

## Dying lessons

*Down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.*

*-Edna St. Vincent Millay*

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I am always, at the least, edgy and out of sorts on the days I hear that someone I care about has died. Lately, there has been a tsunami of deaths in my world, with many people left in the wake, reeling from the impact. We live in a society that manages death poorly; as a result, we are often woefully under-prepared when death takes the life of someone we love or have cared about.

This week, through friends and clients of my counseling practice, I have been witness to the stories of six unexpected deaths and summoned to be a guide as people take tentative steps through the troubling family dynamics that rise up, often unexpectedly, when someone in the family dies. Minutes ago, before I sat down to write about this close-up encounter with death, I wrote a note to my dear friend Ellen, whose sister died just hours before the orange sun rose in the piercing brightness of a cloudless sky on a biting cold winter's day. The message I wanted to convey to a friend in shattering grief read: *In the presence of death—whether the experience is made conscious or not—families are left unmasked, stripped, and shed of their usual means of hiding from each other. All patterns of denial or distortion in relating to one another cannot be kept secret any longer, and emerge, plainly, undisguised. Whatever avenues of communication each family depends on to relate to one another, they are thrust into full force in the time following the death of a member. There's no energy to develop a new way of being together. The operative emotional patterns in a family at the time of a death—jealousy, love, fear, hostility, anger, pain, and most often, a complicated mix of such feelings—become the emotional legacy left for a family to tend in death's wake. No one prepares us for this, but bereavement is a complicated and confusing process of emotional contradictions. However consciously or unconsciously the person lived his or her life, however well or poorly a family functions, however neatly or messily the threads of the family are knitted together during the death, the whole emotional mess breaks open for everyone to see, to know, and to confront at one of the hardest times a family will ever face.*

Families cleave together in the aftermath of a death, or they crumble. Members grieve, or throw their best effort into outrunning grief until it finally catches up with them (which it always will). I urge people to face death square-on, but they rarely do, preferring the small comforting illusion that death hasn't really affected them, to the ultimately more meaningful opportunity to

learn to steady themselves in the presence of a force as painful to step out to meet—unprotected, raw—as death.

Death is not a pretty sight, but it is one of the most powerful teachers we ever encounter, if for no reason than that our illusions *are* stripped from us, and we are laid bare by naked truth. A friend describing a visit to her sister after months of concern about her health, told me, “I have no words. Her face is sunken. Teeth prominent. Skin is discolored. She must be carried to bed. That’s all I can say now. I’m heartbroken.”

Another friend, trying to describe what happened Christmas Day, “My sister has been battling cancer for a year, but everything seemed to be going well. Then her daughter called me late in that afternoon, worried that her mother was suffering a severe headache her daughter couldn’t help to ease. I left immediately but, by the time I arrived, my sister was having seizures in front of her children. She suffered a massive stroke and died a day later, surrounded by her grieving family and friends. Her death was dreadful, awful, messy, and unexpected. We are still stunned by its swiftness and power to steal someone we loved without any kind of warning. Her daughter lives with me now, and all of a sudden I’m a parent to an adolescent who is used to no rules and too much responsibility in my sister’s home. What do I do with the enormity of everything that is happening to my family? I’m overwhelmed, and totally lost in uncharted territory.”

Just as we need inner and outer guidance to live an authentic life, we also need dying lessons. Death is not going to wait until we get our acts together before it comes to the door and calls our names. It comes at its own right moment, when our bodies are no longer able to sustain life, and we are—too late—forced into admission of the delicacy of life in this physical form. Since none of us truly knows what follows life in these bodies (and won’t until we arrive at that passage) we confront death as a formidable and formative moment. How each of us *allows in* the inevitability of death, how we prepare for it, makes all the difference to the ease of our dying...and much of the difference in the detritus we leave behind for others to clean up after we are gone.

With the decisions we make, or neglect to make, as we go about lives of everyday ordinariness, we create a template for the future: how we live, how we die, and how our loved ones will be struck—positively or negatively— by the force of our deaths. In my earlier book, *Embracing the Mystery*, I told a story of my beloved friend Audrey, and how death battered its way through the door and into the prime of her life. For her, dying was as unattractive and sloppy as death can be, yet she made of it, with her conscious attempts, something...not beautiful, but, for certain, something elegant. Ann, Ellen’s dearly loved sister, made this request in preparation for their last meeting, “I don’t want you to tell me how terrible I look. I want you to see me through the eyes of God. If you can do that, then come. If you can’t, then don’t.”

One young woman I know is still reeling with the ramifications of her brother’s murder. An older friend cradled her only son in her arms as he bled to death one cold winter’s night. I know of two teenagers who were solely responsible for the care of their single mothers through the last days of their lives. Both were present—day by day and then moment by moment—as their mothers’ bodies fell away, and slipped from them to go toward the unknown. The two

daughters forge on alone, permanently imprinted with memories of their mother's last breaths upon the earth.

Why do I write this way of death? Who wants to read words that expose so raw a truth? Those of us who wish to meet death with honesty, humility, grace, intention, and whatever degree of preparedness we can achieve—however imperfect or incomplete—before the moment of death reaches for us. Those of us who choose to meet death on terms that are most attuned with how we lived our lives. All of us who want to greet death as a teacher, to learn and to grow from our dying lessons until the final moments of our lives. All of us who have no choice except *to turn toward death* because something in our spirits will not let us deny or turn from it:

*Come, if you are willing to see me through the eyes of God, to see my essential nature, and not the wreck of a body I am at this moment of departure. If you have that courage, then I want you to be with me. If you are afraid, then it is easier that you stay away. I am a beautiful soul, but my death may not be a pretty sight.*

In 1995, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross, the great pioneer of the movement to raise dying—and death itself—into our collective awareness, suffered a series of debilitating strokes in the last years of her life that left her paralyzed, speechless, and unable to go on with her purposeful mission for being on this earth. She had to learn to communicate with a limited vocabulary and other “speaking” aids. Despite the intensity of effort, she communicated clearly about hating the netherworld in which she lived following the strokes. She stated unequivocally that she preferred death to the compromised life she had to endure. This impairment was not what she expected from the end of her life, and she tolerated it, barely.

“I am like a plane that has left the gate and not taken off. I would rather go back to the gate, or take off.” If ever a person was well equipped for the oncoming of death, it was Elisabeth...but it tricked even her. She thought she was ready for death and even welcomed it, but when its long finger lightly touched her, it danced off again, leaving her body in a living stasis for several more years. For something so seemingly cruel as that, even Elisabeth was not ready.

Death and loss are not experiences most of us feel prepared to understand or to face. We find it even more confusing to be challenged with losses that are sudden, traumatic, inexplicable. We grasp for answers to help us avoid our real questions and our true pain. *Why did this happen to such a good person? Why did it happen to one so young, so innocent, so good? Why this way? Why now? What now?* Recently, a gifted young athlete with a promising future and a heart of gold committed suicide. *Why?*

There are so many questions resounding in us when death catches us without warning and we must release into death someone we love. In the absence of opportunities to pursue and probe these questions in advance of a death, to find meaning or significance in our losses, and to talk openly about the Mystery that brings us face-to-face with both life and death, our hearts remain heavy, confused, troubled, and sorely burdened by a pain that does not leave us alone but pursues us relentlessly.

Some of us face our confusion, frustration, and pain inward, wondering what we did to deserve such a blunt trauma from death. In the midst of fallout from her sister's death, Ellie wrote: "Here is my theology: *What did I do to deserve this, God?*" Others face their confusion outward, and direct their distress toward others. Following my mother's death, my father remained angry for weeks at the doctors who hospitalized her after she fractured her pelvis. He was determined to sue...*someone*. In time, appropriately, his distress ran its course, and he settled into more direct ways of expressing his sorrow.

I don't know anyone who can truly be graceful in the approach or aftermath of death. It is just a *clumsy* time, and we are a clumsy people doing the best we can to bear the unbearable. It helps to know that death—mystery that it is—is part of a Great Mystery playing out over light years as life emerges from the cosmic soup and folds back into it. None of this is personally directed at you or me. It helps when we tell stories to fill in the gaps of our ability to comprehend death; for many of us, these stories constitute our only lessons in dying. Blessedly, we can be helped by each other's experiences, and come to our own end better prepared to meet death on death's terms.

I have been told of a tradition that exists in remote villages in South America (although this could be anywhere) where, each day for a year following a death, one member of the village visits the family members of the deceased, sits down to tea and asks, "How did this happen?" The other villagers are not unaware of how the person died; they simply recognize a common responsibility to help members of their community with the process of grieving. By the time the story is told three hundred and sixty-five times, the family has moved through the darkest hours of their sorrow. The stories told in these encounters honor both the lost loved one and the grief through which each family must cycle.

The point we seem to miss in cultures of modernity is that each life, each death, is worthy of our prolonged attention. Giving death its full due actually helps the people left behind to grieve. We have the responsibility to teach one another how to honor life, and the loss of life, by admitting to the pain we feel when death has come to meet us on the path.

Elisabeth Kubler Ross also said, "Beautiful people are not born; they are made." Forged in the fires of adversity, shaped by the alchemy of loss, the dross falls away from our faces, and the gold begins to emerge. Look at the people you know who have bravely endured the catacombs of sorrow, mined the treasures hidden there, and returned to tell the truth of their descent and re-emergence. Are they not among the most beautiful people you know?

If I thought we could be spared a confrontation with death, I would not waste my time writing of things like dying lessons. But we cannot be spared these encounters; even if we run, they find us. I recently came across this brief reflection by an unidentified author:

*There would be no chance at all of getting to know death if it happened only once. But, fortunately, life is nothing but a continuing dance of birth and death, a dance of eternal change. Every time I hear the rush of a mountain stream, the waves crashing on the shore, the brief song of a bird as it pauses near my window, or my own heartbeat, I hear the sound of life's impermanence. These changes, these small deaths, are our living links*

*with death. They are death's pulse, death's heartbeat, prompting us to let go of all the things we cling to.*

All around me, there are people struggling to make friends with death, to come to terms with the transitory nature of life, to emerge from the depths of their pain more beautiful for being held too long in the fires of impermanence. One friend discloses that she talks to her recently deceased lover as she folds the laundry, when no one is around to interrupt. An older couple in the middle of an argument that seemed to trap them perpetually in anger at each other, gasped as I asked the question, "What would happen to this recurring argument if each of you was told today that your partner had only six months to live?" Both sat in stunned silence, unable to find an answer to the question. First one, and then the other, filled with tears, held out a hand, took the other in her arms. The tension vanished, and I was no longer necessary. The very idea that death could snatch either of them from the other's heart, brought the argument to a rapid close.

These are *dying lessons*, and they are always present, if we look. They are everywhere: in the changing of the seasons, in the child growing up and going off to college, in the small moments we are denied something we thought we were going to have, in the slow realization that nothing is forever, and everything is impermanent. Little and big dying lessons, all around us, every day.

So let us teach one another how to live in the delicate *here and now* with a heightened—and probably uncomfortable—sense of the reality of death's power to reach into our lives at any moment and change everything for all time. Let's tell our stories, and help each other to be ready when we make the descent into the darkness of the grave. We do not have to rejoice in what death brings, or even like it. We do not have to resign ourselves to it. We can push back, fight for our own lives, and others', as long as we have breath to spare.

But there comes the time when death is waiting, gently or fiercely. Then, if we allow the hand of death to plunge our hearts into the fires of its transmutation, we will be forever changed. When we return from the descent, and look again into the mirror of life, the beautiful face looking back at us, glowing with a luminosity born of wisdom and experience may be our own.

- This question has been asked many times, in many contexts, but most of us still avoid answering it. *What would you do and what would you say if you were told you had only six months left to live?*
- What keeps you from doing and saying those things now?
- When has death intruded on your life and changed it? What dying lessons were available to you at that time? Did you choose to learn them? How have they changed the way you live your life? It's not too late, even now, to reflect on your dying lessons, and to learn from them.
- Who are the elders in your life? What would you like to learn from them, and what are they trying to teach you, before they go? Take the time to find out. One day, it will be your turn to pass the dying lessons on to those who follow you.

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Ms. Jordan's first book, Embracing the Mystery: The Sacred Unfolding in Ordinary People and Everyday Lives (2004) was well received both critically and in terms of national sales (the book is still selling steadily two years after its release). Interviews with Ms. Jordan have appeared on public radio, Beliefnet.com (the internet's largest interfaith/spiritual website), GoodNewsBroadcast.com (a multi-cultural educational media company) as well as numerous print and radio media outlets nationwide. Her books have been reviewed in numerous magazines, and her stories and articles have been sought after by print media and online magazines. Meredith's new book, Standing Still: Hearing the Call for a Spirit-Centered Life, just released the first of this month.

In addition to her two books and short stories, Meredith also created a meditation CD titled **Be at Perfect Peace**. The CD is a series of five meditations developed for use by people confronted by major life events such as illness, depression, loss, significant life transitions, and unexpected life challenges or upheavals. The CD is appropriate for both patients, family members of patients, and caregivers.

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