

When the Bough Breaks

We all face death, though usually we look away. Dying means loss. Whether it's someone we know and care about or after a tragedy like Sandy Hook and too frequent others, we feel helpless in our grief. Last autumn: two friends with almost identical symptoms. One skates away benign and we bury the other four months later. Why?

In his brilliant Holocaust novel, *The Seventh Well*, Fred Wander describes death in a Nazi work camp. Prisoners are staked within running distance of the woods and possible freedom. They are not tethered, but made to stand until they collapse and die, or choose to run and be shot. Each lives with imminent death for days. The ultimate existential choice. Each second they choose the pain of living instead of bolting for a quick end. And not unique: unless the pain is unbearable, and sometimes even then, we cling fiercely to life. After the doctor told my mother he could not save her and disconnected the oxygen, she lived another 42 hours. She hadn't made it past 12 in weeks. Biology or soul, we choose life.

Some do not. I've known people who chose, or seriously contemplated, an early death when facing a diagnosis that portended losing what made them feel like themselves. Others living lives that seemed worse than whatever lies beyond have left us early, because going on seemed more than they could bear. And others found acceptance in surrendering to the inevitable that we all face, preferring the dignity of choice about when and how they would transition. What felt right to them might make no sense to others, but was their choice. I mourn not just their pain and despair, but the loss and sorrow experienced by those who loved them.

A friend's mother died recently. Amid the condolence and dinner invites, what I most wanted to say was *Take good notes*, because when my own mother died it was such a blur of feelings and doings. Admittedly *Take Good notes* is a baseline as advice to self and others goes. As is *Pay better attention*, and (in my mother's voice) *Stand up straight*. I still blush remembering her

never subtle public prompts, replete with drill sergeant shoulders and a look that burned a path through crowds. But her death was a cascade of feelings that dwarf deconstruction.

I was curious if my friend would have great insights into mortality. She's older than I was when my mom died. We're both ages that you see in the obits, and no longer think, *Oh so young*. More like, *I hope she had a good life*. We're at a time when you fear there's much less life left than you once hoped. But aging brings worse fears too, and a gentle passing sounds like a lovely ride out.

Most of us spend little time thinking about death. Perhaps right after a close call, or the docs, lawyers, monks, or recently diagnosed. But we regular folk go through our days assuming life will be as it is or better: long, fruitful, and happy. We probably spend more time paying bills each month than thinking about mortality. It's more than dodging pain, suffering, or losing those we love. We don't like things so out of our control, or the idea of not being here ourselves.

I've been accused of liking life comfortable. So it was a shock, a curious mix of *Winter is coming*... and an unexpected spiritual graduation gift, that just when I was feeling happiest, most creative, and quite proud of myself for various chunks of personal progress that the doors of change swung wide open. That month we had a horrible ice storm. Freezing rain coated every bud, twig, and branch. Trees bowing low to the ground, and two of my oldest and tallest uprooted and fallen. A landscape forever transformed, cleft open, and all too still. I was lucky. No smashed roof or car. No dangling power line. Just an expensive mess, a denuded yard, and a week without wifi.

The storm hit as a wonderful woman I knew was dying. A brilliant, stubborn, witty, old Jewess, who'd battled social injustice and cancer with the same fierce necessity. She had a stroke and slipped away within hours. An "easy death." So did my tall pine. Falling slowly, cushioned by a faithful crab apple; interwoven wisteria vines guiding her tip to rest gently on the house. I'd

planted that tree three decades before, and was bereft by the sudden loss. So big; so long with me; so quick to transform.

When someone close to us dies we feel the same. We're in a different world than the one we shared with the departed. In one they're sharing a meal and a laugh. In another they are memory. They answer our questions and stories with cryptic silence, or too brief and rare a glimpse in dreams. They are gone. We move forward and they do not. We're in the world; they're off duty. Off to their next assignment, whatever it is. Maybe a little R&R in between. I'm not sure how it works, and willing to learn when it's my time.

I was in my late 20s before anyone close to me died--a side effect of excellent genetics. The loss was my cat, most likely to a coyote. But we lived together in a Los Angeles canyon, and it was my first direct encounter with mortality. I went to a Chinese herbalist. He spoke little English, so I said simply, *My best friend died*. He gave me two, large, paper-wrapped packets: herbs, twigs, seeds, shells, dust, and moss, that I was to boil down to a cup of sludge, two days in a row. Plus a laughably few raisins to clear the taste. On the afternoon of the second day, I literally collapsed into tears. The torrential weeping of decades, all my early unshed tears and so many unshed since. Not for another decade would I have that kind of release.

You're never ready to lose a parent. Even with lots of notice or if you've been through it before. It hurts and it sucks and there's no court of appeal.

After my mother's funeral I went to services to say *kaddish*. The woman sitting behind me sang off-key exactly like my mother, from whom I had another visitation a few years later, at a big fork in my road. After almost twenty years, when I discover an author she'd like or make a fabulous pot of soup, I still feel the urge to call her. She taught me many things, most good and comforting, though some hobbled me in ways it took years to undo.

She took good care of my dad, at clear costs to herself. He could tell a good joke, usually as a wry observer. He was laconic, especially on the phone. After my mother's death I became his designated listener. He loved to answer saying, *Anything else?!* Five minutes was an extended phone call. Few believed me when I said we had long conversations about Wimbledon and politics. I remember sitting together, he newly transplanted to assisted living, cheering as Gore won Florida. (Don't get me started...)

Every transition includes loss of the known, the familiar, the illusion of control. You can shake your fist but still death comes. You can grovel, beg, and plead, but your loved one will still die. As unfair or untimely or simply unwanted as that may be, it is also inevitable. We can rant and hate it all we like.

In this universe, the us we are used to being is 100% mortal. The soul not so much, which is why I keep saying snuggle up and make friends with your immortal parts. Learn to find your truest self, even and perhaps especially in hard or confusing times. Because that's when you'll need her most. Find your inner north star so you have something to steer by.

When the human you have been, the you that you feel that you are, slides off, and your soul goes to new adventures, released and rejuvenated (pun intended), that's when you'll get another of those glimpses, a remembering of your true self, until you start that story anew, and get tangled in its humanness.

My simple rant on death: It sucks. It is nasty and implacable and impossible to satisfy. It takes the ones we love and gives us only memory in return. That seems such a feeble bargain. We know we've been had and there's no one to complain to.

Death's partner time does much of what comes next. The slow dulling, the silent erasure of memory, fewer glimpses even further apart. Unless, like a faithful widower, we tend the

memory, bringing flowers and parking by the grave for a chat. Eventually that might bring comfort, but it takes a while, and there's lots of sadness and missing between one to the other.

What I most want to do to death is what June Squibb does to an ex's grave in *Nebraska*, lifting her skirt and shouting defiance. She's alive and laughing; he missed all the fun. Instead we grovel and beg. *Another year. A few more months.* We bargain even when we have nothing to ante. We don't know how to let go gracefully, not most of us. We want as much as we can get of this life and want it for those we care about.

I've wept over pets as much as people. Their unconditional love, never anger, judgment only when we're slow with treats or opening a door. Among life's wisest teachings came from my vet: *They'll tell you when it's time.* Thirty-five years later, when I'd done what I swore never to do (four different meds and a house papered in pee pads), my old boy so thin and ready for release, she said, *He's like a prisoner scratching at the lock and you have the key.*

We don't get to turn that key for ourselves or those we care about. That decision is taken away by illness or age or distracted drivers to name but a few. It can come out of nowhere. It's a beautiful sunny day, you're watching spring bloom all around you; then a friend calls to say, *The biopsy's back*, and bursts into tears. Suddenly your universe slips a cog or three in a terrible direction, and the life you knew is spinning away faster than you could ever call it back. Your heart just got shattered and stomped on hard.

Most of us don't do the death dance well. Death ignores our wailing and shaking of fists. We hate every minute it's happening and hate the silence it leaves behind. It hurts like hell to let go. To know you can never again just pick up the phone and dial. No texting or stories or hot wonderful sex. No laughter by the fire and rituals of companionship. Not one more hug. Maybe they can see us, but most of us don't know how to see back through the veil. I rely on the quaint simplicity of Billy Collins poem *The Dead*, which tells us they still care, even if we cannot see them.

But in real time it is painful and raw. Not just after they're gone, but from the moment the dreaded words are spoken and our world turns sideways. The horrid clinical phrases that measure our days mask the simplest truth: a countdown clock is ticking for us all. This happened to one of my dearest as I wrote this book. My stomach was a knot for weeks before I could let myself feel the truth of it. To accept I'd likely be here and she would not. I struggled with this quote from Sengai, a Zen artist and poet: *It is no patience which you can bear patiently; Patience is to bear what is unbearable.*

Some day, people will mourn you as you have mourned. They'll be in their version of this story and there'll be a hole where once you were. Perhaps a sore place they'll bump into. A sound, image, or place that evokes you as they feel sorrow and longing in that place named you in their heart. In Judaism when someone dies, we say *May his/her memory be for a blessing*. Like the movie *CoCo* made so vivid, no one is completely dead until all memories of them are gone.

In this inexorable accounting, there is one sure truth. Keep sharing love and comfort. Keep your heart open as well as you can as long as you're here. Keep folks around that you love and that love you back: the deep heart-to-hearts and the ones who call just to say *Hi*, to let you know they're ok. One of my besties is such. I think that in another time I lost her in the trains as we headed for the death camps. Now she calls just to tug on her end of the string. She'll start a conversation with, *I have nothing to say*; we laugh and start to chat. We're different in so many ways, but sisters like the tall pine and the crabapple, sharing our messy joys and stories.

Keep those folks around you and hold them close. Tell them you love them more often than you might. Because one day no phone will work. And you'll have to find them all over again the next time around.

For me the ultimate death question is not, When will I go, but How do I want to live while I'm here? We're all a nano second from the brink. Distracted driver or disease, we will be gone too

soon. So we need to know in our heart of hearts and gut of guts what is worthy of our attention and love. Do you?