

LEARNING HOW TO DIE.

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Before I die, I want to learn *how* to die.

As I celebrate the last birthday before 70, I have reason to be thinking about this process. I am old enough now to have watched my parents die, as well as a dear friend, a lifelong mentor and parental surrogate, and a couple of patients from my psychotherapy practice. Each loss has advanced my place in line. Each has taught me something about suffering, living with pain, and the ubiquitous fear of death.

I have been the shuddering witness to one who chose to die as he had lived, full of spite and anger as well as watching those who struggled through their pain, their anguish, and their terror to find a place of grace. I did learn from the former, that I do not want to go out like that, cursing my fate and cursing the living. I did learn from the latter, that I want to be among them.

Probably the most common attitude toward death in our culture is to deny. I have certainly witnessed and come to accept that is as respectable a position as any. Even Elisabeth Kubler Ross, the brilliant physician, researcher, writer on end of life issues (*On Death and Dying*, 1997), seems to have remonstrated and clung to denial as she faced death herself, not moving easily through the stages that she identified and made famous. We do the best we can.

As a meditation teacher in a cancer support center, I have been afforded other opportunities to be a part, a small part, of the journey of many who are forced to deal with the uncertainties of their illness and their dread of death. Those who come to learn and practice meditation, I realize, are a select group. They have come to the class to learn something about their own spiritual resources and to cultivate an inner wisdom that will see them through to the end. I learn from them how important it is to do this. I don't do it enough myself.

A central teaching in mindfulness meditation, the method I teach my meditators in my cancer support group, is the importance of living in the present, waking to the "now" moment. The inevitable drift from the focus on the breath or the body to wandering thought, worry, and planning is to be met with kindness and attention to bringing us back to the focus, always a focus on the present. Every variation on the basic mindfulness practice brings us back to that teaching. And of course it seems obvious for those whose near-futures are filled with uncertainty and dread. Steeping oneself in the moment is of obvious benefit.

It is truly astounding how difficult it is to be present, really, radically present. Try eating mindfully for 5 minutes, focusing on every bite, every texture, every sensation of taste and swallowing to see what I mean. Just 5 minutes.

Despite that fact that I am teaching this, I am still near the bottom of the learning curve in cultivating a practice of knowing the moment.

I have always felt uneasy about judging the way a person chooses to pace their dying. There are individuals who opt to prolong life despite the certainty of an imminent end, as well as those who seem to give up prematurely. We probably all know people who opted for clinical trials that only promise slim chances of prolonging life and at a high cost of suffering. Perhaps we know someone who chose the alternate route. None of us really knows how we will handle end-of-life decisions when our time comes, should we have these opportunities and not die in our sleep. Medical directives may well fly out the window as we lie on our death bed longing for one more glimpse of a beloved grandchild, the beauty of another sunset, another spoonful of chocolate pudding...

I do not know in which group I will find myself at the end. Will I cling or will I go accepting what is ahead? I hope I will not be judged. I hope I will not judge myself.