

A Death of One's Own

Meditations on grief and the extraordinary ability of some to tackle the end of life with grace.

MARK DOWIE / [NEW VILLAGE PRESS](#)

The following is an adapted excerpt from [Judith Letting Go: Six Months in the World's Smallest Death Cafe](#) by Mark Dowie, to be published February 2024 by New Village Press.

*Love and death are the great gifts that are given to us;
mostly they are passed on unopened.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Part of grieving is not wanting to let go of feelings we had for someone when that person was alive. Despite our efforts to hold on, those feelings subside, of course, drifting gradually into the background. And our sadness comes from watching that happen, as grief works at it its own pace, which, of course, is different for everyone, in every situation, and with every death.

Unlike the story itself, that part of the process, the lethal bereavement, never seems to end. Nor does the love felt for the departed. In fact, it becomes the driving force of our lasting grief, and ultimately, it seems, a companion of death itself.

Having lived a long life among many friends and relatives, who have since died, I've watched more than a few approach the end overwhelmed with tears, panic, longing, and a refusal to let go of anything. Some pleaded for mercy, others whined about the length of their unfinished bucket list, and many saw some sort of injustice in their fate. So it was refreshing to watch someone dive boldly into her final day without a single regret, while refusing to the very last hour to say that she was dying.

Of course she was both right and wrong about that. By one definition, we are all dying . . . always. Aware of the semantic ambiguity of the word *dying*, Judith believed that we are all living full-time until the true dying starts. And her true dying, she believed, wouldn't start until she took that first breath of nitrogen. Semantic subterfuge? Perhaps. I saw it as unshakable composure.

After Judith left, I literally dove, though perhaps not quite so boldly, into death, which I realized by then had, as a subject, been shoved, by me and by Western civilization, into the sterile seclusion of nursing homes, intensive care units, and other places people are sent to die out of sight. While I had lost friends and relatives, and been with dying people to the end, I really hadn't thought that

much about death itself before I met and grew close to Judith. While grieving her absence, I began reading everything I could to learn about where she might be.

Reading too much about death, one comes away with a lot of sophistry, and many more questions than answers. Of course, questions are the lifeblood of philosophic inquiry (and journalism), and sometimes the best we can hope for from philosophers grappling with a difficult subject are more questions, such as the following.

- Can one be completely happy while fearing death?
- Can life or death be understood alone, absent the other?
- Is fearing death simply fearing nonexistence?
- Does death give life a sense of urgency it would otherwise lack?
- How much easier it is to imagine the death of another than it is of our own? And which death should I fear the most, that person's or mine?
- Is the experience of dying in any way the experience of death, or merely the final experience of a fading life?
- Is it easier while living to conceive of existence before birth or after death? Or are they really the same thing?
- Can one be a spectator of death while being dead?
- Do people who are overattached to their own personality, as some analysts claim, really have the most trouble dying?
- Is my death generically different from anyone else's?
- Is death deterministic?
- If so, and it's inevitable, and followed by nothing, why bother doing anything?
- Is nothingness preferable to suffering?

Occasionally I stroll slowly through those questions, waiting a minute or two between each of them, with hopes of learning something from an answer. Aside from being left with a bunch of metaphysical quandaries, many of which can really be understood or solved only through contemplative practice, I really didn't learn much of importance from the process, or from philosophers, pundits, or journalists, that my all too short friendship with Judith hadn't already taught me. And I truly don't think I need to know more than I learned in our six months together to finish this blessedly long life I've been given and accept its denouement with the grace and equanimity I witnessed as Judith let go. But I am still left with questions of my own:

- Do the dark and silent eternities on either side of birth and death both give meaning to life . . . and to time?
- If we don't fear and despise the first spell of darkness, does it make sense to fear and despise the second?