



Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death

by Joan Halifax, PhD

Review by Patti Briggs

With the forward to this profound book written by Dr. Ira Byock and an endorsement from Dr. Andrew Weil, I knew before I began reading that it would be wonderful. Joan Halifax is a Zen priest and anthropologist who has been sitting with dying patients for forty years. She's served on the faculty of many universities and lectured on "Death and Dying" at Harvard Divinity School. Additionally, she founded Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, NM, which offers training for compassionate end-of-life care. Many consider her to be our modern-day Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

Although written from a Buddhist perspective, this informative book is appropriate for readers of any faith. It offers practical guidance to those who care for the dying as well as for people in the active stages of dying. It is easy reading about a rather complex subject. Unlike many of the other books that I've read on the topic of death and dying, "Being with Dying" details the physical act of dying and the moments immediately following death, honoring the sacredness of the transition.

What is the number one topic that no one wants to discuss but that someday every individual will experience? Death. Eventually it takes everyone. Although it's inevitable, most prefer to ignore the subject. Many other cultures have a healthier attitude toward dying, accepting it as a part of the natural cycle of life. It is not a tragedy but an indescribable adventure into the unknown.

By sharing many of her case studies from her years of experience, Halifax enables readers to begin to feel how being with dying feels. After so many personal stories are described, it becomes apparent that death is nothing to be feared. Death is not our enemy; it is not good or bad. As Ram Daas states on page 156, "Death just is." A compassionate presence at a dying person's bedside is what most Americans prefer; however, the majority of Americans actually die in a sterile hospital environment, often connected to machines and tubes.

One of the messages of the book is this: by *practicing dying* (as Plato encouraged his students to do, p. 48), we are able to truly appreciate life to the fullest. Facing death typically enables people to align their priorities. Spiritual and psychological matters become of interest and life is thoroughly enjoyed as a gift. However, there's no need to wait for a terminal diagnosis to create a fulfilled life with meaning. Inner work of mind and heart can begin now, no need to wait till the very end. In essence, practicing dying is also practicing living. "Life is sacred and relationships holy" (p. 201).

The book is filled with helpful advice for the actively dying and for caregivers. It makes clear that there is no perfect or right way to die or to be with dying. Basically, everyone does the best that they can. It's not so much what caregivers do but who they are. The main goal is to offer love and peace and no fear.



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Cultivating inner awareness through meditation and spiritual practices often assist in attending to the dying. The spiritual dimension of humanity's true nature understands that in reality, life is without birth or death but rather is a continuation of the eternal soul, which can mean different things to different belief systems. The simple meditations recommended throughout the book allow the reader to prepare for dying while fully embracing life in the meantime.

The realization that death can arrive at any moment allows people to grow in wisdom and compassion; they can begin to accept and appreciate everyday living as sacred. They "understand the truth of impermanence and that in the end, we can really possess nothing" (p. 201). Death is the final equalizer. The accumulation of material wealth and large bank accounts mean nothing at the moment of death. In actuality, the entirety of life is preparation for dying. Living totally in the present moment allows us to create a fulfilled life and to face our impending death openly and with dignity.

In the retirement industry, we are often faced with people in the final stages of their lives. Many of us could truly benefit from understanding the cornerstone of this book - both life and death are sacred.



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