Peaceful Passing
Practical and Spiritual Reminders for the End of Life
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One of life’s most challenging experiences for many of us is the death of a loved one, especially if we are with them near the end. The dying process demands our spiritual awareness and calls us to practice what we say we believe. It also involves practical considerations we might never have encountered before.

This booklet is intended to bring peace and confidence to those who are preparing for death and those accompanying them on the journey. It includes practical advice and resources, while emphasizing the spiritual aspects of the dying experience. (Unity also has a booklet offering spiritual support for caregivers and a booklet about grief. Visit unity.org/booklet.)

The writers of these essays are people who have sat and prayed and sung with loved ones as they made their transitions into a new form of life. Some are also ministers and some are professionals with years of hospice and hospital work experience. One is a composer whose music for the dying has touched millions of lives.

Of course, each of us will die eventually. But before we do, most of us will be called to the bedside of someone we love who is dying—that is, entering a new form of being. We hope this booklet offers you comfort, insight, and support as you experience this greatest of life’s sorrows and blessings.

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Autumn was particularly beautiful in Dallas last year. Rich crimsons, vibrant oranges, and luminous yellows with variations, depth, and intensity we rarely see here. Not many things about 2020 were perfect, but horticulturally, the conditions for a beautiful fall in North Texas were one of the year’s most memorable blessings.

Autumn has always been my favorite season. The ease with which nature releases and lets go is inspiring. It is a message of trust most profound. Every year, autumn demonstrates how she willingly participates in the transitional nature of life and its attendant peace. It is an annual display of gentle surrender borne of a deep, cellular knowing that change is safe and all is well.

Last fall, it was not just the color explosion that caught my breath but the profound appreciation I felt for it. Sheltering in place during a global pandemic, with little refuge or company save for my garden, there was no taking autumn for granted. No, if ever there were a year when I was primed to find grace wherever I could, it most certainly was 2020.

In addition to its beauty, the autumn of 2020 was a time when we all, both young and old, were presented with the reality of death in a way few of us in modern, peaceful societies ever have had to face. In centuries past, the end of life was not something from which it was possible to be completely insulated. When wakes were held at home and family members were buried in cemeteries on homestead land, a healthy understanding of the reality, normalcy, and, indeed, the inevitability of death were ever present.
When I first heard death referred to as “making one’s transition,” it sounded overly euphemistic—an avoidance of the D-word. But as my ear grew accustomed to the phrase, I realized this had been the perspective, if not the phrasing, with which I was raised. My mother always referred to death as “just another phase of life.” It held no fear for her. Even though her great love, my father, had died tragically at the age of only 32, devastating her heart and our little family, she always managed to hold the perspective that the pain she felt was for her own loss of a husband and father to their two little girls, not fear of what death meant for him.

I believe the design of life is divine, all of it. The living of it and the transitioning from it. Nature knows this, but many of us have forgotten and thus create our own suffering by resisting this sacred step. Thinking of death as the end does not allow for the beauty of the mystery. The unfolding of the majestic unknown. The possibility that what comes next could be an ecstatic experience of peace. An expansion of consciousness beyond what we can imagine. What if in death the joy and fulfillment we strove for in life washes generously over us, swaddling us in the warm, deep peace of understanding? What if death is actually enlightenment?

By peacefully embracing the inevitability of death, be it distant or near, our current life becomes exponentially more vivid. Knowing life is ephemeral sharpens the senses and reminds us of the profound gift each day gives. We as a society tend to place most value on things that are rare. Nature’s harvest, though ever abundant, is seasonal by design. When strawberries were only available in the summer for four weeks, they were much more highly valued than they are now that they are available all year. It is the same with our lives. As long as we deny life’s impermanence, we risk not fully savoring or appreciating it.

As I watched the colorful leaves fall in my garden last year, I couldn’t help but notice the grace of their descent. They floated, flipped, swished, and twirled like tiny, golden whirligigs spinning in giddy delight, with nothing to catch them save the soft, welcoming earth.

There is deep wisdom, faith, and grace in nature’s ability to let go.

If this is true in the world of things, how much more true it is in the world of mind! Soul has a substance of its own, no less permanent for being immaterial, no less real for being invisible. We cannot measure it with calipers or weigh it in a balance. We cannot feel it with our fingers or see it with our eyes. But it is there, substantial, real. It changes, but it will not perish.

Life does not begin with birth. It does not end with death. Life is an eternal process, an eternal progress. A visible form, an audible voice, an aggregation of organs, a network of ideas—we are more than these. These are the trappings of visibility. We are expressions of the Spirit of life …

There is only life. The truth is that we cannot die, for we are life. Life is energy. Life is expression. It cannot end, because it is endless. We may change form and vanish from view, but we cannot cease to be. We never cease to be, not for a moment. We cannot be separated from life. We cannot be less than life.

Life is a road that winds among the hills of time. With every turn in the road an old view vanishes, a new view appears. Life is a pilgrimage, a passage through eternity, a journey into the unknown. People are as travelers on a journey.

Some pass quickly beyond the bend in the road that hides them from our view. Some walk beside us all the way. Some seem to creep along, and some pass as swiftly as a runner. But life cannot be measured in terms of time, only in terms of living.

When people die they do not cease to be; they only pass beyond human sight …

Faced with the passing of someone we love, our hearts cry out in the passion of loneliness and are not comforted with easy answers.

Our hearts tell us that we are meant to live, not to die. We are meant to express life ever more consummately. When someone fails to do this, we wonder why.

To understand the meaning of death, we must understand the meaning of life. Looking at life, we see that all things change. But although all things change, nothing perishes …
He [She] has put on invisibility.
Dear Lord, I cannot see—
But this I know, although the road ascends
And passes from my sight,
That there will be no night;
That You will take him [her] gently by the hand
And lead him [her] on
Along the road of life that never ends,
And he [she] will find it is not death but dawn.
I do not doubt that You are there as here,
And You will hold him [her] dear.

Our life did not begin with birth,
It is not of the earth;
And this that we call death, it is no more
Than the opening and closing of a door—
And in Your house how many rooms must be
Beyond this one where we rest momently.

Dear Lord, I thank You for the faith that frees,
The love that knows it cannot lose its own;
The love that, looking through the shadows, sees
That You and he [she] and I are ever one!

—James Dillet Freeman

Death is a door through which we pass into another room. It is a rest between two notes in an unfinished symphony. It is a page we turn to a new chapter in the book of life. It is not the end; it is a new beginning. It is not the fall of the night; it is another dawn.

We may not know just what will occur when we pass through the door. Yet we can trust the Keeper of Infinity. Life is the work of a grand and kind intelligence and has an order and a meaning beyond our power to see … What scientist could have fashioned the human body? What philosopher could have thought of the laws that govern mind and space? What poet could have imagined love and wonder?

We can trust this intelligence that made the world. We were not made for dying, or for failure, or for pain. We are meant to live gloriously. We are the children of the Infinite. We have a divine destiny. We are advancing toward this destiny.

Out of the Infinite we came, and into the Infinite we return. But we are upward bound. We have risen through an eternity of experiences. We shall go higher yet.

James Dillet Freeman (1912–2003) was an internationally acclaimed poet, author, and lecturer. A Unity minister, he served as director of the Unity ministerial program as well as director of the Silent Unity prayer ministry. A longer version of this article first appeared in Unity Magazine, March 1995.