

READING

Just weeks before receiving a diagnosis what would prove to be terminal, Rick Davis wrote this in his journal:

Is it the background thought of death – and its companion thought, that no matter what you do, your body will end – that drives me to create something that will live beyond me? Don't I do that every day? I make everlasting change happen every day, even though for the most part, in my conscious state, I am unaware of its extent, and after I pass, I will be completely unaware – or will I? Maybe I will be completely and universally aware!!

~ Rick Davis, September 2015

You Can Do It At Home

Jacqueline L. Davis

A recording of Jackie delivering this sermon can be found at <http://uucm.org/ministries/recent-sermons/>

As a Unitarian Universalist, I adhere to our 4th principle: the free and responsible search for Truth and Meaning. I don't like to be told what to believe but I can also be a little bit lazy when it comes to learning what I do believe. Take Death, for instance. Now there's something I've avoided thinking about, and from what I understand, the same could be said for many of you. It's not something we talk about at pot lucks, you know? I mean, we do talk about death -- but someone *else's*, not our OWN! "Let's keep that at a distance, shall we?" You know that Woody Allen quote: "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Well, I have learned that I DO want to be there when it happens. To die with awareness would be the fitting conclusion to having lived with awareness. My husband Rick taught me that last year as we walked together through his illness with brain cancer.

I discovered, as the reality of Rick's impending death began to sink in, that I had 3 different minds that were grappling with the Truth and Meaning of it. In the bustle of daylight, I grabbed onto things that were cerebral and factual and grounded in the real world, that were evidence-based and credible and *Perceivable*. I call this my Discerning Mind. It's loud. It's rational. It's a bit of a bully. And it wants to be right. But also, in the wee hours of the night, or deep in the still

quiet of my solitude, my Discerning Mind will reluctantly submit that there is a vast universe of experience that it cannot grasp. The subtle, the intuitive, spiritual, maybe even divine. The feelings, the Unexplainable, The *Unseen*. This is what I call my Open Mind, or sometimes my Heart Mind. It speaks in a whisper, and waits for me to listen. These two minds sometimes arm-wrestle, sometimes dance. Ultimately, if I'm lucky, they'll be reconciled by my third mind, my Neutral Mind. This is my Both/And mind, my Win/Win mind, where, from these two seemingly opposite worldviews, emerges a third way of seeing and understanding.

For me, Truth and Meaning around Rick's death revealed themselves in part because we were able to have Rick die at home. His home death provided me and my 3 minds the time and space we needed to attend Rick with awareness. And being at home allowed Rick to die with awareness.

A lot of people don't know that dying at home is possible, or even legal. But it's both. In our culture, just as the medical system has co-opted childbirth, it has also co-opted death, making death a medical condition to be managed rather than a naturally-occurring end-of-life experience. That is slowly changing through the "home funeral" movement where ordinary folks like you and me can navigate the deeply personal journey of dying in our own homes. Now, I know there are people for whom a death at home would be a huge burden, or simply unwarranted or impossible for any number of reasons. And I'm grateful for medical care and hospice facilities and the incredible people who dedicate their lives to helping people die there. But what's on the table here is knowing the options and understanding that there are *choices* in how we die.

One of our big choices during Rick's illness was when to stop treatment. We did this together with Rick's family *and* with Rick. On that morning he was alert and aware, and able to contribute to the decision. We all agreed he would forego any last-ditch heroics, like a chemotherapy that *might* extend his life but would likely make him feel sick for the extra days we might win – and in the end he would die anyway, that was a fact. At a time when all the options sucked, and my Discerning Mind was shouting "Try Everything!," my Open Mind, my Heart Mind whispered: "Quality of Life – for whatever time he has left." Rick loved this idea. We

immediately ended his austere diet and he was cleared to eat strawberry rhubarb pie – his favorite – and ICE CREAM, once again. We even wrote up a certificate that we all signed to commemorate the decision. THIS was the option that put Rick’s experience first.

Once we made that decision, the home hospice team parachuted in to provide everything we needed, 24/7, to care for Rick’s physical self – his comfort, pain management, and personal care. I bow before the hospice workers who tend to the dying and their families day in and day out! But what about Rick’s more subtle, unseen needs? The needs of his soul, or spirit – or if you prefer, his Humanness?

Of course we had our minister, Reverend Barbara McKusick Liscord, who was there for us 100%. But we also brought in Deana Darby as our home-funeral director, also known as a Spiritual Midwife, or a Death Midwife. I know that sounds a bit strange, but it makes sense actually. Because coming into this world is a labor, and so is going out of it. It’s a real struggle to leave this life, for the person who’s leaving, and for the people around that person. So “midwife” is a fitting term for the one who is trained to guide us in the labor of dying. We were extremely grateful to Deana for guiding us and advocating for Rick’s sacred personhood.

Deana taught us that dying is a normal process, not a medical emergency. The task, she said, is to sit with that Being through whatever happens, to create an environment for a good death by holding space for death to actually occur without the energy of fear.

One of the things that Deana did in the days before Rick’s passing, was she would sit with him and she would tap him on the top of his head, and she would say, “Go out here, Rick, when it’s time, go out through here.” The top of his head.

She was referring to the Crown Chakra, which certain cultures maintain is the place where the soul exits the body at the time of death. I was comforted to hear her tell him this, though I didn’t fully know what I believed about it. My DISCERNING Mind said: “Naaah. There’s no escape hatch in your skull.” My OPEN Mind said: “MAYBE that IS actually the place where the soul exits the body at the time of death. How incredible! Countless people have believed that for thousands of years, so who am I to say that it’s wrong?”

But my NEUTRAL Mind came to this: Whether it is or isn't true that the human soul actually and clinically departs the body out the top of the head, it must have been comforting *for Rick* to know where to go at the moment of death. Because in our culture there is no place where we are counseled, or coached, on how to actually die. I believe Rick wanted to know his role, his job at the moment of his death. "What do I do? How do I participate in this ultimate experience?" To simply be told, "This is the exit, and you're going to head for the door" – I believe was of comfort to Rick. It mattered to HIS experience of HIS death.

The clinical moment of death is usually marked when the heart stops beating. This happens when you stop drinking water. Our hospice nurse said, "Once he stops drinking he'll run down like a clock. It's natural." She said, "It's the way people used to leave." On average, you can live 3-5 days without water. Rick lived for 6. The cool thing about dehydration is it produces endorphins, a naturally occurring painkiller, the body's own morphine. So as long as the disease itself is not causing pain, there is no pain as the systems shut down. Nice to know, right?

At the same time, the heart works overtime to compensate for the lack of fluid in the body. Though outwardly Rick appeared to be resting, inwardly, as his organs were shutting down, his heart was beating like he was hiking a mountain. After 3 days of non-stop running, his great heart simply stopped. The "immediate cause of death" was cardio-respiratory failure, though glioblastoma was the underlying disease.

I had never witnessed a death before, and Rick's was beautiful. We were all around him when his heart stopped. His blue eyes flew open for a few moments, then gently closed, just like in the movies. Another moment later, a single tear rolled down his face. And at the time I felt, "Oh, he's so sad to leave us." But when I told this to his cousin Tom, who is much more intuitive in these matters than I am, Tom said, "Well, maybe in that moment Rick was experiencing something incredibly beautiful, and he cried for JOY." [pause] Well, I hadn't thought of that. It flipped my paradigm. I was projecting my own grief onto Rick, but guess what? I have no idea what HE was actually experiencing. What was it like FOR HIM? I now believe he was thrilled at the Humungous Awesomeness of this Next Adventure! That would be very Ricky. That he would

be going “Oh My God – this is SO COOL!” That maybe, the moment his heart stopped, he was completely and universally AWARE!

So, what do you believe? Now, this is not mandatory (nothing is mandatory in Unitarian Universalism), but if you’re willing, pause a moment and reflect in silence. Assuming you have an expected death, what do you believe will happen to your... soul? Spirit? Consciousness? ... at the moment your heart stops? [15 seconds]

Thank you.

Many years ago a friend of ours, Ross Jennings, passed away and we experienced a vigil for the first time, where friends came over for 3 days straight and sat with Ross in shifts. Rick was impressed by this tradition and we both thought we’d like to have that done for us when we died.

Sitting vigil for 1-3 days is traditional practice in many religious, eastern and western. There are different names for it and many variations but the common element is that the deceased is not left alone in the hours and days after death. According to Anthroposophy, a spiritual science founded by Rudolf Steiner, it takes 3 days for the different dimensions of soul and spirit to leave the body, and during this time, the soul reviews the events of its entire life.

My Discerning Mind and my Open Mind have conflicting opinions on this, but my Neutral Mind settles it simply: If indeed it does take 3 days for soul to leave the body, then by all means that’s what the person should have.

But if indeed it doesn’t, or there’s no such thing as a soul, or it doesn’t matter to the person who died, think of it in terms of the loved ones left behind. In my case, ME. I had known Rick since I was 19 years old, I’d lived more than half my life in his presence, he was core to my being, and the idea that he was No Longer Here was something that I could not adjust to very quickly AT ALL. In the moments after he died, I kept looking to see if he was breathing – I’ve never seen Rick not breathe. This was new territory. To not perceive presence inside his body was foreign to me. I needed time to really get that he was not coming back.

Deana and I, and our friend Sherry (Ross Jennings's widow) bathed Rick's body, anointed him with special oils, dressed him in his fancy duds and laid him in a pine box that was built by our friend Donat. We placed him in his office (where he spent most of his time anyway) and put ice packs on his chest and belly, and behind his back to keep his organs cold (his brothers changed the icepacks every 5 hours). Put an air conditioner on. That was where he laid for 3 days.

This was when Rick and I renegotiated our relationship. I had always related to him as embodied. But now the rules had changed. I needed a new way to relate to him that did not involve his body. I realized I now had to relate to his Essence. And the only way I could do that was with mine. I needed 3 days *with him* to figure that out.

By the 3rd day I could *really see* that Rick was no longer inhabiting his body. And I could *feel* – it wasn't just an intellectual concept – I could *feel* that it was really time to let this body go. And after 33 years with him, I was grateful for those 3 days to say goodbye.

And what about all the friends and family who came to sit with Rick? What about their search for Truth and Meaning around his death? Rick was their son, brother, and father, and beloved friend.

Our friend Barbara Sim filled in the 2 hour shifts, round the clock: 1-3 a.m., 3-5 a.m., 5-7 a.m. And people came. I could hear the murmur of conversation in that room below me as I was fitfully sleeping, deeply comforted that Rick was not alone. They read poems, they read from *The Little Prince*, Kahlil Gibran, they sang songs out of *Rise Up Singing*, they sang hymns, they played guitar, they talked with him, they sat in silence, they read Rudolf Steiner (which I think Rick probably didn't enjoy quite as much, but tolerated)... I mean how good was it for them, to be with him for the last time ever?

So... what about you? Let's pause one more time. If you believe that you have a soul, or Consciousness, or spirit, then, how much time will it take for your essence to leave your body? [10 seconds]

Thank you.

By the way -- if none of these are reason enough to have a vigil, good ol' Rick hit the nail on the head. Long before he was sick he said to me, "Well, honestly, I'd like a 3-day vigil because I want to be sure, before you cremate me, that I'm really dead."

So – let's have a potluck and talk about death. Not the vague, abstract concept of death, but YOUR death. Because we need to normalize this, because we're all going to do it. And we can't ask the people who already did it. And the best time to do it is when you're well, rather than when you're dying. Maybe if we talk about it together it won't feel so weird. Or maybe it'll still feel weird but we'll all feel weird together. Or maybe it will be just fine.

And honestly – it'll probably take more than one potluck – we might need a weekend retreat! First to dig down into the subtle, the intuitive, spiritual, maybe even the divine *Unseen aspect* of your personal death and your choices about what you'd like to have happen. And then to look at all the gobbledygook: starting with your Advance Directive and your Will, to the cremation, burial, headstone, memorial. Then the bank accounts, life insurance, credit cards, bills galore, and oh my god, the computer passwords!! WHO HAS THE PASSWORDS in your family? Are they on your computer – which is password protected? Do your kids have that password or know where to find it? Hmm. We need to talk about all that.

OH – and we can write our own obituaries! No really! YOU could have the last word on what people think about you! And honestly, who else knows the legal names of your parents, or what your bachelor's degree was in, or what year you got it? When you die, your whole library burns down. Yep. It's best to do this sooner than later. It will be a huge gift and relief to your family. (And full disclosure: I have to do it, too.)

I've posted some resources for you in Barnum Hall downstairs – like the ConversationProject.org that offers a free, downloadable starter kit dedicated to helping families talk about end-of-life planning. Also the Cremation Society of New Hampshire, the National Home Funeral Alliance, the Threshold Care Group right in Wilton of which Deana is a

member. Behold! Deana is here to talk with us at coffee hour. If we ask nicely maybe she'll come to our potluck!

May each of us normalize the concept of dying. It can be done at home. May you search, freely and responsibly, for Truth and Meaning around the inevitable end of your life. May you, in the moment of your death, be completely and universally aware. And may each of us live fully, now, in the time we have left to dance on this earth.

HOME DEATH RESOURCES

ThresholdCare.org (Deana Darby)

A local (NH) group providing education and consultation services on topics including green burial, home funeral, and death midwifery.

TheConversationProject.org

Dedicated to helping people talk about their wishes for end-of-life care. Download the free starter kit.

National Home Funeral Alliance <http://homefuneralalliance.org>

The NHFA empowers families to care for their own dead by providing educational opportunities and connections to resources that promote environmentally sound and culturally nurturing death practices.

Cremation Society of New Hampshire www.csnh.com