

## **The time of writing is Sept 2016:**

### **The Art of Ageing and Dying**

I've just turned 49. I can hardly believe it. I feel young, sometimes mischievous and alert in spirit, and yet, 49 is not considered young in body anymore and the evidence of age is becoming ever more apparent in my skin and around my eyes.

I've also noticed that as I've moved further into my forties, ageing, sickness and death have moved into my consciousness much more.

In March, I was forced to look ageing, illness and death straight in the eye with the death of my beloved aunt - aged 79 - a kind, patient and generous person – and modest too. My aunt was like a second mum to my sister and I. She didn't have a family of her own and was very much a part of our childhood, supporting my single mum and often spending the holidays with us.

During the last two years of her life she suffered unbearable emotional and physical pain, endured endless operations and was in and out of hospital. Despite a strong will to live, her body could not take any more.

I got a call from my mother just before Easter that year, saying that I needed to come. I was just about to go on a two-week retreat in the Scottish Highlands but I changed plans, booked a flight to Germany and went straight to hospital from the airport. I got to spend the final hours with her, witnessing her last breath just after 5am – something I'll never forget. She was gone forever.

Death as we all know, is the one certainty we all share in life and yet it is something we find very uncomfortable to sit with, to talk about.

Can we find a way to turn towards that which many of us consider the most intolerable and painful experiences in life - ageing, sickness and death - with an open mind and heart? They are, after all, experiences that we all have to face - whether we like it or not.

Would we find it easier to talk about ageing and death if we viewed them as an art? If we learnt to relax into and accepted that life is a process, a continuous cycle of becoming and ceasing, embedded in a larger cosmic cycle of life and death.

Seeing my aunt's suffering caused me enormous emotional pain. It also taught me a lot about myself. I discovered that the distress that I was experiencing came from not wanting to accept her suffering and from not knowing how to tolerate the unbearable. I wanted it my way; I wanted my aunt to be well again, I didn't want her to suffer. I didn't want to suffer seeing her suffering.

When I was able to see things as they were, when I was able to sit and see my aunt's sick and decaying body, and the presence of her nearing death for what it was, I felt something in me relax and soften, which helped me to turn towards the experience with patience. I was then able to offer an open and loving attitude towards my own pain and discomfort in the midst of the unbearable.

### **Taking responsibility for one's death**

My aunt's death was also a wakeup call for me to reflect on my own death and to begin to take responsibility for it.

My aunt had no will and this caused much difficulty for my family.

Shortly after her death, I made an appointment with a solicitor to make a will. I asked two of my close friends to become my executors. I asked another friend whether she would be willing to lead my memorial service. I decided to be simply buried in a green burial - to dissolve back into nature.

By taking responsibility for my death, I must face up to the fact that I too will die, that I too may suffer from sickness, that I too may need care, that I too will leave a life and affairs behind for others to deal with.

Taking responsibility for our own death is a tremendous gift to ourselves and to the people we leave behind.

Turning towards what is intrinsic and inevitable in life, rather than pretending it doesn't happen; to feel enriched and empowered by the cycle of life and death we are all born into.

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