

What Death Taught Me About Life

by Thao Phi

A part of my summer internship with ServiceSpace.org involved initiating conversations with people I didn't know, and one question I'd ask them is what do they know for sure in life? Something they know with certainty. When I was initially asked this question, the immediate answer that came to mind is death. Death is everywhere. And I don't mean death is everywhere in some cynical or morbid sense, but death is an inevitable part of life. Rather than seeing death as something good or bad, it is just something that happens.

When I was 12, I attended a boarding school that was also a temple. My parents came to pick me up for winter break. My mom was planning on staying at the temple for a retreat, but I pleaded her to come back since I would finally be home. My mom listened to me, and we began heading back to my house. Dusk was drawing near, and the rain was drizzling. For the first time since I had gone to boarding school, my parents and I were having a happy conversation in the car without any sign of arguing. I can't say I remember the exact moment it happened; I can't even say that I remember it happening at all. The next thing I can vaguely recall is waking up in a hospital bed, and for the next few days I drifted in and out of consciousness.

Death rips you out of a relationship and we are to a large degree the sum total of our relationships. The relationship between a mother and child is especially unique and irreplaceable. How do you tell a child that that relationship has been severed by death? I don't explicitly remember being told that my mom passed away on site of the car accident, but it hit me when it was only my brother, dad, and I on the ride home.

There's a quote that says, "When someone you love dies, and you're not expecting it, you don't lose her all at once; you lose her in pieces over a long time." And that's how it felt for a long time. Dealing with grief as a child is a very peculiar thing. My mom's funeral was exactly a week after her passing, and I could barely process what had happened by then. I was numb and didn't know what to feel.

Death is so abrupt and sudden that we go into a kind of shock. That abrupt ending and then there's no more. No more taking back all that was done, no more of the things that would've been. It is after that one moment that changes everything that anything else is

too late. And that was probably the worst part of it all - the grief of not knowing what it would be like if my mom were there for the big and little events in my life, in the world. For years I didn't know what to do with the grief, and it probably manifested in ways that I wasn't even aware of.

But over time you come to reconcile with this loss. It's not that you're okay with it, but you learn to accept it for what it is.

"Grief can be a burden, but also an anchor. You get used to the weight [and used to] how it holds you in place." My mother's death became an anchor - in some ways it weighed me down. I found myself talking about her death way more than necessary. It was like a sad song repeating itself on a broken record-player. I tried to make it seem like me being so precocious and responsible after my mother's death was in some way triumphant and showed strength. While her death has been one of the worst experiences of my life, I came to grasp that this wasn't the first bad thing to happen to me, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Death can give an obscure and distorted view of reality.

In other ways, my mother's death was an anchor in the sense that it helped me stay grounded. When other not-so-good things happen, if I give myself some time and take a step back, the upset becomes smaller. Instead of seeing it as an isolated event of something bad, I can see the bigger picture. In the grand scheme of things, these moments of suffering are complemented by instances of joy. Without my mom around, I've become much closer to my dad and our relationship is great. This brush with death has made me cherish other relationships I have in my life as well. Whether it's because of death or something else, you never know when someone may be permanently gone from your life, and you don't want to take the time you have with them for granted. Her death has helped me be more open and reach out to others for support, and I've met an abundance of dynamic people. And in subtle ways, her death has taught me to be more humble about life.

Death is a strange thing. Even though it happens all the time, it can blindside you. To be human is to fully come to grips with how you react and deal with death. Not to be overcome by it, not to be obsessed by it. But not to let it slip too far away that you lose the immediacy of this reality. Because it's in losing something that we so closely identify with that we can begin to find ourselves.

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