As a young, single woman in graduate school, Sally Palmer was attacked by a man asking for directions while on her daily run. “I know what it did to me was to say ‘life itself is a gift,’ because you can be destroyed on the spot,” Palmer said. “The line between life and death can be very, very thin. I know that with my bones. That also helped me see what makes life worth living.”

Palmer is now a religious studies adjunct professor at the University of Wyoming and the former pastor of St. Paul’s United Church. She retired as pastor in 2008 and has been at UW since 1994, teaching classes about life beyond death, how religion and science can coexist, and how religions compare to one another.

Raised as what she describes a “superficial Episcopalian,” Palmer wasn’t always religious. In college, most of her classmates weren’t religious and her failed attempts to start a religious organization left her feeling lonely, she said. She stopped attending church and didn’t think about the subject until her near-death experience.

Palmer met her husband in New Hampshire, where she was teaching at the time, and started attending chapel on Sundays. “I decided I wanted to love God with my life,” she said. “It was very hard to say to people, from a secular college, this is what I want to turn from — a well-paying teaching job to go to seminary.”

In seminary at the Iliff School of Theology, she was inspired by one of her teachers who was a process theologian. Palmer said he focused on how God is in every detail, from loving the body to understanding science. She started writing her first book “The Gift of Life” in one of his classes. It was published in 1980.

Much of her work since seminary has focused on integrating religion with science, and finding religious aspects in other academic subjects.

Palmer received the Templeton Foundation Grant to work with scientists from Harvard. Two years later, she participated in a workshop at Harvard on “Truth in Science, Truth in Religion.”

“If I look at myself, I’d say I’m really good at integrating fields,” Palmer said. “Science explains the what; religion explains the why.”

Her religious background expanded into what she calls human rights and environmentalism. After ministering at a small church in a Denver ghetto for three years, she felt she wanted to help people through religion.

She was very vocal in the community after Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998 and often attends services at the Islamic Center of Laramie. “I always say the heart of the Christian faith is have mercy and respect those differences,” Palmer said. “How do we treat other human beings? To appreciate someone’s life is very important.”

When Palmer came to UW in 1994, she was one of two professors under Paul Flesher, the current department head who expanded the program. UW offered a couple of classes about Christianity and Flesher was brought in to build up the department, Palmer said.

Religious studies now has six full-time faculty members and offers classes about Jewish archeology and Hinduism. Palmer said many of her students aren’t religious studies majors and are drawn to the classes because of similar near-death experiences. Half of her students in this semester’s class lost friends or family to suicide, she said, adding that sudden deaths can be more traumatic.

They sign up for the course to understand the world and other religions, hoping to come to terms with what they’ve experienced. Palmer explains this as having two choices in life — controlling or embracing. She explored the idea in her dissertation about “Moby Dick” and its religious message. “(Captain) Ahab (in Herman Melville’s novel, ‘Moby Dick,’) basically asks the question, ‘Why is there evil in the world?’” Palmer said. “For him, the answer is control. Ishmael (the narrator in the novel) is the one who brings it into understanding. One is control and the other is embracing.”

Teaching other religions and comparing them is crucial to determining beliefs, Palmer said. Students are required to put religions in context and explore their similarities, she said. Her favorite religions to teach are Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Native American traditions.

“I think the mission of religious studies is to find common ground,” Palmer said. “There’s so much isolation that can happen in our society. I think the values I hold to be true teach that life itself is fragile and that we can figure out ways to be better human beings together.”