

Love Will See Us Through

“Longing for Longevity”, the topic of this *Health and Healing* is one positive way of speaking about our fear of dying. Most of us will do almost anything to avoid talking about, much less fully considering the painful reality that *we will die*. And yet, acknowledging, facing and accepting our terror about our own mortality can actually lead to a richer and more meaningful life – a life that is precious exactly because of its impermanence.

The death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a life threatening illness, may bring pain, fear and sorrow as well as an acute awareness of all that we take for granted in our lives. We find ourselves wanting to be near family and friends recognizing the importance of those tender connections. We *wake up* from our relatively unconscious state and see the world through new eyes – fully appreciating both the pain and the beauty of it. For a brief time we are fully present.

We may become aware that we are an infinitesimally small speck in the universe - part of an infinitely large whole and intimately connected to everything else. The origin of word universe is “combined into one, whole”. We may respond with awe and wonder at the breathtaking magnificence of our world and terrifying vulnerability because at our connections and attachments to those we love and life itself. The experience is both immanent and transcendent.

How do we live in the face of such awareness? I have an experience that has brought me great comfort over the years. My father died unexpectedly in 1978. David and I were in graduate school in Tennessee and my family was in Texas. We had no money for flights, so we drove all night to get home in time for the funeral. In the middle of the night, somewhere in Oklahoma, I had a *break down* – a *breaking down* of my normal awareness. Suddenly I was terrified and needed to be home immediately, but of course that was impossible so I was forced to simply be with my feelings.

Over the course of that night, in the midst of shock, fear and complicated grief because my father had been the source of significant trauma, I eventually entered a state of peace that I can recall to this day. In the dark, traveling through the great flat expanse of the Midwest under a canopy of stars, I became aware that I was a part of the cycle of life and death and it was all okay. Actually it was better than okay, it was perfect. The difficult feelings were all still there but I was held as part of the universe. Some would call it the Divine and that seems true and it is also true that it was beyond any notion I had had about the nature of God up until that point.

The feeling stayed with me for more than a month. This all happened the Wednesday after Thanksgiving and I remember writing in my Christmas cards that year how important it is to be aware of what we take for granted, urging friends to really appreciate being with loved ones over the holidays. The feeling gradually faded but I can recall it with an immediacy that brings comfort.

My understanding of the experience has grown and developed with time, meditation and healing. When I think about my own death or the death of those near me I know that even in the midst of great sorrow, we are all held in the oneness of the universe and that all will be okay. I don't know exactly what that "okay" is, only that it is the way things are and I believe the universe is without malice. We humans cause all of the really horrendous things in this world. I guess it is simply trusting in the natural order of things and if I can simply accept what is and contemplate being able to gracefully let go when my time comes, my fears and suffering decrease.

So how do we live with the knowledge that we will die? Each of us must find the answer to that question. We must grapple with why we are here. We must find meaning beyond our own time-limited existence, be a part of something bigger than ourselves. In the words of Mary Oliver from her poem *The Summer Day*:

Doesn't everything die at last, and all too soon?
Tell me what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?"

I recently came across a poem, *Guidelines* by Rhina Espaillat. I offer some of the verses to you as something to think about in the New Year. I hope that you find meaning and purpose in your life, experience the comfort of knowing you are held in love, know that everything will be okay and that you *love all you can* while you are here.

Guidelines

Here's what you need to do, since time began:
find something—diamond-rare or carbon-cheap,
it's all the same—and love it all you can.

Don't measure much or lay things out or scan;
don't save yourself for later, you won't keep;
spend yourself now on loving all you can.

It's going to hurt. That was the risk you ran
with your first breath; you knew the price was steep,
that loss is what there is, since time began

subtracting from your balance. That's the plan,
too late to quibble now, you're in too deep.
Just love what you still have, while you still can.

Don't count on schemes, it's far too short a span
from the first sowing till they come to reap.
One way alone to count, since time began:
love something, love it hard, now, while you can.

Rhina Espaillat

“Guidelines” by Rhina Espaillat, from *Her Place in These Designs* (Truman State University Press, 2008). Text as posted at Ronnow Poetry. and then reposted on A Year of Being Here, *daily mindfulness poetry by wordsmiths of the here and now*. Phyllis Cole-Dai, November 16, 2015. <http://us5.campaign-archive2.com/?u=457a3577c6b36ca98077cfe6b&id=169739a3e0&e=4ea4af7766>