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Women Approaching Death and Dying

By Victoria Rue, M.Div., Ph.D.

ABSTRACT:

My mother died in 2008 at the age of 84 surrounded by her eight children and our father. As I turn 68, I wonder about the length of my own life and about how I will face my own death. In a feminist body-affirming theology, how do I embrace fear and my body in the death and dying process?

At the bedside of hospice patients, I saw the gap in Christian feminist theology between affirming the body and embracing its decay. From these narratives, I suggest that what is needed is a Christian feminist approach to death and dying focused on connectivity. My hospice patients spoke about the divine through their connection to everyday life: relationships to friends, families, nature, music, art and memories of the dead. We often think that the body is dying, not the self. But the dying body contains our memories and identities. To experience the deep reality of the body/self dying is to intimately experience the living/dying cosmos.

ARTICLE:

On June 14, 2008 my mother, Catherine, died in our family home in Downey, California. She was 84. My mother's life had declined for three years due to melanoma, strokes and dementia. My father was her constant caregiver. During the last several months, each of my seven sisters and brothers visited and offered help and comfort. In the last week of my mother's life, we all gathered. She could no longer eat or drink and a decision had been made not to insert a feeding tube.

She was not responsive on Saturday, the day of her death. The morning had started with the change of nurses, from night shift to day. 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. She needed

peace and quiet. And I was just as sure that 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 to 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, to 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 read on, passages from various gospels, pieces of other Psalms. Her whole body seemed to relax, her breathing changed.....long spaces between breaths. Suddenly she opened her eyes wide, looked up at something that was compelling, smiled gently, 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 a momentum

driving her toward the mystery of death. Sisters, brothers, father barely breathed. The text was the only sound. "My soul is thirsting for the living God." The prayers, a cadence, delivering life to life's end. Last breath. "Is she gone ?", someone asked. I kept reading. A brother raged with weeping, 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. 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 the opportunity to become a hospice spiritual care counselor. I was privileged to do this work for four years.

From my work in hospice, and 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 their bodies. Certainly feminists have attempted to counter this by

celebrating women's bodies in all shapes and colors. However, the approach of Christian feminism stops short of women's bodies in the dying process.

We need a body-affirming theology, perhaps based on the cycles of nature, the cycle of life and death, including the experience of our dissolving form. In Christianity there is the promise of an afterlife. Traditionally this is interpreted as a reunion with God (and our loved ones) in a place referred to as heaven. For others, influenced by the advance of genetic science, the afterlife could be our DNA being recycled in the cosmos. However an afterlife is understood, it must not be a barrier to the acceptance of the body's dissolving in dying. Women and men would be immensely helped by a Christian theology that sees the Sacred within our living and dying bodies—not somewhere else.

As Christians we believe in the incarnation. Traditionally we limit Incarnation to the body of Jesus. But perhaps we need to see incarnation as belonging to each of us. To incarnate means that flesh and divinity have found a home in each other. Perhaps too, the deterioration of the body does not diminish that divinity but re-imagines it.. Imagine how the dying process might be affected, if older women could feel that enfleshed in their withering bodies is a Divine Old Woman, vulnerable and caring. And so, enfleshed in the breakdown of all bodies is a vulnerable God, aching, suffering, in pain, dependent.

Incarnation seen not as static one time event but a process in which living and dying is Godding to use Nelle Morton's word [God is not a noun but a verb], that is living and dying are connected as part of what God is. More, incarnation need not be confined to humanity. Sallie McFague offers the idea of the world being God's body. Let us add to

that the cosmos as the body of God. And so it is that because of incarnation, Christianity might have a special obligation to honor and embrace our bodies and our connectivity to all that is.

FEAR

In our culture, and also in Christianity, we do not talk about death other than its relationship to an afterlife. We do not talk about the process of the body's shutting-down, the changes one experiences as disease takes over and the Life-force recedes. We do not speak of this, and our silence breeds fear of death. The philosopher Susan Sontag feared death. Sontag struggled with breast cancer. She 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" be her moral cheerleaders pushing her to get better, to take another treatment for cancer, and never admit to, or speak about dying. And so it was that she would not talk with her son. Important conversations between them could not happen. Sontag's son David speaks about how his mother was obsessed by death but fought at it. She denied it any place in her psyche. And thus there was no process to examine this fear of death, no relationship in which she could whisper her fear, nothing to hold on to so that death could turn itself inside out and reveal itself to her.

As humans, we struggle 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. And to die fearfully is a terrible fate. It could be so

different. If a person has some way of speaking about her own life/death, understanding for herself what her own life/dying/death means, then perhaps she dies more easily.

While fear did not dominate my mother's dying process, for others, fear can control the experience of death. Fear can accentuate 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 own body. Fear takes away a sense of self.

How can one engage dying rather than fear it? Here is the story of a woman I met in hospice whose ability to struggle with her own dying process was blocked by fear.

SHE WHO FEARS

"You're the one I want to talk to. If there's an afterlife, am I going to burn? "

And 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, it didn't seem important. She raised her children, worked with her husband's business, took care of a mother who had not taken care of her. Her life was full. No time for hell.

When she'd been taken to the hospital, she kept having a vision: a little man dressed as a genie, sitting cross-legged, back to her, looked at a shiny blackness. What did it mean? It filled her with fear.

Now in hospice, she sat daily watching television in her "comfort corner, " a cushioned chair in the corner of her room. She watched preachers. An elderly couple who daily inveighed on hellfire and damnation. Each day, she was more and more afraid. Still, she watched, 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 7th Day Adventist couple. As they spoke with her, she felt from them a pervasive love and peace. Real Christians, she mused. And so, even now as she recalled them, she felt that deep love and peace.

A second memory: she was on a cruise with her husband. She was standing on the back of the boat at sunset. Suddenly she felt the oneness of everything. Time stopped. 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. She felt part of everything. There was no time, she felt she could just sit there forever. She didn't want to drive into town. Just wanted to stay 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 turned up ahead and then how she could no longer see what was around that corner. She always remembered that image, 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 share cropper and surviving poverty with her children in tow. Their lives gradually changed with her husband's good business sense. And somehow in each conversation, we spoke of the elderly 7th Day Adventist couple, or the moment on the boat, or driving outside of Phoenix, or the road where she couldn't see beyond its curve. These were her touchstones. Something she could carry in her pocket, recall for a moment, feel her own sense of wellbeing. This is not to say that she never felt fear again. She went back and forth for months. Wellbeing. Fear. Wellbeing. 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, she had a dream of being in heaven with her children and husband. My beautiful dream, she called it. She told her family about it. She saw the joy in their faces. It became her prayer. It became another touchstone. Near the end, she began seeing a young girl peeking around corners. Perhaps herself, calling herself home? Or perhaps it was a way to see around the corner to the road ahead.

At the end of each visit, I fill out a spiritual care clinical note. There's a category called "spiritual strengths" with sub-categories to check off: sense of purpose in life, serenity/peace, reconciliation, belief in rituals, acceptance of prognosis, forgiveness, hope, belief in life after death. At the beginning of my visits, I could not check one of these categories. By her death, I checked every one of them.

THE BODY

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

In my hospice work, particularly with women, I saw how difficult it is to accept one's

finite, dissolving body. 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 within ourselves: powerless, complaining, sick, weak, helpless, wrinkled, ugly, etc.

As the body begins to wither, one can feel trapped in a kind of cage. Freedom of movement is often curtailed; help can be needed in order to move from one place to another or even in one's bed. For women, it is often difficult to admit dependency and to receive care, since we have been schooled to give it. In the dying process, sensations, appetite, thinking processes, perceptions can be altered by pain or by pain management through medications. For women, we perhaps don't want to ask for help in managing pain, feeling we can or must bear it. Whether in childbirth or menstruation, or just simple aches and pains, women learn from both religion and society to "bear the pain." When this is internalized, women can continue this perception in their dying process, resulting in stifling/covering up/hiding pain and thus "not staying ahead of the pain" with medication.

Our bodies are the form in which we've lived in this world. In dying, the body itself is experiencing major changes. In my experience in hospice, women across ethnicities and class often tried to hide their changing bodies. Body negation can be a reason that women curtail, limit, or don't allow family or caregivers to offer assistance or relief

through massage and soothing touch. Thus while there is need for assistance and comfort, women can 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, quite literally, with images of God as Father and as Son. Christian liturgies often use exclusive language for God such as “Father,” “Lord,” and a one-size-fits-all “He.” In Catholicism, leadership of the Church is exclusively male.

Women’s bodies, seen as other, must either represent earthy and corrupting Eve or the 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, grow up to feel the need to cover, hide, and feel embarrassed about their bodies within the dying process.

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

DANIELLA

Dec. 4, 2009: First visit

I'm operating on four burners today instead of six.

I've prepared for this.

I've trained my daughter to do what I've been doing, editing my husband's work.

My family is the meaning in my life.

There is no other meaning for me.

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

Short of breath.

When my family moved from Boston to Nevada,

It was the most destructive moment of my life.

I went from being a valedictorian to a nobody.

My mother sat us down and said there would be no more negativity, no pity party

Because the move was essential to our family life.

March 12

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 18

Breathing difficult.

I edited Paul's work last night.

Felt so good to be useful.

March 25

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.

April 9

I'm sleeping later in the morning.

April 15

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

May 19

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.

June 17

Short of breath, dark circles under my eyes.

I've had 74 trips around the sun

I'm on my 75th!

July 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.

July 15

I learn something new everyday

That's my secret.

I learned how to make "touch books" for my grandchildren.

Want to see them?

August 6

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 were in Jordan

I breathed the same cells that Jesus breathed.

August 19

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.

August 26

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.

Sept. 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.

September 23

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.

October 1

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 her.

We are who we pretend to be

Even though we must be careful of what we pretend to be.

October 8

I don't have other things wrong with me, just my lungs.

So this is just taking a long time.

The rest of my body is letting me down, you see.

I'm too healthy.

October 15

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.

November 3

That's it, I'm done.

I've decided to not eat or drink.

It's just normal, ordinary.

She took to bed now. She wanted the 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. My last visit, I sat at Daniella's bedside, holding her hand. For a long time we were silent. Then, amidst 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. She, 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 journey toward death that includes the deterioration of her body. Each day she witnesses her physical decline. She is on a journey. She is watching the signposts. She struggles and accepts their messages. Gradually, she lets go and becomes part of the cosmos. With clarity of intention, her body-life ceases to live and is, to her way of believing, recycled. What is to be gained from her story is not whether or not she

believed in an afterlife, but rather that she honored 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.

I realize as I am writing this that with Daniella I was able to have conversations about her death and dying--conversations I was robbed of in my own mother's dying process due to her dementia. With Daniella, we spoke of her decision to stop eating and drinking. My mother could no longer eat or swallow. With Daniella, I heard the clarity of her belief in recycling. My mother's faith, in this life and the next, was equally clear yet in the end we were not able to speak of it, though I believe that in my reading from the scriptures, we were speaking. Daniella prepared for her death consciously, with herself and her family. My mother's awareness of her self, her journey and relationships faded slowly. Yet, 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.

I am sixty-seven. I am on Medicare. Last week I filled out an application for a senior living residency that asked what year I might move there. I imagined myself at seventy-nine, no longer teaching, in good health, active. I imagined my spouse, Kathryn, who would then be turning seventy. I also imagined her being vital, in good health, perhaps teaching only 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 to not turn

away from my dying process but to keep turning it over in my hand, like a piece of crystal that has many facets and many mysteries.

Just as the sound of her daughter's voice reading scripture must have entered my mother's ear offering an intimate reassurance, perhaps it was also a call to her inner self to open, release any fear and embrace the Spirit. Death is a transition in the Christian faith. 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.

In parting, I offer the experience of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. May we each come to our deaths and find our names called by the Spirit who is both within us and already embracing us.

[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 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. Finally here.....the cave. What?

No! Where are you?! Someone has stolen your body! Where....where are you? How can this be! There, there in the morning mist....someone is there..... is someone??? No it's

not an echo....I hear my name being called. As if I'd never heard it before. As if this was the first time. The fullness of my name, the sound of it.... the sound of me. Yes, you know the sound of me. But more. I am hearing the sound of me. Maybe for the first time. 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 slows.... slower...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.... breathing....no breath....you are here now, aren't you Yeshua. This place between....you are between these breaths.... I feel you here. Quietlyin me....in this garden...part of all that is.... my name....your name....more myself than ever before.

