

## Almost Unbearable

We are all going to die but don't know when. Life is precious. These truths are traditionally contemplated to motivate a spiritual seeker to persist, with patience and trust, during the work of uncovering and then embracing the resistance that seemingly separates us from each other and our true selves. Our woundedness then is no longer overwhelming.

I've been a meditation teacher for almost forty years and am able to calm my mind, open my heart, rest in Presence, merge with the Beloved. The extraordinary events of my life - love, death, survival, tend to deepen my practice. Yet again and again in the ordinary activities of daily life, the scores of emails and telephone calls and little tasks that appear each day, I lose myself and forget to live what I know to be true. How can you and I each find the motivation to put into

practice that which we know, that which in other moments our hearts have embraced?

Recently I needed to have a



new publicity photograph taken. The shot I've been using is over 5 years old, my last passport photo, not much feeling or personality showing. So two friends took about 40 pictures of me. My job was to select the one or two shots that would be used in promotions for upcoming events.

Examining these pictures with a critical eye was an unsettling experience, not because of the wrinkles in my face, the obvious wear and tear that life had so honestly imparted, but rather

because in most of the pictures I look like somebody who was busy having his photo taken. Only in a few was somebody really there,

looking out, knowing that he would die but not knowing when.

I've been around a lot of death in my life. I've often seen death arrive unexpectedly. Despite knowing this possibility I still treasured some unexamined assumption that at least I will be alive for the next few

hours, that I will be able to finish writing this sentence, that when someone is taking my photograph there will be time to take another shot if the image isn't sufficiently enchanting. I realize I was lost in the illusion of immortality once again, missing the preciousness of the moment in which the shutter snapped.

A few days ago a friend told me she regretted all the time she had wasted in her life, time in which she had not been fully alive. But perhaps in those moments anxiety

and fear were unbearable. Distracting herself had been her only possible response; she had not been ready to look nakedly and directly at the truth of the moment. Yet the suffering of all those distracted moments brought her to the awakening of her regret. In truth, not a moment had been wasted. Can we have compassion for that part of ourselves that so often has turned away from the preciousness of life, from our humanity?

Many of the people I know who found the deepest spiritual realization have been motivated by a profound crisis earlier in their lives, often even resulting in a breakdown. For those of us on a more gradual path, finding ongoing motivation in the preciousness of life and the certainty of death seems to me essential. Do I really know that I *am* going to die, that I *am* dying? Can I be humble enough to go back before the beginning of practice and be touched by the preciousness of life? I work with those facing death not just because I want to help people, but because I want to know in the core of my being that I am going to die, possibly even in this next moment, and hence be fully alive right now.

When I accept my mortality I feel particularly vulnerable, raw, exposed. If I directly feel this moment might be my last moment, then my relationship with the notion of self is radically transformed. Receiving spiritual truths at only an intellectual level is far too easy and comforting. If we see nakedly the fragility of life, see that everything is dying each moment, how can we not love and care for other beings and for ourselves? Then, as zen master Dogen puts it, we live with passion and intensity as if our hair were on fire. Walt Whitman said, "Sometimes touching another human being is almost more than I can bear." If I know that you and I might die in the next moment, how can our touching be less than almost unbearable?

—Dale Borglum  
*Executive Director*

*Before you begin to pray,  
decide you are ready to die  
in that very prayer.  
There are some people so intense in their worship,  
who give up so much of their strength to prayer,  
that if not for a miracle they would die  
after uttering only two or three words.  
It is only through God's great kindness  
that such people live,  
that their soul does not leave them  
if they are joined to Him in prayer.*



**Your Word is Fire**  
***The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer***  
ed. and translated by Arthur Green & Barry Holtz

*Please bring strange things.  
Please come bringing new things.  
Let very old things come into your hands.  
Let what you do not know come into your eyes.  
Let desert sand harden your feet.  
Let the arch of your feet be the mountains.  
Let the paths of your fingertips be your maps  
and the ways you go be the lines on your palms.  
Let there be deep snow in your inbreathing  
and your outbreath be the shining of ice.  
May your mouth contain the shapes of strange words.  
May you smell food cooking you have not eaten.  
May the spring of a foreign river be your navel.  
May your soul be at home where there are no houses.  
Walk carefully, well loved one,  
walk mindfully, well loved one,  
walk fearlessly, well loved one.  
Return with us, return to us,  
be always coming home.*

—Ursula Leguin



*Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars*

*of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,*

*the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders*

*of the ponds,  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is*

*nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned*

*in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side*

*is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world*

*you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it*

*against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

**In Blackwater Woods**

—Mary Oliver

# Finding God in Our Hearts

My wife, Margot, was first diagnosed with breast cancer in July of 2002. She was twenty-nine years old at the time. Over the years she pursued both conventional and alternative treatments, but in June of 2011, she was told she had no more than a week to live.

Our dear friend Mira had known Dale Borglum, founder of the Living/Dying Project, for many years and suggested we seek his support. We agreed. Mira contacted Dale and told him of our situation. He offered to meet with us.

Margot was in the house with our family when Dale arrived. I first met with him on the driveway. Dale asked me a number of questions about the situation at the moment, about the family members and their spiritual beliefs. I replied that Margot and I attended Catholic Mass, but were open to all spiritual beliefs and believed God was to be found at the core of all religions, but most importantly in our hearts.

Over the next five days Dale ministered to our family. With his guidance we found peace and love in a very difficult situation, but most importantly, with his support, my wife Margot, and I, her parents, sister, our children and grandchildren, my siblings and their children all found healing.

When Margot left her body she was filled of love, peace, and joy. She innately had all of these qualities, of course, but Dale was able to bring her great peace as she approached the end of her life and in doing so brought tremendous peace and love to me and our family.

I will be forever indebted to Dale and The Living/Dying Project. I urge anyone facing death to reach out to Dale and the Living/Dying Project for their kind and loving expertise.

My wife Margot is missed by us all, but it gives me great solace in knowing that she left her body with such peace and love in her mind and heart.

—Mike Murphy  
*Newly Elected Member of the Living/Dying Project Board*



*I've learned that people will  
forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget  
how you made them feel.*

—Maya Angelou





# Ephemeral Life

I celebrated my seventieth birthday as Dale and I were putting the finishing touches on this newsletter, which means I've been incarnated in this body for seventy years and nine months. From the inside, one's journey feels compelling and significant, and as the years slip by it feels substantial. Our stories are so compelling. Yet, I'm reminded over and over again that, as the Buddha said, my life is little more than the twinkling of a firefly in the long arc of human history.

I recall visiting my partner's home shortly after our marriage and pouring through a stack of photo albums in the den. I was introduced to family members, first those still living who occupied the topmost albums, and then those who had departed. But when we reached the bottom album my partner didn't know who those people were. We took the album downstairs and asked her mother. She didn't know them either. They were surely part of their family's history, yet these once substantial lives left nothing more than faded photographs; their accomplishments, even their names were forgotten.

As an amateur photographer I occasionally visit a local cemetery that was established late in the nineteenth century by a number of Italian families, many of whom were living in San Francisco and who, apparently, didn't mind the ferry trip required at the time to reach San Rafael. As I ramble about the cemetery I note familiar names associated with businesses and streets in San Francisco and elsewhere around the Bay area. But I also find graves that have long been abandoned, stones coming apart, markers tumbled to the ground, the inhabitants long forgotten.

Life is precious in part because it is brief. I've learned over the years as a volunteer, working with perhaps a dozen clients, that the time of life's ending is unknown to us, and often comes in the most unexpected ways. I've never worked with a person who has been older than I am, even a dozen years ago when I still considered myself a young man.

So we celebrate the preciousness of life; we embrace the gift we've been given, for however long it may last. And we share it with those whom we love for surely that is the most precious part of being alive. It is important not to lose track of these truths as we live what feel like substantial, compelling lives. Each moment is a gift and life is fleeting.

*The universe and its inhabitants are as  
ephemeral as the clouds  
in the sky;  
Being born and dying are like a spectacu-  
lar dance or  
drama show.  
The duration of our lives is like a flash of  
lightning or a firefly's  
brief twinkle;  
Everything passes like the flowing waters  
of a steep waterfall.*

Lalitavistara Sutra



—Curtis Grindahl  
*Outreach Services Coordinator*

## Project News

- The Living/Dying Project is in the process of reinvigorating and expanding our spiritual and emotional support services for those with life-threatening illnesses. Open Circle support services will soon be available in Alameda and Contra Costa County. A weekend training program for potential Project volunteers will be offered on January 28 and 29, 2012, in Berkeley, California.. For details see the announcement on page 7 or check our website.
- On January 16, 2012, Dale will be leading Jack Kornfield's Monday evening class at Spirit Rock Mediation Center. In addition, he will be co-leading a a teleseminar with Ram Dass, probably in February and will be co-leading a workshop with Ram Dass and Bodhi Be in Maui, probably in April. Check our website for details.
- One welcome and necessary component of our expansion is the doubling of the size of our Board of Directors. Shannon Curry, Mira Goetsch, Nancy Jaicks Alexander, Charles Miller, and Mike Murphy have joined Judith Briggs, Curtis Grindahl, Lulu Torbet and me on the Board. Diana Rogers has left the Board after many years of service. I am grateful and enthusiastic to be joined by such a talented and caring group of people. Healing is a community event and our Board is committed to healing our individual and collective fear of death, to finding wholeness in life's most difficult situations.
- We continue to expand our website, [www.livingdying.org](http://www.livingdying.org). There are new meditations by Stephen Levine and Joan Halifax as well as new audio files of meditations and videos of talks by me. Coming soon – a complete redesign of the site to make it easier to find what you are looking for. Eventually we plan to have online telecasts and webinars available. Check it out!
- Dale continues to facilitate **Healing at the Edge** ongoing small groups in Sebastopol, Fairfax, and Berkeley. These groups are not focused on end-of-life issues, but on spiritual transformation with an emphasis on meditation and on healing the psychological / physical imbalances that limit transformation. The two groups in Sebastopol are filled, but there are a few spaces available in the Berkeley and Fairfax groups. More information about these groups is available at the Ongoing Groups link on our website. If you are interested in talking to Dale about the groups or in joining a group, please call him at (415) 456-3915.
- We will continue to publish this large newsletter once a year, both in physical form to be mailed and in digital form that is posted on our website. However, we would like to be able to contact all of you on a more frequent basis with shorter mailings – updates on events and activities, articles on the service the Project volunteers offer, and thoughtful and inspiring pieces on the spiritual path. If you receive the newsletter only by mail in physical form, please sign up to be on our digital mailing list on our website at the Mailing List link.

## A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO HEALING

A WORKSHOP FOR THOSE WISHING TO BECOME  
LIVING/DYING PROJECT VOLUNTEERS AND FOR  
ANYONE WISHING TO EXPLORE DEEP HEALING



Physical healing, emotional healing, spiritual healing, collective healing — the journey to wholeness takes many forms and has as many starting points as there are people who embark upon the journey. Each of us is at a particular point on our healing path, confronting our next challenge, often without clearly knowing whether attitudes or practices we have been using to facilitate growth in ourselves or in our clients are becoming stale, without knowing which direction we should now turn to create meaningful transformation.

In this workshop, we will draw upon the wisdom of Theravada Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, the diagnostic message coming from the connection between stages of early childhood development and energetic patterns in the adult body, as well as the softening and passion of heartfelt devotion. Having applied these wisdom traditions during thirty years of being a guide to the dying, a very clear and practical paradigm for the healing path has become apparent to me. Healing occurs through direct contact with the Sacred, through realization of our true nature. There are no shortcuts, but certainly neither taking unnecessary detours nor spending time spinning our wheels can inspire us along what is often a difficult journey.

During this workshop we will explore together a clear, concise and usable model of the healing process that can specifically diagnose and identify the next step that is transformational for each of us, even during crisis. Short, intensive, guided meditations will be presented in order to create a healing experience rather than an experience that is about healing. We are all caregivers and are all seekers of healing. These deeply uncertain times offer an incredible opportunity.

*This training workshop will be offered on Saturday, January 28, 2012, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday, January 29, 2012, from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. at St. John's Presbyterian Church, 2727 College Avenue, Berkeley, CA. There is a \$180 fee for attendance. 10 hours of Continuing Education Units are available to nurses, as well as M.F.T. and L.C.S.W. license holders. Please visit our website for further information at [livingdying.org](http://livingdying.org).*



Workshops will be conducted by Dale Borglum, Ph.D., who, with Stephen Levine and Ram Dass, established the Hanuman Foundation Dying Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the first center supporting conscious dying in the U.S. Dale directed the center until moving to the San Francisco Bay Area. He is the founder and Executive Director of the Living/Dying Project and co-author of **Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook** (Bantam Books).

Board of Behavioral Sciences Provider Approval Number 4367. Board of Registered Nursing Provider Number 9621. Course meets the qualifications for 10 hours of continuing credit for MFCCs and/or LCSWs as required by the CA Board of Behavioral Sciences. Refunds will be made only with notice given two days in advance of the workshop by calling or e-mailing the Living/Dying Project. A \$15 processing fee will be deducted from refunds issued.

*Imagine facing death without fear. Imagine using a life-threatening illness as an opportunity for spiritual awakening. Imagine approaching the unknown with an open heart. We often resist change as a natural part of life. Strength and healing can be found in life's most difficult situations.*



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### Mission Statement

The Living/Dying Project offers conscious and compassionate support in the spirit of mutual exploration to those facing life-threatening illness and their caregivers. We also offer education and training in the practices of spiritual healing to those confronting life's most difficult situations and to anyone committed to spiritual transformation.

### Supporting Us

We offer spiritual support free of charge to those with a life-threatening illness in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as to their caregivers. As the first organization in the Western world whose mission is to cultivate conscious dying, we've offered these services for thirty years. In addition to spiritual support, we offer training and educational services through our website, via telephone and Skype, as well as in person. Healing our individual and collective relationships with death remains the most immediate and direct means to heal that which separates us from others with whom we share this frequently confusing and occasionally conflicted human journey.

The work of the Project is done almost entirely by volunteers. Expenses incurred are financed largely from individual donations. Your support, both financially and with your blessings, allows us to continue this vital work.

You may donate using the enclosed envelope either by including a check payable to the Living/Dying Project or by filling out the attached form that permits you to make a one-time donation by check or credit card as well as recurring donations by credit card. Please be aware that donations may also be made by visiting our website, [www.livingdying.org](http://www.livingdying.org), and clicking on the link that says "Support Us," where it is possible to donate by credit card or using Paypal.

Our heartfelt thanks to all of you who support us. May this holiday season and the year to come be filled with wisdom and blessing for you and for those you love.

—Dale Borglum



### Credits

Layout and design of this newsletter was done by Curtis Grindahl, who also contributed two photos including Frond Curls on page 3 and Tombs on page 5. Curtis is Outreach Services Coordinator for the Project. On the first page is a photo by George Ward, a longtime friend of Dale's whose work regularly appears in the Sierra Club Wilderness calendar. His portfolio may be seen at [www.georgeward.com](http://www.georgeward.com). On page 4 is a photo of Margot Murphy credited to Imagery Immaculate Photography.