



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Universalism with the End in Mind:  
Reflections on Fauré's *Requiem***

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

7 April 2019

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Gabriel Fauré was one of the foremost French composers of his generation. His music served as a bridge from Romanticism to Modernism. As one point of comparison, when he was born in 1845, Chopin was still composing. But by the time of his death in 1924, jazz and atonal music had become the new cutting edge.

Fauré composed his *Requiem* over the course of three years, between 1887 and 1890. And he was 42 years old when the first version was performed as part of a funeral service at the fashionable Church of the Madeleine in Paris, where he was choirmaster.

And while it is true that Fauré based his *Requiem* on the traditional Roman Catholic Latin Mass for the Dead, he also made some fascinating compositional choices—from a UU perspective. He selected texts from the Latin Mass for the Dead that emphasized themes of rest, peace, and consolation. And he omitted the traditional *Dies irae* sequence about the “Day of Judgement” or “Day of Wrath”—including only the final couplet, the *Pie Jesu*.

And although multiple scholarly sources hold that, “Fauré's reasons for composing the work are unclear,” it is worth considering that his father died in 1885 and his mother died two years later on New Year's Eve 1887, the same year in which he began work on his *Requiem*. Fauré himself insisted, “My *Requiem* wasn't written for anything – for pleasure, if I may call it that!” And although there is no way to now

definitively, given the proximity to his parents' death, Freud might say, "He doth protest too much."

Fauré once told an interviewer:

It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death... Perhaps I have instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different.

So let us hear the difference. Let us listen, beginning with that first word *Requiem*, which, in Latin, means *rest*.

### ***Introit and Kyrie***

#### **Sermon, part 1: "Universalism"**

When I consider which parts of our Unitarian Universalist "living tradition" are best reflected in requiem themes such as "rest eternal" and "light perpetual," it is the *Universalist* half of our long religious heritage. The old joke about the two halves of our history is that, "The Universalists think that *God* is too good to damn anyone forever. The Unitarians think that *they* are too good to be damned forever." I suspect Fauré would've been more on the Universalist side.

And in the same way that Fauré chose to compose a *Requiem* with a gentle tone—and to intentionally exclude most traditional references to the "Day of Judgement"—the most important part of the *Universalist* half of our UU heritage is that it has evolved in modern times *from* a focus on universal salvation for *all* in a next world, *to* a universal call to "love the hell out of *this* world."

To appreciate that trajectory, it can help to briefly turn back the clock to more than a century before Fauré's *Requiem*: a much more conservative theology was ascendant, encapsulated most famously by Jonathan Edwards' 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." And in the spirit of *French* composer Faure, let us look to Voltaire, another Frenchman, to better understand Edwards. Voltaire wrote: "**If there is any truth in the teaching that 'God created humankind in God's own image,' then humans wasted no time in returning the favor.**" Indeed, I have come to see

that most “fire and brimstone” sermons are much less about “Sinners in the hands of an angry God” and much more about **“God in the hands of angry sinners.”**

It was into that context that John Murray, the “Father of American Universalism” arrived in the North American colonies from England in 1770, six years before the American War for Independence.

It has been said that the essence of his message was: “Give the people **not hell, but hope** and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach kindness and everlasting love.” Along those lines, one of the roots of our contemporary practice of “Child Dedications” is Murray’s opposition during the late 1700s to the practice of baptism for Universalist reasons: **if there is no concern about washing a baby clean of original sin to avoid hell, then a Child Dedication is a fully appropriate and sufficient celebration of the hope and joy found in each new life brought into a religious community.”**

Notably, when controversy stirred over Rev. Murray’s service as a chaplain in George Washington’s Continental Army (given Murray’s Universalist theology which some viewed as a heresy), General Washington himself “supported Murray’s appointment in the face of much criticism.”

I see a lot of Universalist hope in Faure’s choice of lyrics:

“O free the souls of thy faithful departed from eternal torment.”

“O free the souls of thy faithful departed from out of the lion’s jaw”

“We pray this day for all of the souls departed.”

### ***Offertory***

## **Sermon, part 2: “Universalist Theology”**

Although there is much more to say about John Murray (the founder of Universalism in America), allow me, for now, to shift to Hosea Ballou, who emerged as the leader of the second generation of Universalists. My favorite story about Ballou quotes one of his theologically skeptical adversaries, who confronted Ballou about the ways that Universalism could lead to the moral corruption of society:

“Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”

In that spirit, this next piece is about divine holiness, which literally means “set-apartness.” For our Universalist forebears, divine “set-apartness”—the divine difference—was about the abundance of divine, universal *love*, not merely for an elite, chosen few, but for *all*.

### ***Sanctus***

#### **Sermon, part 3, “Universalist Mercy”**

As we noted earlier, in contrast to the traditional *Dies irae*, which emphasized divine wrath, Faure chose to include only the final couplet, the *Pie Jesu*, which emphasizes divine *mercy*.

This choice is resonant with the trajectory of Universalism in the wake of Murray’s and Ballou’s leadership. Around 1896, only a few years after Faure’s Requiem premiered, a spokesperson for the Universalists challenged our theological forebears to live into the fullness of our potential, saying,

You Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language. Now the world is beginning to want that big word, and you Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises.

Along those lines, in 1943, two decades after Faure’s death, the General Superintendent of the Universalists said to the annual General Assembly:

Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism *is* universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and color-less. A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.

Here you see an emerging clarity, that Universalism requires extending not wrath, but mercy—and mercy not only to those like you, but to all.

### *Pie Jesu*

### *Agnus Dei*

#### **Sermon, part 4, “With the End in Mind”**

In 1924, Fauré's *Requiem*, in its full orchestral version, was performed at Fauré's own funeral. He was 79 years old at his death. And although the predominantly gentle tone of Fauré's *Requiem* has led it to be described as "a lullaby of death," there nevertheless remains in a requiem the haunting reminder that “none of us are getting out of this life alive.”

We UUs have garnered significant praise for our curriculum titled *Our Whole Lives*, which is considered a gold standard in lifespan sexuality education. For the most part, we are doing a good and intentional job of equipping our children and young adults to confront the “Facts of Life.” But the “facts of life” must ultimately include the “Facts of Death” (133). As the actuarial tables tell us: “The death rate remains 100 percent” (2).

And regarding the “Facts of Death,” it turns out there’s an app for that. It’s called “We Croak.” For the low price of 99 cents, this app will “send you five daily invitations at randomized times to stop and think about death. It’s based on a Bhutanese folk saying that **to be a happy person one must contemplate death five times daily.**”

The app’s online description says:

The WeCroak invitations come at random times and at any moment, just like death. When they come, you can open the app for a quote about death from a poet, philosopher, or notable thinker. You are encouraged to take one moment for contemplation, conscious breathing or meditation when WeCroak notifications arrive. We find that a regular practice of contemplating mortality helps spur needed change, accept what we must, let go of things that don’t matter and honor things that do.

As a meme circulating on social media says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know it's me."

I have not purchased the app, but I can imagine that it could regularly put life in perspective. You're going through your day, you have a *minor* conflict that's *majorly* bothering you when suddenly a reminder pops up on your phone: "Don't forget, you're going to die. Open for a quote."

And then you read:

- No one on his deathbed ever said, "I wish I had spent more time at my business" - Paul Tsongas
- Or: "Death is only the end if you assume the story is about you." - Welcome to Night Vale
- Or in the words of Syrio Forel: "There is only one god, and His name is Death. And there is only one thing we say to Death: '*Not today*'." Until, of course, the day we do die.

As one journalist wrote about his experience with the "We Croak" app:

"Trembling with nerves before giving a talk to a group of strangers, I get a ping: "Don't forget, you're going to die." What's a little public speaking next to the terrifying finality of my inevitable demise? Soon after, I'm at a friend's wedding, sulking about an impending deadline, when WeCroak again reminds me, "Don't forget, you're going to die." I loosen up, finish my champagne, and opt to enjoy myself. With each day the app sounds less like a Hobbesian warning—"Life is short"—and more like an Oprah-esque affirmation: "Life's too short!"

So, one takeaway from a Requiem can be, "*Savor life!* Lean in! Don't miss out while you're still here.

Inevitably, the end is coming for us all, which can also be a reminder that part of living well is *dying well* to the extent that is within our control. Along those lines, I was saddened and frustrated to learn recently that the "Maryland End of Life Action Option" again failed to pass out of the Senate. But this year the bill advanced much further than ever before. Death with Dignity advocates, including many UUs, have been working on

this bill for years and this was the first time it got out of committee, let alone passed in one of the houses. So there remains hope for future legislative sessions.

For now, to speak about what does often remain in our control, if you haven't read Atul Gawande's short, but profound and extremely helpful book *Being Mortal*, I highly recommend it for discerning what "quality of life" means to you and those closest to you at the end of life (302).

In the meantime, as I move toward my conclusion, I will share some of the most moving and meaningful advice on the end of life that I've ever received. It is from a rabbi, who emphasized the importance of reflecting, as someone is nearing the end of life, on whether you or others around you feel the need to say any variation of the following four sentiments in the time remaining: I forgive you. Do you forgive me? I love you. Thank you.

As we listen to the next movement, I invite you to notice if one or more of those phrases particularly resonates with you in this season of your life. Amidst this morning's reminder that none of us knows how much time we have left, is there someone you need to have a conversation with that involves one or more of these phrases:

- I forgive you
- Do you forgive me?
- I love you
- Thank you

***Libera me***

***In Paradisum***