that he had lost the war. But did he? I see a host of victories that he has won!

"For one thing – he has won our admiration – because even if he lost the war, we give him credit for his bravery on the battlefield. And we give him credit for the courage and pride and hope that he used as his weapons as long as he could. We shall remember not his death, but his daily victories gained through his kindness and thoughtfulness, through his love for his family and friends... for all things beautiful, lovely and honorable. We shall remember not his last day of defeat, but we shall remember the many days that he was victorious over overwhelming odds. We shall remember not the years we thought he had left, but the intensity with which he lived the years that he had. Only God knows what this child of His suffered in the silent skirmishes that took place in his soul. But our consolation is that God does know, and understands.

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Secular Funeral Readings for After a Long Illness

“When you come to the edge of all that you have known, there will be two possibilities awaiting you: There will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly.” A Turtle Creek Chorale member.

(After goodbye: an AIDS story, a PBS video broadcast in 1995 and 1996 on WTVS-TV, Detroit, Channel 56.)

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