PHOTO BY GAY BLOCK

# Joan Halifax
# Fearless and Fragile

After a lifetime of contemplating death and caring for the dying, Zen teacher Joan Halifax reflects on her life's work and the breaking of her own bones. Kristin Barendsen reports.

THE ROAD TO PRAJNA MOUNTAIN CENTER can be impassable after a rainstorm—replete with massive potholes and slippery ruts. As our SUV lurched and heaved, I wondered again why Roshi Joan Halifax, who runs a Zen center just five minutes from my home in Santa Fe, would request that I interview her at "the refuge," as its known, two hours away in one of the wildest parts of New Mexico. It seemed a kind of trial, a koan about a treacherous path to the master's mountain cave.

It did make sense, though, that a woman who once drove a VW van by herself across Algeria would ask me to make this trek. A woman who just last winter, at age sixty-five, snowshoed through a blizzard in the dark for four hours to reach the refuge. A woman who in March hiked around China and Japan, in the footsteps of Dogen Zenji, on a foot she didn't realize was broken.

"She's the most fearless person I've ever met," says Peg Reishin Murray, Roshi Joan's assistant, who offered to shuttle me up the road in Roshi's Toyota 4Runner. Navigating the deep ruts with ease, Murray told me about the first time she'd made the drive. Roshi Joan was her passenger and the spring melt had dissolved the road to slippery clay muck. Deprived of traction, the SUV's wheels slid across the surface as if it were ice. Every time Roshi got out to assess their predicament, she sank up to mid-shin in mud. "I wanted to turn back," Murray says. "But Roshi wouldn't let me. She just kept saying, 'You can do this!' She even offered to take the wheel."

Known for embracing challenging, even risky situations, Roshi explains, "Inside me there's this incredible optimist."

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Roshi's longtime student and colleague Maia Duerr, however, has a somewhat different take. "I think the key to understanding Roshi Joan is seeing her fragility as well as her fearlessness," Duerr says. "She is literally fragile right now, her bones breaking. Her mind is brilliant and her heart is huge, but her body is at the breaking point. She has pushed herself to exhaustion."

Joan Halifax with Roshi Bernie Glassman

PHOTO BY ANDREW BLAKE

I'm not a "nice" Buddhist. I'm more interested in a "get down in the street and get dirty" Buddhism.

Last June, Roshi Joan slipped and fell on a hard bathroom floor, breaking her greater trochanter in four places. She spent thirty hours strapped to a gurney in a Toronto emergency room, then another two days waiting for surgery. When I met with her two months later, she was still walking gingerly with crutches. Prajna Mountain Center was her escape, where she grabbed a few hours or a few days of convalescence whenever she could.

Fearlessness and fragility: two core aspects of a woman who is also an academic and an activist, a wild child of the sixties, and a Zen priest. Who is funny, irreverent, bold, mercurial, sometimes difficult, driven by aspiration, and tamed by discipline. Who is without her BlackBerry and MacBook Air—tools of building institutions—only on mountain trails and in the meditation hall. But she is best known for sitting at the bedside of terminally ill patients and pioneering a form of contemplative care. Her new book, *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death,* synthesizes lessons from her nearly four decades as a leader in the field. Now, this longtime caregiver must learn how to be, as she says, "a better care receiver." She must also, by necessity and doctors' orders, slow down and reconsider her commitments, including her role at Upaya, her Zen center in Santa Fe.

When I arrived at the refuge, I understood why Roshi Joan had brought me there. Among Prajna's tangle of wildflowers and groves of tall aspens, she is more expansive, at ease. I found her propped on pillows beside a plate-glass window, laptop on lap. We spoke about her life's work and about where she is and who she is at this pivotal time.

"I'm a kind of 'plain rice' Buddhist," Roshi Joan said. "I've seen some really amazing things, but they haven't amazed me." She describes "plain rice" Buddhism as the meditation of everyday life: "When it's time to meditate, you meditate, and when it's time to make a bed, you make a bed. Not very exciting but, actually, exciting. The fierce kind of excitement. Excitement without excitation. It's about being alive."

GROWING UP IN Hanover, New Hampshire, Joan Halifax learned early about illness and death. When she was four, a virus attacked her eye muscles, leaving her bedridden and functionally blind for two years. Although she felt alone and vulnerable, she found a dear companion in her African-American nanny, Lilla, who told stories at her bedside.

Her grandmother, too, was a role model of caregiving, often sitting with dying friends in her Georgia neighborhood. "She normalized death for me," Halifax says. But her grandmother's own death was a long, lonely process in a nursing home. Upon viewing the open casket at the funeral and seeing her grandmother's face finally at peace, Halifax writes, "I realized how much of her misery had been rooted in her family's fear of death, including my own. At that moment, I made the commitment to practice being there for others as they died."

As a student at Tulane University in the mid-sixties, Halifax got involved in the civil rights and antiwar movements; she read D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts and taught herself to meditate. After obtaining her doctorate in medical anthropology, she began working with dying people at the University of Miami School of Medicine. She went on to research, with her then-husband Stanislov Grof, the use of LSD as a supportive therapy for dying people. As they wrote in their 1977 book, *The Human Encounter with Death,* Grof and Halifax found that LSD alleviated patients' fears, transforming the process of dying into "an adventure in consciousness rather than the ultimate biological disaster."

As an anthropologist, she studied the Dogon people of Africa and the Huichol Indians of Mexico, where she witnessed shamans passing through metaphorical experiences of death and rebirth, emerging as wiser and more powerful "wounded healers" for having endured suffering. For several years she studied shamanism and Buddhism in parallel, illuminating their connections in her popular 1993 book *The Fruitful Darkness,* which is given to wild, poetic flights of dreams and visions. Ultimately, however, she chose Buddhism as her path. She studied with the Korean master Seung Sahn for ten years and later received dharma transmission from Thich Nhat Hanh.

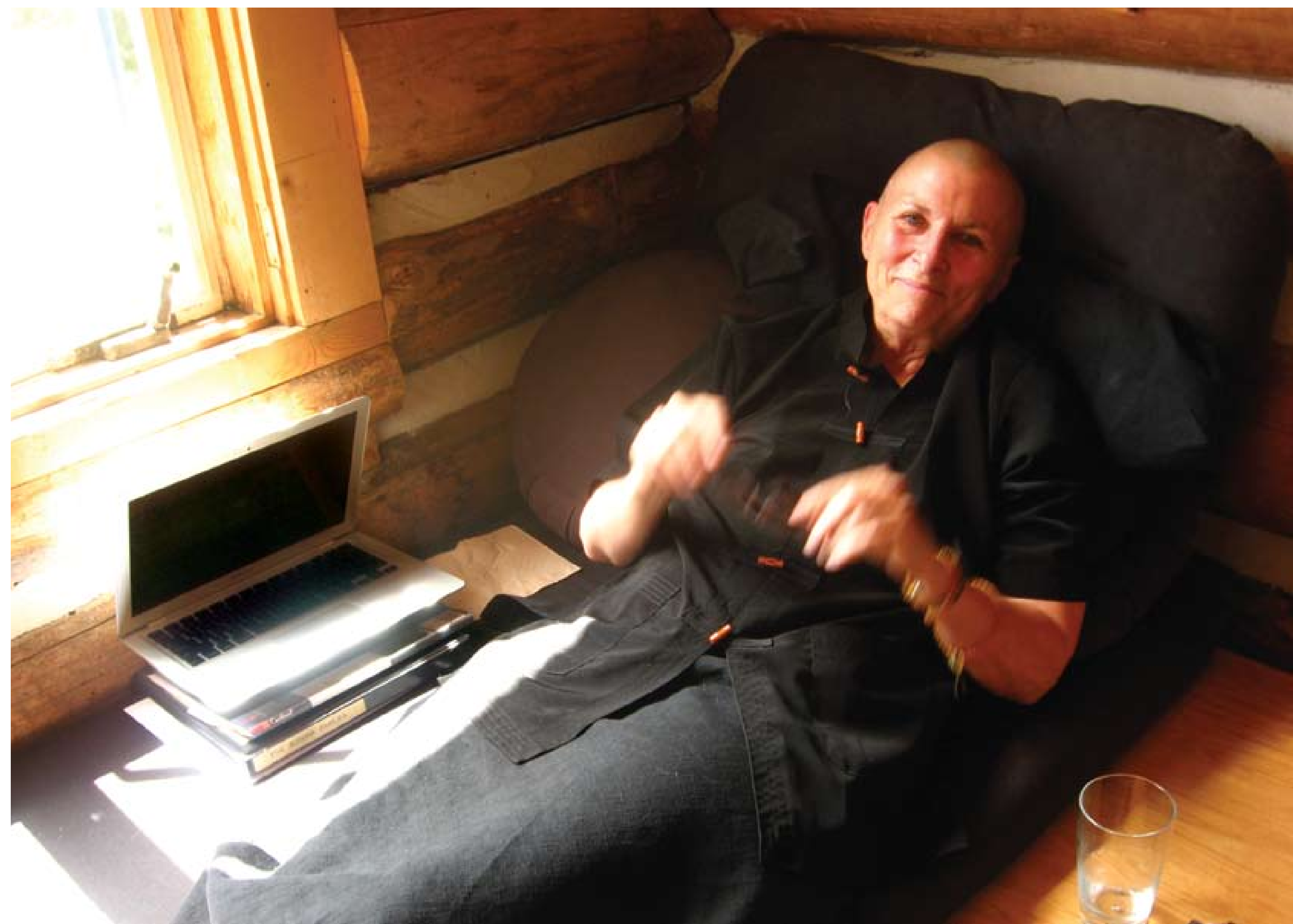
Over the decades that followed, Roshi Joan sat with dying people, a practice she continues to this day. Drawing on Buddhist practice and principles to guide her responses, she tries to help patients meet their challenges with awareness; both she and the patient "bear witness" to whatever emotions and experiences arise. In an initiative to support caregivers, Halifax founded the Project on Being with Dying, a training program for professionals in end-of-life care, now in its fifteenth year.

If these projects weren't ambitious enough, Halifax also built two spiritual communities. In 1979 she founded The Ojai Foundation, a rustic Californian retreat center nicknamed "The Wizard's Camp" for the extraordinary faculty that Halifax invited, such as indigenous teachers and Western academics. This center hosted some of Thich Nhat Hanh's first meditation retreats in the United States, as well as workshops on chaos theory, ethnobotany, and dream research.

Then in 1992, Laurance Rockefeller and Richard Baker Roshi gave Halifax a house in New Mexico, between the Santa Fe River and Cerro Gordo Mountain. She set about building a new retreat center from scratch, regreening the trodden desert land. Now, Upaya Zen Center is a sprawling complex of adobe buildings, with a spacious zendo and lush gardens.

She practiced with Thich Nhat Hanh and his sangha until 1995, when she asked Roshi Bernie Glassman, known for leading "street retreats" in New York City, to be her primary teacher. "Thay [Thich Nhat Hanh] is just an extraordinary force for good," she explains. "I was deeply enriched by his dharma. But the style of his sangha wasn't congruent with my style. Thay is too nice. I am not a 'nice' Buddhist. I'm more interested in a plain rice, 'get down in the street and get dirty' Buddhism. That's what Roshi Glassman manifests."

Halifax cut her long, thick hair and became a priest in the order of Zen Peacemakers, Roshi Bernie's organization of socially engaged Buddhists within the White Plum Asanga lineage. Although celibacy is not required of priests in this lineage, she took a vow of celibacy before the Upaya sangha. "When I decided to really devote myself to practice and community development, I realized I couldn't be in a primary relationship and do that effectively," she says.



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Upaya Zen Center, outside Santa Fe.

PHOTO BY LORI ORSON

As abbot of Upaya, Roshi Joan merges the dharma of compassionate care with the cross-cultural and political elements of her work, inviting guest teachers as diverse as tribal leaders, former prisoners, environmental activists, Catholic priests, Jane Fonda. An admitted "addict" of Internet news, Roshi often weaves current events into her dharma talks and speaks against the Iraq war. November 4 through 6, she co-led the "Politics and Compassion Election Retreat," where on the night of the U.S. presidential election, participants sat in the zendo, breathing and watching their minds as they watched the results pour in on a big-screen TV. "Many people wept as it was clear Obama would win," Roshi says. "There were profound expressions of wonder, relief, and optimism."

"By bringing all the elements of her rich background into Zen, she makes the practice very current and alive," says writer Natalie Goldberg, a longtime friend. Roshi's teacher, Roshi Bernie Glassman, says that what makes Roshi Joan exceptional is "her ability to create new *upayas,* new forms of practice that are needed for this time and place."

Now, her career is coming to a new level of fruition through the 2008 launch of the Upaya Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program. This innovative two-year course, based on systems theory, teaches participants how to understand the causes of suffering and how to intervene on a systemic level as well as an individual level. For example, while helping a dying patient, a chaplain might also work with the family, hospice workers, and doctors, ultimately facilitating change in the health care institution. Roshi calls the program, which encompasses end-of-life care, peacemaking, prison ministry, and environmental activism, "a synthesizing domain for my life's work."

Another such synthesizing domain is her book, *Being with Dying,* which includes personal stories, advice, and guided meditations. One of the book's core messages is "strong back, soft front," which, she explains, "is about the relationship between equanimity and compassion. 'Strong back' is equanimity and your capacity to really uphold yourself. 'Soft front' is opening to things as they are."

Equanimity and compassion: fearlessness and vulnerability. "The only way one can actualize compassion is through the medium of fearlessness," she says, "because to really let yourself feel the suffering of another person—and then to allow the awakened heart to resolve to serve and transform the field of suffering—takes a lot of courage." She says that over the years, losing friends and patients has gotten easier for her to handle. "I just look at death as part of life. For people who are very close or special to me, I grieve, but I don't reject the grieving at all. I wouldn't take one minute of sorrow away from me."

Roshi Joan deconstructs the myth of the "good death," pointing out that some people depart in denial, defiance, even misery. "I think the term 'good death' is an insult to our vocation. Every death has its own narrative."

WHILE GIVING A RECENT LECTURE at Santa Fe's Lensic theater, Roshi Joan quoted Annie Dillard in measured tones. "There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end… and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage." Her voice rose, fierce.

"I… won't… HAVE IT!" The last word echoed in the concert hall as the audience drew a collective shivered gasp. She had the audience repeat the words back to her en masse, forcefully: "I won't HAVE IT!" It was inspiring and kind of scary, a refusal to stay asleep any longer, a vow to do something about a world in crisis. She continued in a more controlled voice, "The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright."

Some audience members seemed surprised to see an older woman—and a monastic with a shaved head and priest's robes at that—speak with such untamed ardor. They may have expected a demure nun, someone more tender and tranquil.

Says Roshi's assistant Peg Reishin Murray, "I found her really scary when I first met her. There's a tremendous amount of fire in her. People don't expect that. Because she's a woman, people expect her to lecture on loving-kindness and to be in a soft place all the time. She does have that side, but she can be undiplomatic. She doesn't sugarcoat things. She has said strong things to people and freaked them out. But to me, that's the point. I want a teacher who can kick my butt and show me to my edge."

Roshi's direct style can get her into trouble. Over the years, several people have left Upaya because of conflicts. "Roshi Joan trusts her own judgment," says Marty Peale, one of Upaya's earliest residents. "But you don't have to agree with her, and you don't have to stay." Peale had a falling out with Roshi Joan in 1999 and left the community. After six years, however, the death of a mutual friend brought them together again. Now Peale is a winter caretaker at Prajna and a mentor in the Chaplaincy Program. She says that even while their relationship was strained, she knew that Roshi's love for her was still strong, and she acknowledges that such challenges are very human. "We have to know that we do cause suffering—she does cause suffering—and not be discouraged by that," says Peale. "Such ups and downs can serve us; they are part of the path."

When asked about Roshi's difficult side, Natalie Goldberg says, "Once or twice, she has been confrontational with me in a way that wasn't so skillful. But we talked about it, and it was fine." She adds, "I'm not afraid of her power. I'm proud of her as a woman. I root for her. She stands up and believes in herself. Women don't know how to support women in success, and that's hard for her."

"My approach to things is quite direct," Roshi agrees, "which isn't always a comfortable thing for anybody. And moreover, I'm not always right." She laughs. "You can be direct and off two degrees, and you can really make quite a mess of things. Or you can be direct and be really accurate, but your timing could be really wrong. Or the person can't sustain what you're reflecting. It's tough.

"People don't like that in a woman. If I had been born into a man's body, I'd be looked on as a gentle person. But I ended up in a woman's body. I'm glad I was born into a woman's body and that at times people find it very difficult to digest how I am. That's been good to live with because it has precipitated a lot of examination of my own behaviors."

Noting that students often project their own issues onto teachers, Roshi describes three stages of the student-teacher relationship: "Idealization, demonization, and if you're lucky, normalization. If somebody's idealizing me, I send that energy back to them. One way is to recognize their own basic goodness, to really feel it within yourself. Another is to show them what a doofus you are.

"I don't walk around my Zen center like Cardinal Richelieu," she says. "I'm constantly making fun of myself, showing my worst side to everybody, and talking about my failures."

She describes her hospital room in Toronto, where three students sat at her bedside. "The back of my hospital gown was wide open, so when I had to get out of bed, my ass was hanging out. And I was

The meditation hall at Upaya Zen Center.

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Death with dignity—it's hype. Who should be dignified? Sickness is a very undignified process.

thinking, 'I've got to sit in front of these students in a month in full dokusan robes.' They really got to see Roshi's feet of clay. That's why I feel such aversion to the term 'death with dignity.' It's hype. Who should be dignified? Sickness is a very undignified process."

EVEN AS SHE WAS speeding in the back of the ambulance on the way to the Toronto hospital, a paramedic poured out his heart to her about his dying wife. "I realized this wasn't about me," she says. "This was always about others."

While she waited for surgery for three days, Roshi Joan practiced *tonglen*, a kind of compassion meditation for the "numberless beings" streaming through the ER and taking priority with their more dramatic wounds. She says her mudra in the hospital was "victory over fear," demonstrating the mudra to me by holding two fingers in a "V" like a sixties peace sign. She says she wasn't afraid, and because of the intense pain, she welcomed surgery. But during the operation to insert a metal plate and five screws into her upper leg, she lost too much blood and needed a transfusion. "I could literally feel my heart ebbing," she says.

Roshi Joan is a universal donor, a rare blood type that can donate to everyone but can only accept blood from its own kind—an apt metaphor for a caregiver. "I was in an extremely fragile state," she says. "Kind of an in-between state. It was so simple. There was so much ease. I felt kindness and gratitude."

However, she relates, "When I came out of surgery, somebody wrote to the Upaya residents, 'Roshi came through surgery wonderfully.' That was a way of turning the prayers off." She hadn't come through wonderfully; her condition was still extremely delicate. "Never say somebody is better off than they are," she says. "Give the picture accurately."

Roshi sent an e-mail to the extended sangha, asking for prayers and for help in slowing down. Her entreaty was met with a flood of cards and e-mail. "Since the accident, I've gotten e-mails from people I thought hated me," she says, shaking her head in wonder. "E-mails that say, 'I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what I've learned from you.'"

Roshi Joan rarely says no to requests for her time, crowding her calendar with travel, retreats, board meetings, and interviews with Buddhist journalists. Since the accident she has canceled some commitments, but I thought her week's schedule still sounded demanding. "I have phenomenal drive," she says, "and a lot of psychophysical energy. So I've been able to push myself over the Himalayas, across the Tibetan plateau, and other kinds of mountain ranges, be they metaphorical or literal. I have to shift that drive into a more balanced perspective."

Peale interprets this drive not as personal ambition, but rather as Roshi's aspiration "to live to her fullest potential." Roshi says it stems from her love of challenges and her respect for excellence and commitments, yet that drive has exacted a physical toll.

"I have not directed adequate mercy into my own life," she says. "I haven't taken care of my body that well."

But the osteoporosis she inherited from her mother is beyond Roshi's control. One thing is certain, she says, "I can't fall again. I want to keep that fear active. Because that's where I think fear can be extremely useful. That's got to be kept in my foreground: being mindful."

Roshi Joan has hiked all over the world and circumnavigated Tibet's Mount Kailash five times. Gesturing to the hills outside the window, she says, "From this distance the mountains are a beautiful artifact. I don't know if I'll be able to walk as I used to. Now every day is an Everest."

Since her accident, community members have volunteered their help in small ways—carrying her glass of water or serving her at mealtimes—and in larger ways, by taking on new responsibilities. "Many people have stepped forward in a brilliant way to take over things that I couldn't do, and they're doing it better than I could," she says. She is delegating more to others with an eye toward retiring from her position as abbot, "the sooner the better, so that I can enjoy more teaching."

She recently promoted Beate Seishin Stolte from vice abbot to co-abbot, and will give dharma transmission to Stolte in November. "I'm very happy Beate is there," says Roshi Joan. "She's so motherly—kind, but also very solid." Earth to Roshi's fire, a combination that works.

Peale notes that today Upaya is a strong center for women, with several women in leadership roles. But, she says, "We're all realizing that someday, and it might be twenty years from now, we'll have to go on without Roshi. We are thinking about how to keep her legacy alive. No one of us can do what she has done. It will take a team."

AS ROSHI JOAN told me in our interview at Prajna, most suffering is rooted in fear, but part of her life's work is to try to be "a kind of role model of what it's like to be free of fear."

When asked whether she feels fragile, Roshi explains, "At times I do feel rather fragile. No surprise—my life has been challenging in many ways. And, for the most part, the difficulties have strengthened my back and tenderized me. As we say at Upaya, 'Strong back, soft front.' And yet, most of us suffer from bouts of 'strong front, soft back.' That includes me, when I am tired or feel as though I have not been quite right in my speech or actions."

As Natalie Goldberg puts it, "She's fearless, yes, but I also know her underbelly. She's vulnerable and tender and also scared like everybody else. That's what makes her fearless. She's not fearless like a brick; hers is a fearlessness that comes out of tenderness for the world." ♦

# You Are Already Dying

**The most profound meditation, says Joan Halifax in her new book, *Being with Dying*, is contemplating the certainty of your own death.**

HOW MANY PEOPLE who will die today even know that this will be the last days of their lives? I think of friends who have died without completing projects, without having had the opportunity to say words of goodbye to a spouse or a child, without having forgiven a friend. Again, we still don't believe it can happen to us.

We may take care of a dying friend and make the natural mistake of thinking ourselves separate from her experience. In our minds, we may divide ourselves from her: "She is dying; I'm the caregiver." But in reality, we're joined by the bonds of impermanence. Maybe it's too disturbing to say to yourself, I am dying, too. But the truth is, you are already dying. So am I. We're all linked by the inevitability of loss and death, even if we seem to be easily meandering down the road of living.

Every one of us has had to give up something we loved. We've sacrificed cherished plans or dreams, felt grief and loss. Already, all of us have experienced impermanence, which is just another form of dying. What hasn't changed in one way or another? Everything is always changing. Even the Sun, a symbol of immortality, is a star that will someday be extinguished. If we start training ourselves to observe the changing nature of our everyday situations, we can be on our way to freedom from suffering.

Accepting impermanence and our shared mortality requires loosening the story knot: letting go of our concepts, ideas, and expectations around how we think dying ought to be. It also calls us to "practice dying"—that is, to let go, surrender, and give away, in the best of worlds, to practice generosity. We can do this now; at any time, we can start practicing dying. And if we do, we might also start to perceive the interdependence of suffering and joy—that life and death are not separate but intertwined like roots deep in the Earth.

When I am sitting with a dying person, I sometimes hear the following words inside me: "Whatever suffering this person is experiencing, it will change." Maybe for better, maybe for worse. Change is inevitable—that's impermanence. And at the same time, it is necessary to be fully there for the often overwhelming and raw truth of moment-to-moment suffering. The awareness of impermanence can serve to deepen our commitment to living a life of value and meaning. Many traditions teach the inevitability of death as the bedrock for the entire spiritual path. Plato told his students, "Practice dying." The Christian monks of medieval Europe ritually whispered to one another, *"Memento mori"* ("Remember death"). And one Buddhist sutra tells us, "Of all footprints, that of the elephant is supreme. Of all meditations, that on death is supreme." ♦

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