

The Way of the Force

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Every minister and pastoral care giver has the story of their first time. The first time they ever witnessed someone in the process of dying. For me it was my second year of seminary working as a chaplain one summer. I would go about my usual rounds, check in with nurses since I was going to be spending the night on call, and just get a sense of what was going on in the hospital that night. When I went up to one of my usual floors the nurse, rather casually, said that the lady in room seven would be dying during the next shift. I was taken aback at this prediction. How did she know what was going to happen to this woman?

Unbeknownst to me, my views of death and dying had been influenced a lot by TV and movies that I had seen. If you watch a cop show or even a hospital show, it seems that there is a death scene at least once an episode. The doctors and loved ones hover over the bed as the patient speaks their dying words, the camera focuses in on the EKG machine with its beep beep beep, and the electronic line wiggling up and

down. The patient reveals the name of the killer or the moment of reconciliation between estranged family members happens, and then flat line, beeeeeeeep, and the person's head flops over and their eyes close. One minute they are alive, and the next minute they are dead. It is a black and white state of being.

In the case of the woman I encountered that night in the hospital as a young minister, there was no clear cut line that got crossed from living into dying. I was buzzed on my beeper at about two in the morning, and met the family in the room. The nurse came in, did some examinations of the old woman, and declared her dead. The EKG was still hooked up, and it was still registering electrical impulses to the heart. However they were crazy patterns that I had never seen. Just twitches apparently—not enough to actually count as a heartbeat to push blood through the body.

What struck me about this was how everything was a matter of degree. The heart slows down. Brain activity slows down. Breathing slows down. Eventually they cross a threshold where medical science declares you no longer alive, but it is a continuum, a process of slowing down, rather than an abrupt end. Certainly there are folks who die suddenly of a heart attack or in a violent accident where that would not be the case, but mostly I witnessed this gradual process of dying.

Looking back on it, this should not have surprised me. Everything is in process, it's just a matter of how fast or how visible that process

happens to be. Carl Jung once quipped that we begin dying one minute after we are born. In our Ancient Reading today the Chinese Taoist Master Chuang Tzu, one of my favorite religious writers of all time, notes that death is a part of the process of life. The yin and yang of the Tao require both birth and death to sustain the universe, and the seeds of one are present when its opposite is in the extreme. Hence the familiar yin-yang sign that you have all no doubt seen before.

In the Star Wars movies this is the message Yoda has for the young Jedi Anakin Skywalker. Anakin had visions of his wife dying in childbirth. He had had similar visions of his mother's suffering just before her death. He was determined not to let his wife die in the same way if he could help it. And so he goes to Yoda for council and advice.

Yoda tells him, much like Chuang Tzu, that he should not worry so much about it. Sorry to disappoint you, but I can't do the voice. Visions are what could be and not what will be. Be willing to let go of everything thing you hold dear. "The cycle of life and death is like the seasons." To return to him for a moment, Jung said that the first half of our life we are intent on competition, status and acquiring things. But in the second half of life, when we are more mature and see that external people and stuff do not bring about the happiness we are seeking, we start to let go, as Yoda consuls.

But that is not what Anakin wants to hear. “Let go” is not a message that suits him. He is trapped by desire and fear. These two emotions, if we let them control us, can quite literally be a path to the dark side of our personality. Fear is the justification for many atrocities. They are terrorists or they are the enemy, and so anything goes as far as our treatment of them. Desire for wealth, for sex, for you name it can become a kind of addiction that shrinks our world down to one purpose: acquiring more. More love, more freedom, more money, more knowledge, or in many cases more of that which we cannot even clearly name, but has control of us. Over time the small hits of satisfaction we get by acquiring more and more becomes weaker and weaker until we realize that getting more is not the answer. In many ways the recent “Occupy” movement in various cities throughout the country is an explicit backlash against this extreme and extraordinary desire for more that our society has been obsessed with for generations. It is time to heed Yoda’s advice, and let go; simplify our life down to the core of what really matters.

In his quest for more power, for more prestige, for more love, and the fear of losing it all, Anakin turns instead to the dark side. Palpatine, the Dark Sith Master, promises Anakin everything he could ever want even though it is all lies. In following desire and fear Anakin kills innocent people, including, ironically his wife; the very person he was

intent on saving. Thus he enters into the last deadly poison—rage. Rage over losing his beloved, especially at his own hand.

Anakin refused to accept that life and death are a part of the same process. You don't get one without eventually having to face the other. Decades later, as the infamous Darth Vader, Anakin faces death again. This time it is the potential death of his son Luke. Rather than see him die, Anakin sacrifices himself—a selfless and compassionate act. He finally considers the well-being of someone else. Whereas in his youth Anakin was motivated by his own desire to avoid pain and loss, in Return of the Jedi he instead accepts his own pain and death so long as it ends the suffering of his son. In the end Anakin's life energy is united with the Force, and he is visible to his friends and family.

In one of the numerous Star Wars debates that have ensued over the years, one of them is this. Darth Vader was an evil tyrant most of his life, and yet a death bed conversion by one act of compassion allows him to be “saved.” As a matter of fact this is exactly what the great Universalist minister and theologian Hosea Ballou used to preach. Ballou was known as an “Ultra-Universalist” which meant that he believed that everyone went immediately to heaven when they died. Other Universalists would have wanted Darth Vader to work off his bad karma in purgatory or something like that for a few hundred years before eventually getting into heaven. But apparently George Lucas has read his Hosea Ballou—even Darth Vader is saved!

Chuang Tzu and Yoda teach that life and death are a continual process. Living forever is a pipe dream, and even if you could, the sacrifices you would have to make in order to achieve that goal would likely mean that you would have much of a life left to live. Just to give a shout out to you Harry Potter fans who are patiently enduring this all this Star Wars talk: Voldemort is a perfect example of someone who denies death to such an extreme degree that in order to live forever he winds up in a half dead life that seems hardly desirable. Living forever is “unnatural” in the words of Palpatine.

People sometimes ask me if I believe in the “Force.” I don’t believe in moving object with one’s mind or that you can see the future or dodge lasers. But there is something to the idea of a natural process, let’s call it the “Tao” for lack of a better term in English, in which we participate and which is larger than ourselves. We are, right this very moment, in the midst of a dynamic and interconnected process of living and dying, of being born again, with each breath we take.

Buddhists call this *shunyata*, which is often given the somewhat unfortunate translation of “emptiness.” Emptiness makes it sound like Buddhism is form of nihilism, which isn’t right. The Greeks taught that everything has an essence or substance as well as an outer layer that we perceive. We can have a mental picture or understanding of a “chair” that establishes what the ideal “chair” may be, and then we go out in the world and see various chairs which may or may not align with that ideal

in our minds. The ideal is abstract, but the chairs we perceive in real life are concrete and particular. This dual reality of essence and perception has been the basis of a lot of Western philosophy and theology.

Buddhism teaches that all that is wrong. Everything is “empty” of an essence or substance. All there is in the universe is a complex matrix of conditions that allow people and objects to temporarily exist. In my opinion, the best analogy that anyone has ever come up with to explain this is Thich Nhat Hanh’s roses and garbage. We all love roses, but they exist not because they have some ethereal essence to them, but because there was a seed, water, some soil, some sunlight, perhaps a gardener looking after them, and then one day a rose shoots up. You cannot separate the rose from the seed, the soil, the sunlight, the water, and the gardener. Take any one of those conditions away, and the rose does not exist, or at least not in its present form it doesn’t. One of Thich Nhat Hanh’s most well known piece of writing is “If you are a poet you can see the cloud over the book you are reading. The book required paper, which required wood, which needed a tree which was grown by the rain, which started out as a cloud. Without that cloud, you cannot read these words.” A sound line of reasoning unless you download his books onto your Kindle!

But it doesn’t stop with the roses. Roses rot, and are thrown away. They become smelly disgusting garbage—but all they have done is change form according to the natural way of life. The roses return to the

soil and nurture other plants and animals. This small process is one of many infinitely complex processes at work in the world. All of them are interconnected with each other, all of them temporary. It is the Circle of Life that we heard our choir sing this morning. That is the Tao of which we are all inextricable a part of whether we like it, or know it, or not.

Thus our lives, and our deaths, are simply an ongoing process of transformation. Every time you breathe in and out you are reconnecting to that complex interconnectedness that Chuang Tzu called the Tao and Yoda referred to as the Force. If you get a chance sometime, sit very still and take in a series of slow deep breathes. You will notice, if you are paying close attention and not planning your work to do list, that there is a brief pause between exhaling and inhaling; just half a heartbeat long when you are technically neither breathing in nor breathing out. Zen Buddhists say that if you are looking for the line between life and death, that brief moment between breaths is it. Right then you have exhaled out into the universe and you are about to inhale everything into yourself. And then it's gone, and another one arises shortly thereafter.

Yoda's advice to let go of the ones we love is extraordinarily difficult to do. Very few of us could grieve as Chuang Tzu grieves. One can hardly blame Anakin Skywalker for not being able to put that teaching into practice no matter how wise and truth-filled it was. We don't want to let go of the people we love when they go through that process of dying, even though intellectually we know we must. Grief is

the heart coming to terms with reality. It cannot happen all at once; grief is not a process that can be rushed. It is a process of healing and it happens according to its own timeframe. Denial is a necessary part of grief, but we must not get stuck there as Anakin did. Eventually, if we stay with the difficult feelings of pain, sadness, and loss we come to let go and accept that our beloved is no longer with us in the same form we were accustomed to.

And while grief is a difficult road to follow, at the end of it is hope. For like in Star Wars, we come to eventually understand the legacy our loved ones have left us. They “live on in the Force” because the universe is changed forever by their very being. I believe Star Wars is the second most Buddhist movie ever made. The most Buddhist movie ever made was “It’s a Wonderful Life” starring Jimmy Stewart. We think of it as Christian because there are angels and it takes place at Christmas time, but the message is a Buddhist one. If you take any one person’s life, even if they may think of themselves as insignificant and unimportant, and lift it out of the interconnected web of existence, the Tao which contains us all, you will see innumerable ripples that result. Jimmy Stewart learns what would have been if he had not lived: his wife would suffer, his brother would be dead and the people he saved in World War Two would also be dead, his friends would be destitute and his whole beloved town would be in shambles. He had a legacy he was not aware of, just by his very being. He was like that cloud floating

above Thich Nhat Hanh's piece of paper—if he didn't exist then the whole universe would be significantly different. He realized that he was a part of the living Force, the Tao.

I believe that all of us are like that. Our lives touch and impact each other in unseen and unknown ways. The only question is, is that impact for good or for ill? Only you can choose to bless the world, to paraphrase Rebecca Parker.

May your legacy be a legacy of love. May we be mindful of our place in the circle of life. And May the Force be with you. Amen
Blessed Be.