

Let the Mystery Be

Reflections by Lisa Flanagan and Rev. Jackie Clement
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Reading: from *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Ann Lamott

I have grown old enough to develop radical acceptance. I insist on the right to swim in warm water at every opportunity, no matter how I look, no matter how young and gorgeous the other people on the beach are. I don't think that if I live to be eighty, I'm going to wish I'd spent more hours in the gym or kept my house a lot cleaner. I'm going to wish I had swum more unashamedly, made more mistakes, spaced out more, rested. On the day I die, I want to have had dessert. So this informs how I live now.

I have survived so much loss, as all of us have by our forties – my parents, dear friends, my pets. Rubble is the ground on which our deepest friendships are built. If you haven't already, you will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and you never completely get over the loss of a deeply beloved person. But this is also good news. The person lives forever, in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through, and you learn to dance with the banged-up heart. You dance to the absurdities of life; you dance to the minuet of old friendships.

Reading: from *Love and Death*, Forrest Church

All our lives end in the middle of the story. There is ongoing business left unfinished. We leave the stage before discovering how the story will turn out. In the meantime, however, to help ensure a good exit, one thing is fully within our power. We can take care of unfinished business. We can make peace with ourselves, reconcile, where possible, with our loved ones, and free ourselves to say yes to the cosmos, to embrace our lives and deaths, to make peace with God.

To be free to accept death is to be free, period. The courage we need comes before, when we face our own demons or reach out across a great divide to touch hands. It is life work not death work, but it pays great dividends down the line. So, if you need to, put down that drink. Or pick up the phone. Or take that long postponed trip. You know what your unfinished business is. Don't wait until it's too late to begin taking care of it. Death may come as a thief in the night, but it cannot steal from you the love you have given away, the strength you have shown in facing life's hardships, or the courage you have proved in quelling your inner demons. In taking care of your own unfinished business, and in helping your loved ones take care of theirs, you can liberate yourself and them from suffering that, if you wait too long, may one day become intractable, written in indelible ink, darkening the pages of your book of life.

Above all, by taking care of business you will improve the story you are in. Today's works of love and acts of conscience weave themselves into a plot that will continue long after you are gone, yet be changed for the better by your deeds when you were here. Life may not be immortal, but life is immortal. Its every gesture signs the air with honor. Its witness carried past the grave from heart to heart.

Reflection by Lisa Flanagan:

When I was a girl, my Ukrainian grandmother, Baba, as we called her, who lived in Alberta, Canada, would crack open “the box below the sewing machine” during our summertime visits. My brother and sisters and I dreaded these moments. “Oh, no, not THE BOX.” My stomach would begin to ache, as if I were homesick or lost. The box was a thin-sided department store gift box which held her burial clothes – her going “home to Jesus” clothes. Her Jesus ensemble consisted of a flowered cotton print dress with buttons up the front and a matching fabric belt, a cotton babushka, thick, knee-high hose, a full length white slip, a pair of old lady underwear, and a pair of house slippers. All but the hose and slippers she had sewn herself on her Singer sewing machine. My stomach ached because I did not want to think about DEATH, HER death, or about her dead body lying in a casket wearing that burial outfit.

This is what she would do every single time we would visit from California: Baba would take the box from underneath the old Singer treadle machine, and motion us to sit with her on the couch. In stilted English, she would tell us that these were the clothes that she would wear when she died and went home to God. Jesus. They were interchangeable, God and Jesus. Or, it was sort of like God was the landlord, and Jesus, the roommate. When she spoke of her future reunion with Jesus/God, her blue eyes sparkled, and joy leaked out at the corners of her smiling mouth. It would be the vacation of a lifetime, a well-deserved destination which she had earned from her deep faith and very hard life on the prairie. Along the lines of destination weddings, this would be her “destination death,” only far cheaper. Baba so believed in this vision of God and heaven that there was never any question that this was the inevitable journey’s end – not only for her, but for all of us. “Jesus loves you,” she would say, blue eyes gleaming. As if Jesus’ love were the best kind of love, better than any human love, the caviar of love. Like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, where basic needs and survival are at the lower rungs, and the climb is to get to self-actualization. Life, according to Baba, was climbing the ladder to Jesus.

I believed that Baba’s Jesus loved me, that Baba loved me, and that I loved her. What I didn’t understand was why Jesus’ love was more important than hers, because I felt hers. Hers was real.

In the winter of 1992 my Baba was dying. She lay in a hospital bed following a series of strokes, and was no longer able to talk or see. She looked like the survivor of a sea accident, floating on her chrome-railed raft. We, her California children and grandchildren, had flown to be there at her bedside, along with her Canadian children and grandchildren, our aunts, uncles and cousins.

We circled Baba for days, singing her favorite hymns – Amazing Grace, The Old Rugged Cross, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, We massaged her aching hips, and told stories of the “old days.” After about a week of holding vigil and listening to her breathing, counting the spaces in between, watching her skin become grayer, her breathing finally became shallower, then slowed, until it stopped. Collectively we held our breath, waiting for the next breath sound, but none came. The room grew colder, and our sobbing commenced. We held hands and closed the circle. Baba was gone.

Since Baba's death, I've spent 13 of the 22 years of my social work career in hospice. I've met dying people whose emotional burial attire was scratchy with bitterness and regret; those who wore joy like soft undergarments; those whose ability to love clothed them in the finest velvet. What will you wear, so to speak, in this life as you *live* it?

At my life's end, will I have a "destination death?"

In my twenties I had a dream. At the time, I was in therapy, excavating my childhood, smoking cigarettes and loathing myself. In the dream, I was sitting in the foyer of a funeral home in a straight-backed chair. I was alone. I realized that I was there to die. Suddenly, I was gripped with desperate sadness that it was too early for my death, and that I had much more life left to live. I sprang from the chair and began dancing in the empty hall -- leaping, twirling, arms flying, hair floating. As suddenly as I began, I stopped, and returned to the chair. My final burst of life energy now spent, I was, once again, waiting to die.

I want to live my life *living* it, not like in the dream, as if I am waiting for it to end. I want *this* life to be my destination, not some heaven, hell, or purgatory. I want to live my life NOW.

At the funeral home, Baba lay in her casket. There she was dressed in the burial garb she had made and chosen so long ago. She looked waxy and unreal, her mouth and jaw set in an unnatural gape. The clothes, once flattened and one-dimensional, were now filled out. Having never seen the burial clothes actually worn before, it was very strange to see them filled with my Baba.

Since then, I've seen hundreds of dead bodies, and many hundreds more dying people. When I meet people who are dying, what I've experienced with them over and over is that they look back on the life they have lived, not to the hereafter. In hospice lingo it's called a "life review." It's very common at the *end* of people's lives. And yet they spend most of those lives worrying about what happens after they're dead. Since I truly don't know what is next after I will take my last breath, I'm left with the "not knowing," with uncertainty. What we know for certain is that we will all die. What's up to us is how we live. So our job is to live... and to dance. The rest is a mystery.

Reflection by Rev. Jackie Clement:

We live in a culture that is not at ease with death. We have developed practices, institutions and laws to remove us from death's proximity. No longer is it expected that people will or should die at home, or that families will prepare the bodies of loved ones for burial. The rituals of communal mourning are replaced by piles of plastic-wrapped flowers and placards at the sites of loss, disposable signs of regard.

Yet we inherit traditions of wisdom in arts and religion that portray death in very different ways—from the sublime to the abhorrent. In the Romantic tradition of Keats, Shelley, Byron, William Blake and Giuseppe Verdi we see death painted as blissful consummation of the heart's longing.

In *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats wrote:

I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever it seems rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such ecstasy!

This romantic view of death as a bliss to sought stands in stark contrast to a modernist view such as that found in the words of poet Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Most of us regular folks probably land somewhere in between, and I would guess, move back and forth within the spectrum of acceptance and denial of death, seeking and pushing it away. But regardless of where we are in that spectrum at any given time, there are things we can do to help ourselves and those we love come to a more peaceful place about our eventual deaths.

This is, I think, is what Lisa's Baba was doing when she showed her grandchildren her burial clothes. She was preparing them, helping them come to a place of understanding that she would one day die. She was coming to as good a death as she knew how.

When I think of people I have known who have died well, I do not think of the circumstances of accident or disease, how many years they lived or how many goals they accomplished. But rather I think of the more intangible aspects – call it the state of their spirit, their frame of mind, their psychological health or even their worldview. And it is not even about a sense of peace necessarily, though it does have to do with acceptance. But acceptance of life, not death. It is about being able to engage openly in what is happening to them, to be able to remain close to people and to engage in loving rather than in dying.

One of the people in this church that I witnessed embody what I'm talking about was Helen Mogill. I know many of you did not get a chance to know Helen well as she and her husband Tim were not members for long before Helen's death. But throughout her illness and her dying Helen exemplified what I mean by dying well.

When she was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer three and a half years ago Helen did, or had already done, all the practical things she could do – made a will, had a healthcare power of attorney, discussed her wishes with Tim, set up a course of medical treatment, informed her children and spoke with her grandchildren about illness and eventual death. And then she got on with living. She continued to do the things which brought her joy and gave meaning to her life. More, she did things that brought joy to other people. She worked for the historical society and taught literacy so that others could have fuller lives.

What Helen did so well in her dying comes down to two things, 1) she faced the fact that her time was coming to a close and 2) she kept on loving. She knew she had more love to give and so she set about not dying (although that was her acknowledged and unsentimentalized reality), but continuing to love, to give to the world in ways she could. Helen's death showed me, yet again, the power of living even in heartbreaking circumstances. I think Helen would have agreed with the piece I read earlier by Forrest Church where he said that the best path to a good death is living well and putting out into the world the love that will survive us, that immortality lies in love.

Death is the ultimate mystery. With mystery can come fear. With loss comes suffering. There are ways to counter both fear and suffering. One way is to distance yourself from all profound attachments. Close off your heart and lock the door of all affection. But another way is to recognize the profound reality that your attachment to all being is indeed *so* profound that it cannot be broken, even by death. And, recognizing this, live in such a way that your life might be worth dying for.

Counter fear with love. Know that love is immortal. And let the mystery be.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.