

Death up Close

It has been a rough year. Late in 2018 I fell off my bike and headed to the doctor to make sure I was okay. From a CT scan discovered two lung spots- four months of CT scans, a PET scan and a biopsy, (which caused a collapsed lung) to find out it was nothing the doctors were concerned about. But it generated a lot of thinking about my end of life, and death. Even went to a Church class on sharing what you have done or need to do to get ready for your funeral.

Then Jim Stovall, Sally's brother (10 years in the Order), came down with stage 4 cirrhosis of the liver. They worked on a liver replacement, but Jim's body became toxic and he died in April of this year. Then in May, Sally (significant other for 14 years) had a major stroke and died- just to give you a feel for this death up close:

Sally, nothing basically wrong...just general 70-year health problems... a little issue with high blood pressure but controlled by pills. She was getting ready for a meeting and I came into the bedroom and she was on the bed- said she got dizzy in the bathroom and just barely made it to the bed. She said she had a headache (her speech was a little slurred) and wanted two aspirins- I gave them to her and left her on the bed for 15 minutes- came back and she wanted to eat something- sure- but she could not get up except her left arm- I grabbed her arm but she was not able to make it up- I called ambulance-we got to the hospital- she had a massive stroke with major brain bleeding... from local Western Suburban Hospital took her downtown by ambulance to Rush (Chicago stroke Hospital). Arrived at Hospital by 10:30pm and they determined she had lost most of her brain function. We kept her on a breathing tube until her sister and daughter arrived the next day and pulled tube after a prayer service with her pastor Marti, Pam Bergdall, Carol (sister), Teresa (daughter), George Emerick (Teresa's father) and myself. Sally lasted about 15 minutes. In a way it was great, it was quick. She was unconscious almost immediately at 7:30pm Monday night and pronounced dead at 4:27pm the next day, May 21st.. a great life

But I wasn't prepared for the HOLE that was blown in my life with the loss of my partner of 14 years. And in the midst of this emotional loss, I have had to spend the last 7 months taking care of the aftereffects of Sally's death and re-organizing my life. So, my learnings from these 3 death experiences (I count my lung problem as a near death):

- 1) In all 3 events I was struck how unprepared we are for death both in handling others deaths or our own. We are overwhelmed by the loss of our loved one to deal with what is the most important event of our or their lives. How can we pay so little attention to expressing the meaning and purpose of this glorious life we have had?
- 2) Second, death is usually hidden and then burst into our lives. Death is wicked how fast it comes and how it is all consuming and leaves little room for preparation or even thought. Sally's stroke was unannounced, and she was gone in less that 12 hours. Jim Stovall was in a hospital fighting a losing battle for his life and Sally and his family were totally consumed with his

care. It is hidden in that we do not want to even consider this end or admit to our finitude and mortality. The hiddenness from death, from this final power cuts us off from our journey leaves us shocked and disoriented in thinking/preparing to have a meaningful ending

- 3) What happens is professionals that deal a lot with death step in and organize the readings, the message, the music, the witness, the reception as the family and friends are frozen in losing a beloved one. When you read Matthew's The Time My Father Died and Matthews gets mad at what the funeral home had done to his father. The issue is not the funeral home but rather Joseph had not thought through his father's death.

In the case of Sally, since I had been thinking about my own death- I asked ICA's Seva Gandhi to do one of the Memorial Services witnesses to Sally's life. I asked her to reflect on Sally's time in the Order, the Ecumenical Institute and Institute of Cultural Affairs. Seva did a great job capturing Sally's thankfulness for being in a religious community and how she engaged herself as being part of a global servant force that was out to care for the poorest of the poor. I was so pleased that it seemed to hold the depth, wonder and uniqueness of her existence;

- Sally loved the religious house and the community, interaction, structures it brought her life.
- Sally loved the town meetings and her engaging the small towns across Utah. She had an amazing memory of those small town meetings and especially the songs.
- It was clear that Sally had found purpose in her life and was sent to make a difference in this world. Others sensed this too. Was pretty obvious when she died on a Tuesday and the next day, Wednesday, we held a prayer service with 100 people showing up and talked and talked about what Sally meant to their lives. And then that Saturday at her Memorial Service 250 people showed up many unknown to us... people were standing in the Church aisles

But my lesson learned through all of this is that we need to take ownership of our death and the message (word) it brings to others. I have worked on my funeral: like to have the Daily Office liturgy, DH Lawrence's Not I, Not I But a New Wind Blowing Through Me read, decided what I like to have read from the NT and the OT and who and what would like have sung plus a witness-one being the ICA. For Sally's Memorial Service her children pulled together a slide show that was fabulous. Need to do that.

I think the basic message is that we need to get our deaths thought through. So 3 deaths (actually Sally's sister died the year before) and a funeral class has made death up close as a reality. Overwhelming experience; need to bring intentionality and attentionally to our deaths and the death needs to speak the "Word". So from this experience and dialogue I have joined with others to form a "Death Team" (Pam Bergdall and Seva Gandhi- who says death is always on her mind), We are proposing a quarterly death webinar or more like a death sharing

circle to get our deaths in shape...it has been said that facing up to death also makes for a better life. What think you?

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