

# Gretchen Rubin

## FUNERAL READINGS FROM *HAPPIER* PODCAST LISTENERS

After the tremendous response to our wedding readings, several listeners suggested compiling a list of readings suitable for funerals or memorial services. Listeners contributed many wonderful recommendations, and I hope you'll find this selection helpful.

Onward and upward!

Gretchen

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**“Funeral Blues” by W. H. Auden**

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a  
juicy bone, Silence the pianos and with  
muffled drum Bring out the coffin, let the  
mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message ‘He is Dead’.  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the  
public doves, Let the traffic policemen wear  
black cotton gloves. He was my North, my  
South, my East and West, My working week  
and my Sunday rest, My noon, my midnight,  
my talk, my song; I thought that love would  
last forever: I was wrong. The stars are not  
wanted now; put out every one, Pack up the  
moon and dismantle the sun, Pour away the  
ocean and sweep up the wood; For nothing  
now can ever come to any good.

**“Ithaka” by C. P. Cavafy**

As you set out for Ithaka hope your road is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops, angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them: you’ll never find things like that on your way as long as you keep your thoughts raised high, as long as a rare excitement stirs your spirit and your body.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops, wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them unless you bring them along inside your soul, unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when, With what pleasure, what joy, you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time; may you stop at Phoenician trading stations to buy fine things, mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony, sensual perfume of every kind— as many sensual perfumes as you can; and may you visit many Egyptian cities to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind. Arriving there is what you’re destined for. But don’t hurry the journey at all. Better if it lasts for years, so you’re old by the time you reach the island, wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way, not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you wouldn’t have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you. Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

**Psalm 23**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the  
paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou  
art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort  
me. Thou preparest a table before me in the  
presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my  
head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely  
goodness and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of  
the LORD for ever.

**“Death is Nothing At All”**

by **Henry Scott Holland**

Death is nothing at all. It does not count.  
I have only slipped away into the next room.  
Nothing has happened.

Everything remains exactly as it was.  
I am I, and you are you, and the old life that  
we lived so fondly together is untouched,  
unchanged. Whatever we were to each other,  
that we are still.

Call me by the old familiar name.  
Speak of me in the easy way which you always  
used. Put no difference into your tone.  
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes  
that we enjoyed together.  
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.  
Let my name be ever the household word  
that it always was. Let it be spoken without an  
effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it.

Life means all that it ever meant.  
It is the same as it ever was.  
There is absolute and unbroken continuity.  
What is this death but a negligible accident?

Why should I be out of mind because I am  
out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an  
interval, somewhere very near,  
just round the corner.

All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.  
One brief moment and all will be as it was  
before. How we shall laugh at the trouble of  
parting when we meet again!

**“Epitaph on My Own Friend  
and My Father’s Friend,  
William Muir in Tarbolton Mill”**

**by Robert Burns**

An honest man here lies at rest  
As e’er God with his image blest;  
The friend of man, the friend of truth,  
The friend of age, and guide of youth:  
Few hearts like his, with virtue warm’d,  
Few heads with knowledge so inform’d:  
If there’s another world, he lives in bliss;  
If there is none, he made the best of this

**From “Unweaving the Rainbow:  
Science, Delusion  
and the Appetite for Wonder”  
by Richard Dawkins**

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia...Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

**“By Night When Others Soundly Slept”**

**by Anne Bradstreet**

By night when others soundly slept  
And hath at once both ease and Rest,  
My waking eyes were open kept  
And so to lie I found it best.

I sought him whom my Soul did Love,  
With tears I sought him earnestly.  
He bow'd his ear down from Above.  
In vain I did not seek or cry.

My hungry Soul he fill'd with Good;  
He in his Bottle put my tears, My smarting  
wounds washt in his blood, And banisht thence  
my Doubts and fears. What to my Saviour  
shall I give Who freely hath done this for me?  
I'll serve him here whilst I shall live And Love  
him to Eternity.

**Psalm 139:16**

You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

**“Because I Could Not Stop for Death”**

**by Emily Dickinson**

Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me -- The carriage held  
but just ourselves -- And Immortality.  
We slowly drove -- he knew no haste,  
And I had put away My labor, and my leisure  
too, For His Civility --

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess -- in the Ring -- We  
passed the Fields of Gazing Grain --  
We passed the Setting Sun --

Or rather -- He passed us; The Dews drew  
quivering and chill -- For only Gossamer my  
Gown -- My Tippet only Tulle -- We paused  
before a house that seemed A Swelling of the  
Ground -- The Roof was scarcely visible --  
The Cornice -- in the ground --

Since then -- ‘tis Centuries, and yet --  
Feels shorter than the Day I first surmised the  
Horses’ Heads Were toward Eternity --

**“Hope Is the Thing with Feathers”**

**by Emily Dickinson**

Hope is the thing with feathers That perches  
in the soul And sings the tune without the  
words And never stops at all.

**“After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes”**

**by Emily Dickinson**

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -  
And stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,  
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -  
A Wooden way Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead - Remembered, if  
outlived, As Freezing persons, recollect the  
Snow - First - Chill - then Stupor - then the  
letting go -

**“If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking”**

**by Emily Dickinson**

If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain; If I can ease one life  
the aching, Or cool one pain, Or help one  
fainting robin Unto his nest again, I shall  
not live in vain.

**“What Is Dying?” by Luther F. Beecher**

**(seen in several versions;**

**attributed to Victor Hugo, Bishop**

**Charles Henry Brent, and others)**

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze, and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength, and I stand and watch her until she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to meet and mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says: “There! She’s gone!” Gone where? Gone from my sight—that is all. She is just as large in mast and bull and spar as she was when she left my side, and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of her destination. Her diminished size is in me, and not in her.

And just at that moment when someone at my side says: “There! She’s gone!” there are other eyes that are watching for her coming; and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: “There she comes!”

And that is – “dying.”

**“The Dash” by Linda Ellis**

I read of a man who stood to speak  
At the funeral of a friend

He referred to the dates on her tombstone  
From the beginning to the end

He noted that first came her date of her birth  
And spoke the following date with tears,

But he said what mattered most of all  
Was the dash between those years

For that dash represents all the time  
That she spent alive on earth.

And now only those who loved her  
Know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not how much we own;  
The cars, the house, the cash,

What matters is how we live and love  
And how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard.  
Are there things you'd like to change?

For you never know how much time is left,  
That can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough  
To consider what's true and real

And always try to understand  
The way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger,  
And show appreciation more

And love the people in our lives  
Like we've never loved before.  
If we treat each other with respect,  
And more often wear a smile

Remembering that this special dash  
Might only last a little while.

So, when your eulogy is being read  
With your life's actions to rehash  
Would you be proud of the things they say  
About how you spent your dash.

**From “The Song of Hiawatha”**

**by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

[Hiawatha] saw the rainbow in the heaven,  
In the eastern sky, the rainbow,  
Whispered, “What is that, Nokomis?”  
And the good Nokomis answered:  
“’Tis the heaven of flowers you see there;  
All the wild-flowers of the forest,  
All the lilies of the prairie,  
When on earth they fade and perish,  
Blossom in that heaven above us.”

**“Ulysses” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson**

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not  
me. I cannot rest from travel: I will drink  
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd  
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when  
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades  
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;  
For always roaming with a hungry heart  
Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.  
I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin  
fades For ever and forever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!  
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life  
Were all too little, and of one to me  
Little remains: but every hour is saved  
From that eternal silence, something more,  
A bringer of new things; and vile it were  
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,  
And this gray spirit yearning in desire

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,  
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—  
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill  
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild  
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees  
Subdue them to the useful and the good.  
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  
Of common duties, decent not to fail  
In offices of tenderness, and pay  
Meet adoration to my household gods,  
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:  
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My  
mariners, Souls that have toil'd, and wrought,  
and thought with me— That ever with a frolic  
welcome took The thunder and the sunshine,  
and opposed Free hearts, free foreheads—you  
and I are old;

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs:  
the deep Moans round with many voices.  
Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a  
newer world.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old  
days Moved earth and heaven, that which we  
are, we are; One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

**“When I Am Dead, My Dearest”**

**by Christina Rossetti**

When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet;  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on, as if in pain:  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget.

**“Remember” by Christina Rossetti**

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can go no more hold me by the  
hand, Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you planned:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.  
Yet if you should forget me for a while  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave  
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.

**From *The Velveteen Rabbit***

**by Margery Williams**

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.” “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

“I suppose you are Real?” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse only smiled. “Someone made me Real,” he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

**“The Thing Is” by Ellen Bass**

to love life, to love it even  
when you have no stomach for it  
and everything you’ve held dear  
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,  
your throat filled with the silt of it.  
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat  
thickening the air, heavy as water

more fit for gills than lungs;  
when grief weights you like your own flesh  
only more of it, an obesity of grief,  
you think, *How can a body withstand this?*  
Then you hold life like a face  
between your palms, a plain face,  
no charming smile, no violet eyes,  
and you say, yes, I will take you  
I will love you, again.

**“Wait” by Galway Kinnell**

Wait, for now.  
Distrust everything if you have to.  
But trust the hours. Haven't they  
carried you everywhere, up to now?  
Personal events will become interesting again.  
Hair will become interesting. Pain will become  
interesting. Buds that open out of season will  
become interesting. Second-hand gloves will  
become lovely again; their memories are  
what give them the need for other hands.  
The desolation of lovers is the same: that  
enormous emptiness  
carved out of such tiny beings as we are  
asks to be filled; the need  
for the new love is faithfulness to the old.

Wait.  
Don't go too early.  
You're tired. But everyone's tired.  
But no one is tired enough.  
Only wait a little and listen:  
music of hair,  
music of pain,  
music of looms weaving our loves again.  
Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,  
most of all to hear your whole existence,  
rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total  
exhaustion.

**“Sometimes” by Sheenagh Pugh**

Sometimes things don't go, after all,  
from bad to worse. Some years, muscatel  
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't  
fail, sometimes a man aims high, and all goes  
well. A people sometimes will step back from  
war; elect an honest man, decide they care  
enough, that they can't leave some stranger  
poor. Some men become what they were  
born for. Sometimes our best efforts do not go  
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to. The  
sun will sometimes melt a field of snow that  
seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

**“Poppies” by Mary Oliver**

The poppies send up their  
orange flares; swaying  
in the wind, their congregations  
are a levitation  
of bright dust, of thin  
and lacy leaves.

There isn't a place  
in this world that doesn't  
sooner or later drown  
in the indigos of darkness,  
but now, for a while,  
the roughage  
shines like a miracle  
as it floats above everything  
with its yellow hair.

Of course nothing stops the cold,  
black, curved blade  
from hooking forward— of course  
loss is the great lesson.

But I also say this: that light  
is an invitation

to happiness,  
and that happiness,  
when it's done right,  
is a kind of holiness,  
palpable and redemptive.  
Inside the bright fields,  
touched by their rough and spongy gold,  
I am washed and washed  
in the river  
of earthly delight—  
and what are you going to do—  
what can you do  
about it—  
deep, blue night?

**“On the Death of the Beloved”**

by **John O’Donohue**

Though we need to weep your loss, You dwell  
in that safe place in our hearts, Where no  
storm or night or pain can reach you.

Your love was like the dawn Brightening over  
our lives Awakening beneath the dark  
A further adventure of colour.

The sound of your voice  
Found for us  
A new music  
That brightened everything.

Whatever you enfolded in your gaze  
Quickened in the joy of its being;  
You placed smiles like flowers  
On the altar of the heart.

Your mind always sparkled  
With wonder at things.  
Though your days here were brief,  
Your spirit was alive, awake, complete.

We look towards each other no longer  
From the old distance of our names;  
Now you dwell inside the rhythm of breath,  
As close to us as we are to ourselves.

Though we cannot see you with outward eyes,  
We know our soul’s gaze is upon your face,  
Smiling back at us from within everything  
To which we bring our best refinement.

Let us not look for you only in memory,  
Where we would grow lonely without you.  
You would want us to find you in presence,  
Beside us when beauty brightens,  
When kindness glows  
And music echoes eternal tones.

When orchids brighten the earth,  
Darkest winter has turned to spring;  
May this dark grief flower with hope  
In every heart that loves you.

May you continue to inspire us:

To enter each day with a generous heart.  
To serve the call of courage and love  
Until we see your beautiful face again  
In that land where there is no more separation,  
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,  
And where we will never lose you again.

**“The Lanyard” by Billy Collins**

The other day I was ricocheting slowly  
off the blue walls of this room, moving as if  
underwater from typewriter to piano,

from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the  
floor, when I found myself in the L section of  
the dictionary where my eyes fell upon the  
word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist  
could send one into the past more suddenly—  
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp  
by a deep Adirondack lake learning how to  
braid long thin plastic strips  
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard  
or wear one, if that’s what you did with them,  
but that did not keep me from crossing  
strand over strand again and again  
until I had made a boxy red and white lanyard  
for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
and I gave her a lanyard. She nursed me in  
many a sick room, lifted spoons of medicine to  
my lips, laid cold face -cloths on my forehead,  
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,  
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,

and here is clothing and a good education.

And here is your lanyard, I replied, which I  
made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,  
strong legs, bones and teeth,  
and two clear eyes to read the world, she  
whispered, and here, I said, is the lanyard I  
made at camp. And here, I wish to say to her  
now, is a smaller gift —not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,  
but the rueful admission that when she took  
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,  
I was as sure as a boy could be that this useless,  
worthless thing I wove out of boredom would  
be enough to make us even.

**From *Light Years* by James Salter**

“Look, Papa.”

“It’s a rhinoceros beetle,” he tells her.

“Mama!” she cries. “Look!

A rhinoceros beetle!”

She is nine. Danny is seven. These years are  
endless, but they cannot be remembered.

**“Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost**

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

**“Hyla Brook” by Robert Frost**

By June our brook's run out of song and speed.  
Sought for much after that, it will be found  
Either to have gone groping underground  
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed  
That shouted in the mist a month ago,  
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow) –  
Or flourished and come up in jewel-week,  
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent  
Even against the way its waters went.  
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet  
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat –  
A brook to none but who remember long.  
This as it will be seen is other far  
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.  
We love the things we love for what they are.

**“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”**

**by Dylan Thomas**

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
Though wise men at their end know dark is  
right, Because their words had forked no  
lightning they Do not go gentle into that good  
night. Good men, the last wave by, crying how  
bright Their frail deeds might have danced  
in a green bay, Rage, rage against the dying  
of the light. Wild men who caught and sang  
the sun in flight, And learn, too late, they  
grieved it on its way, Do not go gentle into  
that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding  
sight Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and  
be gay, Rage, rage against the dying of the  
light. And you, my father, there on the sad  
height, Curse, bless me now with your fierce  
tears, I pray. Do not go gentle into that good  
night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**From *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* by  
John Muir**

On no subject are our ideas more warped and pitiable than on death...Let children walk with nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony

**Psalm 18:16-19**

He reached down from on high and took hold  
of me; he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemy,  
from my foes, who were too strong for me.

They confronted me in the day of my disaster,  
but the Lord was my support.

He brought me into a spacious place;  
he rescued me because he delighted in me.

**“Something Beautiful Remains”**

**by Martha Vashti Pearson**

The tide recedes, but leaves behind

Bright seashells on the sand.

The sun goes down but gentle warmth

Still lingers on the land.

The music stops and yet it lingers on

In sweet refrain.

For every joy that passes

Something beautiful remains.

**“Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep”**

by **Mary Elizabeth Frye** (often misattributed)

Do not stand at my grave and weep

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

**“You Want a Physicist to Speak at Your Funeral” by Aaron Freeman**

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics; that no energy gets created in the universe, and none is destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every Btu of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got. And at one point you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him/her that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off like children, their ways forever changed by you. And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let him/her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors

that are her/his eyes, that those photons created within her/him constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

And the physicist will remind the congregation of how much of all our energy is given off as heat. There may be a few fanning themselves with their programs as he says it. And he will tell them that the warmth that flowed through you in life is still here, still part of all that we are, even as we who mourn continue the heat of our own lives.

And you'll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith.

Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time. You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they'll be comforted to know your energy's still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly.

**“The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry**

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives  
may be, I go and lie down where the wood  
drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the  
great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

**“Perfection Wasted” by John Updike**

And another regrettable thing about death  
is the ceasing of your own brand of magic,  
which took a whole life to develop and market  
— the quips, the witticisms, the slant  
adjusted to a few, those loved ones nearest  
the lip of the stage, their soft faces blanched  
in the footlight glow, their laughter close to  
tears, their tears confused with their diamond  
earrings, their warm pooled breath in and out  
with your heartbeat, their response and your  
performance twinned. The jokes over the  
phone. The memories packed in the rapid-  
access file. The whole act. Who will do it again?  
That’s it: no one; imitators and descendants  
aren’t the same.

**“Epitaph” by Merrit Malloy**

When I die  
Give what's left of me away  
To children  
And old men that wait to die.  
And if you need to cry,  
  
Cry for your brother  
Walking the street beside you.  
And when you need me,  
Put your arms  
Around anyone  
And give them  
What you need to give me.  
I want to leave you something,  
Something better

Than words  
Or sounds.  
Look for me  
In the people I've known  
Or loved,  
And if you cannot give me away,  
At least let me live in your eyes  
And not in your mind.  
You can love me best  
By letting  
Hands touch hands,

By letting  
Bodies touch bodies,  
And by letting go  
Of children  
That need to be free.  
Love doesn't die,  
People do.  
So, when all that's left of me  
Is love,  
Give me away

**From a letter from Benjamin Franklin  
to Elizabeth Hubbart, February 22, 1756**

I condole with you, we have lost a most dear and valuable relation,

but it is the will of God and Nature that these mortal bodies be laid aside, when the soul is to enter into real life; 'tis rather an embryo state, a preparation for living; a man is not completely born until he be dead: Why then should we grieve that a new child is born among the immortals? A new member added to their happy society? We are spirits.

Why then should we grieve that a new child is born among the immortals? A new member added to their happy society? We are spirits. That bodies should be lent us, while they can afford us pleasure, assist us in acquiring knowledge, or doing good to our fellow creatures, is a kind and benevolent act of God. That bodies should be lent us, while they can afford us pleasure, assist us in acquiring knowledge, or doing good to our fellow creatures, is a kind and benevolent act of God - when they become unfit for these purposes and afford us pain instead of pleasure instead of an aid, become an incumbrance and answer none of the intentions for which they were given, it is equally kind and benevolent that a way is provided by which we may get rid of them. Death is that way. We ourselves prudently choose a partial death. In some

cases a mangled painful limb, which cannot be restored, we willingly cut off. He who plucks out a tooth, parts with it freely since the pain goes with it, and he that quits the whole body, parts at once with all pains and possibilities of pains and diseases it was liable to, or capable of making him suffer. Our friend and we are invited abroad on a party of pleasure- that is to last for ever. His chair was first ready and he is gone before us. We could not all conveniently start together, and why should you and I be grieved at this, since we are soon to follow, and we know where to find him. Adieu.

### **Ecclesiastes 3**

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour,

it is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past. And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

**“Turn Again to Life” by Mary Lee Hall**

If I should die and leave you here a while,  
Be not like others sore undone, Who keep  
long vigil by the silent dust. For my sake turn  
again to life and smile, Nerving thy heart and  
trembling hand To do something to comfort  
other hearts than thine. Complete these dear  
unfinished tasks of mine And I perchance may  
therein comfort you.

**“i carry your heart with me” by e.e. cummings**

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in  
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere  
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing, my darling) i fear  
no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want  
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my  
true) and it's you are whatever a moon has  
always meant and whatever a sun will always  
sing is you here is the deepest secret nobody  
knows (here is the root of the root and the  
bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree  
called life; which grows higher than the soul  
can hope or mind can hide) and this is the  
wonder that's keeping the stars apart I carry  
your heart (i carry it in my heart)

**“We Are Seven” by William Wordsworth**

-- A simple Child,  
That lightly draws its breath,  
And feels its life in every limb,  
What should it know of death?  
I met a little cottage Girl:  
She was eight years old, she said;  
Her hair was thick with many a curl  
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,  
And she was wildly clad:  
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;  
-- Her beauty made me glad.

“Sisters and brothers, little Maid,  
How many may you be?”  
“How many? Seven in all,” she said,  
And wondering looked at me.

“And where are they? I pray you tell.”  
She answered, “Seven are we;  
And two of us at Conway dwell,  
And two are gone to sea.

“Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
My sister and my brother;  
And, in the church-yard cottage, I  
Dwell near them with my mother.”

“You say that two at Conway dwell,  
And two are gone to sea,  
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,  
Sweet Maid, how this may be.”

Then did the little Maid reply,  
“Seven boys and girls are we;  
Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
Beneath the church-yard tree.”

“You run about, my little Maid,  
Your limbs they are alive;  
If two are in the church-yard laid,  
Then ye are only five.”

“Their graves are green, they may be seen,”  
The little Maid replied,  
“Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,  
And they are side by side.

“My stockings there I often knit,  
My kerchief there I hem;  
And there upon the ground I sit,  
And sing a song to them.

“And often after sun-set, Sir,  
When it is light and fair,  
I take my little porringer,

And eat my supper there.  
“The first that died was sister Jane;  
In bed she moaning lay,  
Till God released her of her pain;  
And then she went away.  
“So in the church-yard she was laid;  
And, when the grass was dry,  
Together round her grave we played,  
My brother John and I.

“And when the ground was white with snow,  
And I could run and slide,  
My brother John was forced to go,  
And he lies by her side.”

“How many are you, then,” said I,  
“If they two are in heaven?”  
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,  
“O Master! we are seven.”

“But they are dead; those two are dead!  
Their spirits are in heaven!”  
’Twas throwing words away; for still  
The little Maid would have her will,  
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

**From *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather**

-- A simple Child,

There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy; days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil. There were days, too, which she and Emil had spent together, upon which she loved to look back. There had been such a day when they were down on the river in the dry year, looking over the land. They had made an early start one morning and had driven a long way before noon. When Emil said he was hungry, they drew back from the road, gave Brigham his oats among the bushes, and climbed up to the top of a grassy bluff to eat their lunch under the shade of some little elm trees. The river was clear there, and shallow, since there had been no rain, and it ran in ripples over the sparkling sand.

Under the overhanging willows of the opposite bank there was an inlet where the water was deeper and flowed so slowly that it seemed to sleep in the sun. In this little bay a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They sat for a long time, watching the solitary bird take its pleasure.

No living thing had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that wild duck. Emil must have felt about it as she did, for afterward, when they were at home, he used sometimes to say, "Sister, you know our duck down there—" Alexandra remembered that day as one of the happiest in her life. Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change.