

# With Curiosity and Courage

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Socrates called philosophy “the practice of dying.” The primary purpose of philosophy then is to teach us how to die and by doing so to teach us how to live. How do we learn to die well? We know death is inevitable but ordinarily we ignore the fact. We have to. Most of us are simply not strong enough to live with the fact of our own fragility. Life is far more precious and far more fragile than we ordinarily assume.

As age overtakes us we become less and less able to hide from the shadow of death. Some manage to maintain a cheerful façade even as fear and depression take hold. Others isolate themselves in quiet desperation. But there is another way. Call it philosophy or perhaps spiritual maturity. There is another way and it requires practice.

Before we delve into “the practice of dying” I think it wise to spend a little time on what I believe happens when we die. Other worldly traditions attempt to foster faith by promising an afterlife. I can’t believe in the bodily resurrection. I can’t

believe in Judgment Day. Heaven and hell I see as states of mind. I could, of course be wrong but I still hear that old campfire song goes, “There’ll be pie in the sky when you die (that’s a lie).”

Huston Smith in his recently published autobiography, Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine, recounts an encounter between a Zen master and student.

What happens when we die?

I don’t know.

But you're a Zen master!

True. Quite true. But I am not a dead Zen master.

Despite much testimony and a multitude of conflicting claims

regarding life after death what remains true is that no one

really knows. But we do still harbor certain unconscious

assumptions, which shape how we think about death and

dying. John Updike the prolific novelist, critic and poet who

died this past year wrote a lovely poem, which calls the

particularity of each life into high relief. It's called "Perfection

Wasted"

And another regrettable thing about death  
  
is the ceasing of your own brand of magic,  
  
which took a whole life to develop and market --  
  
the quips, the witticisms, the slant  
  
adjusted to a few, those loved ones nearest  
  
the lip of the stage, their soft faces blanched  
  
in the footlight glow, their laughter close to tears,  
  
their tears confused with their diamond earrings,  
  
their warm pooled breath in and out with your heartbeat,

their response and your performance twinned.

The jokes over the phone. The memories

packed in the rapid-access file. The whole act.

Who will do it again? That's it: no one;

imitators and descendants aren't the same.

I agree with Updike that each life is unique. Each person is

particular and must be of ultimate value. Having established

that fact I also must say that I do believe in unity. I believe

there is a universal consciousness out of which we come and

into which we surely do return. The experience of the Holy, those momentary glimpses of reunion when we lose ourselves in sensing a connection with the All-in-All are evidence enough for me.

The conundrum of human consciousness is its dual nature. Each one of us is a particular person, beautiful and flawed, sensing yes, and self-aware. And at the same time we each an expression of the wholeness of the Divine. The place where these two realities touch is called the soul.

William Ellery Channing, the one who laid the intellectual foundation for American Unitarianism taught that the primary purpose of life is to grow our souls. This notion closely resembles the Socratic dictum that philosophy is the practice of dying. Each time we turn from the particular to the universal, the membrane, the gateway, the threshold that is soul grows larger. As we move toward ever deeper living, without losing respect or affection for the particularities we become increasingly aware of the universal. It may help if you think of yourself or any particular person as a prism, which as it



becomes more transparent over time, increasingly refracts the universal light.

So the practice of dying involves a long slow letting go of one's attachment to the particular, to the foibles and failings, to the pleasures and disappointments every person experiences. To practice dying is to learn the art of spiritual surrender. Having let go of the promise of bodily resurrection and with it the comfort of a promised heavenly family reunion we embrace instead the possibility that life is truly one.

We find our faith in moments of transcendent wonder when the eyes of our eyes are opened, This service, “A Tolling of Bells,” provides an opportunity to say goodbye and thank you to those we’ve loved and lost in the year just past. At the conclusion of the service you will be invited to come forward, light a candle, tell us their name and a word or two of how their life helped to open your eyes.

Those of you who worship here regularly have heard repeatedly that we recommend you learn and practice a daily spiritual discipline to help you to find and keep your balance

and lead a loving life. Over the course of his long and loving life  
Huston Smith developed a highly structured approach to his  
daily devotions. Born into a Methodist missionary family in  
China he began life as a believing Christian. As a professor of  
religion he encountered the great traditions and made them  
each his own. For ten years he practiced Hinduism. For ten  
years he was a Buddhist. And for another ten his daily spiritual  
exercises grew directly out of Islam. Through it all he  
maintained three primary practices each morning. He would  
say he was engaged in the practice of dying. He writes "I begin

each day with exercise for the body, reading religious classics for my mind, and prayer for the spirit," each tradition, including our own, offers instruction in these three devotional practices. They do truly help prepare us to meet our deaths and so to live our lives with curiosity and courage.

I will end with a reading from Huston's Tales of Wonder in which he provides a powerful example of how to transform grief and fear into new and lasting faith.

*May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009. Ninety years old...A year ago I did something. I moved from my home on Colusa Avenue, full of air and light and*

*with my study overlooking Berkeley's golden hills, and moved into one room in an assisted living facility. I left Kendra, my intimate companion of sixty-five years, to cohabit with people in wheelchairs or depressed with Alzheimer's...The first night after the move was a dark night of the soul. Religion relies on that successful plot device, the happy ending. I still believed in one, but after my first night in the assisted-living residence I thought, the happy ending will now have to wait until I am dead.*

*And then after three days here, it became acceptable, perfectly fine. The move seemed no more than turning the page of a*

*book...People go to nursing homes, I've heard it said, to die. I came to this assisted-living residence, it seems, to cheer people up. I still begin each day with exercise for the body, reading religious classics for my mind, and prayer for the spirit...Now to the threefold body-mind-spirit morning regimen, I have added a fourth practice. Mentally, I take a census of the other residents here, and as each appears in my imagination, I ask how I might improve his or her day.*

There's nothing more I need to say dear friends. With practice grief can be transformed into gratitude, fear into new

faith and suffering even at death's door can be transformed

into love.

May it be so for each and all of us. Amen.