

Shulamit Izen
November 30, 2012

Living into Our Dying

"She thinks she's dying," the nurse tells me when she pages.
"She thinks she's dying?" I clarify.
"She's nineteen. Has Lupus. She's in the hospital for a kidney infection, but she's not dying, at least not now, or anytime soon. But she thinks she is, so come."

When I reach the patient's room she's in hysterics.
"I'm dying," she tells me after I introduce myself as the chaplain.
"You seem petrified," I observe.
"Dying's scary" she tells me.
"What's it like?" I ask.
"It's awful," she says, "I might even die right now."

I try to stay with her in her fear yet
no technique of accompaniment seems to bring any solace.

My patient is convinced that she is dying.
Hours have gone by.

I decide to help her die.

"Ok, I ask, are you ready to die?"
"Yes," she says, "I'm ready. Just tell my mom that I love her, ok?"
"Ok," I say.
"I'm going to close my eyes," she tells me, "and then I'll die."
"I'll be here with you," I respond.
"Are you going to be scared?" She asks me.
"No," I say, "death is gentle. I've been at many deathbeds."
"How are you going to know when I die?" She asks. "Maybe you should put your hand on my heart?"
"I'll know," I tell her. "You can feel it in the room. But I can hold your hand if you want."
She is spread out on the bed, stiff and scared.
"You can take some deep breaths," I tell her, "that will help."
"Bye," she says, "thanks," and scrunches her eyes up tight.
For a couple of minutes she lays like that.
For a moment I wonder if she really is going to die.

Then her eyes pop open,
"Oh, I forgot, tell my mom that she can read my journals, ok?"
"Ok," I say, inwardly chuckling.

And there, in that hospital room,
I learned again a great truth:
We are dying. All of us.
Perhaps not “actively dying” in a clinical sense, but dying nonetheless.
In this moment and in each moment henceforth
Part of us is letting go and falling away.

And the question is: How can we hold that as truth and not be paralyzed by it?
How can we live into our dying and let our dying inform our living?

Across time and ocean from my patient was a Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, a poet-soul, who wrote about living in a place that was dying. Etty grew up in Amsterdam, and in 1941 was twenty-seven years old. As the war raged around her, Etty wrote and lived, and wrote some more. We have her words from her home in Amsterdam, and from the Westerbork Labor Camp. In 1943 Etty was killed in Auschwitz.

She writes in 1941, “And on Thursday evening the war raged once again outside my window and I lay there watching it all from my bed. Bernard was playing a Bach record next door. It had sounded so powerful and glowing, but then, suddenly, there were planes, fire, shooting, bombs—much noisier than they have been for a long time. It seemed to go on right beside the house. And it suddenly came to me again: there must be so many houses all over the world which are collapsing each day under just such bombs as these. And Bach went gallantly on, now faint and small. And I lay there in my bed in a very strange mood. Filaments of light along the menacing bare trunk outside my window. A constant pounding. And yet I felt so deeply peaceful and grateful, there in my bed, and meekly resigned to all the disasters and pains that might be in store for me.” (*An Interrupted Life*, p. 80)

She continues in another diary entry, “The reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.” (*An Interrupted Life*, p. 131)

Etty writes of the paradoxical nature of confronting death and her own dying while face-to-face with unfathomable terror. I hear a truth in Etty’s words that I hear often from those that sit in places of darkness and that I experience as I sit with them.

I did my first unit of clinical chaplaincy training in New York in the summertime. I would spend all day on the cardiac care unit of the hospital, watching patients gaze out the window, wishing they could be “out there.” Often when I left the hospital it would be pouring outside. In typical New York fashion people would dart from one awning to the next, cover their heads with newspapers, sigh loudly. And I, after my day in the hospital, would move slowly, look up, get drenched. I would mumble

blessings on repeat as I headed home. “Blessed are You, God, who makes me waterproof. Blessed are You, God, who makes me have a sense of humor. Blessed are You, God, who makes me have blessings on my tongue.” I consider myself pretty high on the gratitude spectrum, but never in my life was I as grateful for each moment as I was the first summer I worked at a hospital. It was, as Etty captured, in the proximity to life ending where I felt my life expanding.

I have a hunch that two ways to live into our dying and die into our living are to practice gratitude and to learn to reap the gifts of discomfort. Gratitude extends a moment, makes something finite infinite. Gratitude heightens awareness and awe. Often the deepest moments of gratitude come from letting ourselves seep in discomfort instead of running away.

I am just learning to drive, for the second time. I was in an accident when I was sixteen and before last month stayed away from the driver’s seat. Driving looms for me as a great phobia. I know I’ll figure it out, and still I often cry walking to the parking lot. The phobia is intense. On days I have to drive I wake up anxious. I often wonder if I should just give up. Maybe it’s not worth it to feel so afraid? And yet, the wise part of me is curious about what is under the discomfort, and am aware that I will only know the answer to that from letting myself feel the fullness of the fear. I’ve made a commitment to letting fear be my teacher, for this phobia at least.

To cope, I often talk to God as I walk to my car.

“Well, God,” I say, “at least now I know what it’s like to be scared to the point of tears. Maybe this will help me be a better chaplain.” “Well, God,” I continue, “at least you’ve blessed me with a range of emotions. You’ve given me the gift of discomfort so we can become better acquainted.” I go on. Eventually I laugh at myself. There really are gifts in everything. Curiosity about discomfort is a great teacher. And gratitude cultivation is the most effective tool I know for splitting open the moments when we’re stuck in our own limitations or circumstances.

This Simhat Torah I sat with Mr. J, a Shoah survivor, when he was in in-patient rehab. We had met before, and I had left deeply moved by this *neshama* filled man, his stories of the past, and his all-encompassing gratitude.

This time when I meet with him I bring a small *Sefer Torah*; he is too weak to attend the communal celebration. He rocks the Torah as if it were a child, and presses his face into it, kissing it again and again. “Shula, I will cherish this moment forever,” he tells me. “You know,” he says, “I say *Modeh Ani*, thank you God for waking me up, every day of my life. When I escaped the camp, I was in the forest. I would sleep with my stomach on the ground and when I would wake up my back would be frozen. I thought I would get pneumonia. I kept thanking God for waking me up and letting me move. I think that’s how I survived.”

We live into our dying by relishing each moment of our lives.

By blessing.
By living with unabashed fullness.

We die into our living by being willing to sit with suffering as it is.
By being curious about all that arises.
By letting the reality of the human situation
Electrify us into aliveness.

By embracing death and life as happening equally,
to us,
right now.

Perhaps you might want to know the end of the story
Of my patient and her dying.
The truth is, I don't know.
I know she didn't die while I was in the room. I know she was discharged.
But beyond that, I don't know.
She gets to scribe the rest of the story
As we all do with our own.

The ending is a choice---as are these middle chapters.

In each moment we decide:

How we want to live and how we want to die.

When our strength and frailty meet
There is a surge of aliveness
Which is none other
Than
The Holy Blessed One,
Creator of All.