A Good Death: An Interview with Stephen Jenkinson
by Leslee Goodman

With a master’s degree in theology from Harvard University and a master’s in social work from the University of Toronto, Stephen Jenkinson was the director of counselling services in the palliative care department at a major Canadian hospital in Toronto for several years, where he encountered the deep “death phobia” and “grief illiteracy” that most of his patients and their loved ones brought to their deathbeds. This work motivated Jenkinson to encourage people to prepare for their death well before its arrival so that they might be free to “participate emotionally in their deaths as they participate in other major life events.”

In 2010, Jenkinson founded the Orphan Wisdom School, at his farm in the Ottawa Valley in Ontario, Canada. The school provides experiential learning in the skills of “deep living and making human culture.” Jenkinson believes that what modern people “suffer from most is culture failure: amnesia of ancestry and deep family story, phantom or sham rites of passage, no instruction on how to live with each other or with the world around us, or with our dead, or with our history.”

Jenkinson and his work are the focus of a documentary, Griefwalker, directed by Tim Wilson and released in 2008. In it, we see Jenkinson in teaching sessions with doctors and nurses, in counseling sessions with dying people and their families, and in meditative and often frank exchanges with the film’s director. We glimpse his life on the land as a farmer, fur trapper, and canoe-builder—attempts to live simply and in harmony with the seasons and other demands of nature. Refusal to live within these demands is part of what makes death so difficult for contemporary Westerners; we have no experience with it. Contrary to everything we hear from those around us, Jenkinson reminds us that “Death is a gift. It’s the fact that your days are numbered that makes each one precious.”

Stephen is the author of several books. His 2015 Die Wise: A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul describes his approach to coming to terms with death, with wisdom drawn from indigenous peoples, as well as Buddhism. Come of Age: The Case for Elderhood in a Time of Trouble (2018) calls for a new generation of elders who are willing to serve as responsible stewards for the planet and its species. How It All Could Be (2009) was created in response to the questions commonly asked following screenings of Griefwalker. Part workbook, part meditation, the book supports a deeper inquiry into what dying well could be, and what dying asks of us all. Money and the Soul’s Desires (2002) asks “What does money do to us; what is its power? Can it be reconciled with matters of the spirit and heart?” Finally, Jenkinson’s teachings on death and grief have been recorded in an audiobook: Angel and Executioner: Grief and the Love of Life (2010).
He spoke with me by phone from Oaxaca, Mexico, where he had recently shown the Spanish language translation of Griefwalker. – Leslee Goodman

The MOON: Why do you say we live in a death-phobic culture?

Jenkinson: Because we do. And because it seems to me the responsibility of any citizen to be a faithful witness to his or her place and time. The least-welcome things to witness are often the ones that require so much of our attention. So, one of my responsibilities, in particular, is to be alert where the subject of death is concerned, because I worked for quite a long time in what I call the death trade, where you can see every conceivable wrinkle and mayhem regarding the culture’s position on dying—or its lack of a position; its unwillingness to consider it. Over many years, I was routinely obliged to contend with what, on the surface, looked like personal dilemmas with regard to dying. It took me a little while to recognize that what I was seeing really had very little to do with peoples’ personal association with, memories of, or relationship to the idea or the realities of dying. It had much more to do with the fact that people in any culture inherit their understandings of dying much more than they create them. In our case, that inheritance takes the form of an extraordinary degree of aversion to and dread of dying. My phrase for it was that the culture is incontrovertibly and, for the most part, unconsciously death-phobic.

This phobia has not abated, from what I can tell, even as death has occupied more and more the front page of both the public popular media, as well as people’s more casual conversations with each other. The Death Café phenomenon would be a good example of that. However, if failure to talk about death were the problem, then every conversation about dying should improve our take on it; should improve our chances of doing it well; and should deliver us to the gates of mortality with a kind of jauntiness in our step that was unimaginable even two years ago.

I’m saying this somewhat facetiously here because, in my experience, the more we are “talking about it” in the way that we are as a culture, the deeper the death phobia is running and the harder it is to see. And the more pervasive it is, particularly around dying time. So the irony is that the problem never was that we weren’t talking about dying. The dilemma much more profoundly was, what were we saying when we were talking about it? That has not changed in my experience. I mean, I’m only one person, and I haven’t been everywhere, or spoken to everyone. Nevertheless, hundreds of people died on my watch, and I had the privilege and the burden of seeing it happen. I was trying to be useful in that time and realizing that the repertoire available to me to be useful either obliged me to comply with the death phobia or to defy it. I chose to defy it. And maybe that’s one of the reasons that you’ve asked me to talk with you about this.

The MOON: But isn’t fear of death reasonable? According to western science, it is, after all, lethal.

Jenkinson: Of course, it makes sense to be afraid to die. And if that’s all it was, then fear would be part of what we contend with as we come to it. Still, it would not be the whole story. Reasonable fears are reasonable because they have a proper proportion in the scheme of things. So I don’t disagree with you that it makes sense to fear death; rather, I’m suggesting that there’s a greater emotional repertoire available to us while we’re dying. We can, for example, wish that we weren’t dying, or lament that we were dying. We don’t have to be limited to fear, which is kind of a one-trick pony.

I’ll give you an example of what I mean. Fairly routinely in interviews like this, the
interviewer will say to me, “So you’ve seen a lot of death,” and I’ll say, “Yes, I have.” Then the interviewer will say, “So you must have imagined your own death,” and I’ll say, “You’re absolutely right.” To which the interviewer will say, “So, you must be okay with it then.”

But that line of reasoning does not hold. In other words, having seen as much death as I have, including as much bad death as I have, gives me no moral obligation to “go along with it,” as if it’s another day at the office. The more death I saw, the more I found being alive to be compelling and habit-forming. I’ve grown enormously attached to it, in particular as a consequence of seeing so much of death.

On the other hand, if exposure to death was traumatizing and inevitably obliged you to be fearful, I would be the most traumatized, fearful person that you will probably ever interview. But I’m not. The point is, that exposure to this level of human suffering and dying does not oblige you either to be insulated against it or defeated by it. Instead, I experienced it as an invitation to inhabit the days that are granted to me with a kind of depth and precision and faithfulness that may have never been available to me had I not seen the kind of dying that I did. Somewhere in there am I afraid to die? Of course, I am. But if all you’ve got is a reasonable fear of dying, which grows into a kind of constant dread that you literally can’t swallow your way past, well, that has much more to do with what you bring to dying than with the realities of dying. And that’s the cultural repertoire that I mentioned in my last answer.

The MOON: You’ve said that fear of dying is not a universally human trait because there are some cultures that don’t fear death. Could you give us an example of a culture with a healthier attitude towards death than ours?

Jenkinson: I wouldn’t use the word “attitude,” which is a rather glib and not very profound understanding of what we bring to it. The comment you’re quoting is from the film Griefwalker, which, unfortunately, doesn’t quote the statement in its entirety. What I meant by that is this: if we understand the fear of death—or, I would say the almost neurotic avoidance of death—to be “just part of being human,” two things happen. One is that we assume that everybody who answers to the description of “human” is similarly troubled and brought low by dying, which is clearly not true. And the second is that human nature is undone by exposure to death or by contemplation of death or by approaching death. In my view, this is also deeply untrue. What dying properly becomes in an intact culture is the opportunity—maybe the most glowing opportunity—for the fullness of your humanity to appear. Far from being your undoing, death becomes a showtime for your humanity. That’s the way I’d say it.

In that sense it asks a tremendous amount of us, maybe more than our personal and cultural lives have asked of us prior to coming to our death. I shouldn’t even say “maybe,” because certainly that’s what I saw. People in my care had very little prior experience in contending with and living at the depth and level of intensity that dying asked of them. So, sadly, they came to their dying as a kind of amateur, you see? Which is because there’s not much in the dominant culture in North America that asks people routinely, as a course of their daily ordinary lives, to inhabit the understanding and the reality that their days are numbered. In a consumer culture, that notion is not to be tolerated. If your days are numbered, then your buying power is limited. So dying becomes the first time, perhaps, that you appear deeply and profoundly present to your neighbors, your friends, your family—as well as to yourself and perhaps, if you’re willing to go along this road, to your ancestors and the deities that watch over you ancestrally and culturally. This is a consequence of the lack of any experience with death beforehand. We don’t in fact need
a terminal diagnosis in order to deeply contemplate and befriend the presence of our
death; but that’s what so many of us wait for.

The MOON: Can you give us an example of a culture that better prepares its people for
death than ours does?

Jenkinson: I could, but I’m not going to, because I don’t know how to name a place that
does it better without the inevitable ransacking of that place. I prefer to do my little best
at trying to defend those places against the desperateness that people from the dominant
culture of North America would bring to such a place, thereby contributing to its undoing.
It also seems to me that we all share a particular responsibility to recognize that we were
born into a place and into a time that is so deeply unfriendly to many of life’s mandatory
aspects. Obviously dying and death is one of those aspects. Because of that
unfriendliness, it seems to me our deeper responsibility is to learn how we have come to
be as we are about these matters, rather than to engage someone else’s achievements in
these matters as a kind of “easy way out.” Rather than learning how we came to the frail
departure from real life that we engage in, many of us are inclined just to beg, borrow, or
steal some other more intact culture’s way of doing its business. Our obligation is to stay
home and learn our home place and understand how it’s come to be as it is among us.

The MOON: How might we do that?

Jenkinson: Well, I’m not the recipe guy [laughter]. I don’t have an obligation to be able to
say that in 20 seconds. Also, I’ve been answering that question since you and I began
speaking. I’m not talking around it; I’m talking in the presence of that question, “What’s to
be done?” I’m doing the actual work with you in answering these questions, which dying
asks of me and that you are asking of me.

The “secret” to what’s to be done about “it,” our cultural avoidance of death, is to be
found in how we got ourselves to this point. I’ll give you an example from a kind of typical
fairytale. There are many of them that go like this: There is some kind of garbage heap or
ash pit outside the window of the house. Someone has brought into the house something
they think is precious, but somebody else in the house doesn’t think it’s precious at all
and throws it out the window into the shit pile, excuse the expression. Lo and behold,
what happens the next day is those magic beans have grown 80 feet tall, right into the
sky. Now, I’m not making up that formula. That’s in many stories. One of the things that
all these old fairytales are whispering to us is that there’s gold in that pile of stuff that you
throw away.

If you take that understanding and apply it to what we’re talking about now, what do you
get? Well, maybe you get something like this. In all our ways of avoiding death, maybe
there’s something for us to learn. Not just, “Don’t do it,” but more importantly, “Wow,
how would we have ever mistaken hating and fearing and refusing to die as a good way of
dying?” We’re actually invited into the mystery by the more time we spend wondering
how it came to be as it is. This seems to be the work in front of us now, on the subject of
dying; not just when it’s actually time for us to die. The prescription I’m writing is not,
“Just don’t do that,” or “Go someplace else and die there.” Rather, the prescription is,
“Learn to understand our poverties,” because somewhere in the learning I suspect our
gold is hidden.

The MOON: Is how we have gotten to this place at least partly about losing connection
with our ancestors?
Jenkinson: Bingo.

Would you like me to say more than bingo?

The MOON: I would [laughter].

Jenkinson: Okay. Perfect. I don’t know what kind of long-distance cultural tradition you derive from, but personally I’m generally from Northern Europe in the discernible past. Like me, most of the people who washed up on the shores of what we call North America now, beginning in the early 1500s and probably continuing until fairly recently, who are blue-eyed and fair-skinned, were raised with the idea that we came here voluntarily. And wasn’t it wonderful there was a place to come to? And wasn’t it wonderful that it was kind of empty, and that nobody really owned it? And that we didn’t really have to do too many terrible things to make a little place for ourselves, which turned out not to be so little. In fact, we took over the whole operation, and that’s lamentable, but—okay, so where am I going with this retelling of this foundation story of North America? What I’m saying is this: The front-end part of the story is only recently, it seems, beginning to be recognized and ‘fessed up to by people on the continent who look like me. Yet there’s a backstory to it that I never hear a peep about it, which goes like this:

When all of those people left their home countries, their home villages, most of them did not do so willingly, no matter what the revisionist history says. Most of us came here because we were running from something; from quite a combination of terrible somethings, actually. Medieval and Renaissance Europe presented a dreadful proposition for many, many tens of thousands of people. The people who could afford to run, ran. And even though the revisionist history today says they were seeking their freedom and that they came here as freedom-loving people, they certainly didn’t behave as freedom-loving people once they got here. The sorrowful part of the story that’s consistently left out is, when we came here, we left an awful lot behind that it turns out we could not afford to live without. At least, we couldn’t live without it and stay culturally sane.

What we left behind and never returned for was an intact cultural life that included a living relationship with the dead. That’s what happened. By the time North America turned into the dominant cultural operation that we know today, there was no such thing as “the dead” for us. There was no such thing as ancestry. However, if you grow up minus a living ancestry called your dead, a present ancestry that your ritual and ceremonial life introduces you to, and you live that way across a number of generations, why would anybody be shocked or surprised that, when it comes time for one’s own personal death, the greatest fear you have is not pain and suffering. The greatest fear you have is of disappearing without a trace because, as has been said to me so often is, “Unto whom am I dying? Is anyone waiting for me? Do they know about me?” This is what I mean by the “poverty” we need to learn about. It’s not a closed book that we are kept from, if we’re willing to learn these things. It’s heartbreaking to learn them—that we lost our relationships with our ancestors—but the truth of the matter is that underneath every individual terror of dying in North America is the complete absence of a personal connection with our ancestors—our people; our families. It’s no wonder that most people die sedated and slack-jawed and drooling. And this is my sense of why they do.

The MOON: In one of your interviews I hear you tell a particularly poignant story of how our ancestors lost connection with their ancestors even prior to coming to North America. Would you be so kind as to retell it here? (They were told to choose—on pain of death—between “accepting Christ and going to heaven, where their ancestors would not be,” or sticking with their ancestors and their pagan religion.)
Jenkinson: All conversions are forced conversion, it seems to me, and not just those of the religious kind. This is particularly true when you are forced to choose between your personal soul’s wellbeing and your culturally endorsed responsibilities to all those in your ancestral line who predate this conversion moment. Much more often than not, you are obliged or cajoled or shamed or violated enough to abandon those from whom you come. People who have done that to other people have a lot to answer for. Mind you, the new age druids and such seem keen on throwing their Christian ancestors under the bus, too. So there’s nothing redemptive in that gesture either.

The MOON: What about the dying now, who are going home to Jesus and all their loved ones in Heaven?

Jenkinson: “What about?” is not really a question. I think you’re asking me to respond to the Jesus proposition. I have master’s degree in theology, from Harvard Divinity School, for whatever that’s worth these days. With that very rickety credential, I would say this to you: I’m familiar with the historical person you’re referring to and to most, if not all, of the written sources that give us an account of what he said, or appears to have said. I studied them faithfully for several years of my life. But I don’t pretend to know about “the Christ” part of the whole thing and everything you meant in the question you asked me. So I’m not the best one to ask about these matters. I’ve given myself the job of working in this world, in this life, and whatever happens afterwards, I’ll probably be as surprised by it as anybody.

The MOON: Do you believe there is an “afterwards”? From what I’ve read about “near-death experiences,” people’s beliefs do appear to influence whom they meet as they “cross over.” Even people who aren’t religious describe being met by a loving presence.

Jenkinson: Well, “afterwards” covers a lot of ground, a lot of time. Anyone speaking with authority about it all isn’t to be trusted, I’d say. You’d then be in the land of “beliefs,” where wisdom is often refused entry. But for me, it comes down to the experience of sitting on the wooden stairs just before first light on Christmas morning, waiting for signs of life in the house that would signal that it’s okay to come down the stairs and into the mystery of what transpired overnight. In those moments on the stairs, there was a kind of arousal of the spirit that in every way threatened to rend my ribcage, a shimmering presence that my body could barely contain. Maybe that’s what happens afterwards.

The MOON: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. If it happened to me, I would consider it evidence that there is more to life than our physical experience. In Griefwalker, you say the thing people fear when they’re dying is that the people left behind, those of us still here on Earth, won’t “carry” them. What did you mean by that? How can we better carry our dead?

Jenkinson: My answer about crossing the Atlantic and leaving behind our relationships with our ancestors speaks to how we haven’t carried our dead. I think the reason people are dying so desperately is because they have no sense that there’s anyone who has preceded them who is in any sense capable of caring for them. So that means they have to rely entirely on the living to “carry the dead.” And then dying people look around at what they did when they were younger and healthier. What did they do with respect to their own dead? Did they see to it that their personal deceased family members didn’t disappear without a trace? The lion share of these dying people realize that they didn’t do really anything to remember their dead. To see that they wouldn’t disappear without a
trace. They lived days, weeks, or even months at a time with no thought of them, never any kind of ritual, or work intended for the dead instead of the living. One of the consequences that I saw every day on my job in the death trade was that people’s greatest dread was exactly as I said in the film: that the ones who survive them will carry on pretty much as this day had never been. That’s an observable reality in America. We, the living, don’t do anything to care for our dead.

The MOON: Have you lost anyone close to you?

Jenkinson: I don’t use the language of loss. First of all, “loss” describes a neglected duty. Have you ever lost your watch? Or your wallet? Are you describing what the wallet did? Of course, you’re not. The wallet didn’t do anything; you did something. You misplaced it; or forgot where you put it; or dropped it and didn’t notice. So, of all the words we could use to describe someone’s death, this is the most user-friendly way, right? It’s also one of the ways that we most avoid reality.

The MOON: But we have lost the physical presence of somebody we care about.

Jenkinson: That’s true, but also consider that their physical presence was not available to you at times throughout the course of your relationship with that person. Sometimes it was there and sometimes not. But all of a sudden, the language of loss comes in because we call this loss final. Now the word “losing” seems to fit, but we’ve been losing them off and on throughout our relationship with them. So what language do I use? Well, there’s nothing wrong with the word ‘dying’. Someone I cared about died and as a consequence of that, I’m lost. Maybe, that’s a little more accurate. You see what I mean?

The MOON: Yes.

Jenkinson: When you say “I lost someone,” you’re describing an immense degree of neglect of emotional and psychic duty, the consequence of which is that you are cast adrift—not because of what you did, but because of what someone else did: he or she died. What an odd arrangement. The reality is that the death of someone else has completely dislodged you from your life. So it’s a mystery obviously. Underneath all the observation we can make about it, death is very mysterious. It seems to me that the death of other people can be much more profound for us than our own death tends to be, and maybe there’s something deeply proper about that because the presence of other people has more consequence for us it seems than our own presence does.

The MOON: Yes.

Jenkinson: So I like the industrial strength D-words: die, death, demise, departure, words like that. At least people aren’t left wondering what you’re talking about. What the hell is “transition”? Or “shuffling off the mortal coil”? Are we in a Monty Python skit?

The MOON: Our culture is also rather a violent one. Do you think our violence and our death phobia are related?

Jenkinson: That’s a good question. Let me just think about it by answering it.

I just wrote a newsletter about my personal privacy being invaded routinely when I go down the street by people taking “selfies.” I hate that stuff. I wrote about it and called the newsletter, “Point, Shoot, Repeat.” Which is exactly what they do to me. If you’re paying attention, they’re doing it to you too. And the closed-circuit cameras at every corner?
They’re doing it to you, as well.

However, some readers didn’t read the title as language about photography, but as about guns. One woman explained herself by saying, “Well, I’m an American,” which at some level maybe makes sense, because it’s a gun culture, obviously. And guns are a “right,” which is mysterious too. Anyway, I’m aware that there are people, particularly in urban settings, who wonder when they leave for work in the morning if they’re going to get home at night because of “random violence.” The fact is, however, that most of us don’t die that way. The vast majority of us die in a foreseeable way, in a timely way, in a way that’s not sudden. Nevertheless, death is often talked about as if it was an ambush or an assassination.

That language isn’t helpful. If we were more thoughtful with our language, it could help us understand what dying is. It’s a noble thing. You can come to it throughout the course of your life, including the times when you’re healthy, happy, and with the people you love. Unfortunately, people tend to wait until “There’s a good reason to think about dying.” Well, honey, I’ll give you a good reason to think about dying and it’s this: You’re going to die. If you’re a grownup, then you have an obligation to live your life like it’s going to end. And if you do that, all the people around you learn about what endings look like. But if you co-conspire with the dominant culture to pretend that you’re more or less going to live as long as you want to or forever, whichever comes first, then what you’re doing is stealing from the younger people around you their chance to see what it looks like for a real human being to come to his or her dying time. By exercising your out-clause you’re actually a thief. Stealing other people’s life lessons from them while exercising your right to go blithely about your life as if you have no responsibility to anyone except the responsibilities that you agree to. The principal reason I’ve agreed to talk with you about these things is it’s one more chance I have to try to do something about that.

The MOON: What I was actually referring to is our—Americans’—inclination to inflict death on others. I was wondering whether our inability to face our own death has us project it onto others—rather like the Victorian era’s repression of sex surfaced in all sorts of strange fetishes.

Jenkinson: Violence is much more prevalent than murder. The degree of publicly incarnated psychic violence routinely meted out in every city of any size, the desensitization required to wade through that stuff on the way to work, the degree to which many peoples’ jobs contribute not very subtly to the transgression culture...these are daily fare. They are aided and abetted by the personal devices most people carry around with them each day. We are literally on-call for public mayhem. These are soul-compromising, soul-rending things, and they are constant. I haven’t thought about this in the psychodynamic terms you use, but it could well be that you’re on to something there.

The MOON: I don’t hear you use the word “reciprocity,” but that’s a foundational principle in my understanding of most native cultures. However, I have heard you say that it’s death that renews life. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Jenkinson: Sure. First of all, there are a lot of words you haven’t heard me use, okay? In fact, I haven’t used most of the words in the English language, so that doesn’t mean anything by itself, okay? [laughter]

I would probably use a phrase something closer to “mutual sustenance,” or the mutuality of sustenance. Sustenance is probably the glue that holds our corner of the universe together. That’s not just an emotional reality or a kind of fuzzy feeling; it’s observable. I
farm, and the farm teaches you this every day. Very simply put it goes like this: Anything alive is “on the take,” whether it’s a plant, an animal, or a human, we’re all on the take. We have to eat every day. Somewhere along the way it hopefully dawns upon you that everything you take dies because you take it. Death is what’s nourishing you. If life was what was nourishing you, it would still be alive in the ground or in the field. But instead, it’s in your digestive system. It died to keep you alive. That’s the basic Christ example, obviously. The observable reality is this: it’s death that keeps life going. And it is your death that is the end of you being on the take, or should be. Death is when you finally give back. Every death before your own was probably a death that contributed in one way or another to your sustenance. I’m not talking about times of war or catastrophe; I’m talking about ordinary life; I’m talking about food.

However, apply this understanding about food and expand it a little bit to recognize that for Westerners, our way of life is extraordinarily “on the take.” Some of us are waking up to that fact, and it would be great if more of us did.

Here’s the point: You’re supposed to be “on the take” when you’re alive. It’s not a moral failure that on you’re on the take. It’d be good if we didn’t take as much as we do in the West, that’s for sure. But it’s not a moral failure to be on the take when you’re alive. It is, however, a moral failure to die and continue to be on the take when you’re alive. It is, your death is your chance to literally join the Earth, the great sustaining presence of our lives. It’s your chance to contribute to its capacity to keep life alive. That’s the deal. When you opt out of it, when you get freaking buried in one of those titanium caskets, and so on, and so on, one of the deep consequences is you’ve opted out of the circuitry. There is no reciprocity. You hate the fact that you’re dying. You’re resentful. You’re angry. And finally, you’re tranquilized, you’re anti-depressed. There’s no reciprocity anymore, is there? It’s a refusal to join the parade, the one that’s heading out of town finally; not the one that’s heading into town to entertain you. The case I’m making, the plea, is to imagine that our death is our chance—not to pay back or to break-even—but simply to rejoin the fray on the giving end a little more than on the taking end of life.

The MOON: Many indigenous cultures say that we give back in ceremonies and in expressing gratitude and that there are some technologies that are just too expensive in terms of how much ceremony one would have to do to pay for them. How do you feel about that?

Jenkinson: My feelings about it are irrelevant, but I certainly agree. The psychological, ecological, and spiritual top-heaviness of our way of life is completely unsustainable. Of course, the consequences are visiting themselves upon us now. Previous generations have stolen from the future. There’s no other way to say it. I’m not saying that they necessarily knew this is what they were doing, but as Plato is reported to have said, “Ignorance of the law is not a defense, for if it was, everyone would plead it.”

The truth of our theft is observable to others, and it was observable to us if we cared to learn it. But there’s not much evidence that we did care to learn it. Now, we’re being forced to see it whether we’re willing to learn it or not. Ecologically, spiritually, the technology itself is too expensive. The suburbs are too expensive. The machinery that I’m speaking to you on is too expensive. Computers, cell phones, blogs, internet; it’s all too expensive.

The MOON: You take issue with our culture’s emphasis on individualism and
heroism—which has infected the way we describe our “battle” with death. Will you tell us more about that?

Jenkinson: One of my favorite ways to wonder about things is to ask questions, instead of making declarations. So I’ll ask a simple question about heroism. What culture needs heroes? Which people need heroes? Where does the idea that heroes are needed come from—the notion that somebody can rise above everyone else to do what’s never been done, see what’s never been seen, and win what’s never been won?

The assumption that everybody needs heroes is a kind of trauma that doesn’t want to recognize its traumatized self. In other words, what’s wrong with being ordinary? Last time I checked, ordinary was just as much a creation of the Gods or God as the mountaintop was. Yet ordinary gets absolutely no ink at all. If your kid is described as ordinary in school, man, that’s not good. If the last book you wrote is described as being ordinary, there’s no greater slander than that. But to my way of thinking, ordinary is where you’d like to be, because it means both your feet are on the ground, and you know the ground. And there’s nothing stupifying about this, or otherworldly about it. You get an opportunity to occupy a little corner of the world for a little while. That’s as ordinary as it gets. And it’s a great privilege to be able to do it. And to live long enough to realize what kind of a privilege it is. You don’t need heroes for that. Heroes distract you from being able to live an ordinary life, from what I can tell. Heroes shame ordinariness.

And individualism is a kind of bruise on the western psyche. That’s the way I would put it. Individualism is all we’ve got left from the tattered garment that was once a living culture. Individualism is what you have when your understanding of what it means to be alive with other humans in the world at the same time has been lost. Individualism is the death song of a culture that no longer recognizes itself as a culture. That’s what I’d say about it.

In terms of death, all this talk about heroism is part of our avoidance strategy. If you win your battle against death, what happens the next day? The answer is, you’re one step closer to your death [laughter]. For God’s sake, what is winning supposed to look like, if you turn death into your enemy? Death will win every time, if that’s the way you want to see it. It gets worse. Look around the room that you’re sitting in right now. Pick out a little memento that is important to you. Can you see one?

The MOON: Yes, I have two pictures of my sons.

Jenkinson: Okay, here’s the thing. Those pictures are going to last longer than you, and they’re probably going to last longer than your sons, too. Is that almost impossible to bear? How can a piece of paper with some ink on it last longer than you? But it will. So you lose every time if you think it’s always a matter of who’s going to win. But if you live long enough to look up from your daily cares and realize that virtually all of the stuff you’re surrounded by is going to last longer than you, at least you lasted long enough to realize it. From that realization, you no longer have any obligation to lament your personal departure from the scene. In other words, your willingness and your ability to see the end of what you hold dear is what gives you the ability and the courage to hold it dear. And until you see the end of what you hold dear, I don’t think you’re holding it dear. You might be holding onto it for dear life, but you’re not holding it dear. Until you see the end of what you love, you’re probably not loving it. That’s my helpful suggestion for the day.