



# JOURNEY IN... YEAR TWO ENDINGS STORY

## This lesson's Big Ideas:

- Death is an inevitable reality in our lives. We will all die someday. Everyone we love will die someday.
- If we face this knowledge with courage and grace, death can become a helpful teacher. Death's inevitability has the potential to make our lives more meaningful.

## Lesson Materials

- Copy of *From Long Ago and Many Lands*, by Sophia Lyon Fahs.
- Spirit Play Lesson "The Mustard Seed Medicine" and materials
- Photos of some gravestone inscriptions
- Flipchart paper and markers
- Copies of blank gravestone
- Copy of the storybook *Annie and the Old One*

## TEACHER REFLECTION AND PREPARATION

🕒 Ahead of time

The reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as a part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life, we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.

-Etty Hillesum

"Trisha's grandma used to say that the stars were holes in the sky. They were the light of heaven coming from the other side. And she used to say that someday she would be on the other side, where the light comes from. One evening they lay on the grass together and counted the lights from heaven. 'You know,' her grandma said, 'all of us will go there someday. Hang on to the grass, or you'll lift right off the ground, and there you'll be!' They laughed, and both hung on to the grass. But it was not long after that night that her grandma must have let go of the grass, because she went to where the lights were, on the other side. And not long after that, Trisha's grandpa let go of the grass, too."

- Patricia Polacco, from *Thank You, Mr. Falker*

And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present, and  
can be none in the future,  
And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to  
beautiful results,  
And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death,  
And I will thread a thread through my poems that time and events  
are compact,  
And that all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each  
as profound as any.

- Walt Whitman, *Starting from Paumanok*

### **TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL LESSON**

- Each class' Journey Guide will let you know if any of the children in the group need particular sensitivity when discussing death, either because they've recently experienced the death of someone they love or because there is an imminent death facing their family.

## **GATHERING AND FOCUSING**

🕒 5-8 minutes

During this unit, we're talking about death. While death is a sad thing, right now we're talking how death is a helpful teacher, too. Remembering that everyone dies can help us pay attention to life while we're alive.

- Have the children ever read a story in which a character dies? Tell us about those stories? How does the death happen? How does it change the story? How did you feel when you first read that part?
- If you wrote a story, would you write it so that any of your characters dies? Why or why not?

## **PRIMARY ACTIVITY ONE A BUDDHIST PARABLE: KISI AND THE MUSTARD SEED MEDICINE**

🕒 10-15 minutes

This is a Buddhist parable about the inevitability of death. There are two ways in which it can be told. For older children (grades 5-6), it can be read or recited from the retelling by Sophia Lyon Fahs in the book *Tales from Many Lands*. For younger children (grades 1-4), it can also be told using the Spirit Play script and character manipulatives.

### **Wondering Together**

- I wonder why the Buddha didn't just explain that the child had died and there was nothing that could be done?
- I wonder if anywhere on the planet there's a house where no one has experienced the sadness of death?
- I wonder how death was a teacher in this story? What did the characters learn?
- I wonder what the mother did next?
- I wonder if the story would have been different if the child had been all grown up already.
- I wonder how the mother's life will be different now?
- I wonder how you felt during this story?
- What do you think we can learn from this story?

## **PRIMARY ACTIVITY TWO**

### **EPITAPHS: LIFE'S SHORT STORIES**

🕒 10-15 minutes

When people die and their bodies are buried or their ashes interred, we often mark the spot and celebrate their lives with a special marker—a headstone. On the headstone's are words that describe the life and character of the person who has died. We call those words an **epitaph**. Epitaphs are like very, very short stories of a person's life. You can tell what was important to them by reading their gravestone.

Thinking about our own deaths reminds us how good and beautiful it is that we are living. Knowing that we will die someday can help us to remember how important it is to live our lives in each moment. Every minute we have alive is a wonderful chance to be our real selves and our best selves. We can imagine ahead to the day when the loved ones we leave behind will write words about us on our gravestones.

Here are some examples of epitaph inscriptions:

“Beloved parent”

“Beloved partner”

“A worker for peace and justice”

“A lover of animals”

“A loyal friend”

“Brought music to the world”

Etc., etc...

You can show some example photos of epitaphs. These will be in your classroom.

#### **For Grades 1-4:**

With these younger children, you'll work together to create one UU epitaph. It will be on a piece of flipchart paper. Use their ideas to fill in the gravestone with a marker.

Ask the children in the class, “What do you think most people want their gravestone to say?” You can joke a little, if you need to lighten the mood in order to elicit responses: “Do you think they'd want it to say: ‘She was grumpy the whole time’ or ‘He was a friend to everyone?’” You can volunteer things you wouldn't mind seeing on your own gravestone.

Let's write an epitaph for a Unitarian Universalist who has lived their life well. Some epitaphs rhyme – should we make ours rhyme like a poem?

#### **For Grades 5-6:**

Older kids can work individually on their own epitaph, because their writing skills are more developed, in general. Pass out the copies of blank headstones and distribute markers to the class.

Ask the class, “If a Unitarian Universalist lived his or her life really well, what things would people write on their gravestone after they died? What would their epitaph say?”

This isn't meant to feel sad, but thoughtful. And we're not writing our real epitaphs, since we're all still blessed to be living. It will help us think about how death can teach us how to live.

## **PRIMARY ACTIVITY THREE**

### ***ANNIE AND THE OLD ONE***

🕒 10-15 minutes

Here's another story about the inevitability of death. Annie tries to postpone her grandmother's inevitable death by sabotaging her weaving project. We'll read this story out loud from the storybook. You can ask the fifth and sixth graders if they're interested in seeing the artwork used as illustration, or if they'd rather just hear it.

#### **Wondering Together**

- I wonder how Annie changes during this story?
- I wonder how her grandmother feels about dying?
- What do you think we can we learn from this story?
- Is the ending of this story happy or sad? Can a story be happy and sad at the same time?

## **CLOSING AND LEAVE-TAKING**

🕒 2 minutes

Gather in a circle, assume a comfortable meditative position or take each other's hands. Read these words from Mary Oliver to the children. Teach or remind them that 'mortal' means 'going to die'.

To live in this world  
You must be able  
to do three things:

To love what is mortal;  
To hold it against your bones knowing  
Your own life depends on it;

And when it comes time to let it go,  
To let it go.

## Spirit Play Retelling of Kisi and the Mustard Seed Medicine

This is a story about Beginnings or maybe about Endings. Let's see what we have to help us get ready. What could this be?

*Place felt underlay.*

It's a circle. I wonder what this could be. Mmmmm. That's all. Let's get ready for our story.

Have you ever been sad? I mean really sad? Today's story starts with a mother who was very sad.

*Place the mother on the story telling field. Then take the child piece and cradle it in both hands.*

She was sad because her child was so sick. She had bathed him, and given him medicine, she did everything she knew to help her son get better. Finally in desperation she did one last thing.

*Hold the child in one hand and with the other place the Buddha on the story telling field.*

She had heard the Buddha teach many times. His stories and teachings were so wise. The Buddha was the wisest smartest person she could imagine. This mother like many other people believed that the Buddha could do anything, even make sick people well.

*Place the child at the Buddha's feet.*

She told the Buddha how sick her child was and how she had tried everything she knew to help him get better. She said, "You are the wisest person on earth I knew that if anyone could help my child it would be you."

*Place your hand on the Buddha and shake your head while looking at the child.*

But the Buddha saw that the child wasn't sick. He was dead. The Buddha knew that there was nothing he could do for the child, but he thought that perhaps there was something he could do for the woman. He told her that he could make a special medicine for the child but that to make this medicine he would need the woman to find him a rare ingredient.

*Cup one hand and with the other pretend to with draw a seed. Hold the imaginary seed on the tip of your index finger.*

He would need her to bring him a mustard seed. But that wasn't all. This mustard seed had to come from the house in which none who lived there had ever known of death. No person in the house could ever have had a friend or a family member or a pet who had died. He told her, "Go door to door and bring me a mustard seed from each house free of death. Only then can I make your medicine."

*Hold the woman in one hand.*

So she went to each house in the town . . .

*Point to each child around the circle.*

And at each door she would say . . .

*Look at the child closest to you on the right.*

“My child is dying but the Buddha said if I could find a seed from a home in which no one has ever known death. Has anyone who lives in your house ever known any person or any pet who died?”

*Wait for the child’s response. When the child expresses that yes he or she has been sad then continue . . .*

“So I suppose that you don’t have a seed that would help the Buddha make his special medicine.”

*Continue in this way, asking each child if they have ever been sad or if they have a seed that will help. Each time you learn that the child has been sad or has no seed, shake your head and but as you go around the circle, shift your response from disappointment to expectation to acceptance.*

When the mother had visited every house in the village she returned to the Buddha.

*Set the mother beside the Buddha.*

The Buddha asked the woman what she had learned? She explained that she learned that there was no house in the entire village in which no one there had not at some time known death. She said that she learned that there was nothing the Buddha could do to help her child. She said she also learned that she wasn’t alone. She knew now that as sad as she was, others had cried tears of loss before her, but they also went on living. She understood that she had two tasks now: feel the sadness and find joy in being alive.

### **Responses: Wondering Together**

I wonder if there is anyone who might have a seed to help this mother?

I wonder why the Buddha didn’t just tell the mother that he couldn’t heal the child?

I wonder what the Buddha would have done with a mustard seed had the woman found one?

I wonder how the woman felt going to every body’s house?

I wonder how many people she talked to about her child before she returned to the Buddha?

I wonder how the people felt when the woman came to their doors?

I wonder what sorts of sad things the other people had experienced?

I wonder if the woman felt better by the time she returned to the Buddha?

I wonder if the people felt better after she came to their house?

I wonder where you are in this story?

I wonder which is the most important part of the story?