

THE DIFFICULT WORK OF DYING

“I never thought dying would be so difficult,” he said to his daughter two days before he was rushed into Emergency.

I found him in a curtained little hospital cubicle lying on his back. His eyes were closed, the lower half of his face almost obscured by a plastic oxygen mask. He hadn't shaved for a few days. The white stubble covering his chin and cheeks made it hard to recognize his familiar face. He opened his eyes when I said his name. He smiled and nodded when I asked if he knew me.

I first met this round small bald-headed man when he was the caretaker of the school I attended for grades three and four. I was a short child who had learned early the lesson that small people must make a noise if they are going to be noticed. I felt invisible and determined to make up for my lack of presence by being noticeably irritating whenever I got the chance. It never occurred to me, that any adult other than my teacher, who was required to acknowledge my presence, would ever be aware of my existence.

But, when my grade school caretaker reappeared in my life thirty years later, to my astonishment, he remembered me. He called me by name. Somehow, this quiet, gentle man had noticed me in those forbidding school corridors of my childhood. Even as he had carefully fulfilled the daily tasks of his profession – dusting, cleaning, collecting the garbage of several hundred children, brushing the blackboards, and pounding the dusty chalk brushes – he had attended to my presence.

As he had scrubbed each scuffmark on the long stretches of linoleum floor, he had noticed the hurried children who left behind so much work for him to do.

Perhaps this noticing had been his real work. Perhaps in seeing me, and many of the other hidden children, he had pointed the way to the real task of this life.

Now, at ninety-three his only work was the difficult work of dying. The only corridor he faced was the long hallway that would carry him through this last transition from physical

life into whatever follows that dark mystery we call “death.” As I stood by his bed in the hospital, it seemed unfair that this final journey should be “so difficult.” His kindly life should have prepared him for an easy passage. He should be able to move seamlessly from one dimension to the next.

But in my experience watching people die, the final letting go is often hard to do. Our attachments run deep. Our tendency to identify with those things we have built and foolishly think we possess has a powerful hold. It is the work of a lifetime to unclench. Every moment of each day provides opportunity to prepare for dying. The gentleness with which we live will shape the passage we make into the silence at the end of our days.

As the years move through the classrooms and schoolyards, the work places and the family ties that make up the details of our lives, we have the chance to learn to let go. Time passes most easily for those who hold it lightly and release it without clinging and demanding. We come to know that life does not finally consist in accumulating more and more, or gaining privilege, power or position. Life consists of passing from one moment to the next and leaving behind a trail of goodness and gentleness that comes from seeing that it is the small things that matter and most of the messes we create will untangle themselves in time.

I am sad how little attention I paid to this man I first knew as the smiling face at the end of a broom. As I watch his breath become more shallow and the intervals between grow longer, I hope that I might learn to see the importance of small children kindly cared for and small tasks graciously performed. I hope I might learn that, when one thing is done, I can move on unencumbered to the next and then the next. I hope that I will find ways to get beyond my tendency to cling and demand that life somehow fulfill my dreams and wishes.

My childhood caretaker friend is gone now. There are no more chalkboards for him to erase, windows to clean, or children to notice. There are no longer any ties for him in this

world. He has been released from anything that might hold him here. However, we understand the final state that is death, in the end at least death brings a certain freedom.

Watching this small old man die, it seems to me he was wrong about one thing. His death was not “so difficult.” He passed easily and quickly into the unknown space beyond physical life. He did not struggle. He did not thrash around. For him, the difficult work of dying was accomplished with remarkable ease and extraordinary grace. He died, as he had lived – quietly, without fighting, clinging, or demanding. He had nothing to prove, no great kingdoms he must maintain, no status to protect, no position for which he needed to fight. He did not rage. He passed gently with the grace of a quiet spirit into death’s dark night.

These are the qualities that ease the “difficult” work of dying. These are the tasks that make possible a life of gentleness, a life that may not leave in its wake magnificent monuments to its greatness but neither will it leave a path of destruction and devastation. These are the qualities of a gentler way of being and a kinder life.

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