

## Death as My Teacher

I have been drawn to looking at death ever since I was a little girl. I remember distinctly two very powerful experiences of death from my childhood. When I was about ten, the infant son of a family in our community suddenly died in his sleep. Everyone was devastated. Until then, I had rarely seen my mother cry. She was sobbing. When I innocently asked why she was so sad, she told me that the very worst thing that could happen to anyone was to lose a child. In that moment, I felt the power of death and the depth of my mother's love for me.

The grammar school I attended was across the street from three buildings -- a gas station, a grocery store, and a funeral parlor. I frequently went to the gas station with my father to fill up the car, and I stopped almost daily at the grocery store on my way home from school to buy penny candies. The funeral home, however, stood dark, unknown, and forbidding.

When I was in sixth grade, the town newspaper was filled with a horrible story of a mother driving her three children across a bridge over a nearby lake who suddenly lost control of her car and plunged into the water. All three children drowned while the mom lived. The story affected me deeply. I felt so sorry for this mother. I couldn't imagine how she would continue living after such a loss, one in some way she had caused. But even more than that, I experienced deep grief for these small children whose lives had suddenly ended. When I read in the paper that the children's funeral would take place at the Dawson and Wycoff funeral home, the one across the street from my school, and that their bodies would be available for viewing, I formed a plan.

I told my best friend, Leslie, who was always a companion in my adventures that we needed to go see these sweet little children. So, with real bravery, we walked up the long stone path of the funeral home, pulled open the thick and heavy doors, and entered the darkened entryway. Looming there quite hugely was a man dressed in a black suit. We hadn't expected that. But then we hadn't really thought about any of this, or we never would have done it. He asked if we knew the children. I said we did. I felt really bad about lying. He asked us to sign the guest book for the family to know we had paid our respects. I felt even worse, thinking about those poor parents seeing two strangers' names. But my need to see these children, to see death, was greater than anything else. I signed my name.

The man took us into a candle-lit chapel with three very small coffins lined up across the front of the room. Leslie and I just stood and stared for quite a long time. I couldn't move. So this was what death looked like. It seemed to me they

must be just sleeping, that they would wake up any minute and leap out of those satin beds and start to play. At the same time, I knew they wouldn't. My whole being seemed to stretch, trying to take in these three bodies and the finality of death in front of us. Afterwards, we walked home in silence and never mentioned this event again.

This calling to know death, to make some sense of it all, is part of what drew me to becoming an acupuncturist. Since then death has come to be a major teacher for me in my work.

When I was unhappy in my writing, intellectual job back in the mid-70's and was searching for work that would express different parts of me, I considered several possible careers. I considered being a mid-wife. I had had such profound birthing experiences with my two babies that I wanted to help others also have that. At the other end of life, and stemming from my continued interest in death, I also considered being a death therapist. I had been greatly helped by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's teachings to go through my grandfather's dying in a meaningful, healing way, so I knew the gift it would be to bring that possibility to others. I thought about being a psychotherapist, but I knew that the role of the body and the spirit must be a part of any healing work I wanted to do. When I chose to be an acupuncturist, I recognized that I was choosing to be with people not just at the beginning of life, not just at the ending of life, but throughout the whole kit and caboodle. Now, 17 years later, I feel I have been fortunate to have been able to accompany people on their journeys through birth, life, and death.

Early in my practice, however, when, for the first time, a woman came to me who was quite clearly dying from lung cancer, I was pretty terrified. Lily came for about six months, bringing her oxygen with her, getting weaker all the time. Then I went to England for further training with my teacher, J.R. Worsley. In class one day, I asked him a fairly simple question about how to help this woman die. He responded with an impassioned oration about not assuming anyone is going to die, that we never know that, only God knows. I got quite emotional, realizing I had been focusing on helping Lily die, when now I couldn't wait to come home, treat Lily daily and help her stay alive.

I got home late in the evening and for some reason I felt drawn to call her house immediately. They told me she had taken a turn for the worse, and asked if I could come see her early the next morning. Being at her house was startling to me. Everywhere there was utterly gorgeous pottery Lily had created. When I went into her bedroom, after a few proper hellos, I commented on how beautiful her work was, how it was a reflection of her own beauty. She practically SPAT out at me, in her wheezing style, that I was talking bullshit, her work wasn't beautiful and neither was she.

She died 8 hours later. I was devastated. All I had read of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross led me to believe that people go through stages and come to a peaceful and spiritual acceptance of death before they go. When I saw Lily, she was not there. I had been treating her as a Metal CF, with the emphasis specifically on the Colon. She would have none of the light without also acknowledging the dark. I didn't see the balance within her imbalance at the time; I wanted her to die differently. I wanted her to have a pretty death. She taught me something that I wasn't able to understand until much later.

There have been many other patients' deaths since then, each its own story, just as each life has its own story. Each had their lessons for me. Here are my most recent learnings.

In July, 1994, I began working with Elsa, a 40 year old woman. She had cervical cancer. She had been through chemotherapy and extensive radiation treatment. When the cancer returned very quickly after the treatments ended, a blessed doctor told her that western medicine had nothing more to offer her. He suggested acupuncture, macrobiotics, and faith healing. She came to see me. For two months, I treated her every other day. The treatments helped her on many levels. Her pain was always reduced somewhat, her inability to eat diminished, and her spirit was enhanced. We had a very deep connection.

I was away one weekend. When I returned, I found that she had entered the hospital, where she stayed for 12 days until her death. I treated her every day, sometimes twice a day. I kept thinking the extra pain the needles caused her would make her not want to be treated. But whenever I didn't mention a treatment, even when she seemed unable to have conversation, she would make sure I carried through with the acupuncture.

She, too, was a Metal C.F. She did die what I would call a beautiful death. She was inspired in her dying process. Everyone loved being around her. She was contained. She hardly ever complained. She went through some deep fears, but even with those she was quite reserved. The hospital in the small town I live in permitted her ancient and esteemed cat to be brought in several times. They turned her bed so that she could easily look out on the ocean. Most of the time she exhibited a strong faith and a clear acceptance. She died peacefully.

I loved her a lot and feel like she was a great gift in my life. It was hard for me when she died. I miss her.

So it was with great resistance that I entered into the world of another woman, 52 years old, who also seemed to be dying. The first time I encountered Helen, she

was my second patient, way back in 1979. We went through a lot together. Then she moved away, returning to this area only during the summers. This year, she called me in terrible undiagnosable pain. As we worked, she told me that she had done visualization and intuitive work with herself, and she absolutely knew that whatever this was, it was not cancer. It took Western medicine two months and an endless number of excruciating tests to discover that it was in fact lymphoma, spread throughout her body.

This shock of not being able to know was my first lesson with Helen. I have held a belief that if I, in all openness and sincerity, looked inside myself, I could know what was happening to my body. That was not true for this woman. Treya Killam Wilbur, in the extraordinary book, Grace and Grit, had the same experience, that of trusting her own knowing she did not have cancer, and then discovering that the knowing was false. I'm scared when I hear this. And I'm angry. What is there to depend on in life? What can I have control over? What can I trust? I don't like it, this not knowing.

I have defined myself, as someone who is drawn toward death, a person who has a deep seeking to know more about this phenomenon. I go off for several weeks at a time to meditation retreats, sit on my cushion, contemplate life and death, and prepare myself to face my own death and that of others. Another aspect of my learning was recognizing the other side -- the resistance in me. Each time I went to see this woman, I would tell her I would call her again soon, to check in on whether she was in the hospital or at home, to see how she was. Yet each time I would put off calling until it got to the place where I was embarrassed.

One time, after too long an interval, she finally called me, told me she was going back into the hospital, said she thought she wouldn't be alive much longer, and would I please come treat her. I felt so bad. So ashamed that for two weeks I had repeatedly thought about phoning her, then somehow managed to just forget about it, to not do it. I saw how really difficult it was for me to look death directly in the eyeball. I had done it perfectly with Elsa who, in my mind, was dying the perfect death. I went to see her without fail, even at moments when I felt like I was so tired I just wanted to drop. But as "good" as I had done that one, that was as "bad" as I was doing this one.

I came to recognize that part of my inability to respond also was that Helen was not dying "beautifully." She was not easy to be around. She was not accepting her death in a lovely way. She was furious. She hated the western medical profession. She was full of blame. She just wanted to live. She was continuing to go through horrible test after horrible test in hopes that someone somewhere would find something that would help her stay alive.

I didn't want it to be this way for her. I wanted her death to look like Elsa's. I wanted that for me, for sure, but mostly I wanted it for her. (Well..... some kind of mixture of the two of us is in that. The more I look carefully at all of this, the more I see how much is about my own fear of death, how I want it to be possible for me to die the beautiful death.)

When I went to see her in the hospital, at first she was complaining and angry. She was an Earth C.F. She wanted MORE. More of life. What is so amazing is that what she wanted more of is so very simple. She said, "Vicki, I just love my husband so much. He and I are each other's best friends. I can do anything if I have him to do it with me. I don't know who he will talk to if I die. "(Note she was still saying "if".) "I just want to see my grandchildren grow up. They are so beautiful. I remember when I was in my 20's and my grandmother died. It was so hard for me. They are so much younger than I was." That's all she wanted. To love and to be loved. For a little bit longer. Even for a couple of years, she said.

Then came this totally amazing moment. Helen, in total despair, asked me, "Why am I like this? Why can't I just accept my death? Why do I keep on fighting?" In that instant, something inside me cracked open. Suddenly I knew the answer to her questions. She was dying this way because this was her nature. She was a kicking, screaming lover of life. She was a fighter. She demonstrated to her loved ones continuously how much she didn't want to leave them. She wasn't a "beautiful" picture, but she was a very real one. She was totally lovable for me in her rawness, her gutsiness. Not only could I accept her dying the way she was dying, I could also support her and celebrate her being exactly who she was.

This revisioning changed everything about my experiencing of Helen's dying. Instead of being lost in what I wanted her to be like, I could just listen to who she was, hear her, know her. We entered a place of union. I felt so close to her. In that place, I no longer felt any nervousness, any uncertainty about what should I say to her, whether I would make a mistake, say the wrong thing. Suddenly there was no thinking, no planning, no questioning, no doubt. My heart spoke to her heart. I heard her. She heard me. I heard me. I knew that I could be a valuable support for her during the next days, possibly weeks, as she continued to fight the good fight, or whatever she chose to do. I was now able to be present for her as I had been with Elsa. I was able to be the instrument all my training taught me to be.

Helen stayed alive for four more months. She continued to hope that she wouldn't die. She continued to subject herself to harrowing treatments and surgeries. She suffered. But she also slowly, in her time, opened to an

acceptance of death. She wanted to talk with me about death every time I came to see her, and I was glad to do so.

Her anger transformed into a courageous joy. She, whose body was wracked with pain, became the center of attention for her entire floor at the hospital. She radiated such beautiful loving energy that everyone wanted to be around her. Her room was usually filled with people. Some of the nurses even came in on their days off to check up on Helen. She was surrounded by love in her dying. In the end, she, too, died a very peaceful death.

Five Element acupuncture teaches me that I treat individuals, not symptoms. As an acupuncturist, my work is to see the wholeness in each person, to let go of judgment, to see the beauty in each of us. I try to trust that each of us is living in the very best way we possibly can. All these women reminded me that this is also true in death. We each die our own way. My preconceptions prevented me from giving the greatest gift I have to offer the people I work with, the gift of simply being present to them as they walk through life, and through death. I am so grateful for work that allows me to have experiences like these, to have such extraordinary teachers in my life as my patients.