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**“Not the Opposite of Life”
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Traverse City, MI**

I have some good news to share with you. Just before I came here to Traverse City, my grandmother was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Whoa, whoa, back up, stop. You might be wondering if you heard me right.

“What did she say? Her grandmother has what?” I said she has cancer.

“Well, then how is terminal cancer good news? Should this person be a minister, this woman who can so cheerfully announce an impending death, from an illness so dreadful? Is she crazy?”

Well, I might be crazy, but if I am, I get it from my grandmother. My grandmother’s given name is Helen, but she goes by a different name, Pam, because she likes having a secret identity. What my friends say when they meet her is, wow, she’s a real character. She’s kind of like Lucille Ball, and Auntie Mame, and a slender Mae West all rolled up into one. I can’t tell you how old she is because she would never forgive me, but at this age, which is old enough to be the grandmother of a woman in her late forties — she is beautiful, with bright orange hair and a perfect figure. She was an elementary school teacher, but everyone asks her, “Were you On Stage?” — in capital letters — because she is so dramatic, so gifted at making people laugh, and knows so much poetry by heart.

Pam lives in a retirement community a mile from my home. Friends tell me how lucky I am to have such a vibrant woman as my role model for old age. They don’t know that for as long as I can remember, my grandmother has gone around neighborhoods and peered into people’s windows when they weren’t home, and picked flowers from their yards. And while they have heard her recite Shakespeare and Robert Frost, they have not heard her repertoire of dirty limericks, nor her poems of horror. Here’s one of her favorites: Love to eat them mousies, mousies what I love to eat, bite they little heads off, nibble on they tiny feet.

And my friends don’t know Pam’s greatest secret, which I have permission to reveal to you. For the last eleven years, what she wanted most in this world was to die, or as she put it, to “shuffle off this mortal coil.” She hated being old, and she missed her late husband.

When this all started, my mother was alarmed. She took my grandmother to the doctor and they got her on antidepressants. After a while Pam felt a bit less depressed, but the conversation about wanting to die stayed the same. She put “DO NOT RESCUSCITATE” signs up all over her apartment and made sure she had a copy of her DNR paperwork taped to her refrigerator. She researched the Hemlock Society and methods of suicide, and joined the ACLU so she could fight for the right to die. She repeated at every opportunity: “he yearns for immortality who doesn’t know what to do with himself on a rainy Sunday afternoon.”

But here’s the strange thing. During all those years, every time Pam’s heart rate got too high, or she fell, or got very sick, she called me in a panic and demanded to go to the emergency room. She had scores of near-death experiences, and she lived through every one. She could have simply let go, but

she did not. Instead, she continued to loudly lament living. I remember once when my college-age son and daughter visited her, and she brought out her scrapbook of information on how to commit suicide. There the two tall kids sat, one on either side of their dear great-grandmother, nodding attentively, as she explained the helium method of dying.

Well, a while ago, my grandmother began to take to her bed for days at a time. She gave up many of her activities because she had no energy. My mother took her in for some tests, and we learned that she had between six months and two years to live.

With this terminal diagnosis, my grandmother bounded out of bed and resumed most of her activities. When hospice came to meet with our family, they asked her where the patient was. Now, I can hardly get hold of her because she's so busy, and she says she has more energy than she's had in years. I should add that she has no intention of suffering from any of the pain or what she considers the "messiness" of cancer. As soon as she begins to feel really ill, she will avail herself of one of the many methods she has researched. And we--who now cherish each moment we have with her, and see her foibles not as unbearable, but quirky--we hope she will permit us to be with her at the end.

So this is why the terminal diagnosis is good news: My grandmother is finally getting what she wants. And now that she knows she is really dying, she is beginning to love life.

This simple truth is at the heart of many religious teachings about life and death. Francois de la Rochefoucauld said: "You cannot stare into the face of the sun, or death." But religion—our religion—tells us that while staring into the face of the sun would blind us, staring directly at death can instead deepen and clarify our vision.

Death is something many people deeply fear. Some fear it so much that they refuse to think about it or to acknowledge it will actually happen to them. They won't sign up for life insurance or make wills or advance directives. Some people go to the opposite extreme and obsess over death, spending their nights sweating with anxiety.

There is a simple reason for our fear: the ancient reptilian part of our brain, the limbic system, is programmed to do all it can to keep us alive. That's why my grandmother goes to the emergency room every time she's in trouble. That ancient, instinctive fear is what makes it so hard for us to look directly at death. But as long as we avoid the topic of death, especially our particular death, the fear prevents us from living fully. Only if we confront it squarely can we overcome our fear and truly live.

How do we do that? How do we learn to stare death in the face without flinching?

Well, there are many things we can do. All of them may seem morbid to people who normally avoid thinking about death, but in fact they are anything but.

One is to be present at the deaths of others. In this way we learn everything we can about what death looks like up close and personal; we learn that death, like birth, is a sacred transformation. Another is to celebrate festivals like Samhain, and Dia de los Muertos, in which we invite those who have died before us to join us in celebrating their lives. In this way we begin to understand that death is not the end of anyone.

A third thing, and the one I really want to focus on, is a particular spiritual practice around death. It's common to most of the religions of the world, though it takes a slightly different form in each. This is contemplating the moment of death.

Episcopal priest Alan Jones writes:

“In my tradition we try to practice dying every day so that we may be fully alive. What I understand of my prayer life is to place myself on the threshold of death, to participate in my dying, so that I may live each day and each moment as a gift. What I cultivate is a grateful heart; each moment then becomes a new thing. My gratitude comes from the sheer gift of life itself.”

Joanna Macy, Buddhist teacher and anti-nuclear activist, explains:

“To confront and accept the inevitability of our dying releases us from triviality and frees us to live boldly. Meditation on the twofold fact that ‘death is certain,’ and ‘the time of death is uncertain’ ... jolts us awake to life’s vividness, its miraculous quality, heightening our awareness of the beauty and uniqueness of each object and each being.”

Now, if we are going to meditate on our death, or practice dying, this means imagining what happens to our consciousness at that moment. This is where our theology comes in, or our idea of ultimate reality.

In my experience, some ideas about ultimate reality are helpful when it comes to death and some are not. I worked as a chaplain for a year, in a hospital where many people died. I noticed that the people most afraid of dying were fundamentalist Christians whose idea of God was that vengeful deity who would condemn some people to hell. The people who were least afraid were Buddhists, or Christians whose concept of God was all loving.

Buddhists hope to achieve nirvana, the state of enlightenment in which the ephemeral self disappears. Why should the disappearance of self be desired? Because it disappears as a separate, fearful, grasping thing, into oneness with all that is: from small and limited it becomes infinite. But if the Buddhist does not achieve nirvana, he or she is reborn as another being with another chance to achieve enlightenment. So there is nothing to fear.

Many Christians who believe in an all-loving God believe that at death, they will become one with God, meaning they will rest in a love so large that it holds all that is. This is what our Universalist ancestor Hosea Ballou taught: that at the moment of death, all people were immediately united with God, which was love. We might say this is another way that the small self disappears, into the infinite Self of God.

My own understanding of ultimate reality is informed by my life experience as an ecologist and mystic. It falls somewhere between the perspectives of natural religion and process theology. Natural religion says our starry universe and this living planet are worthy of reverence for their own sake. It says that when we die, our molecules disperse into the larger universe and become available for the creation of new life, and that this is such an astounding and beautiful thing that we need look for no further meaning.

But I am a mystic, and I sometimes feel the need to look for a bit more meaning. At those times I lean toward process theology. Process theology is a union of contemporary physics and mysticism. It says the universe is alive, in a constant process of becoming. What we might call “God” is the creative, generative love that animates the universe; the universe is the Body of God. Humans and all other beings are members of this body, so that we are in God and God is in us. We ourselves are ever in process, changing from one moment to the next, influenced by and influencing all other beings. Thus we are co-creators of all that is.

Our death is merely a change from one being-state to another: when we die, both the energy and matter of our bodies, and our consciousness, are gathered back into the larger whole, which continues to body forth in new and beautiful forms. Life and death are two halves of a cycle, neither of which is possible without the other.

This is the way of things, here, within the divine body: each time something dies, something new begins. This is the great and sacred mystery.

All of these ways of understanding the moment of death—Buddhist, Christian, natural religion, process theology, -- all have something in common. This is a knowing that we are part of something larger than ourselves, so that when we die, instead of being forever separated from all we love, we actually become forever part of it.

Far from being morbid or life denying, then, practices of looking death in the face are deeply life affirming. This is why nearly every indigenous culture in the world has a festival like the Day of the Dead, and why nearly every religion recommends contemplating death.

So I invite you to try this practice. Put on some soft music, or go out to a sacred place, and meditate on the moment of your death. Practice dying. Imagine what happens at each step. Imagine your self dissolving into a love, or a consciousness, or a starry universe so vast you cannot comprehend it. In doing this, may you be freed from fear. May you be awakened to the exquisite beauty of this life now. May you seize the time you have to live boldly, and co-create justice. Let it be so.

Blessed Be.

De La Rochefoucauld, Francois, as quoted on p. iii in Yalom, Irvin D., *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (San Francisco, California, Jossey-Bass, 2008, 2009), p. 23.

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