

Truth



“Truth”

Letting Go Is Liberating

Often the test of courage is not to die but to live.

— **Vitrio Alferri**

Death is our greatest teacher. I am reminded daily during my hospice work that none of us gets out of this earthly journey of life alive. We all must face the fact that we will be leaving our bodies and this planet some day. One of the helpful ways the members of the hospice team assist families in dealing with this reality is that we talk openly about death and dying, using the word “death” and other related words.

In our society we often sidestep the real issue by using euphemisms like “passed on,” “passed away,” “kicked the bucket,” and “gone to heaven.” There is a time and place for these phrases, but in order for us to deal with the finality of death, it is important to become comfortable with the use of words like “death” and “dying.” Children especially need to be talked with openly and honestly about what death is all about, when the opportunity arises to do so naturally.

Recently I learned of the memento mori of the Rule of Saint Benedict. It literally means “remember that you will die,” and is an encouragement for us to daily remind ourselves that we are one day going to die. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a practicing Benedictine monk, speaks of this aspect of the Benedictine Rule in his article, “Learning to Die”:

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When I first came across the Benedictine Rule and tradition that was one of the key sentences that impressed and attracted me very much. It challenged me to incorporate the awareness of death into my daily living, for that is what it really amounts to. It isn't primarily a practice of thinking of one's last hour, or of death as a physical phenomenon; it is a seeing of every moment of life against the horizon of death, and a challenge to incorporate that awareness of dying into every moment so as to become more fully alive.

— Brother David Steindl-Rast

This reminds me of some of the reading I have done in Tibetan Buddhism concerning death. The Tibetan Buddhists have much to teach us. One of the insights that looms large in their thinking is the impermanence of all life. In The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche writes that he often asks himself, "Why is it that everything changes?" And the answer that comes back to him is, "That is how life is." He then makes the point that, "One of the chief reasons we have so much anguish and difficulty facing death is that we ignore the truth of impermanence. We so desperately want everything to continue, as it is, that we have to believe that things will always stay the same. But this is only make-believe."

*He goes on to say that the only thing we can truly count on in life is impermanence, or change. And he suggests that we embrace this reality, and regularly ask ourselves a key related question: **"Do I remember at every moment that I am dying, and everyone and everything else is, and so treat all beings at all times with compassion?"***

In Tibetan Buddhism, all of life is seen as a preparation for the very end, the final and biggest letting go that each of us must confront. As we work through the small good-byes of our lives, we get ready for the biggest good-bye, the "graduation" we face at the very end. How are you dealing with those small good-byes in your life these days??

WE ARE OF THE NATURE TO GROW OLD AND DIE

Here are some wise words from Gotama Buddha that reinforce the Buddhist view of life and death. May you come to honor the awareness of death in your own life.

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I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill health.
There is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me
And everyone I love is of the nature to change.
There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings.
I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.
My actions are the ground on which I stand.

— Shakyamuni Buddha

The following poem was written by a friend of mine who has just begun writing poetry in the middle of her life. I love it that she can actually remember pondering death for the first time as a child.

Trust



“Trust”

Healing into Wholeness

And dying you will leave your body as effortlessly as a sigh.

— Psalm 121:8 (Stephen Mitchell’s translation)

I met one of my finest teachers on dying when I was just beginning this work ten years ago. I met this plucky woman on our hospice unit. Janet was at the end of a battle with lung cancer. She had not had an easy life. Her husband had committed suicide after their divorce, and she had raised their children on her own. Janet’s spiritual journey had somehow given her the faith to face death squarely.

At the point I met her, Janet had decided to stop eating, though she continued to use oxygen and drink fluids. On one of our first visits, Janet shared that she was “looking forward to the last adventure of life.” I was deeply moved by her words. Janet had come to a remarkable place of peace about dying, and was looking at her unknown future with hope and courage, rather than fear. Janet offered me a wonderful gift through her “reframing” that helped me deal with my fears surrounding death, and all kinds of change, for that matter.

Another gentleman I met on hospice was told he had a very serious illness. Adding to this burdensome news, he was also dealing with his only daughter's recent loss of her home to a fire. But his strong faith was holding him steady. In the midst of our talking about what loomed ahead, he shared the following: **"I don't believe the Lord would close one door without opening another."**



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IT'S ALL ABOUT "TRUST, TRUST, TRUST"!

As I share with courageous people with positive attitudes toward death, I realize how important it is for those on our hospice, and their family members, too, to stay relaxed and open-minded. The more they honor and trust the process, the better it works. When the person stays relaxed, there is less pain. Some refrains to engender trust are: "Let go, let God," "Go with the flow," "infinite trust," or simply, "trust."

Here's a wonderful piece on trust and the dying process by the Dutch priest, Fr. Henri Nouwen. He lived life fully and prayerfully, often moving toward his own fears and spiritual questions. I recall his class lectures on "Ministry and Spirituality" at the Yale Divinity School. I biked out there twice a week to hear him. His lectures were an inspiration, an enchanting sermon each and every time. My cup was filled by his deep spirituality.

Over the years Fr. Nouwen got to know the Flying Rodleighs, trapeze artists who performed in the German circus Simoneit-Barum. When the circus came to Freiburg some years ago, friends of Fr. Nouwen invited him and his father to see one of their shows. Fr. Nouwen writes how he became totally "enraptured" by watching the artists move through the air like "elegant dancers."

The Catcher Will Always Be There for You

The next day, I returned to the circus to see them again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend their practice sessions...and suggested I travel with them for a week in the near future. I did, and we became good friends.

One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump...The secret...is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar."

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"You do nothing!" I said, surprised.

"Nothing," Rodleigh repeated. "The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him."

When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: "Father into your hands I commend my Spirit." Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, "Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust."

— Henri J.M. Nouwen