

## Trust Not Terror

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All Saints Day

When I was a child I was afraid of death. Really afraid. This fear continued into my mid-twenties when something happened to take the deepest part of my fear away.

I wonder if I would have been so afraid of death if I had lived on a farm or in the country, where the death of animals is not uncommon. Or if I had lived 100 years ago when your grandmother or grandfather lived with you and you were with them while they were dying and even after they were dead. In some homes, there was a special room for people to come and view the body.

Even church didn't help me much with my fear of death. Because I grew up in a theologically liberal church, like Mayflower, aside from some beautiful hymns and the liturgy of communion Sunday, when Jesus talks openly about his upcoming death; because we didn't talk about heaven—we didn't focus, like some churches do, on *being* good so you can go to heaven when you die; rather we focused on *doing* good so we could all build God's reign on earth--- because we didn't talk about heaven in church we ended up not talking about death much at all. It was all about life here and now on earth.

I do remember going to my grandfather's funeral in Chicago, the only funeral I ever went to as a kid, when I was 12 and being shushed because I was wailing or crying too loud. I loved my grandpa Emil Jusko. I will never tell anyone to shush at a funeral or memorial service.

So I was really afraid of death and it made me kind of an anxious kid in some ways. It was the great unknown I was terrified of. What happens after you die? And I was a thinker and a questioner. I didn't take other people's easy answers for the big things in life. I needed to come to a knowing myself.

Then I had an experience when I was in my 20s. If you were watching me that day, say you were on the wooden steps leading down to the dock and you saw me there sitting at the end of the dock, you wouldn't have seen anything happen. But inside me, everything changed.

It was autumn. The colors around the Lake were stunning—rust, gold, red. It was so cold, the waves were rolling, the wind was blowing. I sat at the very end, for a long time. Completely alone. No boats around. The loons were gone. There was, I recall, one eagle soaring above. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular. Rather I was just being.... absorbed in

the universe. It was a hard time in my life. That's why I was up north for a retreat. Up north where I'd been going since I was a baby. Up North Where I felt the most me, the most free, the most alive, the most in God. Just heading north always felt so good for my soul. Sitting on the dock, I was looking North across the water, no land to be seen, only a horizon of water in the North, contemplating, I was, "the more", when of a sudden, it came to me, a knowing that somehow when I die I will go there, from whence the North wind blows, to-that-beyond-North.... And I felt a great calm descend upon my soul. And it's never left me. This knowing. This deep trust. I don't like to talk about it, because somehow in trying to put words to the unnamable, unspeakable, it distorts it, and leeches it of meaning. But I so want you young people especially to hear it. We need to share our stories about the trust, we come to, in the "impenetrable mystery" of death.

I've had a couple of other similar experiences that grant me this knowing, this deep trust, as when sometimes, while in centering prayer...when I've managed to surrender all thought... and my ego or self dissolves into God... and I am in union with the oneness... that sweet oblivion... and I wonder if this is what death is like....Or when I am with someone who has just taken their last breath and the room is filled with holiness, pure love...

I'm not unusual. Others have stories too. You must ask for them and then listen. Stories of how they learned to not fear death, but rather to trust. Maybe there are as many stories and ways to understand death as there are people in this congregation. Some use language like peace like a river, or like returning to the womb or like turning from a water bug into a dragonfly or like going far North, from whence the North wind blows...

We can never know really know what happens after death. Agnosticism seems wise. Not atheism, but agnosticism, a not knowing for certain, but an openness, a curiosity even, and most of all a deep trust. That all will be well. That as the great mystic poet Julian of Norwich wrote: "And you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well... And in these words God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and in peace..."

So what shall we say about death? How shall we talk of this in church? Tell me your thoughts! Children, elders, everyone, I want to know!

This is what I hope.

May we each live long full lives, the biblical 3 score and ten or more.

May we not fear death, not fear being near it, not fear thinking of it, but rather trust, trust the great river of life and death the river of death and life, the flow into the

oneness of God.... Let us not fear death and in so doing may we be free to live joyfully and fearlessly.

And may we live among the dead, always conscious of their presence among us, the saints... always speaking of those who have died, seeing them, hearing what they would say.... never forgetting them.