

Preparing For Your Death

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Don't assume that the people you leave behind when you die will know what to do. Don't assume that preparing for your death is a task for eighty year olds. I have watched funeral train wrecks; it doesn't have to go that way. Truly.

It begins with the essential first step; don't put off facing up to the one thing that will definitely happen to you. Talk about death, think about your death; do not pretend death can be avoided. Families who have a shared language around death, who have given each other the gift of honest conversation about dying and death are streets ahead.

It helps to have conversations about death which are not promoted by the industries of death, who are making a lot of money out of people's ignorance, fear, grief, unpreparedness, and guilt. I have seen so much money flushed down the toilet - to be more precise, incinerated to ashes - guilt and regret money lining the pockets of a profit-focussed industry. What a waste! Spend that money on each other now, and a party for those left behind.

Death has been left to the industries of funeral directing, Hollywood, bomb-making, news industries and computer-gaming because we Westerners have lost our spiritual ground. This is a tricky subject to raise. I know, because for more than two decades I worked with many people who had left their spiritual tradition because of its abuse, the various forms of abuse. But it is possible to reject the worst aspects of institutional religion and reclaim the deep riches of spiritual wisdom that those traditions were meant to make available to us. The deep wisdom traditions all provide resources for creatively understanding dying and death, for navigating the times of dying and death, for building up communities of people through the experiences of dying and death. Truly. These resources are there, the proprietary possession of no one person, company, or group; they're freely available to everyone.

These riches are the fruit of millennia, of countless generations of our forebears reflecting on their own experiences of dying and death. Why would we not draw upon them, as though we had to make it all up in each and every family, as though humans had never been here before! Each of us has a deep spiritual tradition; all we need to do is go looking in the storage unit we locked up years ago.

There needs to be someone who can stand steady and calm in the face of your death, who is wise enough, who has themselves looked deeply enough into the realities of human existence, who can hold steady your family, your community. Dying and death inevitably shake the ground people stand on; uncertainty is inevitable. Fear and grief and regret and all the strong human emotions rise up. You need to know that there is at least one person - if not a whole family or community! - who can stand steady, who is able to stare into the face of death without blinking, or turning away, or losing their own equilibrium. Faith communities prepare people for this human reality and task; maybe you can find someone you trust there. Wise women and men, mature enough and realistic and steady enough exist everywhere; find one, or a few.

Above all, talk about dying and death with the people closest to you, the people you care about, the people who care about you. Don't catastrophise. Don't avoid or pretend. Don't be miserable or self-pitying or angry or resentful. If they try to put you off, tell them this is important to you and that you need them to engage with you.

Talk about your death as gift; just as this is the only way you can describe your birth, as gift. Talk about your death as a thoroughly natural process; not to be welcomed because you want your life to end of course, but to be welcomed simply because it's a perfectly natural trajectory. Talk about your own death as a process by which you want to bless others and the world.

Yes, your death should be a blessing for others. Yes, even a 'tragic death' can be a blessing, when the person who undergoes the dying is focussed on being a blessing for others. A young life tragically cut short without any warning tests our capacity to see 'blessing', of course – and those left behind are left with the entire burden of finding a way to be a blessing.

Talk about your death as the necessary relinquishment, the healthy detachment for which life has been preparing you.

If you are in the first half of your life don't imagine or presume that this is a conversation that can wait til later. If you're one of the planet's fortunates you may well have a lot of later – but don't count in it. And hoping that you do have a lot of later, know that the simplicity, beauty and gift of your mortality is the surest ground for understanding your humanity and the gift of everything you are working hard to build and create in the first half of your life. There is no too-soon time to face the reality of death – not with the lens of Hollywood, but with the lens of awe and wonder.

If you are in the second half of your life, and if you haven't got started, waste no more time. And don't begin with the funeral directing business and their insurers - details about coffins, cars, and embalming are not the priority, and in fact don't matter.

The priority is facing up to the reality of your finitude, and finding trusted loved ones with whom you can share your conversation. You really do need around you those people who can be steady, who are themselves prepared, who know what is going on, who are not afraid or panicking.

Embrace your need for community, and the community's need of each other. Your last gift to the people you love is to bless them with the kind of experience that enables them to stand shoulder to shoulder, facing into their own finitude, in solidarity - and to do so with hope, love, and gratitude. You can build community by helping them embrace what is universal; the great mystery of birthing and dying.

What a beautiful last gift!

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