

The Golden Threshold
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Perhaps you recall Woody Allen's remark in one of his films that he didn't mind the idea of dying. He just didn't want to be there when it happened.

Of course we *will* be there when it happens. And we can choose to ignore that reality or we can choose to learn from it.

It is said that before he died, Mohammed told his followers that he was leaving behind two teachers, a speaking teacher and a silent teacher. The speaking teacher? The *Koran*. The silent teacher? Death.

As far as I can recall, I was about ten or twelve years old when I first came face to face with a fear of dying. And though it surely didn't *feel* as though I was learning anything I wanted to learn, this was in fact my first experience of death as a teacher.

Why did I experience this intense fear at that time? It may have been that my grandparents had died not long before. Or maybe it was just that time of life developmentally. But whatever the cause, I would frequently go to bed feeling an immobilizing fear of death.

It wasn't just an abstraction; I wasn't doing philosophy as I lay under the covers grieving my own death. Rather, I felt viscerally the reality that someday I would die. I vividly had a sense of a kind of black hole that I imagined my non-existence would be. And paradoxically, at the forefront of this experience was the premonition of deep loss – losing everyone I loved all at once – my parents, my brothers, my friends; losing all the daily pleasures of life, waking to the morning birds, the rain on the roof at night, breakfast, lunch, dinner... all at once, losing it all.

It was a terrible feeling. Some of you, perhaps most or all of you, know that feeling.

Yet in retrospect, in spite of the terror of it, I have come to see this feeling, this experience of fear, as a door opening to the possibility of a kind of wisdom – and it is a life-wisdom available to *all* of us. In the language of today's anthem, we could think of this death-fear as a threshold; rather than a black-hole, a golden threshold – or at the least, a teachable moment as educators might put it, as Mohammed was suggesting.

I like that little story from the life of Mohammed, in which he says that death teaches us just as the *Koran* does; it is the holiest book for Muslims after all, and death, Mohammed affirmed, is its equal as a teacher.

Of course Islam is not alone in affirming that death can be a teacher, if we would but pay attention. Some Buddhists meditate in graveyards to bring home the reality of the impermanence of all things. Christians contemplate the image of the dying Christ on the cross and spend lives of service and love in preparation for death and the next life. Carlos Castaneda's fictional (perhaps) shaman Don Juan taught him to live as if death were always at his left shoulder.

And humanists and atheists may understand the reality of death (which on a purely biological level is after all necessary to life, death making possible the continuance and evolution of life) – as a reminder to live life to the fullest here and now, for as long as we might have.

Death as a teacher.

Returning to Islam: Within the mystical strand of Islam known as Sufism is a particularly evocative way of naming death as a teacher. Sufis say we should strive to “die before we die.”

What might that mean?

Listen to the Sufi poet Rumi, speaking to us over eight centuries ago (as translated by Coleman Barks):

Inside each of us, there's continual autumn. Our leaves
fall and are blown out

over the water. A crow sits in the blackened limbs and talks
about what's gone. Then

your generosity returns: spring, moisture, intelligence, the
scent of hyacinth and rose

and cypress...

...Weep and then smile. Don't pretend to know
something you haven't experienced.

There's a necessary dying, and then Jesus is breathing again.
Very little grows on jagged

rock. Be ground. Be crumbled, so wildflowers will come up
where you are. You've been

stony for too many years. Try something different. Surrender.

And listen to the Muslim/Hindu/Sufi poet Kabir, from seven centuries ago:

What you call “salvation” belongs to the time before death.

If you don't break your ropes while you are alive,
do you think

ghosts will do it after?

The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten –
that is all fantasy.

What is found now is found then.

If you find nothing now,

you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death.

If you make love with the divine now, in the next life

you will have the face of satisfied desire.

There is quite a lot packed into these two passages. But at the least we might get this much: “Die before you die” – or so it seems to me – means, first, to encounter the reality of death as we live in this life, not to deny or put off the confrontation, and then, second, to die to a way of

living which was perhaps too attached to material things and achievements, and not connected enough to things spiritual – to love, to the ecstasy of the moment.

To summarize it in the ecstatic, mystical terms of Sufism, we shouldn't and needn't put off union with the Divine. As Kabir said, "What is found now is found then." So, we can die to one way of living – perhaps feeling separate, lonely, too often frittering away our days and our attention – and find ourselves born to another, united with the Divine or as we may put it with the whole, with all of life – *now, before* we physically die.

Shifting centuries and traditions, and in some ways a little more down to earth, our own Ebenezer Gay, our third minister, shared his thoughts about approaching death in a sermon given on his 80th birthday a little over 200 years ago, the frequently re-printed "The Old Man's Calendar." I talked about this sermon a year ago, as some of you may recall.

Gay preached, first, gratitude to God for having brought him thus far. And then he said, "To remember as we ought how old we are, bringeth death... in a near and affecting view to us."

So... what lessons does Gay take and teach from bringing death "in a near and affecting view"?

Nothing we don't really already know, yet much that we too-often lose sight of in the midst of life's dailiness.

He talks about "repentance" which is really nothing other than considering how we are doing ethically, considering whether we can live more closely aligned with our values, with our conscience, with the truth as we understand it.

He talks about moderating our "cares" and "pursuits" of the things of "this world." Careful to acknowledge and affirm the goodness of our natural human loves and attachments, Gay nevertheless gently encouraged his listeners not to be attached in what we might today call a "psychologically unhealthy way," a way which can lead to always wanting more, more, more, and never simply being content with what is, with what we have and who we are.

All this said, Gay most emphatically *did* believe in a next life (as do the Sufis, by the way), and a next life of "perfect felicity" at that. And while some of us may share this belief and some of us may not, whatever our belief about a *next* life, Gay's message as to how we would wish to live *this* life in the shadow of the teacher death surely still rings true. And is not all that different from the Sufi mystics, from Buddhists, from humanists – at the least, shares some common ground.

So, then, what is our "Golden Threshold"? Our anthem this morning (reborn, we might say, after a century in a pitch-dark time capsule) affirmed that after a life "long" and "weary," after life in a world of "hard strife," the "golden threshold" is that entry into "eternal life" – "joy forever."

But as I've just said, *this* may or may not be our belief. (On this point I say, "Surprise me!") But whether or not we believe in an afterlife, whether or not there *is* an afterlife, I would affirm – as everything I've been saying this morning has been suggesting – that there *is* a golden threshold in *this* life. We *can* die before we die. It is a threshold not into some future state or condition, but into *this* life, *this* moment, *this* now which is the eternal now.

Not that "this now" is all joy and happiness by any means, but it *is* all *now*, even in our hardest times, our most grief-laden times.

Indeed, many of you know that Rumi's poetry itself... the poetry of this ecstatic 13th century mystic of another time, another place, another tradition in so many ways foreign to us... his poetry was born in the midst of that most universal experience, the experience of grief. For it was out of the depths of Rumi's grief for his spiritual friend, Shams, that his poetry emerged and

grew and flowered and still blesses us. His poetry came out of grief, and out of the love without which there would be no grief.

And we *all* know or will know about grief – and about love.

We lit candles of remembrance earlier this morning and heard the names of loved ones who had died. We feel once again the poignant loss – whether it was recent or twenty or forty years ago, we feel it once again and always.

Rumi knew this too, and allowed himself to feel it to the depths of his being. This loss. This love. And then?

He sang his love, his ecstatic love beyond words for his friend Shams in particular, yet also for this world in all its fullness, and also for God, mystery beyond mysteries. Love.

Rumi again:

“Why did I spend my
life denying death? Death

is the key to truth!” When you hear lamenting like that,
say...

... “What moved you then still moves you, the same
energy. But you understand

perfectly now that you are not *essentially* a body, tissue,
bone, brain, and muscle. Dissolve

in this clear vision. Instead of looking down at the six
feet of road immediately

ahead, look up: see both worlds...

Both worlds. This world of form and phenomena, you and me, all those we love, all we enjoy doing... and *also* the larger world in which we live and move and have our being: call it Universe, call it Cosmos, call it God, source of our lives... maybe call it the inner world of love and goodness.

So... with death and the brevity of life as a teacher – sometimes quite naturally feared, yet a teacher nevertheless – can we perhaps better see how to live in *this* world of sense and sight, informed by *that* world of love and energy and goodness?

Both worlds.

The other morning, as on many mornings this glorious autumn, my run was at about the time of sunrise – golden sun shining through dying golden leaves, reminding me of the golden threshold of *this* moment, *this* day, *this* next person who stands before me, *their* eyes, *their* cares and loves, regrets and griefs... yours too. This moment... which holds the past, too, in memory... and the future too, with hope...

All of it... a gateway to a fuller life *here... now.*

So may it be.