

What Truly Matters

By Cynthia Long

We're in the dawn of great transformation. One of the shifts occurring is how we view death and its process. For too long to even whisper the word "death" could cause people to shudder. I've often wondered what others' fear might mean, particularly among those who seem devoted to traditional religious beliefs that uphold a concept of the "hereafter."

Most religious and spiritual belief systems have sanctioned a traditional teaching of the after-life for centuries. Yet the fact is that plenty of people have doubts or conflicting feelings regarding death. So where does both faith and trust in the hereafter enter the larger picture?

Subsequently we must ask why is the grieving process prolonged for so many? Some individuals never get over the death of a loved one. Isn't it worth asking if people truly believe in such a well-documented heavenly place, why dying remains so feared?

I've heard people say they miss loved ones, and that this longing causes extended grief. In studying the phenomena of the near-death experience (NDE), similar experiences are recognizable: "Our loved ones are very close. They're a thought away." (I, too, have had visitations from loved ones. Not one seemed to want to come back here!) The messages I give to loved ones about their deceased is that they are happy and content, and that the deceased also wants the surviving family to be equally at peace. I do understand the difficulty of accepting a concept that is so far beyond imagination, but significantly larger numbers of people are returning from a NDE to share their story. Visitations of loved ones are at record numbers, along with mediums like- James Von Praagh's and John Edward's of the world, helping us heal by sharing their gifts.

I believe one of the main societal feared-based issues is that sharing true feelings is discouraged. Every family I know is dealing with some kind of family dysfunction carried forward from generation to generation. But it's all changing. The self-help industry is a billion dollars strong. Many want change and they're willing to work for it.

So where does death come into play? The death process, including grieving, is literally a part of life—it's a natural occurrence we all will experience. Death's process is probably the deepest-felt experience we can imagine—be it direct or indirect.. Inherently we know this to be true, yet it's a painful and avoided subject in society. Ironically, as some of us already understand, death can be a process that helps facilitate emotional healing. By experiencing someone else's dying, we will be greater enabled to reach a more profound level of human growth and spiritual awareness.

Death and the process of dying are gaining renewed interest in North America and elsewhere. We're beginning to explore and learn more about the ancient traditions and related customs. Hindus, Buddhists, the Chinese, Native Americans and Aborigines are just a few of the countless worldly examples of people who practice traditions that ritualize death and dying and who uphold the after-life concept.

Here's a question to ponder: Why do we treat our closest relationships poorly, knowing they could pass away any moment? If we consciously think ahead (prior to reacting to common daily scenarios) and ask ourselves, "If so-and-so died tomorrow, would this issue at hand matter?" The answer is probably not. Try asking yourself the same question sometime. Notice how your closest relationships shift toward a deeper sense of appreciation.

A few years ago, I connected with a woman whose daughter was killed five minutes after leaving home. The daughter kissed her mom goodbye and went off to school. Five minutes later she was gone. All the times the mother scolded or battled with her child in the past have now shifted. Her daughter's messy bedroom, once the subject of challenging arguments, was no longer regarded as an issue. Instead, this room has become a sanctuary; the tossed clothes on the floor having been used to hold and cry upon. The mother left the room in disarray for months—the disorder was comforting and healing during that most difficult life experience.

We want our children to be responsible but in looking at the larger picture, what truly matters most?

The aforementioned example is, unfortunately, plentiful. However, it's also indicative of how death and its process can facilitate transformations in our relationships before tragedy strikes by creating deeper, stronger and more healthful bonds with our loved ones while they're alive. Perhaps *again* the answer is to ask ourselves: If my loved one died tomorrow, would this current disagreement truly matter? And if my loved one died tomorrow, have I shared all that's possible? Have I expressed my love and appreciation sufficiently so that my true feelings (for him or her) are understood?

Not only do many of us keep our deeper feelings camouflaged, yet for men there's an even stronger societal message that sharing feelings of emotional depth is a less masculine behavior; in essence, that communicating feelings is a weakness in character. Feelings have been tucked under that dusty carpet for too long and they occasionally erupt in dysfunctional ways. Sometimes feelings become so suppressed that illness results. Attitudes are, however, beginning to shift... and it's long overdue.

I was introduced to life's lessons on death and dying at an early age. My father, grandparents, aunts and uncles and a few cousins and friends have given me openings to a new way to view death. Ultimately, what I've learned on my journey is that the only thing that matters is *love*. All the "little stuff" we collect or each circumstance we convince ourselves matters eventually slips away. In short, when we place such an undue emphasis on things or trivial situations, causing our most precious relationships suffer.

A few years ago, depression almost claimed my son's life. As a toddler, he was at death's door several times. Our family persevered through lots of the feelings, the challenging process and made it through. During my son's battle with depression, he literally planned to end his life. I was unaware, as many parents are, of the severity and impact depression had on him. To almost lose a child—or to actually lose one—is one of the most unbelievable experiences one can endure. It brought me to my knees, and I was subsequently pushed into entering the next level of my spiritual growth.

My personal experiences inspired my journey to actively explore death and what that process means to me today. I'm grateful because the lessons I've learned are today helping me support others who are experiencing their own monumental life challenges.

It's taken me many years and just as many stages to arrive at this moment in time. I feel that's probably how most experience this passage, to come to a place where we can objectively observe and reach more healthful, loving and mature decisions based on the larger picture—to honor ourselves and others as points of lights on personal journeys; and to respect that their level of growth is exactly where it's supposed to be. We can choose to accept things as they develop, knowing we'll make it somehow because we always do.

We can also choose to understand when things don't come together it's for our highest good—something better is to follow.

And last, if we can remember, we're all here for a short while—some shorter than others—so treat your closest relationships as temporal blessings... because after all is said and done, we don't know what tomorrow brings.

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