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Worth Dying For

We don't speak about death and mortality much in our country. When is the last time at a dinner party someone asked:

So, what are your thoughts about your own death these days? Or How is the process of acceptance coming with your death and the death of those you love these days?

And so a whole sermon on the topic felt daunting to me, until I started listening to David Whyte's CD on what he calls *The Great Disappearance*, and reading books like *Love and Death* by Forrest Church; *Being With Dying*, by Joan Halifax; *Lessons from the Dying*, Rodney Smith, and *Living in the Light of Death*, by Larry Rosenberg.

And then I thought I had something to say. But I was wrong. It was not until I sat with all of this, let it become part of me, let the night and the wind and the rain touch me that I really knew what was mine to say.

There is a new movement in this country called Death Cafes. These are places people come and talk about death.

Kate Brassington, a Death Café convener, posts on the Death Cafe website that she is interested in death and dying but it does not come from a morbid place. Her focus is on life and the living. She lists 7 reasons why death is a conversation she believes in having:

1. I focus on the closeness brought to relationships when two people talk about death
2. I worry about the crushing fear I see people experience as they approach their own deaths after viewing death as the enemy all their lives
3. Death haunts children who know they are not allowed to really explore it with adults.
4. It is a call to live my life fully.
5. I look to the death of each person in my life and see it as a call to love that person knowing that this is my only chance
6. I look to the world I live in searching for a sign that this is living, this is real and precious, that this is real and temporary and I see no signs, I see endless distractions, and information and entertainment. I see young faces on magazines and billboards and I wonder where all our elders have gone.
7. Yes its morbid, disturbing and dark and morose but it is not death I am referring to it. It is life when we do not allow death into the room.

Death Cafes, where people just get together and talk about death, are on the rise. They are hundreds worldwide, including as nearby to us as Falmouth on the Cape. People report that being able to talk about death brings them peace and a greater capacity to experience life.

Several years ago, I experienced the fear of death quite close up through a health crisis. I am fine now and quite out of the woods as they say, so no worries.

As I was recuperated from major surgery, as soon as I could lift myself, I raced headlong into my life as it was before this event. I completed 4 years of divinity school, did all the work necessary to become a minister, applied to a ministerial position and was called here. And the rest of the story you know.

It was not until I sat with this sermon, sat with the daunting task of facing my own mortality, that I realized I had not never sat with death, never really experienced what happened with that surgery, never let the fear in.

Poet, essayist and lecturer David Whyte writes that we must apprentice ourselves to the arc of our own disappearance. Apprentice ourselves to the arc of our own disappearance. Isn't that lovely?

And what is an apprenticeship? Historically it means: a person legally bound through indenture to a master craftsman in order to learn a trade. Here, death is the master craftsman. It is through apprenticing ourselves to our own disappearance that the possibility of a full life, a life in which we have fully arrived, rests.

This sermon, like all sermons for me, arrived in me long before I set fingers to keys. As the words formed themselves in my dreams, and on my tongue when I woke, and in the windswept tears as I ran in the morning, it came to me that death and I were not close friends. I shake the concept of death off like most of us do. I rationalize, justify, make jokes and generally turn toward anything but death unless it gets real close and then takes me whole into its embrace.

In those times, I wait to regain myself, to be released from knowing that life ends and changes irrevocably all the time. I wait and grieve and when I am done, I turn away not to look again until forced.

Speaking of death jokes:

Einstein dies and goes to heaven. At the pearly gates, St. Peter says, "You look like Einstein, but you have NO idea what some people will do to sneak into heaven. Can you prove who you really are?"

So Einstein asks for a blackboard and chalk and writes out the theory of relativity. 'Welcome to heaven Einstein,' St. Peter exclaimed.

Next comes Picasso and the same conversation ensues until Picasso sketches a stunning mural with a few strokes and St. Peter exclaims, 'Welcome to heaven Picasso.'

Next comes George W. Bush and St. Peter explains that Einstein and Picasso had come just before him and both proven their identities. Whereup Bush says, Who are Einstein and Picasso?

Welcome to heaven George, said St. Peter.

I have never apprenticed myself to death. I do not know how.

David Whyte writes, In order to have ultimate consummation of presence, which is love, we have to face it all. In order to have ultimate consummation of presence, which is love, we have to face it all.

In other words, hiding from death is hiding from life, hiding from the great disappearance is hiding from all the disappearances that life forces upon us (the growth of our children, the loss of loved ones, the changes we go through as we age, the loss of relationships and jobs and homes). Hiding from death is hiding from the utter vulnerability that is life.

The closer you come to opening your heart fully, the closer you touch death. The closer you come to death, the closer you come to opening your heart fully.

Gary was hiking last week for several days, and when he hikes, I cannot reach him. There is no cell phone service and when I tell him that I am worried that something might happen to him on the mountain he answers, Well, you will know I died happy! I am somehow not comforted and just a little upset that he would be happy dying without me!

Without being able to know if Gary was okay, was alive really, and with this sermon beginning to write itself in me, there was just enough aloneness to catapult me into a deep awareness of my own death. I found the experience chilling. I looked for movies on Netflix and tried to read and write, I walked the beaches to distract myself, but this awareness would have none of it.

And so I ended up 40 minutes early to the Dreamland on a cold, rainy night to see the play Vandal, which turned out to be about death. I had forgotten my cell phone, a surefire distraction, and the theater was empty. Sitting in the semi-darkness, I stared at that empty stage and thought of all the things I put into play in the theater of my life, all the parts of myself and the props and scenery, all the noisy drama of life that I revel in. The empty stage called me out beyond the roles of my life and the beaches I walk and the people I love. But what is beyond all of that? For me on that night, the only thing beyond that was fear.

Forrest Church was a leading Unitarian Universalist minister, author, and theologian and was Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City until his death in 2009 from cancer. He wrote a book as he was dying called *Love And Death*. Here is an excerpt from it:

“There are so many instances in our daily lives when our fears stand in the way of our potential to love. We sense the risk of course, that is the main reason we act in ways we do. Every time we open ourselves up, every time we share ourselves with another, every time we commit to a cause or task that awaits our doing, we risk so very much...including the enormous pain of loss.”

All of that was with me in the Dreamland, wrapped in my long coat, unable to take off my hat or scarf, feeling chilled to the bone.

I remembered, mercifully then, what Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, author and teacher, writes about fear: "Sometimes the completely open heart and mind is called the soft spot, a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound. It is equated, in part, with our ability to love..."

Sometimes this broken heart gives birth to anxiety and panic, sometimes to anger, resentment, and blame. But under the hardness of that armor there is the tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those who have ever loved. This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces our indifference. This continual ache of the heart is a blessing what when accepted fully can be shared with all."

And so I let it all flood in to me. I was choked with tears. I took the advice of Pema Chodron and many of my teachers and just felt that great aloneness until I felt something else.

And that is what happens, when we have the courage for it, when we sit and feel what is ours to feel long enough, it changes. My fear changed into this incredible love for everyone who filled the theater, for all the frail, beautiful, mortal lives that filled that space and were living and would some day die. The understanding of death, of my own death, opened me out to life.

The work is to begin feeling what there is to feel when the roles and titles and patterns fall away, to open our hearts to the fear and loneliness until they break and then to let what is comes next, come next. To let it happen. That is what apprenticeship requires. And what is there on the other side is all of life, this one precious life.

As John O'Donohue, Irish poet, author, priest, and philosopher who died in 2008 wrote:

"It is a strange and magical fact to be here, walking around in a body, to have a whole world within you and a world at your fingertips outside you. It is an immense privilege, and it is incredible that humans manage to forget the miracle of being here. Rilke said, "Being here is so much." It is uncanny how social reality can deaden and numb us so that the mystical wonder of our lives goes totally unnoticed. We are here. We are wildly and dangerously free... If you are able let go of things, you learn to die in little ways during your life. When you learn to let go of things, a greater generosity, openness, and breath comes into your life."

When we stay right here together, our mortality, so grand, heart breaking and impossible, breaks us open together so that we might live now, so that our lives might be worth dying for.

What do we do with the fear of death, the vanishing point, the great disappearance? Transmute this all into opening the heart so wide that there is only eternity left, the truth of our smallness, our insignificance and great meaning both, until the cosmos surrounds us and the wind that touches the stars enters our own chests. And then come back here, right here to this place, to our own desperate, heartbreaking, and gorgeous fragility and give more, risk feeling more until a part of us disappears into giving and feeling and loving and entering the next, eternal, now. Until we become part of all that is.

We can practice small acts of disappearing now in our apprenticeship to this master craftsman of death by letting go of the patterns, the closing off, the closing up, the walking away from the profound loneliness and mystery of being embodied right here and now. Practice walking away from what keeps you small, enclosed, separate. By walking into what keeps us alive each moment, breath, a heart beat, a body full of organs we do not will to work, mortality, this air and light, our connectedness- we become more human and life, this precious moment of life- becomes a miracle.

Let the tears come, let the knowing of what we will have to let go of come and let this lead us out to our lives, to each other, to this world with fewer walls and ideas about others that keep us from experiencing their humanity, their mortality, their fear and hope and longing.

Forrest Church also writes in his book *Love and Death*:

“The Israel Museum in Jerusalem contains a collection of tiny ceramic cups. These were sacramental vessels. People cried into them. Your mother has just died. Someone you love has cancer. Your spouse has left you. You are struggling at work or in your relationships. You burst into tears. So, you pick up your tear cup, put it under your eye, and weep into it. When you are finished weeping, you cap it and put it away again. It is a way to save your tears.

Why save them, Church goes on? Because they are precious. A cup full of tears is proof you have felt deeply, suffered, known love.”

Let the tears come until there is nothing left but this moment of life and the understanding that is it passing, until there is nothing left but this profound moment of vulnerability, here, right now, together.

There is so much beautiful grieving to be done. Beautiful because it breaks us open and we can finally see our own lives and the lives of others.

This is work that we each do alone. But it is coming back to life each day and to an understanding of death that while it breaks our hearts it makes them wider, stronger, more capable of love.

I love you all immeasurably. Amen.