

Gratitude

Dear Friends,

For many years the Living/Dying Project offered all of our client services free of charge and covered its basic operating expenses through individual donations and a few grants. Basically we were not a business. Almost all staffing, including my work as Executive Director, was done without salary on a volunteer basis.

Due to financial pressures from the weak economy and particularly to my own personal financial situation, the Project has had to develop a new business model in order to survive. The heartfelt and generous outpouring of donations we

received earlier this year enabled us to weather the immediate crisis and thus have the time to begin the transition into an organization that can continue to offer its basic client services without charge, while at the same time generating enough income to support me and the activities of the Project. We are now a stronger, more vital organization that is serving many more people than before.

I have begun to facilitate ongoing small groups in Berkeley on Monday evening, in Sebastopol on Tuesday afternoon and Tuesday evening, and soon in Marin. These groups, called

Healing at the Edge, are supportive communities in which we explore the interface between our human and divine dimensions and how the tension between them determines the fruits of our search for freedom.

Also I have begun to see individual clients who are exploring end-of-life issues or want to deepen their spiritual practice. These individual sessions are available either in person or via telephone or Skype/Internet for those who do not live nearby. Both the groups and the individual work are for fee, on a sliding scale at moderate rates.



*Barn's burnt down—
Now I can see the moon.*
—Masahide



Our Web site, livingdying.org, has been redesigned and I encourage you to take a look. The site is much more graphically pleasing and user accessible. The site now reflects the evolution of the Project, from an organization that offers spiritual support to those with life-threatening illness and to those who care for them, to an organization that also facilitates healing, healing that arises from a more open and honest relationship with our mortality. We plan to add more content, user forums, and webinars, to create online an authentic community.

If we truly accept that we all will die but we don't know when, that life is truly precious, and that what we do has a real effect in the world, then how are we motivated to act? How much passion and aliveness can we bring to this moment? Can we feel compassion rather than judgment for the supposed imperfections that we see in ourselves and in those around us?

The more I work with groups and individuals, the clearer it becomes that many people who have a deep commitment to inner growth and to healing are still blocked in their growth by subconscious patterns.

Recent brain studies have shown that about 98% of brain activity is subconscious and 2% is conscious. Again and again our best conscious intentions are overwhelmed by our subconscious patterns, patterns formed early in our lives when we were emotional beings. These patterns interrupt, limit and derail our devotion, our worship, our meditation, our very aliveness. Typically these patterns are not examined in traditional contemplative practices that have their roots in the East because it is assumed that people do like themselves and know how to care for themselves, an assumption that does not hold for many of us in the West.

To avoid detours and blind spots along the way, a foundation that includes an embodied, centered stance in life is crucial before we begin the work of dis-identification with ego structure.

We practice an integrative spiritual approach to the transformation of suffering that includes passionate devotion, working with patterns of energy in the body, and working with patterns of conditioning in the mind. Healing is experienced by resting in the non-dual, that which is deathless, the One in the All, the All in the One.

We can feel compassion and also taste joy to the depth that we have encountered our own suffering. This depth can be experienced through loss, through illness, or by spiritual practice. The most profound loss for most is the approach of death. The most beautiful Americans I have ever met were soon to die.

Yet even though I supported each of my parents as they died of cancer, and guided many other loved ones and clients as they died, intimacy with death did not force me to confront and accept my fear and my mortality as honestly as did the sudden loss of almost all my resources. The movement in my life from great fear to genuine gratitude has been the result of more deeply realizing that I am not the doer and that my role is to surrender the fruits of my actions to God, to my Beloved. What relief! The Dark Mother has been a fulfilling yet demanding companion. Sometimes called Kali or the Black Madonna, She is the feminine aspect of the divinity that devours and destroys until She is unconditionally loved.

True healing happens when our suffering comes in direct contact with the Sacred, with that which is

Changeless. Our conditioning often prevents this contact and instead we identify with the part of ourselves that is suffering, becoming fixated on external causes of suffering, rather than courageously relating to the part of ourselves that creates the suffering. Hence we feel stuck and never fully encounter our pain.

The openness and vulnerability of my individual clients and the members of the groups I facilitate has brought me to tears and has nurtured me. Gratitude for my new life of busyness/business grows and surprises. Working with people at the end of their lives has always been a privilege. This new work, bringing the wisdom and intensity that an intimate relationship with death cultivates to spiritual support for those on a path of exploration and contemplation, has been a blessing for me.

We are enthused that the Project is moving forward in new and vital directions. You are invited to participate in our ongoing small groups here in the Bay Area or to have individual sessions with me.

With love,
Dale Borglum



*Just as parents care
for their children,
you should bear in mind
the whole universe.*
—Dogen

*If the only prayer you say
in your life is "thank you,"
that would suffice.*
—Meister Eckhart



Both Sides



*Fear is the cheapest room
in the house.*

*I would like to see you
living in better conditions.*

—Hafiz

Twenty years ago, Joe, a sculptor, called me as his father was dying. Over the phone I helped him guide and support his father as he died.

Joe and I became friends and, even after he moved to Detroit, have stayed in touch. While in Detroit he had been working in the design department of one of the Big Three auto makers until he recently was downsized out of a job.

Last fall, when Joe's mother started dying, he and I began talking and writing frequently. Below are some of the emails he sent a month after his mother died.

—Dale Borglum

Hi Dale,

I have been noticing that when I look at the world without thoughts, I see forms, the lines and shapes of things, as if I am looking at them for the first time. It is like I am in nature. here in Detroit in gasoline alley. When I was looking at my mother as she was dying, I saw her and the emptiness, the mystery, all of what I don't understand or know. I experienced a sense of awe and wonder. I have found that I have been stopping whatever I am doing lately and just looking and feeling the adumbrations of God. There is nothing to worry about; then I start to worry.

The last few hours that my mother was in the hospital, she kept saying, "Let's go," but the phrase she used in her native dialect implied "Let us go together," as if it were an order. She motioned me to pull back her bed covers, then she tried to sit up but could not. There was nothing that I could do but look at her. Her willfulness was getting thin and my desire to respond thinner. The silence pierced through her persistent determination and my dogged obedience to respond. All the anger that I had and all the anger that she had, dissipated. The person she was and the person I was went up like a fog in a morning sun. There was a silence like the silence between two claps of thunder. All we knew was the love between us.

I may have told you that I don't feel like doing anything. I am finding that I just want to sit. I think of things to do but I am not doing them. It is as if my mind is running around trying to do things, but another part of me just wants to be still. Even though I just want to sit I am not sitting. Maybe I am, but just little sittings. I recall hearing or reading Soygal Rinpoche saying something about doing multiple short meditations throughout the day. I guess I have been sitting. But I haven't been.

* * *

When my mom died, I told you that I felt that I was solid on both sides, this ego side and the other side. I felt as if I were helpless to help my mother on this side. On the other side I couldn't do anything either, but I could love her. I was helpless in her presence, but on the other side she didn't need any help.

Death and loss are such creative moments. Moments of real beauty and excitement. The ego mourns and cries but the spirit jumps up. It almost seems that the greater the depth of the loss, the greater experience of the other side.

Maybe I am not making sense. It is almost three AM here. I couldn't sleep.

* * *

I recall reading once, though I don't recall from what tradition, that in the beginning there was nothing and in a corner of that nothingness a space came into being and in that space God came into being and the rest followed.

All the ideas of hurt, joy, confusion exist in that corner and all these ideas of emotions keep bouncing off each other, so I thought that this was all that existed. Part of me knew that this was not so, but part of me was convinced that the ideas of hurt and anger were true and solid. When my mother died I saw that emptiness existed, and I saw that one of those little constructs of emotions disappeared as if it didn't exist. Part of me disappeared. One of those constructs of emotion stopped being. Through the gap which was the space that was my mother, I saw emptiness peer through. If there is a future life or a past life, emptiness still exists. When I touched into emptiness, it didn't matter that there was a past or future, because the underside of everything is emptiness. I felt this in my body. I wasn't trying to understand this. I knew it.

I felt that I was tired of all the fear that I have felt all my life. I just didn't want to do that any more. I was tired of feeling hurt by my sisters. I could no longer be hurt by my mother, she wasn't there. Even when she was alive she wasn't there. Emptiness kept looking through. I could see through those tight little constructs of emotions. I feel such a sadness about all of this, but it doesn't have to do with only the loss of my mother. I disappeared as well. I seem to be mourning everything. There is beauty here too. I think that I only see beauty in forms or in nature when I see emptiness looking back from the other side.

Does this make sense to you? I feel like I am babbling. I wrote this the other day and I didn't send it because I felt like I was babbling. I don't know how to talk about this. A gap opened up when my mother died; the whole world poured through. I saw myself die when she died. This doesn't make sense. The rush of emptiness that blew through that gap felt like a gift.

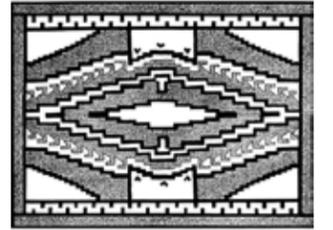
* * *

I feel like I know something, but a part of me does not wish to admit that it is true. It is like being in love with a beautiful woman whom you know is poison for you, you know that as soon as you touch her she will leave you puking in the garbage. You know that you should never talk to her again or be in a room with her, but then when you see her you can't stop from ripping her clothes off and trying to swallow her body whole.

Fear is like that for me. Odd, I never said that before. I never compared the relationship to fear as a relationship to a seductress. What strange words.

When my mother was dying she was kept in a room which had glass walls so that she could be observed. Once when I was leaving I turned around and saw her motioning with her hand for me to come back in. She wanted me to help her leave. It was as if her body wanted to stay alive, but another part of her knew it was time to die. When I looked into her face, there was fear and frustration there. I felt that I knew what she was feeling. When she died that gap appeared and emptiness rushed in. That is when I knew that I could drop this emotional tie into fear. The profundity of emptiness dimmed the attraction of fear and rendered it unimportant.

So it is strange now that I find myself hat in hand, standing on fear's back porch, knocking on her door, waiting to see if she will want to go out with me for a drink.



*Nothing worth doing is
completed in our lifetime,
Therefore, we are saved by hope.
Nothing true or beautiful or good
makes complete sense in
any immediate context of history;
Therefore, we are saved by faith.
Nothing we do, however virtuous,
can be accomplished alone.
Therefore, we are saved by love.
No virtuous act is quite as virtuous
from the standpoint of
our friend or foe
as from our own;
Therefore, we are saved
by the final form of love,
which is forgiveness.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr





Denlow and his hospice nurse, Andrew Getz.

The Journey Ends

Denlow Enlow died on March 18, 2009 after four years struggling with the ravages of Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS. He was 43 years old. Those who have been following his journey over the last two years in the pages of this newsletter are aware that Denlow was a remarkable man who met the challenges of his disease with grace and good humor.

During the final six months of his life Denlow focused his energy on preparing for the end. Most important to him was recording for his young daughter Hannah who her father was. His diagnosis happened shortly after her birth, consequently his illness was very much part of her life from the beginning. He'd witnessed with sadness the space that had been growing between them as Hannah's life took her outside of their home and his growing incapacity made it ever more difficult for him to engage with her when she was at home. He hoped to document his life through photos, videos, music and the written word. During the final months of his life he devoted his limited energy to finishing this project that in reality could never be finished. There was simply too much to say.

He also worked with me during those months to prepare for his memorial service. We reviewed his poetry to see what might be suitable to the occasion. He explored his extensive collection of songs, creating a playlist he called "The Mourning After." We laughed and we cried as we reflected on the fact of this end to his life.

The focus of my work with Denlow throughout the time we met together was quite simply encouraging him to remain open in the face of whatever was happening in his body as it gradually failed him. Early in our meetings Denlow focused on the fear

of being breathless, of essentially suffocating. The subject occupied his dreams and eventually his poetry. He wrote about a snake wrapping its body around him after it had paralyzed him, squeezing the breath and life force from his body. Those fears gradually diminished but as his breathing became labored and occasionally failed him, the challenge remained to keep open to each moment. Denlow did so with remarkable grace.

The day Denlow died was a day I was scheduled to meet with him. I'd agreed to offer respite to Denlow's beloved caregiver, Joe, after Melissa returned to working a few days each week at her employer's office. For the first few years of their journey together, Melissa had telecommuted from home, so she was always available to give Joe a break.

Providing "chair-side" nursing support is not typically part of being a volunteer with the Living/Dying Project and I certainly had some apprehension the first day I assumed my new duties. Yet, I was aware when Melissa asked if I were willing, that the bond of love which had grown between Denlow and me over the years we'd been meeting, made it easy to say yes.

On this particular day, however, the paramedic's van pulled up just as I arrived. I didn't know precisely what had happened but I was aware there had been many emergency visits in the past. I led them to where I expected Denlow would be waiting. He was seated in his wheelchair gasping for breath, a mask over his face as Joe attempted to give him relief with bottled oxygen. The paramedics quickly determined that Denlow needed to go to the hospital. I followed and after convincing hospital staff my presence might be helpful to them since he

couldn't communicate without his computer, they permitted me to join Denlow in the Emergency Room.

Clearly, I had nothing to contribute to this moment apart from the relationship Denlow and I had created over the hundreds of hours we'd spent with one another. I stood at his shoulder, my hand on his arm or holding his hand. I was able to tell hospital staff what I knew of his condition and directed them to Melissa for more detailed information. Beyond that I simply gazed into Denlow's eyes and encouraged him to remember that he was more than this body that was failing him at the moment. With the efforts of the staff and perhaps my calming presence, Denlow was gradually able to calm down. When Melissa arrived an hour later it seemed Denlow had stabilized and that this latest episode would conclude without further incidence. Before leaving I spoke with Melissa about coming to meet with Denlow in two days.

I received a call from Melissa later that same evening. She told me Denlow had died in his bed shortly after returning from the hospital. I immediately drove to their home and joined her in Denlow's room. I noted the photo of me he'd taped to the wall next to his bed as I rested my hand on his now cold head. The journey had finally come to an end. Melissa and I comforted one another.

As Melissa and I collaborated to prepare the memorial service she spoke of her loss. In truth, Denlow's passing represented a relief for her and her family. I knew from my time in their home how extraordinarily hard she'd worked to provide the care her husband needed.

She spoke of how her loss was truly for the man whom she'd married and with whom she'd shared the years before his diagnosis with ALS. She had been grieving that loss throughout the years of his illness.

I never knew Denlow when he was healthy, so my grief was for the man in the wheelchair whom I visited each week for two years. He became a beloved presence in my life. I still think of him every Friday. Sharing his journey was a great gift for which I will always be grateful.

—Curtis Grindahl



Praying

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*
—Mary Oliver

*When we fight with our failing,
we ignore the entrance to the shrine itself
and wrestle with the guardian
fierce figure on the side of good.*
—David Whyte



Mission Statement

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.

The Living/Dying Project offers compassionate support in the spirit of mutual exploration to those facing life-threatening illness.



Board of Advisors

Angeles Arrien

Jerry Brown

Fritjof Capra

Joan Halifax

Jack Kornfield

Anne Lamott

Joanna Macy

Wayne Muller

John Robbins

Sogyal Rinpoche

The Living/Dying Project

Post Office Box 357

Fairfax, CA 94978-0357

415 456-3915

livingdying.org

info@livingdying.org

Supporting Us

We continue to offer free-of-charge spiritual support to those with life-threatening illnesses in the San Francisco Bay Area and to their caregivers. Our educational programs are available nationally and internationally. We have been offering these services for thirty years and are the first organization in the Western world whose mission is to cultivate conscious dying.

During these politically divisive times, healing our individual and collective relationships with death may be the most immediate and direct means to heal that which separates us from our neighbor. Now as always, it is vital to keep what is most meaningful and inspiring to us at the motivating center of our actions.

Almost all of the work of the Project is done by volunteers. A great majority of our budget comes from individual donations. We ask for your support, both financially and your blessings. As well as making a donation in the enclosed envelope, there are three other ways to support us financially:

- ☞ First, you can donate to us online using PayPal by going to our Web site, livingdying.org, clicking the Supporting the Living/Dying Project at the left side of the page and clicking the Make Donation Now button.
- ☞ Second, if you shop online, many sites offer a 1%-6% donation to the Living/Dying Project if you first go to goodshop.com and enter Living/Dying Project in the "enter your charity here" box. Participating sites include Alaska Airlines, United Airlines, REI, Sears, Allstate, AT&T Wireless, Amazon, Apple Store, BestBuy, Buy.com, eBay, Circuit City, Office Depot, Macy's, Nordstrom's, Toys R Us, Target, LL Bean, Lands' End, HP, Dell, iTunes, Williams Sonoma, Zappos and many more.
- ☞ Third, we are a member of the [escrip](http://escrip.com) program. Go to escrip.com and register. Then 2%-6% of purchases you make at Eddie Bauer, Macy's, Andronico's, Delano's IGA, Safeway, Volvo, Big O Tires, and dozens of other stores will automatically be donated to the Project. To register with [escrip](http://escrip.com), please use our group ID# 500002940 or the name "Living-Dying Project" (rather than Living/Dying Project with a slash).

Last year was difficult financially for many, yet we received as many donations as in the previous year. Our heartfelt thanks to all of you who have supported us in any way. May this holiday season and the year to come be filled with wisdom and blessing for you and for those you love.

—Dale Borglum, *Executive Director*



Photo Credits

Curitis Grindahl: Pier Beneath Dramatic Sky (page 4); Denlow and his nurse, Andrew (page 6); Pacific Sundance (page 7). Photos by Dale Borglum: Abstract Oak (page 1), The Mother in My Backyard (pages 2-3). Once again Steven Englander has done a magnificent job with the layout and design of this newsletter. Steven and Curtis both have been integral parts of the Living/Dying Project for many years and our work is greatly enhanced by their efforts.