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A Year to Live



HOW TO LIVE THIS YEAR
AS IF IT WERE YOUR LAST

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PRACTICE DYING

Socrates recommended that we should "always be occupied in the practice of dying." So did the Dalai Lama. Recently, when someone asked him what he would like to do next, he answered that he was fifty-eight years old and felt that it was time to complete his preparations for death.

I too am fifty-eight years old, two-thirds through an imaginary life (one-third of a lifetime from an imaginary death). When a journey is in our future, it is never too soon to check out the travel guides and customs, and to learn the language of the world approaching. And it's never too late to complete our birth. As Buddha said, "It doesn't matter how long you have forgotten, only how soon you remember."

In many cultures and spiritual traditions it is considered an act of wisdom to prepare for death throughout life. Gandhi, shot three times in the chest, repeated the name of Ram, the Lord, as he fell from his wounds. Gandhi wasn't just having a good day; he had practiced for years to be fully alive in the moment no matter what the circumstances. God was in his heart yesterday, and so he was present today.

In the Christian faith, one is prepared for death soon after the appearance of the body, baptism being a ritual water burial that heralds a new birth of the spirit. But to have "a second chance" is barely enough for most of us. We are racing against death just to complete our birth, to fulfill the heart's destiny. Most of us live half-unborn. Perhaps that is why so many have said that when they received their "one year, last year" prognosis, they felt something tighten and then release in their gut. Somehow, beyond anything they imagined might occur in such circumstances, after the fear, an unexpected sense of spaciousness arose. One person said, "As what the doctor said really sank in I could feel something very heavy begin to lift. I felt as though I was free to live my life at last. Bizarrely, life never felt so safe. Maybe I'm crazy, but I felt more freedom and love than I had in some time. In fact, I felt not as though my life was being taken away but as though it had been given back to me. I was going to die and my life was completely my own."

I wondered what this new aliveness was that we see so often in those with only a few months to live. What boundaries have been lifted so noticeably that previous hindrances to joy and mercy toward self and others melt into an increasingly expanding awareness and appreciation of the present?

Approaching a new year at the time I read the Dalai Lama's comment, it occurred to me that a New Year's Resolution Without Parallel would be to make a commitment to live my next year as if it were my last.

In Islam and Judaism, in Hinduism and Christianity, one is prepared throughout life to meet one's maker, the Great One. Even in Buddhism, where one is taught to rely more on supreme beingness than any supreme being, one practices to meet one's maker, one's self, and discover the enormous lumi-

nosity beyond the maker and the made. Though I have in many ways been preparing for death during the last forty years of practicing an openness to, and investigation of, life, never has such a one-year life experiment seemed so appropriate.

Indeed, in the many books of possible afterlives in various traditions such as the *Christian Book of Hours* or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which attempt to remedy our recoiling from a three-headed demon swirling swords and holding severed heads, or face a charging tiger, one teaching is always perfectly clear: that even dying does not overcome our fear of death, that the work to be done is to be done before we drop the body. As the god-drunken poet Kabir says, "What we call salvation belongs to the time before death. / If you don't break your ropes while you are alive / do you think ghosts will do it for you afterward? . . . / What is found now is found then."

So I committed myself to living a year as though it were my last. To practice dying. To be fully alive. To investigate the dread of, and resistance to, life and death. To complete my birth before it's over. To investigate that part of myself that refuses to take birth fully, and hops about as though it still had one foot in the womb. To enter the healing I have seen so many times as miraculous growth during a final illness. To place both feet on the ground at last. To live with mercy and awareness in the midst of the consequences of love, or the lack thereof. To explore this ground, the ground of being, out of which this impermanent body and ever-changing mind originate. To cut through a lifetime of confusion and forgetfulness. To undertake a life review with gratitude and forgiveness. To explore that which holds to its suffering, and cultivate a heart that cannot be distracted even by death.

In India, when someone dies, the body is transported on a

litter by the chanting family from the home to the sacred burning grounds. The litter carries the body as the song carries the soul. Halfway to the burning ghat, the procession halts and the litter is turned about so that the head of the deceased no longer points to the house from which he has just departed but toward the home he is approaching. Just so, I felt the carrying-board under my body and the song lifting my spirit. Clearly, it was time to stop the funeral procession and to turn my corpse toward the timeless present that includes my birth as well as my death. It was time to sit by my corpse covered in sacred fire and sing the song that frees the enormous heart from so small a life. There was just enough time for a year of being fully alive.

It is said that if you're fully alive before death, you will probably be fully alive afterward. It is also said that for those who think of themselves as "spiritual," the ego wants to attend its own funeral. Therefore we must be aware of such romantic notions during the one-year life/death experiment so as to keep ourselves from getting stuck in a tar pit of self-pitying aggrandizement. We need to remember that what will die in a year's time is not our essential being but our ability to interact physically with those we love and cherish.

You might think that working with the dying would have fully prepared me for death, particularly since I have also been teaching Buddhist meditation. But during the course of my one-year experiment I realized that all I had understood about death could be experienced at a yet deeper level. It was clear that though I was exploring the fear of death, it was the fear of life that needed to be investigated first. Certainly, on a good day, I might have been able to let go into death without much of a struggle and with my heart somewhat open. But I would have been dying without a sense of having healed and com-

pleted certain aspects of my life that I was able to control through spiritual practice but that were not wholly resolved: qualities of ambition, unforgiven miscreancies, posturings of the insecure self-image, primal attachments to, and identifications with, my suffering.

So, although I might have been able to depart life without much fuss, I still would have been leaving some unfinished business behind. (It must be said that even those who die in great peace may still have remnants yet incomplete, but the heart carries them over these obstacles nonetheless. Such largesse, however, is not something I would bet my life on.) I would have been dying perhaps without drawing all the healing and insight from the teachings life had provided. It would have been a bit like planting and nurturing a tree, protecting it from storms and drought, watching it bear fruit, and then abandoning it. Taking only those few offerings that had fallen to the ground, never reaching higher to glean from the upper branches. Leaving untouched provisions that might affect whatever navigations are to come for the migrating spirit. When we die we leave our life behind. In death, whatever wisdom we have garnered from the life just past continues to light the way for the next appropriate step.

Since we ordinarily live on the surface, caught up in bodily sensations and wildly competing thoughts, drawn into external stimuli, we more often relate *from* our life than *to* it. We hardly glimpse within the subtly expanding concentric circles that ripple through the mind from each moment of experience.

But when the heart at last acknowledges how much pain there is in the mind, it turns like a mother toward a frightened child. All that remains incomplete seems somehow workable

and an unmistakable joy arises at the possibility of becoming whole at last.

Because we never know whether our next breath may be our last, being prepared for the immediate unknown becomes as practical as applying for a passport while still uncertain of our destination or time of departure. Without these first steps the last steps can go badly.

And so the one-year life experiment begins. It's my last New Year's Eve. There are only 364 days left to look into Ondrea's amazingly deep eyes, to hold our children in my arms, to do what I need to do to become who I really am, to fulfill my birth.