

Learning to Die

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Ancient Witness: Genesis 3:17-19

An important lesson about living a spiritual life is the awareness: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In the Christian tradition, this is what we remind ourselves when we put ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent. Oh sure, we all know this, but we don’t really *know* it. I submit to you that much of our knowledge is like that of children, singing and dancing, yet not really grasping the full meaning of their own words: “Ashes to ashes, we all fall down.”

The more we are able to embrace our own death, the more we are able to embrace our own life. Being alive—truly alive—is to discover and to be in full contact with Life and therefore the Source of life that lies beyond and within.

A few years ago, Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast, wrote a wonderful article about the rule of St. Benedict that instructs those in the monastery as part of their spiritual discipline to have death at all times before one’s eyes.

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.

He remembers a story told by a young woman whose mother was close to death. She once asked her, “Mother, are you afraid of dying?” and he mother answered, “I am not afraid, but I don’t know how to do it.” The daughter, startled by that reply, lay down on the couch and wondered how she herself would do it if she had to; and she came back with the answer: “Mother, I think you have to give yourself to it.” Her mother didn’t say anything but later she said, “Fix me a cup of tea, with lots of cream and sugar, because it will be my last cup of tea. I know now how to die.”

And Brother David said, “This inner gesture of giving yourself to it, of letting go from moment to moment, is what is so terribly difficult for us; but it can be applied to almost any area of experience.” He wrote:

One reason why Christian tradition has always steered me away from preoccupation with reincarnation has not so much to do with doctrine as with spiritual practice. The finality of death is meant to challenge us to decision, the decision to be fully present here now, and so begin eternal life. For eternity rightly understood is not the perpetuation of time, on and on, but rather the overcoming of time by the now that does not pass away. But we are always looking for opportunities to postpone the decision. So if you say: Oh, after this I will have another life and another life,” you might never live, but keep dragging

along half dead because you never face death. Don Juan says to Carlos Castaneda, That is why you are so moody and not fully alive, because you forget you are to die; you live as if you were going to live forever.” What remembrance of death is meant to do, as I understand it, is to help us make the decision. Don Juan stresses death as the adviser. Death makes us warriors.

Several years ago I heard Cornel West give a lecture at the University of Arizona where he pointed out that Plato said the main purpose of philosophy is preparation for death. By death he means not an event, but a death in life. Because there’s no rebirth, there’s no change, there’s no transformation without death. Growth means we die to what we are in order to become what we are not yet. A seed dies to become a plant. We die to being a child to become an adult. And therefore, the question becomes, “how do you learn how to die?”

And so the pursuit of wisdom depends upon becoming human. That is we are beings heading toward death. It depends upon letting go of arrogance and upon embracing our finitude. To pursue wisdom is to become human, the root of the word, “humility.” It is to acknowledge that we emerge out of the mud, which is what the Hebrew word, *adam*, means. “Mud creature.” And it is to the mud we return.

Brother David suggests that we learn to die so that, when our last hour comes and if we are still alert to it, we will be able to die well. But at any rate, let’s learn it, and that means let’s learn to give ourselves over and over again to that which takes us.

I suppose the death what we call a bad death is the one in which we struggle and cannot die peacefully. Perhaps one never learned to let go, so one hangs on for dear life, as we say. And while they will eventually be killed, they have not learned to give themselves freely.

We all fall down. And when we are able to truly embrace this, we open ourselves to the Source of strength and life that is beyond and within. However, most of us, most of the time, do everything we can to avoid this awareness. In her book, *Nothing Special*, Zen teacher Joko Beck uses the following illustration:

There was once a man who climbed to the top of a ten-story building and jumped off. As he passed the fifth floor on his way down, he was heard to say, “So far, so good!”

We laugh at the man because we see what’s coming up for him in a moment. How can he say he’s doing well, so far? What’s the difference between the second when he is at the fifth floor and the second just before he hits the pavement? The second before hitting the pavement is what most of us would call a crisis. If we think that we have only a few minutes or days before we die, most of us would say, “This is a crisis.” On the other hand, if our days are proceeding normally (the usual job, the usual people, the usual tasks), life may not seem wonderful, but at least we’re used to it. (p. 221)

Beck points out that most of the time we don’t think there’s any crisis. We say, “So far, so good!” But the truth is we *are* in crisis. We’re all falling. We’re all on the way down, every single one of us, and there’s nothing we can do about it.

And even though there's no avoiding the bottom, she says that we spend most of our lives trying to do just that. Most of us spend our waking hours trying to avoid the bottom. Only we can't avoid the bottom. We try to figure out how never to suffer through a crisis. And this, writes Beck, is a complete waste of time.

We try different strategies such as achievement or success. We try to be liked, to be nice. We try to handle our lives so that we never hit the bottom, spending our entire lives trying to avoid the unavoidable.

And so this leads me to an important point about when we face an unavoidable crisis in our lives: it can be a blessing. As strange as it may sound, there can be something wonderful about getting close to the bottom. What I'm saying is that people who are seriously ill or who face a devastating situation in their lives often "wake up." And when they wake up and come to an awareness, they are able to live their moments with a wonder, appreciation and fullness that escapes most of us, most of the time. Because we're so preoccupied avoiding the unavoidable. Beck writes,

Waking up means realizing that our situation is hopeless—and wonderful... We realize that our usual maneuvers—worrying about the past, projecting an imaginary future—don't make sense; they waste precious seconds.

When we find ourselves in the middle of a disaster it can remind us that we are falling, and there's no answer. There is no solution, no special relationship, no achievement, no security, nothing that can make it stop. This is why those who face the Abyss are, in a sense, cursed but also blessed. It can help us see that life is a crisis, that we start the descent when we're born, we're falling each moment of our lives. Whether we're on the ninth floor or the first floor, each moment is infinitely precious and sacred. When we realize we are falling, each moment is a source of joy instead of misery and dread. When we are "blessed by disaster" we awaken to the fragile beauty of this miracle we call life.

Now, I don't mean to minimize these times of disaster or to say that they aren't real or painful. They are. Yet I am saying that they can carry more with them than just suffering.

Sometime ago I read another book by Philip Simmons, called, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. In 1993, Simmons was just 35 years old when he learned that he had ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, and was told he had less than five years to live. He writes early in his book,

My balance is not so good these days, and a short time before I began work on this essay last summer, I fell on the short path that leads through the woods from our driveway to the compost pile. I had just helped my six-year-old daughter into the car, and turned to start down the path, when I stumbled and went down hard. I lay stunned for a few moments, face numb, lip bleeding, chest bruised, my daughter, Amelia, standing over me asking, quite reasonably, what I was doing down there and whether I was all right. I

wish I could have managed an answer such as “Practicing my yoga” or “Listening for hoof beats.” What I was doing was learning to fall. (p. 9)

Simmons’ main idea is that his “fall,” his disaster, the progression of his disease, helped him learn how to live deeply and richly. He describes this process as a blessing. Listen to how he describes the experience:

When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them. (p. xi)

In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them. Instead of grasping and trying to avoid the unavoidable, we can accept with joy the moment, which is our life. Instead of desperately trying to find a solution, we can experience the fullness of life. For life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.

Realizing that he was nearing the bottom became a blessing to Simmons, as it sometimes does to others. This reminds me of a Buddhist adage that goes, “Death is too important to be left to the end of life.” And what this is talking about, I think, is that an awareness of death—and I’m talking about more than just a rational awareness, but an awareness in our gut, in our bones—ironically helps us to truly live. This paradox is affirmed by every religious tradition. There’s a saying by the Desert Fathers: “One who keeps death before one’s eyes conquers despair.” By becoming aware of the crisis we are in, of the descent of life, we realize there is no crisis at all. Understanding that we are falling and giving ourselves over to this defeat is to find victory.

We are—each of us—falling. We are dust, and to dust we are returning. Ashes to ashes, we all fall down. People like Philip Simmons have important things to teach the rest of us. And I can’t say it any better than he does:

...what do we fall away from? We fall from ego, we fall from our carefully constructed identities, our reputations, our precious selves. We fall from ambition, we fall from grasping, we fall, at least temporarily, from reason. And what do we fall into? We fall into passion, into terror, into unreasoning joy. We fall into humility, into compassion, into emptiness...We fall, at last, into the presence of the sacred, into godliness, into mystery...(p. 11)

So we let go of our current life to die into a fuller life, a bigger life, a more abundant life. And we can start right now. May we practice doing this, every day.