

The Buried Soul

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Readings

June Kraeft died on June 21, 2004. She was a widely published poet, a Tucson poet and my friend. Her husband Norman, also a poet of note, found this poem on a yellow pad by her hospital bed the morning after she died. These are June's final written words. At the end, her arms, hands and fingers had swelled up, and her penmanship on that yellow pad shows what a struggle it was for to write the words she wanted to leave.—Ed Waters

Death stalked me up and down

the corridors of life last night,

chemo and cancer locked in lethal fight

morphing life's experiences into a satellite,

endlessly circling earth, no exit signs in sight.

Death chased me mercilessly, not polite.

Out-of-body experiences, the only show this night.

You are not here, I know that can't be right.

No reassuring marriage scenes, not black nor white.

Death stalks me up, down the corridors of life.

--June Kraeft

WOULDN'T MISS THIS FOR ANYTHING

- A tribute to Walt Whitman.

Quietly, he opened the door, gripped the extended hand,

shook it heartily, saying,

"Welcome, I've been waiting for you;

you are as welcome here as joy, grief, love, lust,

honesty, accomplishment, satisfaction

-- all I celebrate, all I delight in -- the stuff of life !"

"Please sit down; perhaps we can talk a while.

You will have my undivided attention !

Sorry, just a little joke."

"Oh essence of fear, trembling, denial;

of dirges, muffled drums, caissons draped in black;

of gallows humor and trite expressions --

he has his reward, it was a blessing, she can rest now --

of concerns greater than those for life itself;

of unshakeable belief in a hereafter,

any hereafter, any desperate means to avoid..."

"You see, I am ready -- eager!

Well... perhaps a song, another dance, a last cigarette.

Maybe there is no more than darkness, silence.

One doesn't know, but I know this; I fear none of it,

for I have lived loudly, filled my days to the brim.

I have been here and they all know it!"

"Oh, I see you must leave. Yes, of course, I'm coming;

wouldn't miss this for anything."

--*Ed Waters*

It is ironic that the one thing that most everyone in the world can agree on regarding life is that someday it will end in death. A *lifetime*, as in the book I read, is defined by the borders of birth and death. Death comes to us all.

This is pretty much where the overwhelming agreement stops. Some believe that when life ends, it ends...that's it! In the words of a bumper sticker I read recently, "Life's not too short...It's the longest thing anyone will ever do!"

Others would say, no...though this life ends in death, there is another life awaiting us, a *much longer* life, indeed an *eternal* life for which this lifetime is mere preparation.

Others would say though this lifetime ends, we will be called back to live out more lifetimes in a cycle of reincarnations, and that each lifetime is preparation for an eventual escape from this cycle.

Still others subscribe to something of a middle road, found in both scientific and mystical versions...this life ends, our identity is snuffed out with it, but life itself, in some form, continues on from the elements from which we are made.

Along with a whole host of other thoughts about what happens after death, there are widely varying conceptions about how we should view death. Some would say we need to understand the natural cycle of life and death and accept the rhythm of that cycle, savoring our lives all the more with the knowledge that they will someday end. Others would say, along with Dylan Thomas, "*Do not go gently into that good night...Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*" [my italics]

I was surprised, at my father's funeral, to have the minister say to me before the service that he saw death, not as natural, but as the great enemy over which Christ would one day prove victorious. I found that somewhat disconcerting. Even though I had been raised with a similar theology, I had always felt that I needed to somehow gain an underlying acceptance of death—however fleeting, however tenuous—an acceptance of *death as natural* in order to fully appreciate this life.

And yet, if I am to fault his manner of seeking solace in a divine future rather than the natural order, it may also be that I am sentimentalizing a brutal fact of existence that does not lend itself to such painless acceptance as I would hope. How is it for those who, like June Kraeft, feel Death stalking them up and down the corridors of life, feel death chasing them mercilessly? And though the rest of us may be able to submerge the realization in the hubbub of our daily lives, certainly we all know that Death has *our* number, too. As the late Tucson writer, Alan Harrington has said, "It would be foolish not to be paranoid when the universe is out to kill every last one of us." (*The Immortalist*, Harrington, pg. 156)

I can *say* that I understand death as a natural process; I can *say* that I'm not afraid of dying...but I don't know if I can *mean* it, not *completely*.

Those of you who have experienced the deaths of people you cherish know that acceptance is not a once-and-for-all process. There is a part of us that may understand it as the rhythm of the universe; we nod our heads to those well meaning phrases in Ed's poem-- *he has his reward, it was a blessing, she can rest now* --and there is another part of us that still cries out, "Why? Why now? Why *ever*?" It may be natural, but it is not just. It may be the *rhythm* of things, but sometimes it stills the *most beautiful of melodies*. When a life is undeniably over, we cannot help but ask ourselves in the tired, worn words of the Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

And even if I have come to terms with the death of loved ones, I have to admit to myself that accepting *your* death is a quite different thing than accepting *my own* death. *Your* death is something I have to assimilate into the stream of my life, hard as that may be. *My* death is the death of the whole universe, the dying of the light that precludes any chance at acceptance or rejection on my part, the end beyond which it is impossible to see.

John O'Donohue, in a reading from *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* that Sharon Travis shared with us a few weeks back, said that "all fear is rooted in the fear of death," and says that we need to acknowledge the rhythm of death in life.

Alan Harrington, in a brazen 1969 treatise entitled *The Immortalist*, would agree that all fear is rooted in the fear of death and that, for that very reason, we can and should do everything we can to conquer death through medical/scientific means. Death has become intolerable to self-aware creatures such as ourselves, he says. Further, the fear of death and the struggle for immortality through religious, superstitious, unscientific means overshadows all of human history and determines much of human behavior. The struggle for status, popularity, excellence is a way of standing out before the gods as worthy of eternal life. Conversely, the submerging of our identity within a larger body, be it religious, political, or otherwise, is an attempt to sneak into eternal life on the group pass.

He traces the often camouflaged struggle against death through a wide range of literary, religious, and philosophical texts, and, on the other hand, interprets our perceived abandonment of the struggle, our hypocritical acceptance of death, as a way to find favor with the gods who will be so impressed by our humility that they will grant us *what we say we don't want*. (Like the child saying, "No, really, I don't want another cookie...save it for another kid...I'll go without...really, it's ok.") Even if we subscribe to the Buddhist insistence that there is truly no "I" to rescue from death, we really are, according to Harrington, simply trying to throw death off of our trail by claiming to have no separate identity at all.

Though we have repressed the awareness of our defiance of death, he sees this submerged and distorted struggle for immortality as the source of evil. In our struggle to climb the ladder to the eternal, and our assurance that there are only a limited number of spots available, we are willing to step on another's fingers, claw our way to the top, and to hell with everyone else. If we brought this desire for immortality into the light, he says, pooled scientific resources and talents across religious and political and sociological divisions, to make immortality a reality available to all, we would usher in a new dawning of peace and good will in human relationships.

It's a provocative position, but I admit reluctance to signing on to his view. He is impressively thorough in his depiction of how immortality would work in terms of population, food distribution, etc., but I have lived through a sufficient number of technological breakthroughs and read enough good science fiction to know that such a major feat as achieving immortality through medical means would involve moral and ethical consequences for the human race that we cannot even dream of (and may not want to imagine).

Yet one thing is clear: one way or another, we humans cannot help but look for life beyond life. And it's been that way for as far back as we can see, it seems.

In this vein, I was greatly looking forward to reading a book entitled, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, by Timothy Taylor from Beacon Press, the publishing arm of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Sifting through archaeological and historical evidence, he "charts the story of the human response to death."

Hmmm...Maybe if I was more anthropologically savvy, I wouldn't have imagined solemn, respectful and reverent rituals dating from prehistoric days...As it was, I was treated to page after page of cannibalism, ritual rape, live burials, vampirism, ritual murders, and bog burials. Hardly the normal sermon fare...(and not exactly appropriate for the children's story, either.)

But what struck me, throughout the gruesome details, was the huge specter that Death casts over the whole of human history. All of the things described, as bizarre and cruel as they sometimes appear from this vantage point, were created by humans who were trying to maneuver the dangerous terrain of life's end, believing that something—*something*—lives on, and that humans could play a part in navigating that hazardous journey from one mode of existence to the next.

Some of the techniques were straightforwardly practical. Cannibalism, after all, is one way of assuring that my loved one will live on within me. It is no wonder that Pagans suspected Christians of cannibalism when these Christians repeated the words of Jesus: "Take; eat; this is my body which is given for you..." The symbolism is clear. Early humans were simply more literal.

And there was a notion across many different times and cultures that, upon death, a spirit was released, a *soul* that had simply lived within the body, but was not reliant upon it. Many of the customs surrounding death had to do with the safe passage of that spirit to where it belonged, either incorporated into the ongoing lives of the mortal, or safely distant from that realm, as restless spirits were known in certain societies to cause all kinds of trouble for the living.

And this notion of a surviving spirit has continued down through the ages. Many of us are convinced that, somehow, a life is more than the sum of its body parts, or that the soul, during our mortal existence, takes up residence within one or another of the body parts, (the heart, according to some...the brain... even, some have suggested, the liver), but at death, this soul is released from the body.

Author Mary Roach reports in a book entitled, *Stiff: The Curious Life of Human Cadavers*, that in 1907 Dr. Duncan MacDougall "began a series of experiments seeking to determine whether the soul could be weighed. Six dying patients, one after another, were installed on a special bed in MacDougall's office that sat upon a platformbeam scale sensitive to two-tenths of an ounce. By watching for changes in the weight of a human being before, and in the act of, dying, he sought to prove that the soul had substance." MacDougall's results, doing his best to rule out all other possible factors, was that the soul weighed three-fourths of an ounce.

Personally, this notion of a soul departing upon dying was made evident to me at the nursing home where I worked, upon experiencing for the first time the death of a resident on my hall. Another nursing assistant, one with much more experience than I ever achieved, came into the room upon hearing of the death. Yolanda was a no-nonsense sort of woman, about as colorfully foul-mouthed at break time as anyone I have ever been around, and yet, in this instance, she brought an incredible tenderness to the situation as she patiently walked me through the steps of preparing the body for the family to see. At one point, she opened a window, even though it was a chilly night. My expression must have betrayed my unspoken question: "We have to let Mary's spirit leave this place," she said. "She doesn't wanna be here anymore. You let the spirit go free" this last an instruction for me, for future reference, as I faced other deaths on my hall. And opening the window was as practical as changing the sheets, as wiping the saliva and sweat off Mary's face and brushing the tangles from her hair...let her spirit go free...it was what you did when someone died.

And it felt right to me. Though I neglected the practice in later experiences, first as a nursing assistant, then as a chaplain, I hope I held the spirit of that practice in mind. I don't know that I believe it...I don't know that it's a question of belief. But the deaths that I have witnessed, the passage from one state into another, seems so slight, so imperceptible, the breath is no more, but is life itself so easily extinguished? Can we say for sure that nothing lives on? One moment passes into the next. It seems sometimes, though I know better, it seems that just a single breath, a snap of the fingers, a gentle touch might bring the person to life again. It seems that close, and unreachable at the same time. But if life has passed...where does it go? "You let the spirit go free," I hear Yolanda say.

So is death a stalker or a welcome visitor, as welcome "as joy, grief, love, lust, honesty, accomplishment, satisfaction"? Is death an enemy, or a necessary companion in this mortal life? Should we rage against the dying of the light, or work toward accepting the extinguishing of each life's flame as we extinguish the chalice at the end of the service? I think that our relationship to death is paradoxically inclusive rather than either/or. I pray that we love and support each other through the often painful paradoxes that death and the fear of death present to us. The heartbreakingly beautiful truth of these mortal lives we share is, as Mary Oliver states in our hymnal, that we *need to love what is mortal*, hold it against our bones knowing that our lives depend on it, and when the time comes to let it go...to let it go.

Reflections and Meditation

The Yupiit Eskimos said "that when one of them dies, it is the beginning of a sweet, infinite journey on a beautiful underground river. But there is danger along the way. The departed person's kayak can get caught in one of the vicious currents and be trapped forever in one of the eddy pools near the riverbanks. The traveler has no power to guide the kayak. Only those who remain behind can keep the kayak in the center of the river, safe from the dangerous currents and eddies. They do this by the words they speak and the thoughts they hold about the one who has left..."

Let's take a few moments to remember those we love who have died. The names that you hold in your heart, you may now speak into the silence, knowing that this community will hold them with loving

tenderness.