

The Forbidden Subject

This newsletter looks at something people rarely speak about in our culture. It is seen as dark, forbidden and laden with fear. At the same time many teachings say that becoming intimate with this matter is what can bring joy and freedom to our lives. The subject is death.

I've worked with several patients for whom death was imminent and I learned a great deal from the experience. One young woman, aged 24 was dying of lymphoma. She saw me regularly for Cranio-Sacral therapy because it helped her in alleviating pain and promoting relaxation. During the months we worked together her body became depleted, and yet her spirit remained strong. Although fatigued she was joyful, confident and passionate about her life. She celebrated what she had and released what no longer served her. She taught me about the beauty of life and death.

Stephen Jenkinson, the author of *Die wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul* teaches "about grief, and dying and the great love of life." He was the director of a palliative care center at a major Toronto teaching hospital where he provided counseling at hundreds of deathbeds. He said of the experience:

"I recognized that something essential was missing. At every deathbed and hospital room,

I didn't see sane dying. I saw sedated dying, depressed dying, isolated dying, utterly disembodied dying. We have no language for what really happens, no ability to be a faithful witness, to do justice to how it feels to be dying in our time and place."

In preparing for and honing the skills for my profession I logged in eight years of a college education, an internship and thousands of hours in continuing education. I'm grateful for all that training. And yet the training for the certain fact of my own death is almost nonexistent. While there are very few models for sane dying, some resources exist that are paving the way. Aside from Jenkinson's work, "A Year to Live" by Stephen Levine offers valuable instructions on how to live mindfully in every moment of life and gives practical exercises to prepare for life's end.

In the Hudson Valley a group called the Circle of Friends for the Dying (CFD) hosts Death Cafés which provide a safe, relaxed setting for exploring issues around dying and death. I have found these meetings to be quite helpful in candidly addressing death's emotional and practical issues. CFD is also in the process of purchasing a house in Kingston, NY to be the first Home for the Dying in the Mid-Hudson Valley region. It will be a residence in which a person who is dying can spend his or her final weeks celebrating the end of life with family, friends and the community.

The Tao Te Ching suggests that living sanely and dying sanely are intimately connected. Here is an excerpt from Chapter 16 of The Tao (translation by Stephen Mitchell):

Empty your mind of all thoughts.

Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes you are ready.

The author and teacher Byron Katie comments on this passage from The Tao: "Until we know that death is as good as life, and that it always comes at just the right time... it's always going to hurt. Whenever you mentally oppose what is, you're going to experience sadness and apparent separation."

Katie speaks about a friend of hers whose beloved husband died. By working with his death in a sane way, by questioning her own stressful thoughts that formed a story of separation about her husband's death, her friend's sadness washed away and was replaced with what was true. "Everything she thought she'd had in him she could find in herself; there was no difference. And because he turned out to be her, he couldn't die. Without the story of life and death, she said, there was just love. He was always with her."

In my work with Neuro-Emotional technique issues of death and dying often emerge. By locating and releasing patterns of unresolved stress in the body, you are better able to "deal with whatever life brings you." When the illusion of limitation and separation is lifted, what remains is an experience of connection and love.

These are some emerging examples of how we can become intimate with death and dying in our times. There are others. Explore what feels true to you. A conversation is beginning that may very well change the way we in which we die, and the way in which we live. I invite you to be part of the conversation.

Best regards,

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