

Ready or Not Part 7: Our Relationship with Life's Endings

Reflection for Sunday June 25, 2023

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Death is maybe the last great taboo. We don't want to think about it. We're reluctant to talk about it. Which is perfectly natural because of our powerlessness over it. While we seem happy to talk about every other thing that effects our human experience – every other life milestone, passage and event, when it comes to death we're mostly silent and often totally unprepared. But this is behaviour akin to ostriches sticking their heads in the sand, since every single one of us, whoever we are, whatever our story, will die and be touched by death at some point.

We aren't helped by our western culture that sanitizes anything to do with the topic in favour of optimism and capitalism that has convinced us we can avoid or distract ourselves from our own deaths. We aren't helped either by the Christian church that developed whole belief systems around the idea that death was somehow not final. It's all contributed to us not having a realistic relationship with death. The result: when you don't talk about it, it gets imbued with power that breeds fear.

Ironically, in order to live fully, we have to be able to talk about and embrace our mortality – the loss and the grief of it all, and what it could be to find meaning in that mortality in a way that doesn't rely on old, perhaps tired religious ideas and beliefs.

As Mark Nepo writes, “the gateway to meaning is not in avoiding loss or getting over loss, but in the effort to *accept what-is* while keeping our hearts open.

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The story of the death of Lazarus is one in the Jesus tradition that may have some valuable wisdom around this.

It's a story about a group of Jesus closest friends: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus has learned that his friend Lazarus is ill. He's far away and he heads toward Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters live. When he hears the news, he literally walks toward death – he walks toward the death of his friend. And when he arrives, he enters a scene of grief and loss. Lazarus has died in the days before he arrived. Martha and Mary have a conversation with Jesus. They

say, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." And those around the family too: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

This question reflects something valuable in the spiritual tradition. The writings of prayers and psalms are full of crying out and complaint. And in the world of this story, space is given for lament and grief, bargaining, anger and objection.

We all know through the real lived experience that there are no simple answers to the cry of "Why?" There are no pat answers. There's no adequate responses, no matter what your theological perspective. Nothing satisfies our need to make sense of death, of tragedy, of loss.

In fact, in the face of death most of us don't have the words to comfort. Nothing is adequate. Nothing works, nothing is enough.

This story does have one response to the grief – and its not with words, but with actions: Jesus arrives on the scene and enters into the grief of Lazarus' family, sees the people of Lazarus' community gathered around and crying, he is "deeply troubled." And when Mary and Martha take him to the tomb where they laid Lazarus, he began weeping. This is a story of a friend present to it all; one not afraid to express compassion and deep feeling to the ones he loved. Sometimes all we need is someone to share in the overwhelming nature of it all. With no words at all, someone that sees, hears and feels alongside.

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I pause in the story here to say that it doesn't matter to me whether you believe in a life after this one or not, whether you have an interpretation of heaven, whether you think we continue on in our atomic building blocks, that nothing is lost in the principle of the conservation of energy, or whether life simply ends and we become as philosopher Cornel West puts it "the culinary delight of terrestrial worms". What *does* matter is that confronting the fear and walking toward the reality of our own deaths, gives us something that is immensely valuable: an ending. Our relationship with endings, particularly our can bring about strength we didn't know we had.

Without an ending, there's no urgency. Without an ending, there's no need to further the plot of our story. Without an ending, our living would become shapeless, difficult to sustain our enthusiasm for many of our most significant engagements. Many of us, regardless of our personality type, need a deadline.

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It's made clear to me in every memorial service we host here within our community – starting with the conversations we have with those who are dying, and continuing after their death with that person's family and friends are the importance of the story of what can be done with a finite amount of time. The questions that arise are the center of it all. Questions to those that are dying like:

- What principles do you live by that have given your life meaning?
- Who do you believe you have ultimately become...and what got you there?

And to family and friends:

- What have you learned most from your loved one?
- What stories do you tell that help you remember the values they lived by?

It all comes down to the stories that our lives tell. This is the legacy that will outlive us all: what ways did we live that made a difference to those that knew us?

In the Muslim tradition, there is a concept called “Sadaqah Jariyah,” loosely translated to “Ongoing Charity,” which are good deeds and knowledge left behind that continue impacting even after a person has died. This sounds so familiar to those of us that hear the legacy of loved ones being shared. We'll hear for example: “My father used to tutor kids in the community for free, and he used to plant fruit trees in different areas. I think of him now that he's gone and I realize I also wish to work with kids and give away fruits from these trees, as a way to honour and remember him.”

Our living, our stories, lead to our legacies.

Interestingly, a study begun in late 2017, is based on personal interviews with elderly folks who would define themselves as nonreligious. The 97 stories collected confirm some of the conventional assumptions about nonreligious people. Most do not believe in an afterlife, and most do not think the universe, has an inherent purpose. But, contrary to conventional assumptions, these understandings don't lead to despair. Instead, a large percentage construct their own meaning-making narratives. These narratives function similarly to religious narratives by helping to make sense of the past, and to offer direction and inspiration for the future. They articulate the meaning of human existence

to something bigger than just one person, the connection of one to others, with a moral dimension that is part of the impact.

Facing Death without Religion: Secular sources like science work well for meaning making. Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Beyond the Nones. Autumn/Winter 2019
<https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/facing-death-without-religion/>

It's the stories we tell, that we write with our living that make meaning of our lives, and give purpose. Compare that to that old mindset of our past acts being weighed and judged, and receiving our reward or punishment in the afterlife. No, this expansive mindset is about us living in ways that create their own purpose and meaning and longevity.

And here we are still in a position to write our stories. To ponder what meaning we give our living and to start telling those stories of meaning with those around us now, to talk about how the values we're living now connect our past and our present – and how it might continue beyond our time and place.

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The last bit of that Jesus narrative is curious. The story goes on to tell of Jesus removing the stone from Lazarus' tomb and calling him to come out, to rise from the dead and live. What wisdom is this symbolic and mythical story trying to tell us? How can we ignore the fact that this process of Lazarus coming alive again comes only after shared grief, after tears and anger, after the connection and friendship of the storytelling? What will be called out from our lives, our living and loving? What will be called out of our death that will rise up and live even after we're gone?

It will take courage to walk toward this reality. The courage that already is inside of us to look at the wolf of our mortality face to face, and become its friend and let it guide us. To strengthen our intentions to live and act in ways that continue writing our story. There's still work for us to do: May we encourage each other in our efforts of good living, but more than that, in our walk toward our dying, and what will live beyond us all.

May it be so, in so many ways.