

May 28, 19
Worth Living For, Rev. Linda

I went up to visit my mom in April. She called and asked if we could talk about death. I have been joyfully visiting my mom since I moved to Nantucket 6 years ago and each time, at one carefully chosen moment or another, I bring up the topic of death. She has never appreciated it. I ask her flatly, as if death were a far away galaxy, what her wishes are around dying, if she has thought about death, what her plans are about her house that is in need of much repair and has 2 acres to mow, which she mows adroitly, and when she would like to get started on cleaning the barn and attic. I want to help her, at 84 years old, to be prepared for what is coming.

She always tells me she doesn't need help coming to terms with dying, that when she is dying, she will figure it out.

And one time maybe last fall, visiting her with some new book or article I wanted her to read about death and dying, she got mad at me, which she never does, even when she should, and said with a stern voice, "Linda, I know that you will make all the right choices when I am dying. What I need from you now, is to be here more often for me when I am living."

Those few words stay with me. My mother has been a teacher to me for many years now. Maybe she always was and I could only hear her when I had made as many mistakes as she had and knew that mothers are not exempt from their share of humanity.

While I was struggling with the time I had lost in asking her to talk about what she was not yet ready to, she called and told me she was ready to talk about death and asked if I could I go come down and visit the Hospice House with her.

Just when we are ready to throw in the towel on our awareness, everything shifts and we have to figure out where this new boat is docked and if its ropes are tight enough against the pulsing tide.

From the book, The End of Your Life Book Club:

There are two books called the *The Diamond Cutter and Seventy Verses on Emptiness*. *The Diamond Cutter*, which is largely about impermanence, was composed by the Buddha in around 500 BC. A woodblock copy dated AD 868 was found in 1907 in western China and is the oldest printed book in the world.

Seventy Verses on Emptiness was written around AD 200. One of its passages reads, "Permanent is not; impermanent is not; a self is not; not a self is not; clean is not; not clean is not; happy is not; suffering is not."¹

¹ Will Schwalbe, The End of Your Life Book Club (New York, Random House, 2012). 29.

Each day I consider that who I want to be is still so far from me.

There is still so much I miss, deny, move away from that needs to be moved toward. I want with a fierce longing to be consciously present. This grows more fierce as I watch the sunset on another day that flew from my intentions. How much time did I spend working through my agenda, protecting, defending, lamenting, demanding, consumed by a present that is consumed by keeping up?

Gary and I recently decided that before we go to bed, we'll tell one another about one or two feelings we felt during the day. We even have a list of them from the Adult Children of Alcoholics group we attend, that describes what each feeling is and how they are experienced in the body.

For instance, Loved is described as "a sense of feeling valued, understood, and heard. Listened to. Feeling safe with another. Warmth in the heard. Lightness of body." Loss or grief is described as "a sense that something has been taken, a longing for feeling. A school yard without children."

Permanent is not; impermanent is not.

Driving to see my mom for those few days in April, I was elated that she was ready to talk to me about death. I had a list in my mind; I had packed a copy of some Advance Directives in my bag. Fully armed, I could not feel the grief of the school yard without children; life without my mother in it.

There is a play by W. Somerset Maugham (MAUM) in which he retells a classic Iraqi tale.

Here is an adapted excerpt:

There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent one of his workers to the market to buy provisions and in a little while the worker came back trembling and said, Just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. Now, lend me your horse and I will ride away from this city. I will go to Samarra where I cannot be found.

The merchant lent him his horse and the worker mounted it and dug his spurs into its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop, he went to Samarra. Then the merchant when down to the marketplace and he saw Death standing in the crowd and asked, Why did you frighten my worker when you saw him this morning?

Oh, said Death, I did not mean to frighten him. I was just startled with surprise when I saw him here in Bagdad for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.²

I rode all the way to my mother's house in that rented car to Samarra, spurs dug in.

² Ibid, 21, 22.

I am reading a book called The Watch³ about an American outpost in Afghanistan about an Afghani woman whose legs were blown off and how on a small cart that she moves with her arms, she travels down a mountain and across a desert to go to this American outpost and ask for the body of her dead brother so she can bury him and his spirit will be at peace.

She waits and waits outside the walled outpost, guns trained on her, with little food or water, covered in dirt and dust, telling her American interrogators that she will not leave without her brother's body. Her brother was the leader of a group that attacked the outpost, seeking to rid their country of what they call the American Invaders.

He was not Taliban but a from a tribe that believes Afghani destiny belonged to themselves. Some of the Americans soldiers were killed in this raid. In retaliation, the Americans dropped a bomb on the brother's mountain village, killing his and his sisters entire family as they walked home from a wedding, and taking his sister's legs.

The American soldiers, seeing the woman's steadiness in the desert, her determination and mutilation, have dreams they cannot account for, talk loudly of revenge for their fellow soldiers killed by her brother's group, train their guns on her with hopes she gets too close, they could take her out; and many too speak of decency and dignity and history and understanding.

What would I be willing to die for and live for? What would you be willing to die for and live for?

A self is not; not a self is not.

When I got to my mom's, she was in a buoyant mood. She is always so happy to see me even on these visits, even as I drag myself in from a long boat and car ride through traffic I no longer know how to negotiate. We chatted about our wider family and the tragedies that the people we love are enduring. We eat and laugh and share notes on the work we have been doing to become more present people. And then she said, okay hon, let's go now for our visit to the Hospice House.

I drove, past greening hills and fields, iridescent in the sun; mom and I chattering away like spring birds revived by the new light.

As soon as we walked in, mom, a self taught and long under utilized interior designer, became more animated. She loved the softness of the wallpaper and the choice of wall art and, a fastidious housekeeper to the end, the smell and feel of cleanliness.

Clean is not; not clean is not.

³ Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, The Watch (New York, Random House, 2013).

Mom marveled at the light and gardens and peace of the place. She made me take a picture of one sculpture because she wanted to try and find something like it for her living room. She smiled so bright at me and told me she wouldn't mind coming here at all. I didn't remark that people only come here when they are in the last stages of dying, which does not typically include appreciation of the palette of the wallpaper. After all, mom was still redecorating her house!

Happy is not; suffering is not.

I began grieving when we were there. My mom, my daughter named after her, Regina which means queen of heaven. What a light she is on this earth. How she tried to shine for so many years and could not. How she shines now and how often blind I am to her light, my eyes shaded, my mind caught up in whirlpools of living that drown awareness.

How often I betray myself, not showing up, not letting what is be. My mom knew where she was, and she was alive while knowing it.

Betrayed from the Children of Alcoholics list is defined as, Similar to abandonment; being deceived in meaning, feeling fooled. Weak in the limbs. Praying is difficult.

My prayer: May I be present enough to know I am here and will not always be. Samarra awaits us all.

And as we arrive, one journey at a time, our awareness in the desert sun refusing to leave, may we find the presence to know that it is here, right here, that has been waiting for us, to embrace us with the knowing that this is all we have and it is enough.

From the list, Joy, a sense of integration. Coming out of the darkness with sureness of foot. Seeing light in self and others. Energy and warmth throughout the body.

This Memorial Day, may we remember what matters. May we love what is before us and meet what is ours to meet with sureness of foot, energy and warmth, noticing that as Ram Dass says, we are all walking each other home.

Amen