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Arlington Street Church
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Honoring Death

Woody Allen said, “I don’t mind dying. I just don’t want to be around when it happens.”

At the close of most yoga classes, the teacher invites the students to lie on their backs in a state of deep repose and surrender: eyes closed, palms of the hands facing up, integrating the benefits of the practice. This isn’t just napping; it’s a real yoga posture called *savasana*, or corpse pose. Many of us joke that it’s our favorite part of class. But recently, we were practicing with a teacher who called *savasana* the most difficult pose of all. Its original intention was to give the yogi the opportunity to taste mortality.

Ramana Maharshi, a modern South Indian guru, became enlightened while lying in *savasana* ... as a 16-year-old. He wrote, “I lay with my limbs stretched out still, as though rigor mortis had set in, and imitated a corpse.... I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape.... ‘Well, then,’ I said to myself, ‘this body is dead. It will be carried ... to the burning ground and ... reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body, am I dead?...

He continues, “I feel the full force of my personality, and even the voice of “I” within me, apart from it. So I am the Spirit transcending the body. The body dies, but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless spirit.’

Ramana Maharshi concludes, “All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truths, which I perceived directly almost without thought process. It was something real, the only real thing about my present state.... Fear of death vanished once and for all.”¹

¹ Over six weeks in 1930, Ramana Maharshi had a series of conversations with Narasimha Swami; this memory is from 1896. Please see bhagavan-ramana.org

“[We] are frightened of death because [we] have postponed it...” Indian philosopher and teacher J. Krishnamurti says. “[We] cannot be frightened of the unknown, because [we] do not know what the unknown is.... Thought, which breeds the fear of death, says, ‘Let’s postpone it, let’s avoid it, keep it as far away as possible, let’s not think about it.’

“But [we] are thinking about it. When [we] say, ‘I won’t think about it,’ [we] have already thought out how to avoid it.”

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Author Katy Butler has just brought out a book with the fabulous title, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*. The great majority of us say that we would like to die at home, she writes, but “nationally, less than a quarter of us do. Two fifths die in hospitals, and ... one fifth die in intensive care.” Why the disconnect? “Why don’t we die the way we want to die? Because lifesaving techniques have erased the line between saving a life and prolonging ... dying.... Because we say we want good deaths, but[, as Krishnamurti says, we] act as if we won’t die at all.”

Krishnamurti concludes, “... Most of us are frightened of dying because we don’t know what it means to live. We don’t know how to live; therefore, we don’t know how to die. As long as we are frightened of life, we shall be frightened of death.”²

Katy Butler’s subtitle to *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* is *The Path to a Better Way of Death*, but it could just as well have been *The Path to a Better Way of Life*.

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On Tuesday morning, I pulled over while a long funeral cortege passed by, on its way from the service to the cemetery. I prayed, as I always do, for the family and friends of the deceased, for comfort and peace. And then I prayed to be touched with the urgency of what the sight of a hearse might awaken in us all. Instead of averting our eyes or avoiding all things funereal, what if we seized the opportunity to be reminded of the preciousness of life?

Though I haven’t yet verified it, I am told there is a tribe in Africa whose ceremonies include a rite of passage into adulthood in which each

²J. Krishnamurti, edited by Mary Lutyens, *Freedom from the Known*, chapter 9 (from the seventh and sixth paragraphs from the chapter’s end). He wrote “you” instead of “I.”

adolescent is presented with a burial shroud: their own. They wear their burial shroud over their left shoulder every day for the rest of their lives, until they are wrapped in it at their deaths. The shroud serves no other purpose than to remind them to remember and honor their mortality, and so to honor and remember the precious gift of life.

Joseph Campbell said that the real search is not for the meaning of life, but for the experience of being alive. What if we honored death with a healthy regard, grateful for its inspiration to cherish life and to live with grace and gratitude? To honor death is not to romanticize death. To honor death is to re-enchant life.

In *The Wheel of Life*, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote, “My dying patients taught me so much more than what it was like to be dying. They shared lessons about what they could have done, and what they should have done, and what they didn’t do until it was too late, until they were too sick or too weak.... They looked back on their lives and taught me all of the things that were really meaningful, not about dying ... but about living.”

Bonnie Ware is an Australian palliative care nurse. “Health,” she writes, “brings a freedom very few realise,³ until they no longer have it.” Working with patients in their final twelve weeks of life, she began gathering insights and epiphanies in the face of death, recording them in a blog called *Inspiration and Chai*, and, ultimately, in a book called *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. Here are those regrets – a cautionary tale:

Regret number 1 – the most common regret. “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”

Regret number 2. “I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.”

Regret number 3. “I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.” Bonnie Ware notes the cost of so-called “keeping the peace,” and has come to believe that bitterness and resentment literally make some people sick.

Regret number 4. “I wish I’d stayed in touch with my friends.” Bonnie Ware saw many deep regrets about not giving friendship the time it deserves. “Everyone,” she says, “misses their friends when they are dying.”

³ *sic*

And regret number five. “I wish that I had let myself be happier.” Bonnie Ware writes, “Many did not realise⁴ until the end that happiness is a choice.... Fear of change had them pretending to others,” and even to themselves, that they were happy.⁵

I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself,
not the life others expected of me.
I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends.
I wish that I had let myself be happier....

Sitting in the hospital, as he slowly came face-to-face with his mortality, author John Welshons' father said, “I'm thinking how differently I would have lived my life if I had ever realized this was going to happen someday.” And when John asked him how he would have lived his life, he said, “I would have done more things for other people.”⁶

Do we really have to wait 'til we're dying to appreciate these insights? Could we adopt that perspective now, asking ourselves, *In the face of death, what does it mean to live a good life?*

Yaqui Indian teacher Don Juan Matus said, “... ‘Change comes suddenly, and so does death. What do you think we can do about it?’

“I thought he was asking a rhetorical question,” writes his American student, author Carlos Casteneda, “but he made a gesture with his eyebrows, urging me to answer.

“‘To live as happily as possible,’ I said.

“‘Right! But do you know anyone who lives happily?....

“‘*I do,*’ don Juan [answered himself]. “There are some people who are very careful about the nature of their acts. Their happiness is to act with the

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Susie Steiner, “Top Five Regrets of the Dying,” in *The Guardian*, 2/1/12. Please see the guardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying

⁶ John E. Welshons, *Awakening from Grief*, p. 158

full knowledge that they don't have time; therefore, their acts have a peculiar power....

“‘Acts have power,’ he [repeated], ‘... There is a strange consuming happiness in acting with the full knowledge that whatever one is doing may very well be one's last act on earth. I recommend that you reconsider your life, and bring your acts into that light.’”⁷

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Beloved spiritual companions,
 May we honor mortality with a healthy regard,
 grateful for its inspiration to cherish life
 and to live with grace and gratitude.

The real search is not for the meaning of life,
 but for the experience of being alive.

Rather than come to the end filled with regret,
 let us ask ourselves now, today,
In the face of death,
what does it mean to live a good life?

To honor death
 is not to romanticize death.
 To honor death
 is to re-enchant life.

Let us re-enchant life.

Amen!

⁷ Carlos Casteneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p.83