Falling into Grace

2017 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture

Steven Fick

Canadian Quaker Learning Series

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by Steven Fick

2017 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture
presented at Western Half-Yearly Meeting

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Pamphlet Number 10

Published by Canadian Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ISBN: 978-0-9948004-2-8

Layout and design: Bev Plett

Printed by Contemporary Printing Services Inc.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Fick, Steven F., author
Falling into grace / Steven Fick.

(Canadian Quaker learning series no. 10)
(Sunderland P. Gardner lecture ; 2017)
"2017 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture presented at Western Half-Yearly Meeting."
Falling into Grace was the Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture presented by Steven Fick at the 2017 Gathering of Western Half-Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, on May 20, 2017, at Sorrento Centre in Sorrento, B.C.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-9948004-2-8 (softcover)

1. Society of Friends--Doctrines. 2. Spiritual life--Society of Friends. 3. Death–Religious aspects--Society of Friends. I. Society of Friends. Canadian Yearly Meeting, issuing body II. Title. III. Series: Sunderland P. Gardner lecture ; 2017 IV. Series: Canadian Quaker learning series ; #10

BX7731.3.F53 2018 236'.1 C2018-901968-9

Printed on paper with recycled content

I dedicate this book to my beloved wife, Signy, who has always supported me in being the best I can be.

About this Pamphlet

Author Steven Fick was born in Colorado. After completing his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Colorado, he spent two years in Thailand teaching with the Peace Corps and resettling Laotian refugees. In 1977, he moved to British Columbia to earn his Master's degree at Simon Fraser University, where he met his future wife, Signy Fridriksson. In 1989 they moved their growing family to Ottawa, where Steven worked for 23 years as Chief Cartographer at *Canadian Geographic*. He now works as an artist and cartographer, and joins Signy in counseling couples. Steven has served the Religious Society of Friends in his own Meeting, through a number of Canadian Yearly Meeting committees, with Friends Couple Enrichment, and as a representative on Friends World Committee for Consultation.

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Sunderland P. Gardner (1802–1893) was an outstanding figure among Canadian Friends. He ministered with great plainness and vigour. Day or night, he was ready to travel in all weather to be with those who were sorrowing. He left behind a legacy of great tenderness. (adapted from *The Quakers in Canada: A History*, by Arthur Dorland)

This pamphlet is the tenth in the Canadian Quaker Learning Series, published by Canadian Yearly Meeting through its Publications and Communications Committee. Suggestions for future pamphlets may be sent to the editorial board at cqp-clerk@quaker.ca, or care of Winnipeg Monthly Meeting (Quakers), Box-MPR 145 Maryland St, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3G 1K9.

Death will inevitably make us an offer that we cannot refuse – to surrender into the vastness of a power that is beyond our ability to comprehend. In the meantime, our daily life offers us ongoing opportunities to begin that process of surrender, to "die before we die," and by doing so, to awaken to a deeper aliveness – a "falling into grace" that turns our mortality into a spiritual companion.

Our Quaker ancestors considered death to be a spiritual event that involved the whole community. When we hide death away, or treat it primarily as a medical event to be managed by professionals, we discourage the dying from doing the profound soul work they need to do as they prepare to enter into this great mystery. As well, we the living are robbed of what the dying process might teach us.

I would like to begin with a poem by Hafiz, a fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet, called "Deepening the Wonder."

Death is a favour to us,
But our scales have lost their balance.

The impermanence of the body
Should give us great clarity,
Deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes

Of this mysterious existence we share
And which we are surely just travelling through.

If I were in the Tavern tonight,
I would call for drinks

And as the Master poured, I would be reminded
That all I know of life and myself is that

We are just a midair flight of golden wine
Between His Pitcher and His Cup.

If I were in the Tavern tonight,
I would buy freely for everyone in this world

Because our marriage with the Cruel Beauty
Of time and space cannot endure very long.

Death is a favour to us,
But our minds have lost their balance.

The miraculous existence and impermanence of Form
Always makes the illumined ones
Laugh and sing.[1]

When I was originally asked if I would accept the honour of delivering the Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture, the invitation was to share it with Christina Tellez, whom I met when we were both at the conference of the Friends World Committee for Consultation that took place in Peru in January of 2016. In our initial discussions about how we might share the lecture, Christina and I thought a good approach might be for her to talk about her spiritual path as a younger adult, while I would talk about mine as an older adult.

In the meantime, an opportunity opened up for Christina to be in Bolivia volunteering with a women's cooperative through a one-year position with CUSO. The decision was made that I would deliver the lecture alone. So in the end you will get none of Christina and her younger viewpoint, and twice as much of me and my older viewpoint. I pray that Christina is doing well in that very important work.

What is my older viewpoint? Increasingly, it is about making peace with the notion of my own impermanence about which Hafiz speaks so eloquently. Although it is conceivable that I could live another thirty years, I know that I am in my life's homestretch, and that this entails a big change in my job description.

I don't see that as bad news. Researchers tell us that, contrary to stereotypes we might have, the overall trend is for people to actually get happier with advanced age. As the reality of our own mortality starts to permeate us, we could indeed grow more fearful of death, but what in fact happens for many is the discovery of a new wellspring of peace and

contentment. As advanced age brings people closer to the likelihood of their own death, a large proportion tend to become less fearful of that reality, rather than more fearful.

I first started to think about these things six years ago when I left a long career with *Canadian Geographic* magazine. I was having dinner on our back deck with Signy and a couple of our children, who were then young adults. A memory came to me from a world religions course I had taken in university decades before. In the Hindu tradition, they consider that there are four stages of life: the *student*, the *householder,* the *hermit in the forest*, and the *homeless wanderer*. I realized that I was moving from the *householder* phase to the final two phases: the *hermit in the forest* and the *homeless wanderer*.

The first part of our lives – the *student* phase – is about defining, building, and developing who we are in the world. It's about obtaining confidence, knowledge, and skills. It's about finding our calling and bringing it forth into practical realization. In the middle part of our lives – the *householder* phase – we build on these foundations, whether it is to mature in our careers, to deepen in our intimate relationships, to raise families, to develop rewarding lives as single people, whatever life calls us to do.

According to this tradition, in the last part of our lives – the phases of the *hermit in the forest* and the *homeless wanderer* – we begin the process of shedding our outer encumbrances so we can grow richer on the inner level. This echoes what the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says about "first half of life" spirituality, versus "second half of life" spirituality, the second half being when we remove our centre of gravity from our own self to something much larger.[2]

I decided that to the degree I was able I would start letting go. I would follow the example of the homeless renunciate. I figured, however, that being a renunciate did not require wandering around with a begging bowl and a loincloth. Neither begging bowls nor loincloths are well received in Canada, and there are Ottawa's sometimes brutally cold winter temperatures to take into consideration. Instead, I figured it required the loosening of my clinging to my self-importance, to my security, and to my tried-and-true anxieties. In my particular case, this is an especially daunting project, to say the least, considering how rich I am in all these encumbrances.

Talking about the spirituality of older adulthood necessarily includes talking about death, and we live in a culture that has been deeply phobic about death. Kathleen Dowling Singh, the author of *The Grace in Dying*, whose work I will talk about later, jokes that to raise the topic of death and dying can ensure you don't get invited back to the dinner party. But this is the core of my lecture tonight – the mystery of our own impermanence. I certainly don't presume to have the answers, and I assure you we will not solve this mystery in the short time we have together, but maybe we can knock on the door and have a gentle peek in.

The clues about how I might begin to wrestle with the reality of my own mortality have come from a number of places, some of them unexpected. As the cultural taboo against discussing death begins to weaken, a burgeoning body of writing about all aspects of death and dying has become available. I was enlightened by Lucy McIver's 1998 Pendle Hill Pamphlet – entitled *A Song of Death, Our Spiritual Birth: A Quaker Way of Dying* – in which she explores how our Quaker ancestors dealt with dying and how the reality of death informed the way they lived. The work of Richard Rohr, who, among others, is fostering a revival of interest in Christian mysticism, has been a frequent source of inspiration.

Interest in Sufism – the mystical branch of Islam – has also mushroomed since the relatively recent translation of the writings of Rumi and other Sufi poets into European languages. These writings reveal a strong connection to other mystical traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, but they exhibit a uniquely passionate, fierce, and engaged approach; they have had a profound impact on me. I will say more about these influences as this lecture unfolds.

At the same time, because relatively recent developments in medical science have allowed doctors to successfully revive large numbers of people who had been clinically dead, we now have thousands of well-documented reports of "near-death experiences" – that is, descriptions of what people experienced on the other side of their physical death. Similarly, Kathleen Dowling Singh and others have explored the "nearing death experience" – that is, the inner transformation that people appear to go through in their final days or moments before death. All these areas of exploration have provided a helpful context in which to understand certain things I have personally experienced in dreams, ceremony, and meditation.

I experienced my first powerful intimation of death in my early twenties, at a time when I was overseas, alone, and suffering a painful unravelling of my life – a bona fide *dark night of the soul* by any account. That evening I had a dream in which I suddenly found myself in the middle of what felt like an infinitely powerful current of electricity. I immediately knew that I was experiencing death. Surprisingly, death was not an absence or an emptiness, but a vast aliveness and fullness. I knew – and I knew that in fact I had always known on some level – that this is what death is, but that I had just chosen to forget it.

And then, 37 years later, on the very night after I walked away from my long-term career at *Canadian Geographic* magazine, I had a similar very intense vision in the middle of a sound-healing workshop with a group of close friends. Again, there was an infinitely powerful current of light and energy. This time, in the middle of this current, a small standing ripple had formed, a ripple that had created its own point of perspective. I knew that I was that ripple – an individual perspective within the larger stream.

But it was also crystal clear to me that there was absolutely no separation between the ripple and the whole current. It was just as true that I was the entire current. I awoke from the vision laughing. Some of the people around me chuckled along, but did not know the actual cause of my laughter – a sense that the way we focus on the small ripple and forget the larger current is both comic and tragic.

These two visions together suggest that life and death are essentially one thing. The second vision in particular has become a spiritual shorthand for what I believe is the essential truth of being human. Like the paradox of modern physics – that something can be a wave and a particle at the same time – we have two sides to our nature, two sides that are universally recognized by every great spiritual tradition of the world.

On the one hand, there is our pure, unbroken connection to the great web, the great field of all that there is – our connection to the Divine, to the infinite Light, to the Source of infinite compassion, to the Ground of Being. On the other hand, there is a separate self – what the early Quakers called the "worldly self." Psychologists call it the "ego." Buddhists call it the "small self" or "relative self." Sufis call it the *nafs* or "lower self." The development

of the individual ego seems to have been a powerful tool for the survival of the physical body, and it most certainly contributed to our overwhelming success in evolutionary terms. But in the end, the great teachers tell us that the ego has only a relative reality, and is ultimately only a partial truth.

To varying degrees in different cultures, in different times and places, people have paid so much attention to the small self that they forgot their connection to the great overarching Self. Accordingly, virtually every tradition and culture has developed practices to help them see past the veil of our isolated self in order to experience the deeper Ground of Being. These practices include the contemplative use of prayer and meditation common to many religious traditions, including Quakerism, and also embrace a range of shamanic practices used by many Indigenous peoples, including fasting, dancing, drumming, and medicines.

When the loss of these practices leads to the loss of the authentic experience of deeper reality, and to the wisdom it affords, our personal and collective egos can become dangerously untethered. Religion can become a matter of membership in a particular tribe, rather than a matter of authentic experience. The emphasis can shift from personal transformation to an adherence to a prescribed set of beliefs that, in some cases, are based on partial or even degraded interpretations of the world's great religious texts. At the same time, an unnecessarily dogmatic form of scientific materialism has become an orthodoxy that cannot be questioned without a loss of credibility. When things cannot be described within the tenets of this orthodoxy, the tendency can be for them to be ignored or explained away.

In 2003 Ottawa Monthly Meeting invited Connie McPeak Green to lead a weekend workshop entitled "Living Intentionally, and Dying Well" at our annual residential retreat. I showed up not knowing what the theme was. I left deeply changed.

Connie had been a hospice nurse for many years, and spoke from her own experience attending many people at their time of dying. She talked about what commonly happens with people as they approach the time of their passing. People sometimes appear to postpone the hour of their death, until, perhaps, they have a chance to say "thank you," or "I forgive you," or "I am sorry" to someone, or to reconcile with a long-alienated loved one.

Perhaps they wait until they are confident that their physical affairs are in order, or that a certain loved one will be cared for. In other words, they have work to do, tying up ends before they take their leave.

As the final hour approaches, Connie said, it can seem like the dying have a foot in two worlds: the world we share with them, and the world toward which they seem to be moving. They converse with people we don't see, and describe luminous landscapes beyond our ken. Their language becomes more metaphorical as death approaches and they talk about "driving back to the farm," or "waiting for the bus to take them home." She said there were exceptions, but in the dying process, most of the people she attended had shed layer after layer, like an onion, until only a very pure essence remained. And they died in peace, often with a smile on their face. Yes, there were those who died in torment, but they were the exception.

In the early part of my adult life, I had no active curiosity about death. I figured the important thing was to live a good life, and if there were anything afterwards, I would find out about it when I moved on. After this weekend workshop, I became more curious about death. Perhaps my main takeaway was to ask myself whether I would wait until the time of my death to do the preparation it invites, or whether it might make more sense to do this work through my lifetime.

Preparing for death takes place on a number of levels besides the emotional one. The physical, practical level can involve divesting ourselves of the physical possessions we no longer need. It can involve writing a will, making decisions around what sort of palliative care is desired, decisions about when life support systems will be turned off, or about what will happen to the body. If we don't do this preparation in advance, it can have seriously negative repercussions for those we leave behind. Too many families have been torn apart over the conflicts that can result.

The question that challenges us the most, perhaps, is how can we prepare for death *spiritually*? If death is simply seen as the ultimate catastrophe, the ultimate medical failure – if it is nothing more than the final turning off of the lights – is it necessary or even possible to prepare?

Observing the deaths of many people, as Connie McPeak Green and others have done, does not prove that death is a transition rather than an end, but such accounts should at least invite us to seriously consider that

possibility. Our Quaker ancestors believed that death was a release from a type of confinement in order to be "wound into largeness" to use the phrase of the seventeenth-century Quaker Richard Hubbarthorne. In his book *The Quakers*, Hugh Barbour describes the practice of early Quakers to gather around the dying to listen to their words, with the belief that these Friends were able to speak with an authority that came from standing in the gate between the two worlds. The entire household and their guests would be present, including young children.

Another phenomenon that invites us to question our fixed ideas about death is what has been termed the "near-death experience" (or NDE), a term referring to experiences reported when a person regains awareness after a period of being physically dead. Accounts of these experiences stretch back throughout history, but the number of such accounts has proliferated in recent decades as modern medicine has acquired the tools to revive people who have been physically dead for a period of time, who have, in other words, "flatlined," exhibiting no metabolic function and no neural function. As awareness of this phenomenon has spread, more and more people who once feared that describing their near-death experience would bring judgment or ridicule are now speaking up.

Much has now been written about NDEs. People of all cultures, all ages, all religious backgrounds, people who are atheist, people who had been previously unaware of the phenomenon, all speak of a similar sequence of events. Elements that may or may not be part of the experience include an "out-of-body" experience, seeing their own dead body from a detached perspective, usually from above; being in a dark space, and then being drawn to a point of light, often through what feels like a long tunnel; encountering a light infinitely brighter than what could be seen with the physical eyes, a light that has a personal presence and embodies a feeling of infinite compassion and non-judgment; seeing and perhaps communicating with other beings, including friends and relatives who have died; experiencing a "life-review" in which one sees the positive and negative effects one's actions have had on others; a call or decision to return to their bodies. On their return these individuals often experience the shock of a reintroduction to great physical pain.

There have been many attempts to explain near-death experiences using a currently prevailing paradigm that posits consciousness as nothing more than a product of our neurology. It is obvious that there is some intimate connection between our neurology and our consciousness. However, if consciousness is simply a product of our neurology, the question arises about how can people experience things when their neural function has totally ceased. How can they describe in great detail what went on in the operating room, when by any scientific measure they were dead? Or more remarkably, how can they recount what was happening at a distant location such as another floor of the hospital, or the home of a relative living in another part of the country? It is often argued these experiences are hallucinations caused by oxygen deprivation or by chemicals released by the body. There are, however, profound differences between near-death experiences and what people experience under these other conditions.

Regardless of what one believes about the nature of NDEs, we cannot dispute the remarkable effect they have on those who experience them. Almost universally, they lose their fear of death. They become less religious and more spiritual as their inherited system of beliefs gives way to a view of the world much more in line with the great, universal wisdom traditions. They become less concerned with material wealth and status, and more concerned with giving service. And for most, the experience is so compelling that the arguments about whether it was "real" or simply imagined are of no significant consequence.

These changes are remarkably similar to the changes observed in terminal cancer patients to whom the psychotropic drug psilocybin was administered in recent experimental trials at New York University to help such patients deal with their anxiety. Virtually all lost their fear of death, and the explanation they gave was something along the lines of seeing how their individual death was simply one part of a much more vast cycle of birth and death.

Kathleen Dowling Singh, a psychologist, a life-long Buddhist practitioner, and a hospice worker who has looked at death from another perspective, coined the term "nearing death experience." Her observation is that the spiritual transformation that occurs at the very end of one's

life parallels the transformation that occurs over the stretch of the life of someone who has maintained an active spiritual practice. It is as if death will do the work for us if we don't do the work ourselves.

While she is aware of the more comprehensive spiritual roadmaps around death provided by the Sufis, Tibetan Buddhists, and others, Singh says – to greatly over-simplify things – that there are three stages to dying: *chaos*, *surrender*, and *union*. The stage of *chaos* can be a time of gut-wrenching fear and anguish as all the things that have given us a sense of who and what we are are relentlessly ripped away from us. Then comes the stage of *surrender*. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross used the term "acceptance," but Singh says this term implies a sort of begrudging agreement to go along with things, while *surrender*, on the other hand, is the clear realization that the force that is pulling you through your death is infinitely more powerful than your ability to resist. Immediately after surrender occurs, she says, there is *union*, bliss – a sense that what is being experienced is actually what we have longed for our whole lives in the deepest recesses of the heart. A sense of being home, of the ripple relaxing back into the current, is often reflected in the final words of the dying when they talk about seeing something incredibly beautiful or being bathed in love.

Like many people, when I wonder how to prepare spiritually for death, I have found inspiration in the great mystical traditions. These traditions often have not only a roadmap for what happens after death, but also a roadmap for living based on the concept of *dying before we die*. At our Ottawa Meeting retreat, Connie McPeak Green described a dying person shedding layers, like an onion, until a purer inner essence is revealed. Instead of waiting for death, we can live our lives trying to let go of all the illusions and attachments that keep us small and disconnected, and locked in cycles of fear and pain. In Lucy McIver's words,

> It is out of such moments of surrender that I have come to define living into death as an inner labour which lets go of self will into a larger acceptance of "divine creation." It is a liminal state, neither in this life or the next; a state where, as we live our dying, we come to know with inner authority the mysteries of creation with a sense of peace and completion.

> If we can daily face loss as the growing edge in living, we begin to understand that all the small surrenders are a rehearsal for the physical death that each of us must ultimately face. And that physical death will become easier if we consciously accept all of life's small deaths, repeatedly practicing letting go of our self-will.[3]

I would like to return to the poetry of Hafiz, the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet with whom we started.[4]

> Love is
> The funeral pyre
> Where I have laid my living body.
>
> All the false notions of myself
> That once caused fear, pain,
>
> Have turned to ash
> As I neared God.
>
> What has risen
> From the tangled web of thought and sinew
>
> Now shines with jubilation
> Through the eyes of angels
>
> And screams from the womb of
> Infinite existence
> Itself.
>
> Love is the funeral pyre
> Where the heart must lay
> Its body.

In the fierce and elegant simplicity of this poem, Hafiz cautions us that we should not be surprised when the process of *dying before we die* is painful. It goes against our very nature to give up the things that have defined us. But Hafiz's reassurance is that this path leads to a deepening of freedom and joy.

For me, this poem has been a companion and teacher ever since I came across it. When I face uncertainty, anger, fear, or disappointment, Hafiz's

words remind me that I am being given an opportunity – perhaps small, perhaps large – of stepping forward into the fire, rather than backward into the darkness, so that I can be purified of whatever it is I am clinging to, whatever it is that keeps me from a deeper connection with what I most sincerely long for – the Divine. If I can do this, through some mysterious alchemy, my joy quietly grows. Hafiz's poem talks about something much more fierce and beautiful than the possibly facile assertion that everything happens for a purpose. That may be true, but for me the deeper truth is that within every crucifixion there is a potential resurrection.

The Sufi poets were well aware of the Biblical story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection: the Gospels are one of the four primary books of the Islamic canon that also includes the Torah, the Psalms, and the Qur'an. Rumi was profoundly influenced by Jesus, and wrote 82 poems to him. For Rumi, and for many mystics, the Crucifixion and Resurrection were not one-time events through which God redeemed a broken universe by the blood sacrifice of his Son (a belief that developed relatively late in the history of Christianity), but were instead a core truth about creation, about the path of transformation, and about our path back to the Divine.

Early Quakers also saw the Crucifixion and Resurrection not as a one-time event, but as an ever-present reality, as the path to divine connection that involves constant deaths and births. Christian mystics used the phrase *dark night of the soul* to refer to a time of intense suffering, a personal crucifixion that leads to the resurrection into a more deeply embodied connection to the Divine. Interestingly, scholars have suggested that early Christian mystics, such as the Spaniards Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, were influenced by Sufism through the long period of Moslem dominance in Spain.

The *dark night of the soul* is very much about what Muhammad calls *dying before you die*. We may want to rid ourselves of the attachments and illusions that keep us separated from an awareness of God, but the very nature of the ego is all about self-preservation. The Sufis believe that sometimes there are things that are virtually impossible for us to give up on our own. In this case, the Beloved may help us out by custom-crafting a *dark night of the soul* for us – a catastrophe that fiercely, but compassionately,

forces us to give up the false parts that we could not give up on our own. One of Rumi's best-known poems about the experience of the dark night of the soul is called "The Master of the Work."[5]

The grapes of my body can only become wine
after the Winemaker tramples me.
I surrender my spirit like grapes to his trampling
So my inmost heart can blaze and dance with joy.

Although the grapes go on weeping blood and sobbing
"I cannot bear any more anguish, any more cruelty"
the Trampler stuffs cotton in his ears:

"I am not working in ignorance.
You can deny me if you want, you have every excuse,

But it is I who am the Master of this Work.
And when through my Passion you reach Perfection,
You will never be done praising my name."

Underneath the seeming cruelty of a Winemaker who tramples the grapes in spite of their cries of anguish is a Beloved Master whose ultimate purpose is to transform the grapes into the radiant wine of bliss, and who stuffs cotton in his ears not because he is heartless, but because his tender heart cannot bear the sound of the anguished cries. He is a Beloved Master guiding us through our process of *dying before we die* so that we can experience, while we are still alive, our true connection to that great current in which we are but a ripple.

In his journal, George Fox wrote in detail about his protracted *dark night of the soul* during which he could find no remedy for his profound confusion and pain. He finally experienced the transforming presence of the Christ, the one who could "speak to his condition," and he had numerous "openings," along with his great vision about the two oceans:

"I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death,
but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the
ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God …"

I had always assumed that the ocean of darkness and death was something bad, and that the infinite ocean of light and love was something good. Perhaps, however, the "infinite love of God" that Fox experienced is a love that enwraps and enfolds everything into a mystery much greater than light and darkness, joy and pain, life and death. And maybe we cannot comprehend, nor do we need to comprehend, this mystery. Maybe, in the end, all we can do is surrender into it.

So in light of all these considerations, how am I preparing for my death, and what does my "second half of life" spirituality look like? On the practical level, I am sorting and shedding my belongings, instead of leaving this task for my survivors. I am preparing a will and end-of-life plans. I am being more judicious about how I spend my time and energy. I am making myself available as much as possible as a mentor and support. I spend much more time in reading, prayer, and contemplation. My spiritual friendships have become more dear to me.

And what do I believe about the big questions? My current beliefs are definitely not the ones I have always had. I have come to them through a lot of doubting and a lot of searching. Some of my most powerful insights have often come at times when it seemed that the veil of my conditioning had thinned and I could see a much clearer and broader landscape.

I have a growing conviction – in spite of all evidence that might be given to the contrary, and there is lots – that the light of Love is indeed the fundamental reality, the electric current that powers the universe. I believe that Love is the one Source, and that Love is the one path back to the Source. The more we let Love permeate every aspect of our lives, the more we will be fuelled by this universal current. When we live into our own death by letting go of our addictions to security and self-importance, we allow the Love to permeate our lives.

We can turn to the light of Love to guide our day-to-day lives, choosing the paths that in the eye of the heart appear most bright, and choosing activities that best use our gifts in service to others. In our private and corporate spiritual practices, we can be transformed by becoming naked to that Light, letting it permeate every corner within us – the dark and painful corners along with the bright and beautiful ones.

For much of my life I have not been atheist per se, but rather non-theist, in the Buddhist sense that whether there is a God or not is sort of beside the point. Over time, however, I have grown to relate to the Divine in more and more personal terms. I don't hold the personhood of God as a theological belief, and have no inclination to discuss whether it is "true." Rather, it is a poetic truth – a mode of relating to a great mystery – that has proven to have a great power in my life.

I have not always thought this way, but my best guess now is that when we die, we return to the fullness of the Light. I don't think we can understand with our minds or foresee with our eyes what this means, but we can know its essential truth in our hearts.

I would like to end with a poem written in January 2017 by Kenneth Jacobsen, of Stillwater Monthly Meeting in Ohio, while he sat in vigil beside his wife Katherine, who died two days later.[6]

Our Ten Thousand Days

Oh, my love, as I sit by you, breathing with you,
as your body softly lays itself down like a prayer,
I'm feeling our ten thousand days,
the gift of our ten thousand days,
traveling together, this blue-green planet among stars,
this living school for Love called earth,
traveling together to find out
what Love is all about.

I'm feeling our ten thousand days,
ten thousand mornings of prayer time in the quiet,
side by side, wherever we found ourselves,
like here, like now, drinking in the dawn,
listening again, for what Love would have us do this day.

I'm feeling our ten thousand days,
ten thousand evenings of prayer time in the quiet
side by side, drinking in the darkness,
listening again for what Love has taught us this day,
as we lay ourselves down to sleep.

Oh, my love, I'm feeling in my grief,
the joy of our ten thousand days,
how this school of Love is just beginning,
our school of Love is just beginning,
with you needing to leave your body now,
and I given to stay in mine, and
we're just beginning to find out
what Love is all about.

Oh, my love, I am feeling in my grief,
the joy of our ten thousand days
on this sweet planet among stars,
thank you, love, thank you.

And Katherine's final words, when asked how she was doing, were "In love."

Epilogue

This Earth a Bow

You let my sufferings cease,
for there was no one who could cure them.

Now let my eyes behold your face
for you are our only love.
My spirit's body is rising near – this earth a bow that shot me;
now lift me into your arms as something precious that you dropped.

My only suffering, from this day forth, will be your divine beauty,
and you will constantly cure my blessed sight
each time you bring your face so near to mine
and call me bride.

Do not be sad, my old friends;
look, these wings are finally stretched and laughing.
Our souls are rising near to you – this earth a bow that shot us;

Now lift me into your arms, dear God,
like something precious that
you dropped. [7]

Hafiz, Persian Sufi poet, 1315–1390

From *Love Poems From God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, translations by Daniel Ladinsky, Penguin, 2002.

This poem was offered as a gift by the translator, Daniel Ladinsky, when giving permission for the use of his two other translations of Hafez poetry included in the text.

Selected, Annotated Bibliography

There is a large and ever-growing body of work on death and dying. Here are some of the sources that influenced my thinking.

Byock, Ira. *Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997. A series of short, very readable and inspiring stories about all sorts of deaths.

Callanan, Maggie, and Patricia Kelley. *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

Grof, Stanislov. *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. Stanislov, one of the founders of Transpersonal Psychology, draws from a breathtaking range of sources, including psychological research, the world's mystical traditions, and contemporary science, to reflect on some of life's most profound mysteries.

Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. *On Life After Death*. Berkeley, California: Celestial Arts, 1991. Kübler-Ross's ground-breaking book *On Death & Dying* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1969) set the stage for the development of this field. This 1991 book is more controversial, touching on a subject that many consider taboo.

McIver, Lucy. *A Song of Death, Our Spiritual Birth: A Quaker Way of Dying*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 340. Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998.

Pearson, Patricia. *Opening Heaven's Door: What the Dying May Be Trying to Tell Us about Where They're Going*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014. This gifted journalist shares her broad research into "near death experiences," the "third-person" phenomenon, sensed presences at the time of death, and "nearing death awareness." Her book is well-researched, highly readable, and very thought-provoking.

Singh, Kathleen Dowling, *The Grace in Dying: How We Are Transformed Spiritually as We Die*. [San Francisco]: Harper One, 1998. Singh talks about the "Nearing Death Experience" – the spiritual transformation that she has observed in the dying in their final days, hours, or minutes.

Waller, Francis. *Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals and Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2015. Waller explores the transformative power of grief, especially when expressed in a communal container.

Notes

1 Hafiz, "Deepening the Wonder," in *The Subject Tonight is Love: Sixty Wild and Sweet Poems of Hafiz*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 2007). Printed with permission from Daniel Ladinsky.

2 Richard Rohr, "Two Halves of Life: Week 1," Centre for Action and Contemplation, cac.org/two-halves-life-week-1-summary-2016-06-18/ [accessed 23 December 2017].

3 Lucy McIver, *A Song of Death, Our Spiritual Birth: A Quaker Way of Dying*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 340 (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998).

4 Hafiz, "Deepening the Wonder," in *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, trans. Daniel James Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 2007) Printed with permission from Daniel James Ladinsky.

5 Rumi, "The Master of the Work," trans. Andrew Harvey. Printed with permission from Andrew Harvey.

6 Printed with permission from the author, Kenneth Jacobsen.

7 Hafiz, "This Earth a Bow," in *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, trans. Daniel James Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 2002). Printed with permission from Daniel James Ladinsky.

Death will inevitably make us an offer that we cannot refuse – to surrender into the vastness of a power that is beyond our ability to comprehend. In the meantime, our daily life offers us ongoing opportunities to begin that process of surrender, to "die before we die," and by doing so, to awaken to a deeper aliveness – a "falling into grace" that turns our mortality into a spiritual companion.