



My journey from dying, to death to living

Anne Bury

The death of my grandparents was my first experience of people close to me dying. At the age of fourteen, my mother informed me over the phone that my grandfather had died. The funeral had already taken place. There had been no suggestion that I should return from boarding school for his funeral, despite my having a close relationship with him. I don't think any of my teachers were aware of his death, and indeed I myself seemed to be disconnected from any emotionality at the time. At eighteen, my grandmother's death was different. I had spent time with her up until her death and have memories of following her coffin with tears flooding down my face. I mourned her dying in silence; this was my family and our culture's way, and despite being brought up a catholic (or indeed because of it), I didn't really question or consider any after life.

Death and dying became common-place for me as a young student nurse. I remember my first experience of laying out a dead person: I was providing supper relief on another ward and was asked to help lay out a person who had died. There was no support or acknowledgement of the potential emotional impact of this, or indeed subsequent deaths of children, young and older people during my nurse training. We learnt the practicalities and sent the

bodies off to the morgue; we coped by trying to lay people out with dignity and a dry and black humour. Any emotion was kept hidden or went unfelt. The culture of nursing in the 70's was to be seen to be busy, and definitely not to become emotionally attached. At the age of twenty-two, working in an American Hospital in Saudi Arabia, I asked the person in charge after the death of a beautiful young boy, 'when am I ever going to stop crying when a child dies?' She replied:

'the day you stop crying will be the day you are no longer a good nurse'.

This response had a profound impact on me. It gave me permission to care about and be touched by dying and death. I began to allow myself to be more fully present for the children and families, and to notice the beauty in dying. In particular I noticed the wisdom of dying children. In hindsight I realise I developed some kind of spiritual understanding, and learnt to balance my emotional involvement and live with my professional and personal grief.

Twenty years after this, I began work as an educator in a hospice, teaching palliative care and death and dying to health professionals. I encouraged people to question the position and nature of death within our society, themselves and within the hospice. I noticed that although hospices were established to care for dying people, the nature and meaning of death and dying were rarely discussed and death itself remained hidden. The emphasis on intervention, evidence based treatments and outcome measurement masked and overshadowed death and emotion. Staff in particular were rarely given the opportunity to share and reflect upon the emotional or spiritual impact of death on themselves, or to explore what death meant for them. On the occasions when staff were personally affected by the death of someone close, or indeed died themselves, some staff members seemed frozen and

unable to respond or support them. The reality of death so close to home was both frightening and painful.

While staff obviously need to develop coping mechanisms when constantly faced with death, they also need support to avoid distancing and dissociating themselves from their patients, or giving too much of themselves as 'wounded healers' and burn out. Therapists and counsellors working in hospices often provided a crucial supportive role for staff.

My own personal journey through hospice was a challenging one. When I started work as a hospice educator I intuitively knew that it would help me explore and work with my deep fear of death. I didn't know that I would encounter several personal deaths and losses within the next few years, and that it would be these which would have the most impact.

The death of my parents was the most profound. I was fortunate to be able to be there with them as they journeyed to their life's end, which I found deeply moving, painful and challenging. Past struggles in our relationships were ever present and I grieved them both in different ways. The value of creating meaningful funerals for each of them was crucial, sharing my emotions with friends, learning to understand that the ways in which different family members dealt and coped with their grief was not a reflection on me, and that I had a right to grieve in my own way.

I found creating rituals and marking special days and anniversaries important. Writing a journal and releasing memories I no longer needed, remaining attached to some of their possessions, wearing their clothes, talking to them and longing for them were all part of a healing process for me. It was facing bereavements head on that led me to explore my own existence and meaning, and in hindsight I can fully understand the transformational power and potential of loss and grief.

*The secret house of
death
(Shakespeare)*

My life now has meaning. I value others and myself more and in particular the wonderful world around me. I have created a better work-life balance and can feel a spiritual essence within me. I have a renewed understanding of the cycle of living, dying and living. I believe that talking about dying and living and being with the reality of our dying is crucial, if we are to fully embrace our lives and to fully connect with and accompany the dying. I have now come a full circle as I grow towards my mid-fifties. I am happier than ever before, more conscious of my own fragile earthly existence and more able to be in the world. It is only now that I feel emotionally and spiritually prepared to journey alongside the dying and the dead.

I wish to thank Maxine for inviting me to work with her and develop a framework for this

special edition. Within this I wanted to share in some small way my own learning and thread and interweave a variety of themes. The academic in me wished to provide a sociological understanding of the position of death and the need to understand both society's and our own inadequacies in dealing with it, and in particular to question the professionalisation of death - thanks to Tony Walter for this. Next, I wished to create some excitement and controversy about death and to voice the unvoiced. There

is more to death than we can possibly know; in death there may be life and in life there is certainly death. Josefine Speyer's article sensitively and clearly illustrates some of the inexplicable phenomena which many people experience but keep silent about. Carmella B'Hahn's article sheds further light on the continuation of consciousness, and she beautifully shares her personal experiences, her 'art' and practice, and illustrates ways in which clients can be supported in their pain and questing. Abigail Robinson's article shares the value and importance of vigiling with the dying, the need to be fully present, and the way in which the shared language of music communicates so beautifully with the soul. Simon Smith and Jane Morrell share the importance of symbolic ritual and ceremony when working with dying and bereaved people, and highlight

the fundamental role and value that creating funerals and endings has for people in their bereavement process. Finally, John Ridpath, one of the founders of AHPB, and Robin Shohet, share their experiences.

Counsellors and therapists have now to some extent taken over from priests and

doctors in assisting and birthing the dying and bereaved. They have become confessors and intimate friends to people struggling in a world that is upside down and increasingly annihilating of the soul. They are in a privileged and crucial position to support clients when they come face to face with death.

Useful Books

Thompson, Neil. Loss and grief. A Guide for Human Services Practitioners. Palgrave Macmillan 2002.

Levine, Stephen. Healing into life and death. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group; Reissue edition 1989

Anam-Aire, Phyllida. Celtic Book of Dying: Travelling with the Soul of the Dead. Findhorn Press Ltd. 2005.

De Hennezel, Marie, and Janeway, Carol Brown. Intimate Death: how the dying teach us to live. Time Warner Paperbacks; 1998.

Kubler Ross, Elisabeth. On death and dying. Simon & Schuster; 1997.

Rinpoche, Sogyal. The Tibetan Book of living and dying. Rider & Co. 2002.

Levine, Stephen. A year to live: how to live this year as if it were your last. Thorsons. 1997.

Singh, Kathleen Dowling. The grace in dying. Harper, 1998.

Anne Bury is an independent educator in palliative care and death and dying, a sociologist, a shamanic healer and a nurse. She cares passionately about the care and support provided to dying people and their families and to challenge the taboo and fear of death. She runs courses, conferences and workshops which encourage people to go beyond conventional understandings of death and dying, and to reflect and find meaning in life, living and death. She is grateful to Maxine for inviting her to create this special edition. Anne@landcross.fsworld.co.uk.