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Casting out fear *(death and dying)*

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On June 14, 2008, my mother, Catherine, died in our family home in Downey, California. She was eighty-four. My mother's life had declined for three years due to melanoma, strokes, and dementia. My father had been her constant caregiver. During the last several months, each of my seven sisters and brothers visited and offered help and comfort. We all gathered together in the last week of my mother's life. She could no longer eat or drink. Hospice counseled us that her current state, absent extraordinary intervention, would result in her dying within a week or two.

She was not responsive on Saturday, the day of her death. The morning had started with the change of nurses from the night to day shifts. One of my brothers stood at the foot of the bed talking with the nurse about her pain medications. As I stood listening, watching my mother, I felt a surge of anger. All that medical talk was filling her room. I felt that was the wrong energy for this tender time. She needed deep peace and I was just as sure she needed scripture. I hurriedly left the room and returned with the book of Psalms and the Gospels. Sitting at her bedside, I leaned in close to her left ear and started to read Psalm 23.

Oh God, you are my shepherd—
I want nothing more.

You let me lie down in green meadows,
You lead me beside restful waters:
You refresh my soul . . .

My mother suddenly turned her head toward me. Her eyes remained closed. I could feel her listening. My brother and the nurse stopped talking and moved out of the room. I continued to read and pray. It seemed her total focus became the scripture. I sensed that something in her was searching for how to get ready. She was looking for a pathway and this Psalm, so familiar to her, became her stepping stone. My sister Monica came in and sat on the other side of the bed. I continued to read passages from various gospels and pieces of other Psalms. Her whole body seemed to relax, her breathing changed, and I could hear long spaces between her breaths. Suddenly she opened her eyes wide, looked up at something that was compelling, smiled gently, and closed her eyes half way. The nurse quickly called in my father and sisters and brothers. I continued to read, propelled now, feeling the sacred texts were somehow leading her, giving her a path and a promise as she met her death. There were longer spaces now between her breaths. The ancient words drove as a momentum toward the mystery of death. Sisters, brothers, and my father barely breathed. The text was the only sound. "My soul is thirsting for the living God." The prayers, a cadence, were delivering life to life's end. The last breath. "Is she gone?" someone asked. I kept reading. A brother raged with weeping and sisters cried out, holding one another. I kept reading on and on knowing that the hearing is the last to go in death.

An hour later, the nurse helped me wash my mother's body. This body had once been my home and was my pathway into this world. Filled with many emotions, especially deep gratitude, I gently wiped her face with warm water that had a delicate rose petal scent. I washed her hands and arms, her torso and legs, but the skin had no life to it. My mother was not there. It was so clear. But to honor her body was my honor.

Questions

My mother's dying challenged my own finitude and propelled me to go deeper into understanding the death process. I found myself

asking these questions: What is death and should it be feared? What role does the body play in the dying process? Is gender a factor? Months later, these questions stayed with me when I was offered an opportunity to become a hospice spiritual care counselor. I was privileged to do this work for four years.

From my work in hospice, and in teaching religious studies, I believe what is needed is a new Christian approach to death and dying. Specifically, Christian body negativity has fueled women's fear of and disdain for their bodies. Certainly feminists have attempted to counter this by celebrating women's bodies in all shapes and colors. However, common approaches in Christian feminism have stopped short of valorizing women's bodies in the dying process.

We need a body-affirming theology, perhaps one based on the cycles of nature, the cycle of life and death, including the experience of our dissolving form. Traditionally, mind-body dualism and the theological concept of heaven drove Christians to emphasize the importance of the next life over this one. As a result of these beliefs, the body became an obstacle to one's spiritual journey toward heaven, something to be punished (as in practices of bodily mortification) or discarded. Thanks to the ideas of Augustine, the body was to be regarded as a bag of sinful impulses and temptations keeping us from God. But what of the core Christian message: the Incarnation?

Traditionally, Christianity limited the Incarnation to the body of Jesus. God took on flesh in the divinity/humanity of Jesus. But Christian feminist theologians suggest that we need to see Incarnation as belonging to each of us. Incarnation can be seen not as a static one-time event but a process in which living and dying is "Godging," to use Nelle Morton's word (n.b., God is not a noun but a verb) such that living and dying are connected as part of what God is. And further, Incarnation need not be confined to humanity. Sallie McFague offers the idea of the world being God's body: the cosmos as the body of God. Because of Incarnation, Christianity might have a special obligation to honor and embrace our bodies and our connectivity to all that is. Enfleshed in the breakdown of all bodies is a vulnerable God who is aching, suffering, in pain, and dependent. Imagine how the dying process for women might be affected if older women could feel that enfleshed in their withering bodies is a Divine Old Woman who is vulnerable and caring. The deterioration of a woman's body would not diminish that Divine

Old Woman, but re-imagine Her as the woman dies and releases her body, birthing the Divine Old Woman into the Mother of the Cosmos.

Fear

Christianity does not generally focus on death other than its relationship to the afterlife. Left unaddressed is the process of the body's shutting-down, the changes—gradual or immediate—that one experiences as aging and disease take over and the life-force slowly recedes. This silence breeds fear of death. The philosopher Susan Sontag feared death. Sontag struggled with breast cancer. She mistakenly felt that if she did not acknowledge the possibility of death, she could prevent its happening. Her fear was so fierce that she demanded her “community” to be her moral cheerleaders to push her to get better, to take another treatment for cancer, and never admit to, or speak about, dying. So it was that she would not talk with her son about her death and dying. Sontag's son David remembers how his mother was obsessed about death, fought it, and yet, was silent about it. She denied it any place in her psyche. Thus there was no process for her to examine her fear of death, no person to which she could whisper her fears, nothing to hold on to so death could turn itself inside out and reveal its process and place within the life cycle to her.

We struggle as humans to understand who we are in this universe. We reflect on the meaning of life and ask, “what is death?” The life/death experience needs, begs for, our attention. This is not morbid. This is healthy. If we do not speak of it, if we live in fear of death, we will die in fear of death. To die fearfully is a terrible fate—and it could be so different. If a person can speak about her own life/death, understanding for herself what her own life/dying/death process means, then perhaps she could die more easily.

While fear did not dominate my mother's dying process, for others, fear can control their experience of death. Fear can accentuate physical and psychic pain. Fear can close one off from relationships. Fear can stop the eyes from seeing, the ears from hearing, the nose from smelling, the mouth from speaking, the skin from feeling. Fear can wedge itself into one's body. Fear can take away one's sense of self.

How can one engage the dying process rather than fear it? Here is the story of “Helen,” a woman I saw for a period of five months in hospice. Fear blocked her ability to come to terms with her dying process.

Helen

“You’re the one I want to talk to. If there’s an afterlife, am I going to burn?”

That’s how our visits began. She’d been raised as a child on a steady diet of hellfire and damnation. In her adult life, such matters didn’t seem important. She raised her children, worked with her husband’s business, and took care of a mother who had not taken care of her. Her life was full. She had no time for hell.

She experienced heart failure as an older woman. She kept seeing a vision when she was taken to the hospital of a little man dressed as a genie, sitting cross-legged, with his back to her, who was looking at a shiny blackness. What did it mean? The vision filled her with fear.

Now in hospice, she sat and watched television everyday in her “comfort corner,” a cushioned chair in the corner of her room. She watched preachers like an elderly couple who daily inveighed on hellfire and damnation. She became more and more afraid each day. Still, she watched that couple, hoping for answers.

At first I wondered if there was something in her life that she deeply regretted, something left broken. Perhaps that was why she was afraid of damnation. She scoured her memory, dredged up spankings of her children, moments where she’d been angry with her husband. No. That wasn’t it.

I asked her if she had ever experienced a moment of peace. Suddenly she was full of memories. Once she had gone searching for answers to a local Catholic priest. But he didn’t seem to take her questions seriously. Then she went to an elderly, Seventh Day Adventist couple. As they spoke with her, she felt from them a pervasive love and peace. Real Christians, she mused. Even as she recalled them, she felt that same deep love and peace.

A second memory: she was on a cruise with her husband. She was standing on the back of a boat at sunset. Suddenly she felt the oneness of everything. Time stopped. There was stillness. She was filled with peace. She wanted it to never end.

A third memory: she was driving on a back road outside of Phoenix. She pulled over. There was silence. Suddenly, she felt part of everything. There was no sense of time, she felt she could just sit there forever. She didn't want to drive into town—she just wanted to stay right there.

One more memory: she'd been on a balcony of a motel. She looked down and saw the road and saw how it curved and then turned. She recalled that she could not see what was around that corner. When she thought about that image, she wondered about it. Maybe that's me, she said, always wondering what's around that corner.

The question of whether she had ever experienced a moment of peace was the simple impetus for a deluge of crystal clear memories that rushed back to her. She had touched something vast and yet peaceful. As she recalled each memory, its gift of peace returned to her. But would the preaching television with its relentless threats of hell and damnation erase those memories?

Through many months of conversations with me, she told stories of being a sharecropper and surviving poverty with her children in tow. Their lives had gradually changed with her husband's good business sense. Somehow in each conversation, we would speak of that elderly Seventh Day Adventist couple, or the moment on the boat, or her driving outside of Phoenix, or the road where she couldn't see beyond its curve. Those were her touchstones: something she could carry in her pocket, recall for a moment, and feel her own sense of well-being. This is not to say that she never felt fear again. She went back and forth for months between well-being and fear. Sometimes it felt like her fears became so entangled within her that they were more like roots. It's hard work to uproot fears and expose them to the light so that they can gradually shrivel up.

As her death grew closer, Helen had a vision of being in heaven with her children and husband. She called it "my beautiful dream" and told her family about it. As she saw the joy in their faces, it became her prayer and another touchstone. Near the end, she began seeing a young girl peeking around corners. Perhaps this was her, calling herself home? Or perhaps it was a way to see around the corner to the road ahead.

At the end of each hospice visit, I would fill out a spiritual care clinical note. There's a category called "spiritual strengths" with subcategories to check off: sense of purpose in life, serenity/peace, reconciliation, belief in rituals, acceptance of prognosis, forgiveness,

hope, and belief in life after death. At the beginning of my visits, I could not check any one of these categories. By the time of her death, I checked every one of them. Helen had faced her fears.

The body

Washing my mother's body allowed me to honor the memories I had of how my mother had honored her own body in her lifetime, including her ambivalence about aging. As I smoothed her hair on the pillow, I recalled how, at seventy, she stopped dyeing it and embraced her gray. As I washed her face, I remembered as a child watching her in the mirror carefully "putting on her face," as she called it, to cover her lines and wrinkles.

In my hospice work, particularly with women, I have seen how difficult it is for individuals to accept their finite, dissolving bodies. After all, throughout our lives as women, our bodies have represented an important part of who we think/feel we are. So perhaps it is no surprise that the body-struggles women encounter, particularly in aging, are met again in the dying process. It is confounding that in the dying experience, women must once again face the disturbing depth of female stereotypes that now reside, internalized, within ourselves: that women are powerless, always complaining, incapable, weak, helpless, wrinkled, ugly, smelly, indecisive, unintelligent, etc.

As the body begins to wither, one can feel trapped in a kind of cage. Freedom of movement is often curtailed; walking can be slow, or help is needed to move from one place to another or even in one's bed. It is often difficult for women to admit dependency and to receive care since we have been schooled to provide it to others. In the dying process, sensations, appetite, thinking processes, perceptions can be altered by pain or by pain management through medications. Many women, however, don't want to ask for help in managing pain, perhaps because we feel we can or must bear it. Whether in childbirth or menstruation, or just in dealing with "simpler" aches and pains, women learn from both religion and society to "bear the pain." When this message is internalized, women can continue to "grin and bear it" in their dying process, resulting in concealing the true extent of their pain and thus "not staying ahead of it" as per standard medical advice with medication.

Our bodies are the form in which we live in this world. In dying, the body itself experiences major changes. In my experience in hospice, women across ethnicities and class often tried to hide these changes. Body negation can be a reason that women curtail, limit, or don't allow family or other caregivers to offer assistance or relief through massage and soothing touch. Thus while there is need for assistance and comfort, women often recoil from touch or the visibility of their withering body. Sometimes this can take the form of not allowing friends or even family to see them, or insisting on their hospital bed being placed in an isolated room rather than in the midst of the family.

Religion can play a part in how people view their bodies and sexualities. The male body has been reified by Christianity, both literally and metaphorically, with images of God as Father and as Son. Christian liturgies often use masculine language for God such as "Father," "Lord," and a one-size-fits-all "He." In Catholicism, priestly leadership the church officially recognizes is exclusively male. Women's bodies, seen as other, are forced into the false dualism of "sinner" or "saint": they either represent earthiness/sexiness/the temptress and rebellious Eve/Lilith or the obedient/pure/chaste Virgin Mary. Christian body-negativism and sex-negativism have offered women two choices, the historical dualism of virgin/mother or fleshy whore. Imagine then how women, influenced by Christianity, can come to adulthood lacking in body care and positivity, and in the aging process continue those same trends. Thus by the time women enter the death and dying journey, those initial body-negative feelings have given way to greater depths of shame, where the women feel even more embarrassed and isolated.

Daniella

I sat for a year with a hospice patient named "Daniella." As she worked with and ultimately accepted her weakening woman's body, I sensed she was able to do this because she embraced a philosophy of life that included her body's death. She accepted her body's demise because she believed that her body in ashes continued to be part of this world by being recycled in the great wheel of the cosmos.

Each time I would see a hospice patient, I took notes to help me later create a written report of each visit. Daniella often said

very memorable sentences and phrases. I wrote them down. In what follows, I've adapted and arranged some of those sentences and phrases into a "poetic journal" that charts her journey toward death.¹

Dec. 4, 2009: First visit

I'm operating on four burners today instead of six.
I've prepared for this.

January 13, 2010:

I'm doing a thousand steps a day.
Getting up every thirty minutes to walk.
Got a timer to keep me on track.
When I can't get around
I'll stop eating and drinking
And force myself to die.
Dying is a person's last job.
I'm going to do it well.

January 28

I'm tired.
Wish I could just stop and it would be finished.
But other days I'm glad to be breathing
Glad to be with my family.

March 4

My arms feel like 600 pounds and my heart is racing.
I live with it.
But it's taking so long.
This is a pity party.
I've got goals for the next five months.
Not sure after that.
I can tell myself not to be negative, like my mother did.

March 12

Breathing difficult.
I edited my husband's work last night.
Felt so good to be useful.

March 18

Well it felt like I just couldn't get enough air
So I looked at the oxygen unit, wondered about it,
Discovered that the tubes were blocked partially as well as
leaking air!
Called the company. They changed machines.
Immediately had new energy and could breathe!
It just took figuring out what the problem was.

March 25

I'm sleeping later in the morning.

April 9

We don't get out of this alive, do we. . .

April 18

I'm going to miss me, because I like me.
I want my ashes to be part of the earth
Not in a plastic container that never feels the rain.

April 25

Short of breath, dark circles under my eyes.
I've had 74 trips around the sun
I'm on my 75th!

May 1

My genes connect me to the cosmos.
I hope I have unfinished business at the end.
That's what makes each day interesting . . .
Because it has unfinished business.

May 8

I learn something new everyday
That's my secret.
Yesterday, I learned how to make "touch books" for
my grandchildren.
Want to see them?

May 15

This is the new normal: red in the face, red eyes, deeper coughs,
less energy.

I'm mispronouncing words, can't think of words, get confused.

I hear whistling

Like someone just pleasantly whistling.

At first I was afraid.

Then I asked myself,

Why am I assigning fear here?

So now I just witness it.

I'm a child of the universe.

My cells are part of all history.

And I want to be re-cycled.

When we lived in Jordan

I breathed the same cells that Jesus breathed.

May 23

I'm taking morphine once an hour.

And I've been thinking about meaning.

Religious symbols are empty for me.

The universe and becoming

And continuing through re-cycling

That's my meaning.

May 30

My sister, who I am the most like, will come for our last visit.

I'm taking lorazepam in addition to the morphine. It's helping.

I'm still vertical, but feel diminished.

I don't recognize myself. Woozy. Not me.

Different than the person you first met.

I think of my body as a library

That will soon cease to exist.

June 8

You know how you and I used to greet each other . . .

By touching elbows . . .

Because I was afraid of catching germs?

Well, I'm hugging everybody now.

I've seen the coroner's room
 Through a key hole.
 It felt peaceful.

June 16

Do you know how salmon spawn?
 They lay their eggs after coming back
 To the stream of their birth
 And then they change color—pink, red—
 And die.
 They've been out at sea for four or five years
 And return to their birthplace
 To spawn and die.

June 23

My sister and I didn't say good-bye
 We agreed to meet in the spring.
 One of your hospice team said to me
 "that's a long time . . ."
 I felt sorry for that woman.
 We are who we pretend to be
 Even though we must be careful of what we pretend to be.

June 30

I don't have other things wrong with me, just my lungs.
 So this is just taking a long time.
 I'm too healthy.

July 6

It was all a rehearsal.
 The fire trucks came, but they saw the "do not resuscitate" on
 the refrigerator.
 Then they saw that the oxygen machine was off.
 They turned it back on.
 It was a good rehearsal.
 Now we're ready.
 Everybody had a chance to cry and express their fears.
 I had a chance to feel what low oxygen saturation feels like.
 Now everybody's on board.

July 13

That's it, I'm done.

I've decided to not eat or drink.

Dying will be just normal, ordinary.

The natural cycle of things.

Daniella wanted her hospital bed put in the center of the living room, facing a large window. There she could look out on a stately oak tree and hummingbird feeder with all of the comings and goings of those colorful, busy, mysterious creatures. In my last visit, I sat at Daniella's bedside, holding her hand. For a long time we were silent. Then, amid my tears, I thanked her for all our rich conversations and for what she had taught me about life and dying. I didn't try to hide how sad I was. She looked at me, smiled, and said "I loved. . . every one. . . of those visits."

Daniella died a day later. I do miss her, just like she said that she would miss herself. Her body, as a library of wisdom, would be gone, but some tiny speck of sand might still hold her.

Daniella's story offers us all a chance to witness how a person gradually comes to understand her transition toward death that includes the deterioration of her body.

Each day she witnessed her physical decline. She was on a journey. She was watching the signposts. She struggled and accepted their messages. Gradually, she let go and became part of the cosmos. With clarity of intention, her body-life ceased to live and was, to her way of believing, recycled. What is to be gained from her story is not whether she believed in an afterlife, but that she spent time getting to know, notice, and honor her deteriorating body. Daniella talked about her dying and accepted the role her body was playing in that process even to the point of knowing it was time for her body to stop eating and drinking.

In writing about these events, I realize that I was able to have with Daniella conversations about her death and dying—conversations I was not able to have with my own mother due to her dementia. With Daniella, we spoke of her decision to stop eating and drinking. My mother, in contrast, was no longer able to eat or swallow. With Daniella, I heard the clarity of her belief in recycling her body. My mother's faith about this life and the next was equally clear but in the end, we were not able to speak of it. I believe, however, that in

my reading from the scriptures, we were communicating. Daniella prepared for her death consciously, with herself and her family. My mother's awareness of herself, her journey, and relationships faded slowly. But, in spite of her dementia, in her last twenty-four hours, she was able to summon clear words of love and insight for each of her eight children and our father. This was indeed a parting, conscious gift.

Reflection

I am seventy-one. I collect social security. Last week I filled out an application for a senior living residency that asked what year I might move there. I imagined myself at eighty, no longer teaching, in good health, and active. I imagined my spouse, Kathryn, who would at that time be turning seventy-one. I also imagined her being vital, in good health, and perhaps teaching part-time. My, time flies, I sigh, hearing the old cliché, but feeling it in my bones. Perhaps my mother's gift to me, along with my hospice experiences, is the lesson to not turn away from my own dying process, but to keep turning it over in my hand, like a piece of crystal that has many facets and many mysteries to behold.

Just as the sound of her daughter's voice reading scripture must have entered my mother's ear as an intimate reassurance, perhaps it was also a call to her inner self to open, release any fear and embrace the Spirit. In my Christian faith, death is a transition to the next life—a life after death with God. When it is accepted rather than feared, when death and dying are folded into our humanity and our culture, when the deteriorating body is experienced as part of the incarnational journey, then perhaps we can all live better and die better.

Note

- 1 I have received permission *via* email to use "Daniella's" words in this poetic journal format by her husband, Allen, on April 2, 2018 (n.b., his last name is omitted to protect his privacy).

In parting, I offer my imagined experience of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Is it death? Is it life? May the mystery of Magdalene's space between her breaths come to you in your life/death and may you find your name called by the Spirit who is both within you and already embracing you.

A meditation on Mary Magdalene

This road is endless today. Every step is sorrow. I promised him I would not let his death stop his dream, that we would find a way to keep the community together, that we would go on loving and caring for one another and all we meet in the way he taught us. Such a look he had on his face . . . when he spoke about his death. . . . Such a strange beauty, like he'd thought a lot about it and knew something about it. I'm finally here . . . the cave. What?

No! Where are you?! Someone has stolen your body! Where . . . where are you? How can this be! There in the morning mist . . . someone is there . . . is someone? No . . . but I hear my name being called, Mary . . . Mary. The fullness of my name, the sound of it. . . . As if I'd never heard it before. As if this was the first time. The sound of me. Yes, you know the sound of me. I am hearing the sound of me. The fullness of me. My whole self. My body, life, all that I have done and thought . . . How can this . . . ? I came here in such sorrow such loss. Death took my Yeshua. But now something new is happening . . . opening in me. I put my arms around myself. I close my eyes. Each part of me . . . heart, blood, tissues, muscles . . . breathing deeply . . . slow and slower . . . no boundaries . . . part of . . . this garden, bushes, the air, the morning light warm on my skin . . . a pulsing . . . breathe . . . breathe . . . something being born . . . something dying, something moving on . . . the flower opens, slowly collapses, caught by earth to seed again . . . breathe . . . no breath . . . caught between breaths . . . space . . . no time . . . you are here now, aren't you Yeshua? This place between . . . you are between these breaths . . . I feel you here. Quietly . . . in me . . . in this garden . . . part of all that is . . . my name . . . your name . . . more myself than ever before.

Questions for discussion

- 1 The author's professional experience in hospice care has provided her with ample experiences of spiritual accompaniment with persons as they face their own mortality. What do you understand to be a "good death"? How might others (e.g., family members or professional caregivers) facilitate that for patients and loved ones?
- 2 Victoria offers a feminist reinterpretation of the doctrine of Incarnation, where it is not simply a "one-time event" that occurs in the person of Jesus, but something that happens to us all. What does it mean to think about "incarnation" in this way? And what are the implications?
- 3 Is Victoria arguing that death and the body's deterioration in dying is not something we should fear? Or that we should face our fears (as opposed to deny them) as we approach death and dying? What say you to this question?
- 4 The author implies that women, who have long been socialized into providing care for others, find it more difficult than men to receive care from others, with the result of their underreporting their pain. Do you know of examples of this either in your own life or in the lives of others?

Suggestions for further reading

- Isherwood, Lisa, and Elizabeth Stuart. *Introducing Body Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- May, Melanie A. *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Russell, Letty M., Pui-lan Kwok, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Katie Geneva Cannon, eds. *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.