

Reading from *Garmann's Summer* by Stian Hole

“Are you going to die soon?” Garmann asks. Auntie Borghild looks up at the branches of the apple tree. “Yes, it probably won’t be long now.” She straightens her dress. “Then I’ll put on my lipstick and my best dress and travel in the great starry wagon in the sky until I come to a large gate. I’ll go through the gate and wander into a garden as beautiful as yours, just a bit bigger!”

“Are you scared?” Garmann asks.

Auntie Borghild nods slowly. She takes a hairbrush from her bag and runs it through her silver-grey hair, which glistens in the sun. “Yes, Garmann, I’m scared of leaving you. But the big garden could be exciting.”

Auntie Ruth is next to wake. “What are you scared of?” Garmann asks.

“The long winter,” Auntie Ruth answers. “All old ladies are scared of winter—the cold, dark nights and snowplows and slippery pavement and shoveling snow. And trudging through the snow in heavy boots with a walker.”

Strange that anyone could be scared of winter, thinks Garmann, imagining the snowmen he is going to build and sledding in the park and hot chocolate with marshmallows.

Auntie Augusta isn’t scared of anything. She is a bit forgetful and doesn’t remember what it is like to be scared. “I’m looking forward to almond tart,” she says when Garmann asks. If you can’t remember anything, you have nothing to be scared of, Garmann thinks.

Soon, they will be leaving. They have all the time in the world, but no time to lose.

Tricked by the Future You Picked?

Nathan Pawelek, Director of Religious Education

All Souls UU Church, New London, CT

October 23, 2011

There are people celebrating birthdays today among us. Josh is celebrating his birthday. Happy Birthday, Josh! Reverend Carolyn Patierno is turning over another year. Happy Birthday, Carolyn! And I am celebrating my birthday. Happy Birthday, me!! For me, it's one of those big ones—with a three in it (43). You know those birthday cards that tease a person's age? I have never found them funny. They're actually called "Ageing Disgracefully" cards, and they make it seem like it's your fault for getting old.

They go something like this:

Josh: *- 40? You don't look older, act older. Is this birthday really necessary?*

-50? Fire Department standing by to put out your cake?

From my mid-life view, the sole purpose of these cards is to help us evade the anxiety we feel about our common, final outcome.

I am reminded daily, and I am scared sometimes, like little six-year old Garmann from our reading. He seeks reassurance from his elderly aunts. What are you afraid of? He asks. Garmann is aware that he cannot avoid school. He has to go, and he's scared. How he responds is profound, and to me represents the first inkling of how we face death—facing our fears. Some of us do it better than others.

At 43 I find myself reflecting on death more and more. It's helpful for finding what is meaningful to me. This is the *practicing* we need to do to prepare in order for that final moment to go—“smoothly?”

I find myself taking inventory of the superfluous, draining stuff—in my house, in my life. All of it goes to the proverbial garage sale. What things do you own that have served their purpose and are no longer useful? What about that gingerbread cookie cutter? What have you gotten used to that could use a change—a crack in your windshield, the dust under your bed? How about the color of a room, the music you listen to, the TV shows you watch? What about your relationships?

With respect to the things I own, I'm gradually becoming a secret purger. I purge my house of its stuff, much to my children's displeasure. They have countered with a rather clever excuse when I am thinning out the toy closet:

Josh: *“No, no. This can go in my used stuff collection.”*

I was not always like this. Aging by itself has not been the sole factor to my thoughts of death. I believe starting a family makes parents more aware of aging and dying. My hair is graying and I have a new “something” on my palm that wasn't there a year or two ago.

The other factor, a most personal one, is that my wife and I lost a child 7 years ago. She was our daughter, Emma. Losing a child, more than anything I can think of, forces you to see death. Since that horrible day, death has become a bit of an obsession. I catch myself checking the obituaries, searching for notices about children.

Josh: *What will be your last words?*

When will be the last time you brush your teeth?

Many years ago, I had a close friend who noticed that I am always—

Josh: *doing, doing, doing.*

Nate: I don't know how to chillax; I am always moving somewhere rushing about—

Josh: *biting your finger nails.*

Nate: Yes! I could not possibly be—

Josh: *romantic with anyone carrying on like that.*

Nate: Do you have friends like this? The ones who can understand you quicker than you can blink? My friend asked:

Josh: *Do you ever take a break from the pursuit?*

No. I never take a break. I have always filled up the time. If I have ten minutes, I find something to do. To stop is to die...!

Josh: *“But that’s not fun. And not at all romantic.”*

I *get* that I am not romantic! But then my friend said something that has stayed with me since:

Josh: *“It’s not good for someone who’s an artist. If you always are doing, you can never reflect.*

Am I an artist? Artists are eccentric and complicated, crazy, hungry, poor. An artist must have a strong ego, but also must know humility, failure. Must have some time to create.

I have never made a lot of money... Hmm... I *have* been called complicated.

Then I asked myself, “When during the course of a day do I lose track of time the most while in the midst of my *doing*? The answer for me is while I’m creating—writing, composing, taking photographs. That’s when I feel most like me. And no matter how hard I try to snuff out

thoughts of recreating my mid-life self, the projects keep percolating in my mind, nagging and nagging at the oddest time.

Before I put a foot on the floor each morning, I set my sights on that lone precious free hour I might have when I can devote time to one of my projects. For me, time is not money; time is a profound gift that allows me to contribute my atoms to the universe.

People are “tricked by the future they picked”—sucked into routines until it’s too late. Little 6 year-old Garmann observes that his retired and aging aunts have all the time in the world now—

Josh and Nate: *“but no time to lose.”*

Most of us know that Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, died recently at 57. In 2005, Mr. Jobs delivered the commencement address to Stanford graduates:

Josh: *I look in the mirror every morning and ask myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’ And whenever the answer has been ‘No’ for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.*

Easy for you to say. I do not know much about Steve Jobs other than he started his computer business in his garage. Upon his death he was immediately admitted to the capitalist hall of fame as a gold-standard America-style inventor—an Edison or Ford. His is a truly inspiring story. He had audacity to pursue radical ideas in artistic ways—art that goes straight down to product packaging. Steve Jobs, a hugely successful capitalist, was an artist!

This is not the story most of us will live—it usually doesn't work this way. I think of the daily steady stream of guests at the Hospitality Center across the way. Their priority is their next meal, a good pair of shoes. Their dreams are just as important.

Let's say we never lose sight of our dreams—to make enough money, start a family, cure cancer, be a CEO, or just to learn to play the banjo!—life pressures have a way of depleting us—draining our energy, dampening our determination. How do we pursue, with the time we have, what is our most authentic self?

Startling as it may be, death is a great motivator to make big choices, to change. Almost everything—expectations, pride, fears—quickly evaporate in the face of death, revealing only the most important. Steve Jobs said, “Remembering that you are going to die is the best way [we] know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.

Josh: *There is no reason not to follow your heart.*

Nate: But no one wants to die!

Josh: *Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there.*

Nate: But death is our destination!

Josh: *No one has escaped it.*

Nate: Rich or poor.

Josh: *Your time is limited. Don't waste it.*

Nate: Don't be trapped by dogma.

Josh: *Don't let the noise of the world drown out your own inner voice.*

Nate: Have the courage to follow your heart, your intuition. All else is secondary.”

At 43, I am following my inner voice as best I can, but I find myself in the midst of the most *doing, doing, doing* I've ever done. This is very demanding, as it is for everyone in one

way or another. And I'm guessing that at least some of you are thinking that this is all sounding grim—proclaiming about time, death.

But something happened a while back that suddenly changed everything for me. Three years ago I became your director of religious education. I assure you this came as a complete surprise. I had never, even remotely, considered such a thing. My very own brother, UU minister and close friend of Carolyn's, when I called him to seek advice about the DRE position at All Souls, he said, "You don't want to do *that* kind of work."

After all, I am a musician. But today, with your bold initiative and wonderful generosity, I am moving toward a full-time position. Wow! This is exciting! Overwhelming! But where does that leave me in the pursuit of my impractical projects and my inner voice?

Gradually, over this short time at All Souls, it has dawned on me that as your DRE, I am *already* doing the very things I yearn for. I was raised a Unitarian Universalist, and I guess I have always taken for granted that the pursuit of truth and meaning is deeply linked to creativity. I realize that now.

This is an amazing job for me. I can summon all my skills. I get to write every day, I have my own monthly column; I get to compose music—for the choir, the All Souls Orchestra; I get to perform my horn; organize space, work with crafts! I share wonderful ideas with a circle of dedicated volunteers. Most important, I get to interact with children and youth. Some believe this is the most creative work we do.

Last Sunday, the Spirit Play classes learned about their place in the universe starting with their house on a street, in Connecticut, in the United States, in North America, expanding to the solar system, galaxy, and universe beyond. This led to a discussion about dinosaurs.

I walked by the Emerson Room to see the kids trying to navigate their way across the room, without bumping into each other, walking backwards using a mirror to guide their steps. The 6-8th grade class went outside and pretended to be the Living Forest of Obstacles while a blindfolded traveler had to negotiate the way through.

Each Sunday is a little production with me the director and stage manager. And I find myself profoundly fulfilled and *proud*. I warmly thank all of you for putting your trust and faith in me for this most important position. I have grown to deeply love the All Souls community, and I am really, really happy to be here.

But how shall I spend my other precious time? If I wish to finish writing a book I have been working on for years, if I am determined to compose my second symphony or maybe even an opera, if I am interested in painting more and taking photographs, things that have been on my backburner for a while now, I may have to sacrifice some things, like playing my horn professionally. What would that feel like?

Josh: *Are you scared?*

Nate: Yes, I am afraid to change. It's all wrapped up around dying.

Josh: *How do we pursue, with the time we have, what is our most authentic self?*

Nate: But what if—?

Josh: *Those are not productive questions.*

Nate: So I just trust my intuition and my heart?

Josh: *They already know the answers.*

Nate: All I really want to do is contribute my atoms to the green universe.

Josh: *There is no reason not to. Today. Right now. On your birthday.*

Nate: But what about the rest of us?

Josh: *It doesn't have to be a birthday to follow your heart. Today is today.*

Josh and Nate: Go and contribute your atoms to the green universe.