

**Melting into God¹:
Mortality, Resurrection and Everlasting Life - a personal reflection.**

During Lent and Easter we are reminded of mortality, resurrection and eternal life. Their juxtaposition appears throughout the Church Year in our liturgy at Mass, and our own lived experience of loss, recovery, resilience and understanding about eternal life. We travel through the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry in terrible public and violent death, the seeming annihilation of the work he and his followers lived and worked for, followed by resurrection.

"For God so loved the world that he gave the only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be destroyed, but may have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16.)²
(I have used the Jesuit, Nicholas King's translation.)

I have read obituaries of three friends in the last few weeks, having reached the age when some of the people I have known have died. Certainly their deaths have reminded me of my own mortality, my connection with them and what I learned from them.

It is unwise to believe that we can plan our lives and complete all of our tasks before death comes. It can be sudden, premature and unexpected. And it can be prolonged which gives an opportunity sometimes for resolving unfinished business and reconciliation. But, by its very nature death reminds us time and again of its power, mystery and inevitability. It is a journey from which we do not return as humans, and, barring "near death experiences", I am not aware of any human mortal returning to tell us what "after death" and eternal life is really like. It is a matter of faith, mystery and hope. Jesus returned from death and his Resurrection has become the primary focus of our faith. It is the guide and continuing strength for us who are followers.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in me even if they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me, they will not die for ever. Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:25)

Other people's obituaries remind us of our own strengths and frailties. Indeed, there is a well known spiritual and self awareness exercise where we are encouraged to write our own obituaries and reflect on our lives. This can help us to see where we have come thus far and perhaps how others might see us, the repeated patterns of behaviour, the times when we have flourished and diminished, and the gaps and incomplete areas that still require work. So, for me, reading these three obituaries was like re-playing an imaginary internet (or snooker game) when participants' pieces collide momentarily and can send us off in a different direction. Those directions may be positive or negative, transient or long lasting. An obituary editor would find it hard to write much of significance about many of the Apostles or Jesus' followers individually, compared to the amazing legacy the group left to us. Indeed many of the women followers are unnamed and have nothing written about them that survived for most of us to read.

And perhaps that is part of the point. What we do publicly and the achievements and failures noted by others are not as important as we might think. It is the personal, unsung, private spiritual development we each make in our life journeys that matters. It is those thoughts and actions towards God and others that perhaps only God knows about that builds towards 'our eternal obituary' which will matter as we die.

I have sat at the bedsides of a number of people who are dying. My stepfather had found the last years of his life painful and difficult and had begun to withdraw into himself. Somehow in the last weeks of his terminal illness he became the person again we used to know: interested in life and people, although he knew he was dying. He wanted to stay alive for his birthday. We were with him and half an hour into his birthday he asked for his glasses to be able to look at the clock. My brother told him the time and half an hour later he died peacefully.

My mother in law had been dying for a few days but we were told her heart was still strong. She seemed to be unconscious. My daughter, her beloved grand daughter, decided to go and fetch family and we told that to Granny. Within ten minutes of her leaving the hospital bedside Granny had died: as though she had been waiting until my daughter had gone. She slowly stopped breathing, as I, the other oldest woman in the family, talked to her and said prayers that she liked. I was worried my daughter would be upset she had not been present at her death. Later my daughter confided that she dreaded being there when Granny died. The timing of death worked for both of them...

“Amen, Amen I tell you the one who believes has eternal life. I AM the Bread of Life.” (Jn. 6:47;)

Death is a mystery and I admire anyone who has made that last journey, though it is usually totally beyond their control when they will die. Sitting with a dying person is sitting in that liminal, threshold space between life and death: wanting to communicate with them and receive a sign, and yet wanting to let them go unhindered. In my hospice experience, staff and family would sometimes say to dying people who seemed to be waiting that ‘it was all right to go now, that family and friends would manage...’ My step father and mother in law seem to have died when it was the right time for them. They made that monumental journey between life and death. What is death like? What happens next? I am naturally inquisitive and can’t know what it is really like until my turn comes.

The body visibly gradually changes after death. The soul has left the body. The body is somehow empty. The person is undeniably dead whether they look different or as though they are sleeping. Life has left them. The room is apparently still the same. But also, perhaps not. It has been a liminal space of significance. After my stepfather had died at home and the doctor came to certify his death, he lay in his bed until the next morning. My mother, sister and brother and I had no fear of his body but we kept coming through to see him, somehow not wanting him to be alone and realising he would be leaving home soon. His appearance changed as the night wore on. He was now somewhere else even though we might feel his presence around us. He was in a different place. Apart from making the Sign of the Cross on his forehead I didn’t feel the need to say set prayers during the night. He was with God. Perhaps my stepfather was praying for us...

“For the present lightweight of our affliction is bringing about an incomparable, immeasurable, solid weight of glory for us. We keep our eyes, not on the things that are visible, but on the things that are invisible; for visible things are just temporary, while invisible things are eternal.” (2. Cor. 4:18.)

At Easter we try to understand the Resurrection and its meaning for us. As I age I become more convinced in an all loving God who loves us unconditionally. This does not mean we can do what we like, but I believe that if we keep trying to live lovingly and with integrity God forgives our faults and wants lasting connection with us, and

that we will die and go to eternal life with God. How that eternal life will be I do not know. Will we recognise each other? Will that matter then?

Joan Chittister writes about ageing, and I have borrowed one of her phrases for the title of this article: "melting into God". It is at the end of the last chapter entitled "Afterword: The Twilight Time."³

"The twilight time is time for trust...It takes strength to bear well what we cannot do a thing to change...This is the time for melting into God...Now the Mystery is about to reveal itself. Now the time is complete. Now it is finished. Now it is only beginning". (pp. 221-222.)

¹ *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully* (2008 Darton, Longman and Todd) Joan Chittister.

² *The New Testament* (2004, Mayhew) Translation by Nicholas King SJ. All other biblical references are from the same translation.

³ *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully* (2008 Darton, Longman and Todd) Joan Chittister.