



## Understanding Aging and Death – Part I\*

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Having spent many years in hospice programs in a variety of roles, I can testify to the transforming power of death. But to fully understand this power, we must first become aware of how the subject of aging and death works on us. Death, as I am using the term, is the ending of experience(s). This includes the ending of the experience of life as we know it, which we call physical death, but it also includes the moment-to-moment falling away of all aspects of life at every sense door even as our bodies continue to live. Within this definition, aging is a kind of death where we are dying to our youth of yesterday with all the abilities, skills, and dexterity we once took for granted. Death also includes the disappearance of the current moment as the next moment arises, including all the forgotten thoughts, the missed opportunities, the lost vitality, the mislaid memories, the ending of expectations and hopes, the passing away of sentient beings, and many other experiences.

At some point many of us realize that our fear of death is much more encompassing than the fear of our physical demise. Death, like all issues that are strongly denied, spreads its terror far beyond the initial subject matter. The fear of death holds us within form, and if we are going to spiritually move into the formless realm, we have to intentionally deal with this issue. As we survey our anxieties and fears, we see that much of our need for self-protection gains traction from the root fear of annihilation, and if we want to release our defenses and evolve beyond our identification with form, we are going to have to get much closer to death and dying.

What can we expect when we approach death as a spiritual teaching? There are a number of stages that many of us go through as we begin to realize the true nature of death and are willing to examine it up close and personally. If we throw our shuttered heart open and allow death to enter, the subject will transform us.

The following sections will give us a sense of the insights that unfold at each stage, but like all models of practice these stages are rarely linear or sequential but often intertwined, merging with one another. The exercises are meant to encourage your entry into the subject. There is a natural progression of realization that occurs as we release our defenses and meet death on its terms. If we do not turn away, death takes us through a radical spiritual transformation, leaving us at the doorstep of the deathless.

### The Stage of Self-Preservation

When I look back over my hospice career, the first six months were the most traumatic. Visiting the dying day after day left a growing sense of despair and anguish. When Christmas arrived around this time I felt annoyed with the lights and gaiety. How, I thought, could anyone be so callous and insensitive to the fact that all around them people were dying? Once while passing through a park I notice a father rolling a ball back and forth to his infant son. I stopped and watched for a long time and realized that I had become so contracted within the daily suffering I was witnessing that I no longer felt joy. I understood that I was not despairing about the dying—usually they were doing fine; I was reeling from facing my own mortality.

As much as I was trying to be open to the idea of death and dying, I was actually recoiling back into myself when faced with the fact that I too would die. I related to death at this point in time not for what it offered but for what it took away and the emotional pain that it caused. I had a bitter taste for death even as I was deliberately exposing myself to it; I could find neither a way out of it nor a way into it. The results were a quickening frustration and annoyance with the smallest incident and a growing cynicism that was festering within. At one point I realized that I was trying to deal with death by insulating myself from it. Though I knew what I was doing, I was angry that death existed. I could not force myself through this fear and needed a resolved patience to delicately navigate the subject at my speed.

Fear of death is often the greatest fear we have in life, but the depth of the insights that can come from death are proportional to that fear. The greater the fear, the greater our resistance, ignorance, and blindness. We are afraid to look for fear of seeing the truth of what is behind that ignorance. Ignorance always protects us from a more accurate orientation to reality, and our ignorance of death is no exception. What we see when we look into the eyes of death is how we have misperceived reality. We misperceive our intrinsic unity, which is the reason death is so stubbornly resisted: for the most part, we do not want to grow beyond ourselves. Once awareness is able to move into that resistance, an enormous amount of pent-up energy is liberated. That energy is the glue that has cemented the sense-of-self together since time immemorial; once released, it becomes the liberated energy of the formless.

The ego would love to take the upper hand and force its way through death in conquest of the subject, but since death is the ending of the ego, death holds the upper hand. The one thing the ego cannot force itself to do is face its own demise; as we get close to the subject, the egoic instinct for survival activates, and we turn away. This leaves us with the choice of either looking in the opposite direction—interfacing with death through our defenses of denial, hope, busyness, and despair—or facing the fear that surrounds death.

**Exercise:** In graduated steps, start familiarizing yourself with death and dying. First let yourself notice road kills; then when you feel ready, read the obituaries, go to funerals, and visit someone who is dying. Start internalizing the process by saying, “This too will happen to me. It is the nature of life to die.” As death becomes personal, does fear arise? How will you address that fear? Does looking away from death solve the question of your mortality? What defense mechanisms does the fear of death bring forward? Can you explore that fear without denying death?

If death is going to open the door to our hearts and reveal its wisdom, we will have to work effectively with the secondary response of fear. Seasoned caregivers like hospice workers have had to face this fear many times, but even those who work side-by-side with the issue over many years can only get so close, as death is always happening to the other person. Realization of death requires a different orientation than being on the safe side of caregiving, and most people squirm considerably when the tables turn and the dying is happening to them.

Even those who are physically close to death can remain distant from the subject by placing a lifetime of mental content between themselves and their death. They worry about their loved ones, their lack of forgiveness, their remorse and grief, their religious convictions, or the symptoms they may be facing as death approaches. Each mental disturbance keeps them tangential to their death by making these subjects more important than the understanding of death. To abide within death, death must be the central focus; otherwise, the wisdom within dying will pass us by, and, as with many of life’s experiences, we will move through death without any recognition of the depth and profundity it contain.

## The Stage of Universal Death

The first insightful door death opens is its commonality and complete normalcy. The only reason it does not seem common is that we usually do not focus on the ending of events. For the most part, the excitement of life is in its birth, its renewal, and its newness. Birth holds our attention, and whether it is a new idea or a new friend, we revel in the “getting to know” phase of life before the experience ages and becomes the usual and routine. What we already know (the old) is never as enlivening as what we are learning (the new), for the simple reason that the mystery is unfolding within the birth of the moment, within what we do not know, and what we do not know holds our attention. But that is also true of death. We do not know what it is, and therefore the same energy can be brought to focus on death as to birth.

The second reason we miss the everyday nature of death is due to the way we hold on to information. It is difficult for us to allow experiences to come and go within the natural timing of events. We usually feel compelled to retain the experience, mull over what has happened, and squeeze the last nectar of emotion or revelation from it. In doing so, we conceptually prolong or deny the ending, often forcing the experience into memory where we can repeatedly renew our relationship with it. Extending our exposure to the experiences of life allows us to deny the existence of death and forces us to view life through a distorted lens. This gives us an artificial sense of continuity that is at odds with a reality that includes death.

Memory not only prolongs what has been but also moves us forward into the future. It gives us the security many of us need that, though we may not have specifically been here before, this situation has enough similarity to the past to assure our safety—safety from harm and death. Memory is the essential mental quality that wards off death in both directions by calling forth an experience of the past and repeating it, thereby extending its continuity and providing the assurance that we are not in harm’s way. All of this keeps us from experiencing the ubiquity of death that is continually occurring as a natural and organic part of life.

As we continue to journey into death, we become less willing to distract our attention away from the reality of death and consciously allow death to show itself, and show itself it does. We are astounded by how much we have been denying the reality of death. We have always had a vague sense that death was happening everywhere, but now we realize it. This may seem like a disheartening realization, but it is actually very freeing. Death is no longer understood as a destroyer of life but the simple end of an outbreath or a gentle dispersal of a gathering. Things come together, things depart, every relationship ends in separation, and that is the way of life. Death destroys nothing but our fabricated myths and self-delusions. It is a constant and gentle reminder not to hide from what is true.

**Exercise:** Start noticing the universal nature of death and dying. See it everywhere and within every living thing. Wherever your mind alights, notice where that plant or animal lies within the natural life cycle of birth and death. You might see a tree and notice the autumn leaves or that the tree itself seems diseased or aged. As you are walking down a street, observe the people in relationship to their aging process. Take out earlier photo albums of yourself and your loved ones and bear witness to the aging process that moves almost unnoticed throughout your life. Let death and aging become an ongoing living reality.

Viewing death in this inclusive way is like suddenly being born into a reality that is complete and benevolent. The energy from the avoidance of death becomes redirected back into the full embrace of life, and the moment opens without paranoia. The mystery that was obscured by death reappears, and we find a home in the midst of change and transition.

To give us a sense of the mystery this subject holds, I would like to offer the following true story of a hospice patient I cared for many years ago. Mary was a young woman in her thirties with two children in their early teens. Mary was dying of cancer and lived only a short time after the hospice became involved with her care. I was the hospice social worker and, given the state of her condition, focused very quickly on preparing the family for her death once she was admitted under our care.

At the time Mary was comfortably in her home with her family, which is where hospices prefer to support and care for the dying, but within a few days Mary asked to be moved to our inpatient unit and out of her home. Though it was an unusual request, we consented and transferred her to our designated unit that housed other terminally ill patients. Once she was transferred, she began to actively die. As she was dying, Mary's family and several hospice staff who had accompanied her during the transfer surrounded her. Unlike most patients who are actively dying, Mary was able to verbally tell us what she was going through as she was dying. She said the following: "I can no longer feel my body (bodily sensations had ceased). I can't see (her visual field was gone). I can no longer hear" (hearing had ended). Then she said, "I am no longer in my body." Mary then tried to speak but could not. Her body then died.

I glanced up at those of us around her bed and noticed we were all in rapt attention, as if Mary were conveying the secrets of the universe. Even her husband and children were staring with astonished wide-open eyes. We spent several minutes after her death in a state of wonder. The mystery was palpable, touching everything. About 15 minutes later, one of her children started to weep, and soon the rest of the family was in tears. Immediately the hospice staff abandoned the wonder and came to their side, consoling and supporting their grief.

Death is that wondrous, and once acknowledged ignites the wonder within life. By excluding the universal nature of death, we confine the dying to imprisoned nursing homes, walled hospitals, and darkened somber hallways. Life and death are a single unity. Light casts a shadow, and the shadow is as significant as light. The two cannot be separated, and to try is to try is to live in fear of the shadow.

[The second part of this article, addressing the stage of personal inquiry and the stage of living death, will be published in the next issue of the newsletter.]

*\*Excerpted from Rodney's forthcoming book on navigating the Four Foundations*