

# Hallowing Our Diminishment

## Intentional Living and Mindful Dying

(A review of the course conducted at Toronto Friends Meeting.)  
by Gordon Thompson

Jeff Field of Toronto Monthly Meeting introduced our presenters, Connie McPeak and her assistant Marty Grundy, both of Cleveland Friends Meeting.

A course of this nature deals with one of the most profound events we may experience, both indirectly and, eventually, directly. It therefore has an inherent potential to transform perspectives and perceptions. It can be likened to the experience of a child who at a young age has a perception and appreciation of flowers in a garden, but who, at a later age, becomes aware that a garden may represent an opportunity for action and participation. There are plants to be placed, divided when needed, watered, trimmed, enjoyed. There is scope for active, informed involvement.

So to it is with death and diminishment. These are processes as natural as the passing of the seasons, but also opportunities for active, informed involvement.

Connie began her presentation by pointing out that in our current society our typical familiarity with death and dying differs from that of our forebears. Early Quaker journals reveal the uncertainty of the outcome of any serious illness, and the consequent necessity to be spiritually and emotionally prepared for death at any given point in time. This contrasts with the ability we have through current medical knowledge to have some element of predictability right into the final stages of one's life. Possibly as a consequence this, many of us defer coming to terms with this aspect of life. In addition the collected folk knowledge and wisdom that enabled earlier generations to deal effectively with death has now largely been replaced with the specific knowledge and experience of medical and hospice workers. It does not have to be so, however, as Connie's presentation amply pointed out.

It is not possible to do justice to the entire content of the day-long course (I was absent from the closing session on the following First Day), and much of the learning took place on a personal level as we broke into smaller groups. The following are only some of the highlights.

Connie reviewed the five elements or tasks that together comprise the key psychological process of letting go for the dying. They were expressed as objectives of the dying individual, as follows:

- i. Forgive me.
- ii. I forgive you
- iii. I love you
- iv. Thank you
- v. Goodbye

The progression through these steps would ideally involve the participation of loved ones. Connie reminded us, however, that anytime we are in the presence of one another and in the

presence of God we are in Holy Communion. Her work as a hospice nurse clearly showed that in the absence of family the needed presence can be met by others.

The last of the tasks to be achieved is saying of goodbye to our relations and loved ones. The fear in this is that we will be alone at the point of death itself. Accordingly, presence in some form of companionship is an essential aspect of the process of dying. At this point the dying need unconditional love and a sense that they are protected and loved.

The individual study groups allowed for personal exploration of some of the ways in which these five tasks may be achieved, not only in respect to the letting go of dying, but also in respect to our day to day living. Do we have broken relationships? Do we have hurt places? Are there people who we don't want to bump into on the street? In the tradition of Advices and Queries we were called upon individually to examine our own lives. We were also shown the way toward healing: that unresolved issues with other people can bring about blockages in our relationship with God, and that the first step in mending broken relationships is to pray for the other person.

The remainder of the course was equally informative. The physical process of dying was described in forthright yet caring and human terms. Practical considerations for end-of-life care issues were shared with us. The last session of the day was again a very personal and informative sharing of the experiences of the dying and those who have experienced near-death experiences as related to Connie herself by her hospice care patients.

It was a privilege to attend this course, to meet with Connie and Marty and the Friends who attended and shared their experience and wisdom with us. The writer is grateful to Toronto Monthly Meeting and Cleveland Friends Meeting for the opportunity to participate.

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