

Day of the Dead
November 5, 2017
(c) Sylvia Stocker

Thought to ponder at the beginning:
Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.
– Sogyal Rinpoche

Reading

Talking to the Dog, by Kate Barnes

When I used to get up in the morning
And make some funny noises –
Jargon, bits of songs, nonsense –
I wasn't really talking to myself;
No, I was talking to the dog.

But now the dog is dead -
No more unkempt wolf-hound lying asleep on her back
With her legs against the wall.
I must say good-bye to her prehistoric howling,
Good-bye to the look of those
 yellow owl eyes.
I drop her unfinished dinner onto the compost pile,
I wash her bowls and put them away,
I pull the rug over the place where her bed was;
And still I think I hear her
Just stirring in the next room.

It is almost Midsummer;
The blackberries are flowering in festoons beside
 the pasture;
I will bury her ashes under the crooked pear tree
With the fruit already growing among its green leaves.

I know that for a long time I will go on
hearing her at the door,
And for a long time I will be seeing her out of the corner
of my eye.
When the wind tracks light through the bending grass,
For a long time I will be talking to the dog.

Reflection

All My Memories of Love (c) Sylvia Stocker

If you have been here for previous Day of the Dead services, you have probably noticed different decorations today. Typically I set out festive Mexican decorations – my vast collection of playful paper mache bones, all dressed up for the party. A large skeleton that usually sits in a chair up here, a couple of skulls, a lady with a fancy dress, a cat, a dog, some paper marigolds. This year, I felt too uncomfortable displaying them, when our nation is seriously contemplating deporting Mexicans and building a giant wall to keep them out. Here's how displaying those decorations felt to me: “We'll help ourselves to your tradition and festival, but we won't welcome YOU.” So my paper mache bones are packed away, waiting for some more generous and open-hearted time.

Nonetheless, contemplating death and honoring the dead are activities many cultures share, especially during autumn. As the year dies, it's natural to think of “the final harvesting,” as Samhain portrays the occasion. As one turns over the garden soil, making ready for the new that will appear after a time of rest, one might contemplate all that returns to the ground. One might wonder about the mystery of tilling under so that new growth can appear. As the days grow colder (which surely they will, won't they?), one might wonder about one's own chilling.

Death is a universal meaning maker – one of the greatest motivators of thought and action. When I think of death, two things command my attention: First is the death of loved ones. All my memories of love, the subject of this first reflection – a subject so evocatively captured in Kate Barnes' poem.

The disorientation, sadness, and poignancy Barnes describes portray the rupture in the fabric of life that occurs when a loved one suddenly isn't there any more. Sometimes death carries off our beloveds suddenly. Sometimes death lingers. Sometimes death is tragic, sometimes a welcome relief. Regardless of circumstances, death always ushers in a new reality, a new normal – that only the work of grieving can make clear. One might talk to the dog for a long time, until eventually the need, the impulse fades

away. After my mother died, I would momentarily forget, for instance, and think I ought to give her a call.

Grief comes to all. And with that grief comes all the attendant feelings – sadness, confusion, numbness, disbelief, disorientation, anger, to name just some – as well as the work of re-ordering our world.

A famous Hindu parable goes like this: Once upon a time, a young woman called Kisa Gotami lost her only child, a son. Devastated, she refused to accept the loss. Instead, she carried him from door to door, begging her neighbors for some medicine to cure the little one. One of her neighbors told her the Buddha was nearby: Kisa should go ask him to cure the child.

Hopeful, Kisa brought the body of her son to the Buddha and begged him to bring the child back to life. The Buddha asked her to go back to her village and gather mustard seeds from the household of those who had never been touched by death. From those mustard seeds, he promised, he would create the medicine that would bring Kisa's son back to life.

Kisa set out. At home after home, she encountered people who were willing to give her mustard seeds, but they told Kisa they had all been touched by death. Every single household. They said, “The living are few, but the dead are many.”

Kisa began to understand: Death was universal. And with that understanding came a calming of her grief. She buried her son in the forest, then returned to the Buddha to confess she had not been able to obtain a single mustard seed.

Kisa then became Buddha's disciple and eventually was the first woman to achieve nirvana.

I like that story for three reasons: First because it shows, vividly, how all of us will suffer loss and pain. Death will separate all of us from loved ones. Second, the story portrays the disbelief, confusion, and work of transforming one's understanding of the world in the wake of such a tragic loss and fracture. Third, the story illustrates how working through loss brings greater wisdom.

This year, in the wake of my father-in-law's death, the death of loved ones is much on my mind. The vastness of the twin mystery of life and death is fresh for me: I feel the words to that chant viscerally: *“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery.”*

How completely death alters what was once so familiar! As Steve and I sat by Steve's dad's side, it was clear he was dying. We tried to soothe him; we told him we loved him. Even though he couldn't respond, the person there was clearly him. But when he actually died, the body left behind was so fundamentally *not* him. Whatever it was that made Frank Frank had departed with that last, closing breath. As I sat by his side, I felt inspired a deep feeling of awe: *Where did he come from? What was hWhere did he go? Life is a riddle and a mystery.*

Joanna Macy says the heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe. Indeed, much arises as people make meaning out of the deaths of loved ones: Charities created to find cures to diseases that take loved ones. The violinist I once knew of who devoted her life to teaching violin to little children after her only daughter and grandchild were killed by a violent husband.

The Civil Rights Act, signed into law in the wake of Kennedy's assassination.

The Swanson window (in the Wendell Berry room) created to memorialize a daughter of this congregation.

The hymn "Precious Lord Take My Hand," written after Thomas A. Dorsey lost his wife and child in childbirth.

The simple private vows made and kept when people want to honor departed loved ones.

Death can so vividly open the way to compassion and clarity. My observation is that much of the good human beings offer up to this world has its genesis in the final harvesting we recognize today. All our memories of love.

Reading

words of Carlos Castaneda

“Death is our eternal companion,” don Juan said with a most serious air. “It is always to our left at arm's length. It was watching you when you were watching the white falcon; it whispered in your ear and you felt its chill, as you felt it today. It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you...”

“The thing to do when you are impatient,” he proceeded, “is to turn to your left and ask advice from your death. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or you catch a glimpse of it, or if you have the feeling that your companion is there watching you.”

Reflection*“Marshal Tito is Still Dying”*

Rev. Stocker

The first thing that commands my attention when I think of death is all those memories of love – the deaths of loved ones. The second thing is my own death.

Last week, Roger Cohen wrote an editorial for the NYY called “If All Else Fails.” It began this way:

Micha Shagrir, the Israeli moviemaker, was an irreverent wit and a man of peace. I saw him last in his beloved Jerusalem. He was close to the end. Cancer had him in its claws. I asked him how he was doing.

“Well,” he said with a warm smile, “I am reminded of the quandary of the newspaper headline writer who ended up with this: Marshal Tito Is Still Dying.”

Well, aren't we all? I am still dying and so are you. I hope none of us does it any time soon, but, well, there is only one way out of here. Death is whispering to us, watching us, and someday it will tap us on the shoulder and off we will go. Where the death of loved ones may inspire one to offer good to the world – in ways large and small – knowledge that one is still dying may provide the kick in the pants needed to *do it now*. Time's a-wasting!

Like so many people, I fear a painful death, I fear a lingering death that makes my loved ones suffer a great deal. But I accept the idea that my life will end and the world will go on. I guess my sentiments are a little like those Woody Allen described when he said, “I'm am not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

But even that isn't fully accurate, either, because I kind of *do* want to be there, too. I'm kind of ... *curious*. Are you a little bit curious? There is so much that's mysterious. What happens to us? – that's a curiosity. Where are we going? Anywhere? Do we just cease to exist? Where does the collection of energy that was once us *go*?

Here's something else I'm curious about: We seem to have some choices about our deaths. Now if you asked me here today how to set the scene for myself, I wouldn't have a clue. But how many people do you know who somehow held on until the last child telephoned? Or until all the loved ones left the room for a quick cup of coffee? (So many of us, it turns out, like to do our dying with a bit of privacy, without our loved ones clinging to us.)

One of my high school friends lost her husband to cancer almost 30 years ago. They had two small children, 1 and 3 years old. Jim's desire was to be home for Christmas with his boys. He died December 26, after getting his wish.

What *is* that? How do we know how to do it? I am filled with curiosity.

Lean into that curiosity, I say. For out of that curiosity comes poetry, music, art –any number of imaginings as the human spirit contemplates what it can never, ever fully understand.

Lean into the curiosity, and touch the wonder, the awe, the amazement that we should even be here to witness, to experience, and to love.

I'll Fly Away Alison Krauss

Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away.
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.
I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away. (In the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye, I'll fly away.

When the shadows of this life are gone, I'll fly away.
Like a bird from prison bars has flown I'll fly away.
I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away. (In the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye, I'll fly away.

Just a few more weary days and then I'll fly away
To a land where joy shall never end, I'll fly away.
I'll fly away, O Glory, I'll fly away. (In the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye, I'll fly away.

The Cost, by Dorothy N. Monroe

Death is not too high a price to pay
for having lived. Mountains never die,
nor do the seas or rocks or endless sky.
Through countless centuries of time, they stay
eternal, deathless. Yet they never live!
If choice there were, I would not hesitate
to choose mortality. Whatever Fate
demanded in return for life, I'd give,
for never to have seen the fertile plains
nor heard the winds nor felt the warm sun on the sands
beside the salty sea, nor touched the hands
of those I love – without these, all the gains
of timelessness would not be worth one day
of living and loving; come what may.

Benediction

By Matt Alspaugh, adapted
I invite you to join hands with your neighbors.
Hands touch hands.

These hands you hold now, once held their loved one's hands.
Hand by hand we touch those who are here with us,
and those who are no longer with us.

And hand over hand, we touch all of humanity.

Let our hands touching hands remind us:
Our loved ones are no longer with us, but they are in us.

They touched us, they are in our memories, they are in our stories, They are in the way we move
through the world.

Let us go into the world
and joyfully carry our loved ones with us in our hearts.