

What Death Means to Me

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My most powerful and closest encounter with death was when my father died some ten years ago. My father was 81 when he died, and for the last few years of his life had been bedridden with bronchitis. I found this slow decay most distressing and did all that I could to put it to the back of my mind. I often felt angry that he put me through his decline, but in truth I was afraid for him, because I knew deep down that he was terrified of dying. I was also scared that he might not die with dignity, but would pass on screaming and kicking so to speak. Fortunately for me, several months before he died I had a vivid dream which helped shift my attitude. In the dream I remember seeing my father in a field with an oxygen tank beside him and a mask attached to his face. Without the oxygen I knew that he would die, and I wondered whether I should end it there and then by turning off the supply. I started to fiddle with the tank valve, but suddenly I stopped. Something inside me realised that it was fine for my father to live and die in his own time. When I woke up I felt a tremendous sense of relief and a weight lifted off me. In whatever way my father died was fine by me.

This shift in my attitude was crystallised several months later at my father's death. I was still studying at university,



and rushed back home one Saturday afternoon after I had received a message that he was dying and probably wouldn't last the night. Most of my family was gathered in my father's bedroom. The atmosphere was peaceful, and I was fortunate enough to witness my father die with peace and dignity. At one point, while unconscious, he clenched my hand and I knew that he knew that I was there. That was enough for me. As the night wore on I watched the life force get weaker in him, until eventually his breathing stopped and there was silence.

My initial reaction was a certain sense of euphoria that I had witnessed my father's death, which was his final lesson to me — a lesson on how to die. I was also very happy that his death had been

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filled with dignity. As the days went by, however, the euphoria was counterbalanced with a terrible sense of loss which cut very deep. The two emotions were odd bedfellows, and in retrospect I realise that I did not express the terrible loss I felt. Indeed it has taken me years to come to terms with death, not least because of what was not completed between us while he was still alive. Eventually, as the pain decreased, my desire to think of my own death slowly came through.

Within the last year my attitude to my own death has shifted. One important event that helped was a workshop run by Christianne Heal, *Exploring Our Own Death*. I have always had a terrible fear of how I would die — I always assumed that it would be painful. In the workshop I was able to explore this fear. We did an exercise which involved experiencing our own death by imagining that we only had six months to live. We were in effect given the opportunity to experience our own death. As I lay down and relaxed, I visualised a huge golden-yellow suspension bridge. The bridge was solid and extended off into the distance. I was moving along it, and when I reached the end of the bridge in the distance I knew that I would die. I was not afraid and as I glided along the bridge I felt totally at

peace, and went deeper and deeper into myself. I do not remember reaching the end of the bridge, but recall my consciousness slowly expanding out of my body. My consciousness became vast and limitless; it was not fixed in physicality (in the purely material sense), and I felt at peace.

Upon coming out of this experience, I felt a change within myself. No longer was it necessary for me to think that there was nothing after death — my awareness lived on, and nor did I have to fear death. There was something on the other side which I felt I had had a glimpse of. This experience was very important for me because it showed me what could happen if I let go of my fear of the unknown. Death is a very personal thing — it is different for each of us, and it is up to each of us to explore it as best we can.

Of course, I still have a lot of fear and sadness tied up with it, but at least I feel that I have started on a path to developing my understanding of death, and to exploring more fully my connection with living. I sense with an increasing strength of feeling that it is terribly important to enhance our own awareness of consciousness. Given time, this awareness will help us come to terms with our own death.

