

DEATHS I HAVE KNOWN

Death is a bodily event. I am less afraid of it as it approaches. I am more afraid of "being left," and it seems to be the men who leave first. I thought it clever of me to have married a man nearly seven years younger.

But the fact that death occurs in the body highlights the possibility that what remains is the invisible soul. I often hear bereaved persons speaking of the time it seems to take for the soul to actually depart. I felt this about Dad—that he lingered a few days before actually departing. With Mother, I had occasional "visitations"—through dreams in the night. I found these post-mortem experiences comforting after my father died, instructive after mother went.

When I was first married, I occasionally experienced panic if Don was inexplicably late or if we had got our signals crossed about meeting at a certain time and place and he failed to show up as expected. To be bereft so soon, when I had waited so long, seemed unconscionably cruel.

Now I am heading toward four-score years on this planet and my perspective is different. I try to imagine scenarios anticipating how I will react to approaching death—my own, or Don's, but I can't hang onto anything concrete. I will have to wait. This is a time in life when my generation is gradually petering out. The obituaries are of greater interest to me in the Wheaton Alumni magazine than the weddings and births. I have been present with two peers during their last months or days of life. What I have observed is more common than I had thought: in each case, the person looked forward to dying—something attributable in large part to a strong conviction that what lay beyond death was even better than life.

Death of a colleague

Last year, Dick Faxon died. He is the person with whom we founded Life/Work Direction in 1981, and who worked beside us until his retirement in 1993, when he moved to Rhode Island. A few years later, he moved into Jamaica Plain to be nearer his sons and their families. We began noticing his forgetfulness, and soon he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Good medical treatment and medications slowed the progress of the disease, but we learned what it was like to begin "the long goodbye" that Alzheimer's delivers. He spent parts of some days each week at the nearby excellent treatment center for Alzheimer's in Jamaica Plain.

It was the observant staff there who alerted Dick's wife Alicia to a marked deterioration in Dick's condition. Hospital tests showed inoperable cancer, and he was referred to hospice. The day he came home to die, he asked me to visit. Alicia said I was the only one he asked for. I sat beside him quietly, as Don and Alicia were seated at the foot of

his bed, chatting away as they often do—only perhaps a little more tensely now. Dick looked at me and smiled, and then looked at Alicia and Don with such love and appreciation. He and Don had been brother-close, too. But Dick and I are both more quiet, whereas Don and Alicia carry on rapid-fire intellectual conversations about art with great exuberance.

That was my final goodbye to Dick. Next time I visited, he was essentially "gone," waiting for life to ebb out. I knew how much Dick longed to "go Home"—those would have been his words—so I could not grieve for him. And I had said goodbye long ago to the person I had known over the years of our work together.

So, growing old, I grow friendlier with death. My maternal heritage, especially, bears this out. Mother and Grandma Dyer both turned resolutely away from life and toward death at the end. Both had undiagnosed cancer—in mother's case, it would have been inoperable at her age and condition—and both of them lost interest in sustaining life. They stopped eating. On mother's part, it was deliberate, as well as the natural negative response of her body to food. Her brain was lucid to the end—which bodes well for my brother and me. This was her self-chosen euthanasia, the kind that feels natural.

My father-in-law: Choosing to let death come

So it is not chosen death in itself that haunts us. It is when the young choose it that feels like a tragic waste to me. Then death comes abruptly and with shock, precipitating an endless series of "Why's." This was the difference, for me, between the suicides of Don's father in 1974, and my brother's son Ted in 1979.

Don's father had been haunted by debilitating depression since Don was 18. He went in and out of treatment, but nothing helped. After retirement, he no longer had his public position as judge to shore up his sense of meaning in his world, and he plummeted steadily downward. The very medication that was to grant some relief now provided the means of final escape.

My nephew: Recklessly reaching for death

My nephew Ted was a young man with a certain level of inborn rashness in his disposition. He married young; that marriage failed, and he had turned to drink to assuage his restlessness and unhappy prospects in some areas of his life. He entered a program of recovery for his drinking, and fell in love with a woman in her forties, who had an eleven-year-old daughter by a previous marriage that had failed.

There were disturbing incidents occurring more frequently, dealing with his wife's husband, who shared custodial responsibility for the daughter. One night, an argument between Ted and his wife escalated. Ted's actions were rash. Reaching up into the

bedroom closet for the pistol on the top shelf, he shouted, "I know what what I will do, take myself out of the picture," and shot himself before her panic-stricken eyes. The young daughter was nearby.

My instinct was to come to the side of my brother and his wife, and I flew out immediately, despite their plea to "come at a happier time." I needed to be there. But once I arrived, I felt helpless and "extra." I had so little part in his life, really. I was outside the circle of grieving.

So I watched. Since there was no wake, no funeral, no memorial service, no urn, no grave, no formal recognition of that gaping hole in our lives, I saw one line in our family heritage cut off in one fell swoop. No wonder there is anger with the grief. The anger may help the grief. It helped me. I could not get close to the grief. "How could he. . .?" I asked it endlessly.

Ted may have had a kind of blind military courage, not the kind with the tempering capacity to face life's complexities with a slower more nuanced response. He was a man of immediacy. "In the world of the blind, all things are sudden," wrote Marshall McLuhan. In this odd way, was Ted like my Dad, whose funeral Ted could not bring himself to attend five months earlier?

For me, the shock at my nephew Ted's death was accompanied by anger more than grief. I had not known him intimately enough to comprehend what his absence in the family circle might mean. But rage may not be too strong a word to express my feelings. I told someone, "Suicide is a hostile act." My reaction was primal; I felt he had done something outrageous to our family, and I held him responsible.

A young friend: Choosing death over lifelong healing

Just six and a half years later, another chosen death was to darken our lives—this time a young woman of 23, Anne, who had lived with us for a year. We knew Anne at close range, but she closely guarded secrets from her past, so we may have overlooked the trajectory on which she was headed. We had taken Anne into our home at the urging a Catholic Sister Marie. Anne had declared her interest in becoming a nun, but the wise Sisters who were her mentors advised her instead to get out into the world, date, taste life outside the cloister before committing herself to such a life.

Anne moved in with us, enrolled in a local community college, and began an exemplary freshman year, being elected to the one student government position on a college governing council, excelling in sports (the only female on the soccer team—and a very skillful one), and dating a very fine fellow student. As her dating relationship deepened, it precipitated the need to deal with some secrets of her past that were clamoring for attention—sexual abuse by her grandfather. She told us nothing of this. She began

therapy in the spring with a college counselor, and established a strong bond of trust.

When we left for a three-week holiday in England in August of 1975, we knew she missed us keenly. She hinted to us that something ominous was brewing underneath her calm surface. She seemed extraordinarily relieved when we returned home. Then her college counselor announced to Anne that she could no longer see her for long-term therapy (college mental health services are supposed to be crisis-oriented and short-term), apparently a dam broke inside Anne's seemingly sturdy exterior, but very fragile interior.

On the day when she was supposed to see her counselor for a referral for long-term therapy, Anne disappeared without our being immediately aware of it. Our paths did not automatically cross every day. But the next day, we returned home from work and found Anne missing. She had taken great care to leave little signs that she was indeed voluntarily gone (like her bus pass), but no sign of where we could find her. Because she worked with young people in Roxbury, a Black enclave, and had failed to appear that day for her volunteer assignment, the Boston news media immediately picked up the story on page one, suspecting foul play. Television crews swarmed into our apartment. Everyone was on high alert.

She turned up in North Carolina, at a Womens' Shelter, where she had to reveal her identity as a condition of staying. Consequently her name was matched with the national network advertising Missing Persons and she was herded back to Boston where we sat in our kitchen with her forlorn parents, and tried in our oblique way (to shield Anne's confidentiality) to indicate that there was something terribly wrong they needed to uncover. We hoped they would guess the core issue of abuse in the family and would help Anne address it.

There was nowhere for her to turn now except to go back home to St. Louis, and after a short time, to enter psychiatric treatment. She slowly seemed to get better and was about to be released. She confided in her older sister how anxious she was about being "outside." On the day of her March release, she carefully chose time and place to leap over the fence surrounding the property, and hurl herself into the path of an oncoming truck and to her instant death.

It would not have occurred to me to tell this tragic story if I had not received an e-mail some time later from her brother, Joe, who periodically contacted us because he felt we understood his suffering. He bravely worked to try to heal from the confusion of his grief—descending into addiction to alcohol from which he was then now recovering, with help of professional treatment.

Anne's suicide was a shock to us, even though we now knew her history. My limited experience tells me that suicide is always a shock. . .one that continues to reverberate in

widening circles—to family, friends, and community.

Death yet to come

Recently, I had a glimmering about the meaning of my brother’s eventual death to me. I was caught by surprise. Is this exemplary of genuine caring for him and his wife Leigh and the offspring left behind? Or is it because I will be the last leaf on the family tree—if my brother goes first? Is it always for myself I mourn, in any death?

Of course, logically, I might be the last of our family to go: I am, after all, the youngest. I have no offspring, so when my husband and I shuffle off this mortal coil, it is not clear who will mark the event as an official “duty.” It will require the attention of the governmental officials who need to record certain necessary details.

Reading this in 2019, I can speak about my brother’s death, now in the past tense, for in December he landed in the hospital with pneumonia, and subsequent testing revealed inoperable cancer. It was then that he followed through on his intentions to “let go” under circumstances of this sort, and he simply stopped receiving nourishment. In less than ten days he was gone.

I wrote to his wife, Leigh, and his daughter Jane and the grandkids:

December 19, 2018

Dear Leigh and Jane and the grandkids:

It means a lot to me to reach out to the extended family as we remember my brother, your husband, father and grandfather and recall scenes of connection each of us had with this 6’6” man whose life has now ebbed out peacefully. Some permanent things remain—those memories several of you have put in writing.

I think I was most struck by the deliberate choice he made long ago about how he wanted to die—and then how circumstances came together, not entirely of his own choosing, but consonant with it, to make it possible for him to depart in a way he himself would have applauded, I think. We think of our own feelings at a time like this, but the deeper truth is that *his* experience is what counts because we love him and want his going away to be as pain-free and orderly as possible.



The other striking thing, to me, were the pictures Leigh took near the end, and shared—for I saw in his face a look I do not recall having seen in quite that way before. It seemed to me that he was beginning to “know something the rest of us did not yet know”—and I think this accords what others have said of loved ones dying process—that they “begin to be somewhere else” in a sense. As someone once said of a dying friend, “She opened her eyes at the very end and with a smile, suddenly looked up and said almost mischievously, ‘You’ll be surprised!’ and instantly closed her eyes, and died right there at that moment!” Since none of us have ever been at that mysterious dying moment ourselves, this way of thinking ahead is comforting and cheering.

We all know that Phil had to adopt a very strong position in his life—as the child of strong parents. Certain positions he has taken reveal that strength—his position about God’s existence or non-existence in one case; and his consistent interest in the equal rights of women and his honoring of that in the way he conducted his work in the Navy, in his choice of medical practitioners, and his honoring of each of us in the family who were women.

In these days, I find myself remembering the little moments that speak to our early experience as brother and sister. In some ways, Phil did not introspect about his early life very much—whereas I can bury myself in past reflections! When I asked him once, What did it feel like to be four years old in 1929, having been indulged like an only child throughout those formative years not only by your mother and father, but also the mothers and grandmothers in the church our father pastored in Epsom, New Hampshire during those years—with that kind of start in life—how did you feel about a new baby (and a girl!) arriving to displace you—getting all the attention and care and concern? But Phil could not remember any residual feelings. We can only speculate what it might have meant for him.

We lived fairly separate lives growing up—in my recollection. He was a tease and challenger, but mostly we inhabited different worlds. Four years age difference is considerable—and especially as we approached adolescence. Something began to change when I turned 12 and he was 16, and I remember how he got me to come out into the yard so he could teach me how to hit a baseball. Maybe he wanted someone to play ball with. He would pitch the ball to me over and over again, instructing me to “watch the ball!” until I got it right. He also taught me how to play ping pong—but lost interest when I got good enough to occasionally beat him. Both of us liked to win at games, and at life.

There is a particularly poignant memory around Christmas that same year. Mother was trimming the Christmas tree in the usual way—with a string of multi-colored lights. Phil asserted his own preferences that year—wanting a more modern artsy version—wanting just blue lights on the tree, illuminating the silver tinsel with a special subdued effect.

Mother saw no reason to depart from tradition, so Phil went out and bought himself a small tree, and the blue lights, and set it up in his bedroom window. I watched all this with a peculiar pang of sadness; it seemed to me that he was simply asserting his own choice separate from family, and we should have included him in his creative endeavor. Something deeply wistful arose within me—perhaps knowing that this signaled further separation from family on a broader and deeper level.

That same year, and the next, he developed into an avid fan of the music of Bing Crosby, and bought his records. So along with the special tree in the bedroom, I often heard the sounds of *"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. . . just like the ones I used to know"* and felt again the mix of feeling about the season and the way war was taking young men away from home and out into the world. The following year when he was in the Navy and came home at Christmas, and still a fan of Bing Crosby, I heard the words—*"I'll be home for Christmas; you can count on this"*—as a "silent" plea from Phil to be received for who he was, as well as who he was becoming.

Our later history is more interwoven with the rest of you who receive this letter, and you have your own perspective and experience. I was always miles away across the continent, carving out my own history, and Phil and I were not really close. So a few years ago, I undertook a project I called "Dropped Stitches" where he and I corresponded by e-mail conversing around a series of "topics" that would catch both of us up on how our thinking had changed and in what ways we could find subterranean connections that we could discover. We had the same parents, but the trajectory of our lives had differed in some ways. There were surprising similarities—one of them being the entrepreneurial streak in both of us.

We dealt with death differently. And death hit the family in piercing ways. I have compassion for the way he and the rest of the family journeyed through the pain of losing son Ted in 1979, as well as his wife Betty twenty years later. I am not sure how he was able to shepherd the family through those losses, for in some matters, he tended to keep silence.

When he found warm companionship and love again in Leigh, he said to me quietly one day, "I lucked out," —his somewhat awkward way of expressing profound understanding of new treasure for his last stage of life with a companion who was attuned to his particular way of expanding his experience. There would be lots of travel and other delights around the edges as they found their own unique way of filling life to the full. It was Leigh's entering the picture that helped bring him east to New England for visits with my husband Don and me—thereby deepening our brother-sister relationship because of her insight and encouragement. This also gave Leigh and me a new sister-in-love as well!

I write this with deep respect for all of you, and for my brother—in whatever “surprise” may come from this mysterious process for my brother, and for all of us! I want you to feel this same reassurance when my time to transition out of this body arrives. I’m planning to be surprised!

Love,
Eunice

Death—the Mystery

What does it mean to outlast others? I know Mother struggled with this. First Emmet left, then in one year she lost her dearest friends Bernice Cox and Mabel Bartlett. She was left with old folks at the Manor for whom she felt no particular affinity. She had always surrounded herself with the young. We have realized the wisdom of this as a childless couple. I see how persons unrelated biologically often give of their care and time freely, without the sticky strings of blood relationship and obligation.

What lies beyond? We do not know. We can trust. But perhaps the Czech poet, Czeslaw Milosz, who died this past August, said it well:

*When I die, I will see the lining of the world,
The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset,
The true meaning, ready to be decoded.*

I find myself viewing my own death as a release into a mystery—something not yet coded, but a reality to be trusted—making life on this planet matter beyond imagining. I get glimpses occasionally. Each year that passes will etch some of that future on my conscious mind and heart in a way that turns my life now into a journey tracked by God, and its outlines occasionally glimpsed by me. At the present time, it is mostly music that makes any sense in limning the outlines of that future life beyond the grave. I may have more intelligent things to say about this when I get old enough to see more clearly.

My eyesight is getting clearer each year. That gives me hope.

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