the blessed & cursed catastrophe we call death & dying

an interview with joan halifax roshi

It is a quiet and early morning. I shut the door to my yellow room and make the call to Joan Halifax. After nearly a month of trying to arrange a time that would fit into our busy schedules, the call goes through easily this morning. She answers right away. Finally, from snowy Montréal, I reach what must be a place of ochres and browns and sands: Santa Fe.

Joan Halifax Roshi is inspiring what she calls a gentle revolution in dying. A Buddhist teacher, author, anthropologist and social activist, she is the founder of the Upaya Zen Centre, a Buddhist study centre committed to teaching and practising the contemplative care of the dying. The centre reaches out into the community with projects such as Being with Dying, which teaches health professionals, caregivers and people with severe illnesses contemplative perspectives on death and dying, as well as offering retreats that emphasize "the awareness of death as the ground for the experience of dying and of caring for life." The Upaya Partners Program trains volunteers to sit with the dying and the Upaya Prison Project brings this work to prisoners on death row.

Joan is also one of the main proponents of engaged spirituality, a movement that supports new ways of practising compassionate action in the world.

From the action in her life, Joan still manages to speak from a place of stillness. As we talk, there are the long full silences of a woman who has trained her mind by sitting patiently and compassionately with herself and with the dying. I listen closely this morning to her words and her silent spaces. She is offering something I want to know.

Joan Halifax Roshi's life has a remarkable balance of ordinariness and extraordinariness. When I ask her what a day of her life at Upaya is like, she responds, "I sit in the *zendo*, I teach, I sit with dying people, I garden, I write, I clean. It's a regular life. I'm very fortunate to live in an extremely beautiful place, but we are surrounded by suffering, so I have to ask, how can I bring the gifts of my life forward to really help other beings?"

And how does she do this?

"I sit and consult with people literally all over the world, around this particular blessed and cursed catastrophe we call death and dying."

—*CM*

by clea mcdougall
illustration by emrys damon miller

Clea McDougall What drew you to work with the dying?

Joan Halifax Roshi I think it was my grandmother who gave me a heart for working with dying people. She was from Savannah, Georgia and was a sculptress. Many of the beautiful monuments in the Bonaventure cemetery in Savannah were made by her. She had a great deal of peace with dying and transmitted to me the depth of experience in being present for a dying person.

CM And what made you follow it through into your spiritual life?

JHR I think that my interest in being with the dying comes out of my own suffering. I am reminded that suffering is part of the experience of profound transformation that one goes through on a spiritual journey. You can learn a lot from people and from yourself when you observe the inevitability of death, your own responses and the responses of others to that truth, that fact.

CM What can we learn about life through observing death?

JHR In Zen, we call the great question Life *and* Death. There's no real separation between the two. To be fully in life is to also be fully in death. At a point, the mind stops making personality statements; there is cessation in terms of what we do, who we think we are, what we think the world is. When you're with a dying person, your own priorities change dramatically. Death is a very profound experience to be close to—an experience of that which is really ungraspable and ultimately uncontrollable.

CM You've referred to the people you work with, the dying, as bodhisattvas. Why?

JHR Because they really teach one compassion.

CM Yet your work gives so much to the dying… it seems like a process of give and take. Would you consider yourself a bodhisattva?

JHR Oh, not at all. I'm an aspiring one. But I'm also very much a human being with many flaws and many challenges. And the work feels beyond give and take. It's more a quality of open presence to whatever is arising.

suffering is part of the experience of profound transformation.

CM You have used the image of the bodhisattva riding the waves of birth and death when talking about impermanence. Why is it so hard for people to accept change, or accept the idea of impermanence?

JHR It's an inability to accept the groundlessness of existence—the fact that you can't hold onto anything. We tend to fixate on a lover or a religion or an idea or a place, and that fixation is a source of suffering. When you come to the situation realizing that nothing stays, then you have a certain kind of freedom.

CM Is that freedom ever really attainable? Just when I start to think I understand impermanence, something comes up that makes me realize that I haven't accepted it fully. Do you think we can ever get to that point of freedom? Are you at that point?

JHR I think there are moments when I am there and moments when I am not there. The whole practice is about opening yourself to a basic not knowing, to being with the inconceivable and not trying to figure it all out. And that is, in essence, what the practice of being with the dying is all about for me. You don't know, you bear witness to each moment as it arises. The image of riding the waves of birth and death shows that you are in a continuum of constant change, constant groundlessness. And instead of drowning in the waters you are surfing, you are riding it. And every time you fixate, you start to drown. The struggle can be very profound. And that includes when we are dying and grasping onto life.

CM You've quoted Rilke: "Love and death are the greatest gifts given to us, but mostly they are passed on unopened." So what would we find if we opened the gift of love and the gift of death?

JHR Each person finds what is theirs, and it changes through time as well. The fact is that love and death are about fully letting go. Rilke brings it to a beautiful characterization when he talks about these great gifts that are given to us. In the middle ages, the Christian monks bent over and whispered in each other's ears—*memento mori*—remember death. Spiritual practitioners the world over have used death as a way to deepen their lives. I think it's an extraordinary opportunity for each of us to observe those who are dying in order to not

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just help them, but to liberate ourselves from the continuum of suffering.

CM Can you talk a bit about "engaged spirituality?"

JHR Engaged spirituality, in the best sense, means that we simply are in the world helping other Beings seamlessly. It's not just frantically helping another Being, it is a contemplative practice. We can use our service to others and say this situation is actually my practice.

From the Mahayana perspective, engagement means you are constantly looking with experience and compassion as a basis for your practice. And compassion is different from sympathy or pity. It's really being able to feel the suffering of others and also to see the source of their suffering, which is usually a delusion, and to try to help people transform delusion into something else.

However, there can be a big problem in engaged spirituality if there is an intent to do good in the world. You have to be very careful that it's not some kind of socially prescribed or socially winning behaviour.

CM And how would people be able to start making their practices engaged?

JHR Well, I think there are many ways to do it. To begin with, you need to have some kind of contemplative practice that allows the mind to become stable and that cultivates compassion and insight. And once you have those elements present, when you can do your work with stability, then you translate your practice into the world, which is really the point. In Zen we say, "Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water." It's the same activity, but it's done in a very different way. The emphasis is on service as a spiritual path but not a path of ego.

CM What is the path of service?

JHR I think it is the realization that all beings are interconnected at the most fundamental level. So, if you are "serving" another person you are really serving yourself, and the more your ego gets out of the way the better you can do it. It's a great experience to be in a relaxed, seamless relationship with the world and it's not "service"—you've gotten over the syndrome of the server, where A is doing something for B.

engagement means you are constantly looking with experience & compassion.

Some Buddhists use the image of the right hand taking care of the left hand, because it happens automatically. It's a question of whether you can open yourself to that degree.

CM You've brought your work into prisons. What has that been like?

JHR It's been an extraordinarily deep experience, working with people in prison systems. We work a lot in death row and maximum security, where you become a companion to hopelessness. You can't hope for any outcome, because usually the outcomes are pretty similar—death or life incarceration. But without the typical expectations, you have greater freedom in the kind of work that you do.

CM Can I ask what you do when you sit with people who are dying?

JHR It really depends on the individual. There is no prescription except being present, to be fully present. There can't be a prescription because every individual and every moment is unique, so having a practice that really stabilizes you is critical in this regard. You may have to rub a foot or a head, or change a bedpan or counsel the dying person or be with family members or facilitate good communication with the family or help educate the family around the issues, or help the family make decisions that are helpful … it's a constant process that is unpredictable. So you have to be present and at the ready and not afraid.

CM It seems like such a very intense way to engage in life, to be present with death constantly.

JHR Well, I think it's rather liberating. I'd rather be examining these deep questions and constantly waking up to reality in this way than to sleep my life away. ॐ

To find out more about Joan Halifax Roshi and Upaya, visit www.upaya.org or email upaya@upaya.org. Joan Halifax's books include *The Fruitful Darkness* and *Simplicity in the Complex: A Buddhist Life in America*.

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