

# *Spirituality & Community*

*September 2004*

*www.spiritualityandcommunity.com*

**What Truly Matters**  
By Cynthia Long

**Zen and the Art of Yard Work**  
By Kurt Venables



## **Henry D. Thoreau** **Walden**

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**  
By Robert Frost

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# Who We Are

[www.spiritualityandcommunity.com](http://www.spiritualityandcommunity.com)

## Origins

Spirituality & Community was founded in late 2003 by Kurt Venables to communicate with others who share an interest in spirituality and an appreciation for a diversity of spiritual beliefs.

## Mission

*We are dedicated to the spiritual development of our members and promoting spirituality and appreciation for the rich array of spiritual beliefs the world provides.*

## Foundations

*Spirituality & Community is a magazine and online community for those seeking answers to life's deepest questions. We hold closely these fundamental truths:*

- To find true happiness, one must open his or her heart to the pure goodness that lies deep within. We call this pure goodness the Good, the Light, and the Lord within.*
- The process of opening one's heart is a lifelong journey, which we call Spirituality.*

We distinguish between spirituality and religion. *Our focus is spirituality, which we view as an inner search for happiness and fulfillment.* We are concerned with what lies within the heart. In religion, metaphysical and supernatural concepts are inextricably linked to spirituality, and you will find such religious concepts discussed here to the extent that the writer believes them to be entwined with spiritual topics. However, you will not find material written for the sole purpose of asserting, denying, or debating supernatural religious phenomena, whether they be associated with traditional religions or new age religions. Examples of such phenomena might include the existence of God, reincarnation, or extraterrestrials. It's not that we don't consider these to be worthy subjects; it's just that we believe that spirituality, the inner journey, is important in its own right, and that is our focus here.

*We believe that true spiritual development depends upon a genuine appreciation for a diversity of spiritual beliefs.* Among our highest values is open-mindedness. We do not require or expect others to accept the particular beliefs of any one of us. We believe that as we develop such an appreciation for diversity, our perspective shifts away from an "all or nothing" concept of spirituality, an approach that supposes that one must either wholly accept or utterly reject a particular set of spiritual beliefs. This perceptual shift allows us to view the beliefs of others from a fresh vantage point, take from each set of beliefs that which rings true, and synthesize a personal spirituality that makes sense for each of us. *We believe that spirituality may best be defined as a personal journey towards true happiness and spiritual fulfillment and that the beliefs of others serve to guide each of us on our own journey.* Our goals are the personal growth of each and every member and the promotion of spiritual values and respect for individuality.

We believe that when we view the spiritual beliefs of others with our hearts, we see truth shine through. Truth shines all around us if we know how to see it. The truth we see in the spiritual beliefs of others guides each of us. It is in this vein that we wish this organization to be viewed. ***Through Spirituality & Community, we reveal our most intimate beliefs. We sincerely hope that some will find some truth within them, and we wish you only the best on your own personal journey!***

## **What We Do- Opportunities for Exploring Spirituality and Communication**

***Spirituality & Community produces a magazine and encompasses an online community. Both aspects serve as the basis for bringing together those who share our aspirations and beliefs, to meet each other and exchange ideas.*** We provide many opportunities for exploring spirituality and communicating with others:

- Spirituality & Community magazine***
- Features on the site***
- Online chats***
- Retreats*** (as interest arises)

The magazine is based on a Reader's Digest® type model. It is comprised primarily of reader submitted material. It is the primary mechanism for a member to both explore spirituality and communicate his or her ideas to others. Features from the past several issues are also posted on the site. When interest is sufficiently high, we will hold chats online. An eventual goal is to organize retreats in major metropolitan areas to allow participants to meet each other and discuss issues face to face.

Membership in Spirituality & Community is free and may be withdrawn at any time. The magazine is also free. Level of participation in any aspect of Spirituality & Community is strictly voluntary.

The organization and site were launched only very recently. Currently, membership is very small- We are in growth mode right now. ***If you would like to join, please visit our web site and click the Join Us! link.***

# Henry D. Thoreau

## *Walden*

(excerpt)

From Chapter 2,  
*Where I Lived, and What I Lived for*



*Walden Pond, by Herbert W. Gleason, circa 1900.*

[12] Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon"—said Damodara,[\(6\)](#) when his herds required new and larger pastures.

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

[13] Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran [\(7\)](#) or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was that part of creation where I had squatted,—

"There was a shepherd that did live,  
And held his thoughts as high  
As were the mounts whereon his flocks  
Did hourly feed him by."[\(8\)](#)

What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?

[14] Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora [\(9\)](#) as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching Thang [\(10\)](#) to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey [\(11\)](#) in the

air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air—to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas (12) say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, (13) are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

[15] We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

[16] I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty

about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."[\(14\)](#)

[17] Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,[\(15\)](#) made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan [\(16\)](#) simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers,[\(17\)](#) and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.

[18] Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for *work*, we haven't any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus' dance,[\(18\)](#) and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a woman, I might almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire—or to see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it

were the parish church itself. Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, "What's the news?" as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be waked every half-hour, doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. "Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe"—and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River;(19) never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself.

[19] For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life—I wrote this some years ago—that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all *news*, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure—news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada,(20) from time to time in the right proportions—they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers—and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649; and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year, you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted.

[20] What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old! "Kieou-pe-yu (21) (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to Khoung-tseu to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot accomplish it.. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy messenger! What a worthy messenger!" The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the week—for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not the fresh and brave beginning of a new one—with this one other drabble of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, "Pause! Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?"

[21] Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments.

If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul," continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*." [\(22\)](#) I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be. If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the "Mill-dam" go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it.

[22] Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry—determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest of the way is down hill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor, sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. [\(23\)](#) If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, [\(24\)](#) below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, [\(25\)](#) but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time.

If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.

[23] Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.

### Notes

1. William Cowper (1731-1800) English poet, hymnist, *The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk* (italics by Thoreau - a surveyor)
2. in Greek mythology Atlas supported the heavens on his shoulders
3. Marcus Porcius Cato (234-149 B.C.) Roman agricultural author
4. in Greek mythology, home of the gods
5. 5th century Hindu epic poem
6. another name for the Hindu god Krishna
7. Cassiopeia's Chair, Pleiades, and Hyades are constellations
8. anonymous, published 1610
9. in Roman mythology, the goddess of dawn
10. another name for Confucius
11. *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer, 8th cent. B.C. Greek epic poet
12. Brahmin religious books
13. statue in ancient Egypt said to produce music at dawn
14. Westminster Catechism
15. group of European states, 1815-1866
16. like the Spartans of ancient Greece, disciplined, austere
17. wooden railroad ties that support the rails
18. chorea, a nervous disorder characterized by involuntary movements
19. river in Arkansas and Louisiana
20. relating to Spanish & Portuguese politics, 1830's & 1840's
21. character in a book by Confucius
22. Brahma, Hindu god of creation
23. Roman name for Odysseus, character in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
24. a point of support
25. gauge used to measure the rise of the Nile River

# Spiritual Soup

By Kurt Venables

## Zen and the Art of Yard Work



This past weekend, I was out in the yard putting up a fence. We just got a new puppy, and we need an enclosure in the backyard for him to play in. Samantha (my 5 year old) loves animals, and we just had to get a dog for her. He is much loved and growing fast. Anyway, putting up this fence involved a lot of heavy physical work- digging, mixing concrete, lifting, nailing, especially the digging, as I was hitting a lot of rock. It was a typical hot July day, and with the sun beating down, the sweat was just pouring off of me. The kids and the pup were out in the yard playing. I took a short break and was watching them play when I was struck by one of those Zen moments. Maybe I was experiencing some kind of pain induced euphoria, like a punch drunk prize fighter, but I was suddenly overcome by complete peace and joy. The world seemed to just melt away, my mind grasped a single thought, and I was overcome by a deep sense that I had grasped anew an important truth. That truth is that ***to find complete happiness, we must be true to ourselves; we must simply be ourselves, without any extraneous or negative thoughts and feelings.*** Kids are happy when they are simply playing. The pup was happy simply to play or snooze. Likewise, people don't need lots of material possessions or prestige to be happy. They simply need to do what they were "made" to do. This month's feature is Thoreau's Walden, in which he describes his two years of rustic living at Walden pond. In the second chapter, Where I Lived, & What I

Lived for, Thoreau talks a lot about living deliberately and finding truth. I think that the idea I grasped in my Zen moment, that we must simply be ourselves, without extraneous or negative thoughts and feelings, is what he was talking about.

To understand in more detail what I believe lies behind this idea, first consider that the mind encompasses a duality of reason and emotion. The rational mind uses logic to plan actions. Basic emotional needs drive the rational mind; they provide the goals that rationality aims to achieve. Without emotion, there can be no reason. I believe, and this is what I think Thoreau was saying in Walden, that we need to take time to slow down, step out of the rat race. So many people run from task to task without ever thinking about what's important in life. SUV's and expensive houses really aren't that high on the list of basic emotional needs. With respect to true happiness, these things are essentially irrelevant. Yet this is what people crave most. So what *is* important? Basic physical needs, security, family, friends. However, I believe that the most important emotional need, that the very core of humanity, is goodness. One who's heart is hard and black cannot feel true happiness. Conversely, if our hearts are full of Light, they are also full of joy. In order to achieve true and complete happiness, we must simply "be ourselves"- if we simply

open our hearts, the Light will naturally shine through. This idea is difficult for the rational mind to grasp, and our culture places little value on it. This is unfortunate, but things can change. So let us each renew our realization of this most fundamental and critical truth and count ourselves profoundly blessed. Thoreau puts the situation eloquently in chapter 11, Higher Laws, of *Walden*:

*If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal-that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause*

*momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.*

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# What Truly Matters

By Cynthia M. 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.

By Cynthia M. Long

1311 ShoreView Dr  
San Ramon, Ca. 94583  
925/735-9002

[www.asacredmemory.com](http://www.asacredmemory.com)

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# Robert Frost

## *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.