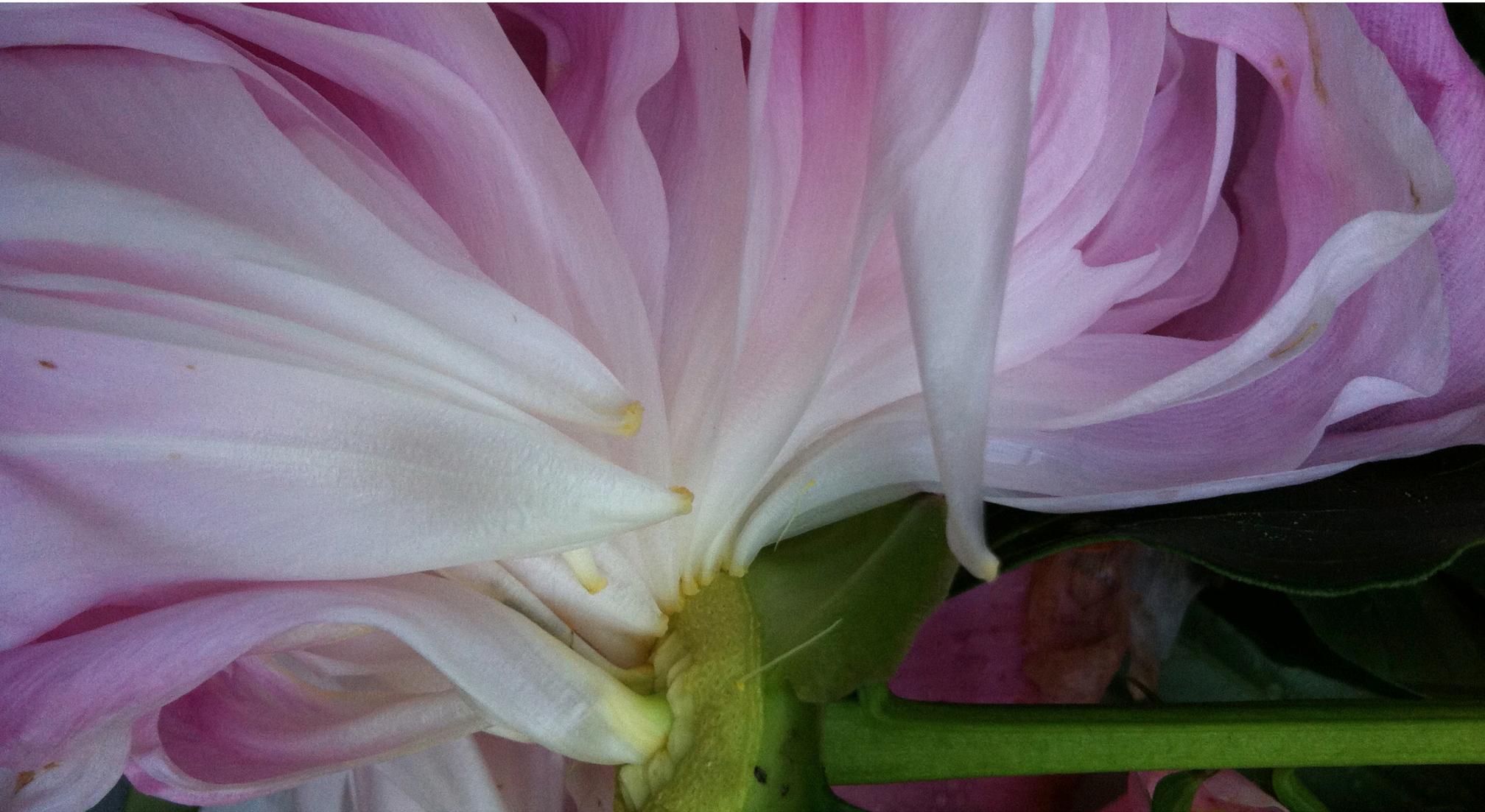


CLAUDIA SHERWOOD



*Let's Talk about Death:
How We Can Heal Ourselves*

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*Can you try to begin to contemplate your death openly even with your fear?
... It may become a more peaceful transition*

Claudia Sherwood



Introduction

Contemplating death at any age is the hardest thing we can ever do. It takes a tremendous amount of courage. But it can also bear many rewards. If we are able to lift some of our fears, we may do some deep healing which will help us feel at peace.

My mother died twenty years ago as a young adult from Multiple Sclerosis. We were a spiritual family and yet my sisters and I rarely talked about her oncoming death. We avoided this out of fear. I now realize how healing it would have been for the whole family to have these conversations. She must have sensed our fear and rarely brought up the subject. She had a clear idea that she would die soon and she was valiant and smiling until her last day. My stepfather said that she was the bravest woman he ever knew. But now, thinking back, I wish that we could have had the chance to sit together with her and talk about her feelings. We were not with her when she died and it would have been freeing for all of us.

Recently, I practiced Reiki as integrative support on hospital oncology patients. I worked with a woman who underwent radiation and chemotherapy for a long period of time for ovarian cancer. She did not survive the illness. I worked with her up until and on the day she died and I felt blessed to accompany her on her end of life journey. She knew that she had only days to live and I encouraged her to concentrate on what she was still giving to her family, her daughters and her grandchildren. I reminded her that she still had the ability to pass on her wisdom and love and I suggested that she keep a sort of diary near her bed and consider writing something to her grandchildren. At some point she did. She wrote poems to them.



Your Path

“When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced.

Live your life in a manner

So that when you die the world cries and you rejoice.”

Native American Proverb

Throughout the world there are many traditions and rituals for death, and for the consideration of an after-life. You can follow tradition or you can create our own tradition.

In Mexican culture, El Dia de los Muertos, is a celebration of death where children joyfully carry paper skeletons to small towns with their families. Death can include reverence, joy or humor, just as in life.

In Latin American cultures there was a deep respect for the elderly and their life experience, and it was the elder’s duty to pass down their wisdom and learning.

* What gems of wisdom have you acquired throughout your life and would you like to share this with someone?

Native American belief centers on the natural world - the earth, the animals, the trees, and the natural spirit. Even among those Native Americans who have been converted to Christianity, there is an emphasis on the reunion in the afterlife of our spirit with nature – a sense that everyone and everything on the planet is connected.

* Do you have a special connection with nature that you would like to share with someone, or even create your own personal ritual or ceremony around?

In many Eastern cultures like Tibet, families speak practically of death from early childhood as part of a process – not an ending – and they believe that this life is only one of many lives. They consider that a peaceful state of mind at the time of death, based on a lifetime of daily reflection, is extremely important, and will affect your future lives.

* Would you consider speaking freely to your children about this idea?



Fear of Death

*“Death is not extinguishing the light
It is putting out the lamp
because the dawn has come”*

Rabindranath Tagore

You die each day when you release to sleep. Sometime it’s called a “little death,” and the next morning you awake and you are born to the world again.

While you cannot time your death, you can choose your state of mind. Through regular practice, you can try to examine your fear of endings from moment to moment – of the things you cannot control – whether the end of an encounter, a relationship, a day, a weekend, or a season – they all will end.

Prayer, meditation, or quiet contemplation. They are all a way of seeking inner peace by allowing the mind to rest and the breath to relax. These tools have been practiced throughout history from Jesus to Buddha to Krishna, and Mohammed. Countless studies have shown that deeply listening to our inner voice is transforming on many levels of human experience. It requires moving beyond our thinking mind. This inner focusing allows us to come closer to our true nature and our connection to the universe. It helps us to decide what happens with our consciousness after our death. Try the meditation exercise below.

Meditation I

Close your eyes and after taking the three long, slow breaths, to clear your body and mind, you can begin to check where you feel the fear in your body. Fully breathe into that area or areas and feel the experience of that fear. Don’t rush it away, but give it your full attention. You have the power to change the way you think about fear, but first just let it be there - with compassion for yourself. Can you see what it looks like in your body? Does it change the way you hold yourself, your posture? Can you let it stay for a while and see what happens? Does it soften as you breathe slowly?

If you do this inner work, you may find a different relationship with thoughts of death. When you are finished you might write something in the journal in the back. There is a space for your notes on meditation.



Ars Moriendi

“Ancient Egyptians believed that upon death they would be asked two questions and their answers would determine whether they could continue their journey in the afterlife. The first question was, ‘Did you bring joy?’ The second was, ‘Did you find joy?’”

Leo Buscaglia

Ars Moriendi or the Art of Dying were Latin texts, based on Christian teachings, written to offer advice in planning what was thought of as a – good death – or how to die well.

This texts were composed during the late Middle Ages following the Black Death plague, and offered advice on planning a good death – and guidance and comfort to those on their deathbed and their families. They outlined what to expect throughout the dying process and the after-life.

Do you also need guidance and support?



Your Journal for Life...and Death

Each of us are born to live. And die.

Each day we continue to live, we make conscious choices on how we live. We can also make some very important and conscious choices on how we die. It is never too late to start recording your thoughts, expectations, preferences and decisions on your own personal death.

I encourage you to start journaling your thoughts. Each new day may bring you new thoughts, and you can continue to add these changes as your heart dictates. Share them with the individual right to plan. Take advantage of opportunities to share these wishes, as we never really know when our days will end.

Remembering Your Life

- * Think back on all of your accomplishments, no matter how big or small they are. Perhaps you include the people you affected, the lives you've changed, the moments that you felt the most proud.
- * Take time to release any regrets you may be carrying with you. Are you holding onto any anger that may be holding you back? Seek forgiveness as you offer forgiveness to others. Maybe you will share them with others. Maybe you won't. Either way, writing them down may be your first step to free your mind and your heart.