



The River Of Silence, by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

Death, whether our own or others, can be a powerful gateway to complete tenderness. The confrontation with the impermanence of all things is perhaps the widest gate to liberation from suffering. Facing death or dealing with death, our sight becomes clear. “Priorities and omissions are etched in a merciless light,” as Audre Lorde wrote. Given the sheer quantity of death around us, why not use this merciless light to better see who we are?

When I was thirty-nine years old it was I who received the call that my father had died in the hospital. I had long known with my childhood intuition that it would be I who would tell my mother. That Sunday I drove together with my sisters to the church where our family had worshipped with migrants from Texas and Louisiana for more than forty years. Mom was coming down the long cascading steps when I ran to meet

her. She knew by the look on my face that Dad had died. Ten years later my mother would be diagnosed with a brain tumor and take the great leap into death herself. When my parents died I came to learn that despite the fact that everything appeared the same the day after as it did the day before, death, in fact, changed everything and everyone. Death widens the river’s mouth, loosens our relentless grasp on life, and delivers us closer to the ultimate silence on this earth.

I came to see that the great matter of death is not great because it’s scary but because it is profound in its immense capacity to arouse a loving nature within us. It brings our attention to birth as an entrance into belonging. No one should be denied this belonging, regardless of their race, sexuality, or gender. Proximity to death provides an experience by which we can see our profound lives, not as defined by vocations and careers, but as an experience of being awake.

Death seals a formidable interrelationship between all beings and all things. All things arise and cease; all beings are born and die. In death we come to know the spirit within us all. When death arrives it reminds us, like nothing else in life, that we are completely interdependent with each other. When a life is lost, we lose. When, in the wake of catastrophes caused by war or weather, many are found dead in the aftermath, we see ourselves in the dead. We tremble as we connect with each other in the face of such loss.

Perhaps we can be less afraid of our differences when we realize that this merciless light of death shines upon us while we live. Perhaps we can awaken to the flow of “the river of silence” (as prophet

Kahlil Gibran called death), as it courses through the vast continuum of life. This doesn't mean that we won't tremble in the presence of our fears of one another, but that we will be more present with our trembling, more awake to the truth that underlies our fears.

Published at www.awakin.org on Jul 19, 2021