Facing Death with Life

(*adapted from a sermon preached on May 25, 1997*)

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October 9, 2016

Meditation

The seasons turn, turn, and turn again…
The seasons of our lives turn, turn, and turn again…
Let us rest amidst the turning, pause and reflect, simply be present…
Turn our attention within… to our heart's core…
Turn our attention to those values and concerns that matter the most,
to those people in our lives who matter the most…
turn to forgive and to allow ourselves to be forgiven…
Turn thoughtful minds and kind hearts toward ways we might serve
from our heart's core, from our deepest concerns…
in the midst of the coming to be and passing away
within each moment, each day, each life.
Turn to love, compassion, kindness…

Readings

from *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*, by Henri Nouwen:

> Is death something so terrible and absurd that we are better off not thinking or talking about it? ... Or is it possible to befriend our dying gradually and live open to it, trusting that we have nothing to fear? Is it possible to prepare for our death with the same attentiveness that our parents had in preparing for our birth? Can we wait for our death as for a friend who wants to welcome us home?

from *The Grace in Dying: A message of hope, comfort, and spiritual understanding*, by Kathleen Dowling Singh:

> We begin to get the feeling of entering holy ground when we approach a person who is nearing death. Many of us who work with the dying get a sense of the sacred as the dying person's awareness moves closer and closer in to the great mystery at the edge of life and death. The *quality of the sacred* begins to emerge – to my way of thinking – precisely because the last bond the dying person has to bodily life is love. Because they are of the same essence, the quality of the sacred and the quality of love arise simultaneously. And the moment when they arise, the moment when the heart begins to fully open, is perceptible. It can be felt like a shift in the air or recognized by the initial awkwardness of those in the presence of the dying person's intensity before they too, quite often begin to experience some of that intensity themselves.
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> I have come to believe that the time of dying effects a transformation from perceived tragedy to experienced grace.

Sermon

There is an old Sufi story about the student of a spiritual master who was sitting in an inn in Baghdad one day. The student overhears a conversation between two men, one of whom is clearly the Angel of Death, who is saying that he has some calls to make in Baghdad during the next few weeks.

Well, the student is terrified, fearing that one of the calls might be for him; so he travels as fast as he can as far away from Baghdad as he can, all the way to Samarkand.

Meanwhile, back in Baghdad the Angel of Death meets the student's master and asks him where this young man might be found. Upon learning that to the best of the master's knowledge he was somewhere in the markets of Bagdhad, the Angel of Death is surprised – for he looks at his list and sees that he is meant to collect the student in a few weeks in Samarkand.

(adapted from *Tales of the Dervishes* by Idries Shah)

We can run away from death, the story reminds us, but not forever. So, better than running away, might be to accept life as in some measure an extended conversation with death so that we might learn to *face* death *with* life.

We certainly have many opportunities to face death, for conversations with death occasioned by losses, by grief, by illness, as well as by the simple and inescapable reality of our mortality. We, too, will die.

I remember some of my early "conversations."

I remember being terribly afraid of dying when I was quite young, perhaps eight or nine, and not just being afraid but lying in bed at night and having a vivid experience of somehow feeling the reality of my future non-existence. It made me sad and frightened and lonely all at the same time.

I remember the first funeral I ever attended, that of my Grandfather Brown. I remember trying to imagine what he looked like inside that box. Was he still in the pajamas he had worn most of the time through the last months of his life, as he lived through the final stages of ALS? Or was he, more probably, in one of the blue suits that he had worn so often, even, I'm told (for he was a formal man) to the beach?

I remember when the boyfriend of an acquaintance of mine in college was killed in a car accident. I didn't know what to say to her. I avoided her – avoided, didn't want to face her – or death. I learned from that too.

And over the years – as a friend dies or a parent or as we simply get older ourselves – the conversation, this facing of death, becomes more difficult to avoid.

Which is, I believe, as it should be.

Just in the past nine or ten months or so, for example, I've officiated at more than the usual number of memorials and funerals for this length of time – more than a dozen, with another this Saturday.

These numbers of deaths make quite clear, if I needed the reminder, that death is not something out of the ordinary course of things. Death is not the exception, but is part of the ordinary course of things, along with the grief and sadness that follow. We just don't always like to face that reality head on.

Which is actually a huge loss!

For it turns out that *facing death* even or especially when we are quite well and apparently not close to death may enrich, enhance, deepen our living.

I've known people, as I expect some of you have, who had come to terms intimately with death as they faced their own deaths; and who yet seemed to be glowing with an affirmation of life. In his book *The Denial of the Soul*, M. Scott Peck describes an encounter with such a person. He writes that he had been dreading attending a dinner party to be hosted by a man who was facing death from cancer. Yet the man matter-of-factly put him at ease right away by offering "succinct and realistic information about his illness and impending death." And then he seemed throughout the evening "filled with light" which "seemed to embrace the entire company assembled." The dinner seemed, Peck wrote, like a celebration.

Of course historically one of the most well known serene and open-hearted deaths was the death of Socrates, who, we are told, said during the hour before drinking the hemlock that death was either the end of consciousness or it was the beginning of a new adventure, and so in either case was nothing to fear.

(As Walt Whitman wrote, in a similar spirit, speculating: "And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.")

As for Socrates, in Plato's account one of his friends who was present said:

> I had a singular feeling of being in his company. For I could hardly believe that I was present at the death of a friend, and therefore I did not pity him…; he died so fearlessly, and his words and bearing were so noble and gracious, that to me he appeared blessed.

All this said, we know that not everyone meets their impending death or the idea of death with such grace and affirmation. Perhaps we're not even sure if grace and affirmation is appropriate in the face of death. The familiar words of Dylan Thomas speak to an alternative view:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

So, what is it to be? Acceptance or rage. Or something else.

Well, we learned through the pioneering work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross concerning the stages of our human responses to dying that… we don't have to choose. Indeed, we could say that Dylan Thomas and Socrates were simply expressing two of these so-called stages. And since Kubler Ross first proposed her theory, we have also learned that these stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) are not usually traveled in a smooth progression from one to the next, but often involve an unpredictable shifting back and forth from one stage to another – different phases of the conversation we might say, as we face death with our lives.

We have also learned that each so-called stage has its own integrity and appropriateness. So the poet's anger is not bad or wrong as compared with the philosopher's acceptance; it is simply human – and sometimes such anger in the face of an untimely death or a death filled with suffering is utterly appropriate, certainly understandable. Likewise with denial or bargaining or depression – each can be appropriate in their time and circumstance.

Indeed, there may be times when acceptance – which may seem to be the goal toward which we should be striving – is *not* appropriate, when the battle still needs to be fought.

At the very least, knowing of these stages may help us to realize that coming to terms with death is not something that happens all at once and is not something that involves simply rationally telling ourselves to accept our fate.

No, we usually move through this learning gradually, sometimes in fits and starts, as we move through so much of life's learning.

Yet we can and often do resist the learning that can come from facing death (a resistance made easier by the many ways in which the very sick and the very old so often live and die separately from the rest of us); or we can embrace the learning from death *now* as an opportunity for our soul's growth in what, yes, we can call wisdom. We do not have to wait until our last weeks or days or hours. We may not, after all, have weeks or days or even hours at the end.

Now… I am *not* suggesting that we should morbidly dwell on the reality of death. All I'm saying is that death is a reality, and we can learn and grow – waking up to *life* actually – from our approaches to death, from our conversation with death, from facing death consciously ahead of time, rather than waiting till denial is quite impossible.

Socrates affirmed that philosophy (which literally means the love of wisdom) grows from acceptance of death. Buddhists affirm that awakening or enlightenment comes through the acceptance not only of death itself but of all the small deaths that come with the transience of living, the coming to be and passing away of each moment.

In this spirit, I find that a few quiet moments in the cemetery can bring a measure of peace, a peace it seems to me which emerges from experiencing amidst the headstones that I am part of the comings and goings of a tapestry of life far larger than just me, than just now. An experience that at the same time can help the "just now" come into clearer focus, become yet more precious.

It all may be as simple as this: If we consistently deny the reality of our death, we will inevitably deny and block out much else besides. Whereas if we open ourselves to the reality of death, face death as part of life, we may find ourselves more open to life and, indeed, life more abundant.

Let me put all this in one more way.

What I'm talking about ranges from the quite practical and down-to-earth to what we might call the spiritual and even mystical.

On the practical end of the spectrum, I can report this about my conversations with folks who are apparently not threatened with approaching death any time soon, yet who want to talk about their end of life choices and plans for their own memorial service. Without exception these are pleasant, sometimes even genuinely cheerful meetings. I may not be in the presence of a Socrates or a Buddha (or maybe I am!), but I do feel as though I'm with someone who realistically understands the fact of his or her own mortality (at the very least in the abstract) – and is the more alive for it.

Somewhere between the practical and the spiritual, I've observed that near death people often find themselves able to make amends, to let go of old arguments or grudges, to forgive and be forgiven, and so can die with more peace. What a beautiful thing.

At the spiritual end of the spectrum, we have Kathleen Dowling Singh's description from the second reading of a palpable, intense feeling of what can justly be called the sacred in the presence of someone who is dying. Elsewhere she writes of her

many encounters as a hospice companion with those who are dying who have, by their own testimony, lived through and beyond simple acceptance to something more like transcendence, to an experience of being held by or part of a reality much larger than the individual self – call this reality God, cosmos, Brahman – call it what you will.

Which leads her, as it leads me, to affirm the importance of the dimension of most spiritual practices that can help us to, as the Sufis put it, die *before* we die – to die here and now, at least a bit, and then a bit more, to small self, to ego, to the never-ending quest for satisfaction through achievement, success as the world measures success, material accumulation, and so on. And so be better prepared for physical dying itself when the time comes. Since you've already let go of so much else.

Not easy work, whether mystical or practical, this lifetime of facing death with our lives, this lifelong conversation renewed every time we lose a dear one and grieve, renewed with the fear that arrives with the hint of a diagnosis, or a near miss on the road.

Yet traveling through the path of our lives with eyes open… rather than running away to Samarkand, does enrich our lives, does help us to treasure *these* present moments. It's like the feeling near the end of a symphony, when your attention is heightened simply because you know the music is almost over. Each note, each phrase taking on a brighter, more beautiful quality.

Or like watching a sunset, the gradual dying of the light, the bright reds and yellows fading into pastel pinks, the last gentle colors fading altogether. And noticing that though the colors fade and the darkness approaches, the experience of beauty and the experience of the fullness of the moment somehow become more intense.

Oh… and what then? I haven't said much about that, and we no doubt have different ideas or beliefs or speculations about what comes next. But here's what the Persian poet Hafiz wrote seven or so hundred years ago:

> THE CANDLE BURNS DOWN
>
> We melt a little each day. The candle
> burns down.
>
> And it may wonder at times, it may
> wonder:
>
> What will become of me? What will
> happen to my precious flame?
>
> *O, so much brighter, my dear, you will*
> *become, so much brighter.*
>
> Hafiz (1320-1389)
> (translated/interpreted by Daniel Ladinsky)

Meanwhile, though:

Engaging in the conversation with our mortality, while we're still here facing the reality of our own eventual dying, may we grow into ever deeper affirmation of life and love, grow into the wisdom of a life lived always or at least more often with kindness, grace, and courage.

So may it be.