

Holy Dying. There is a truth of the phrase, holy dying – which seems to come from the title of Jeremy Taylor’s work, *The Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying* – from the 1600s.

The truth is that dying is often holy – from time to time, when dying becomes beautiful, when it is astonishingly a part of life, when the person dying is unsure, but also unafraid, when the family does not hide from death.

When dying is holy it is a bright light, the color spectrum fully present.

Ginny Eliason’s death was holy. Ginny had five daughters, and innumerable grandchildren. All were musical, playing various instruments well, even the youngest.

As Ginny closed in on her last breath, Tom – her husband – and this wonderful and large family turned her living room into the bedroom. They placed the hospital bed in the middle of the ruby Karastan oriental rug and kept vigil. As is the way with death, the space between each breath grew, Ginny’s strength ebbing with each exhale, time becoming irrelevant.

Ginny was a person of faith. She trusted – not completely – her trust was at times like that of Mother Theresa, unsure, unsteady -- but she exercised her faith nonetheless. By prayer, and God for his part had poked and prodded and challenged her. God didn’t make it easy for Ginny.

And so while Ginny trusted, she did not always believe – not the way we tend to think of belief, anyway. She died with questions unanswered, but the person and beauty of God she still trusted, when all was said and done, she trusted.

As she was dying, Ginny’s family kept vigil, like many churches do overnight between Maundy Thursday and Good Friday– the vigil of the dying – some would read to her, some would pray with her, some would hold her hand, and some –

Tom, who didn’t know what he would do without her – kissed her gently. Tom who didn’t understand her, didn’t get her faith, was sometimes angry with Ginny – Tom who would be completely lost without her – kissed her gently.

And to a person, this family offered Ginny music. Even the children played classical pieces, sang, or even played hymns. The piano, the flute, the guitar. Their music to eased Ginny along.

All of this gift made for – beautiful dying, but her dying was made holy by embrace.

Life embraced Ginny as she died. The energy of life, and the Holy was invited into the moment. The respect for life established firmly in the process of dying.

Zora Neale Hurston writes of death, about the death of a woman,

Just then, Death finished his prowling through the house on his padded feet and entered the room. He bowed to Mama in his way, and she made her manners and left us to act out our ceremonies over unimportant things.

Death personified, death as a person, inviting, pulling, taking . . .

And so Ginny died. After Ginny died, her five daughters bathed her body themselves. Then they dressed her – they didn't want strangers to do this – and they put on the simple dress that most reflected her – and they didn't pollute her remains with embalming fluid – they left her natural.

Death is, if you will forgive me, intimate. It is the most intimate act – the most intimate time – it is intimate for the person dying, for the family. Completely vulnerable, and embarrassingly honest. There is no falsehood in death. No props – one's fame or success, one's wealth or superior intellect – none of this strengthens one in death... none, save faith – perhaps faith is the only element that divides rich from poor in death – rich in spirit from poor in spirit – besides faith, there is nothing to ease the transition from this life to the next.

And so it is -- death renders its victim completely honest, absolutely vulnerable, and without protection.

A priest's job is to perform ritual: baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Each of these rituals is attended at some level by untruth – even lying. Priests marry people who intentionally hide drinking issues or cheating. They baptize babies whose parents promise to raise their child in faith – knowing they won't. Priests conduct funerals in which the heroics of the deceased exceed truth.

But, at the moment of death, at the sacrament of death, there is raw humanity, a person is rendered completely helpless, like a baby at birth, dependent on forces outside of herself – God, the process of dying, the universe – often for the first time in decades the person and family are dependent upon forces completely outside of the self. And that makes death oddly beautiful.

Dean Karnazas is a Bay area endurance runner. A few years ago, the guy ran 300 miles – straight. No sleep between. He also decided to run fifty marathons in fifty cities in one year – or was it 50 days? Something like that.

When asked about it all, Karnazas said this: "A great run definitely involves suffering. I think any adventure athlete will tell you that there's honesty in suffering. ... There's magic in misery. I talk to God out there."

Closer to death by running to death, one experiences the failure of the body, after all, and the nearness of it all to God. Instead of relying on his strength at this point, the athlete becomes vulnerable, and honest – honest, after all, or at least as much as one can be.

Consider the scene of Jesus' arrest, and his early-morning trial before Annas and Caiphas – the high priest, and the former high priest – with Peter warming himself and then running off in despair – and Jesus' trial before Pilate – the scene seems ethereal and monochromatic.

Black and white, observed through some blue lens – surreal, and perhaps that is the curse of unholy death – there is no truth in the moment, no honesty. Death is present with hooded robe and sickle, and completely devoid of hope or life.

There is chaos in this scene, no one seems in charge, people are lying, and the scene is tainted with evil. Evil men yielding to evil impulses, and the scene is monochromatic.

In this story, of Jesus before Pilate, Pilate utters what at first appears to be an innocuous, throw-away line:

"Truth, what is truth?" For indeed there is no truth here, in this scene, at this moment.

But later, by the time Jesus carries us as the cross to Golgotha, the scene becomes honest – raw honesty has supplanted monochromatic chaos – for Jesus is dying, and his death is holy.

Evil as death appears to be winning – evil having played its trump card -- there is order; chaos does not reign, for Jesus' life has not been taken from him, he has given it voluntarily. Jesus has given himself away, spent himself by choice.

Jesus as Christ, and God on the Cross – there is in that moment of death complete vulnerability by God – naked, bloody, exhausted, complete truth.

Complete truth in the moment – for here at the intimate cross is a man in whom there is no falsehood, and God exists completely – and even in this scene one intuits somehow that life itself emanates from death, and is the reason, for the cross. Life you can somehow access.

That is the irony – God becomes completely vulnerable to evil and death – truth was placed on trial, convicted and sentenced, but truth cannot be killed, can never be killed, and life radiates from the scene and moment of death. Not just because you know Easter is two days away, but because a new reality emerges from the horrific and violent scene –

And that new reality is this: death is a portal, not an end. The cross is a doorway, and not a wall. Not something of which to be afraid, but an object of embrace.

Life and love and grace and goodness have triumphed behind cross, and in all locations of the cross – at Auschwitz, the Sudan, San Quentin; but not just the obvious locations, the little places – your places, the location of despair and agony in the soul itself – through these windows and doorways you can find life –

Acknowledging this, death becomes holy.

There can be holiness in dying . . . not for the beauty of the death itself – it is never for the beauty of death, for death itself is not beautiful, nor to be glorified – but for the emergent life, the bud, the seedling rising.

And so it is – the cross of Christ becomes your cross. And God in this Christ has not abandoned you – or anyone – to the cross . . .

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me.