

THE DEATH OF THREE FATHERS

It is curious that my experiences of the dying process concern the three Fathers in my life: my own father, my father-in-law and my “spiritual” father. Particularly curious, I feel, because as a non-Jewish interloper into his orthodox Jewish world, I was in no way ‘close’ to my father-in-law. Why not my beloved mother or any women? Of my mother’s death I had no intimation, and though I was present when my mother-in-law passed away, it was a strangely mundane and matter-of-fact affair.

These accounts are in chronological order, and cover a span of about twenty years.

Father 1

I was living with my husband and our two young children in a London flat when I was phoned by my family in Australia to say that my father had had a stroke and was unconscious in hospital. The prognosis was not good. For a day or so I carried on with family life, aware of my dear father probably near death so far away at the other side of the world. Even then I was intuitively aware enough of death issues to say to my mother by phone: “Tell Dad to think of the sun setting behind the Otways (mountains he loved and had spent much of his life gazing at), and go with the light.”

She did not get the chance to tell him. The next evening in London I was having dinner with my young family when I suddenly felt queer. Not ill, just as if my digestive system was shutting down making it difficult to take in food. I struggled on for a while not wishing to make a fuss or disrupt routine, but then I had to make excuses and go away by myself.

I had barely settled into a quiet space, when I felt my father, full of bewilderment and confusion. I calmed and embraced him and, as it were, took his hand, and together we walked towards the soft radiating light. At a certain point I knew I could go no further and he must go on alone. Therefore, I let go, and simply pointed in the direction of the light which had become a powerful, white radiance. There was a moment of parting, and my father left me, moving towards the Light.

The phone call came early next morning, London time. My father had passed away during the Australian night: they weren’t sure of the exact time. But I knew. I did some calculations and realised that the time I had been with my father would have been about three a.m. in the morning Downunder. It didn’t matter that my mother had not been able to pass on my message. He had got it anyway.

Father 2

My father-in-law was in many ways a difficult man, and devoutly orthodox Jewish. Although non-Jewish myself, and always slightly an outsider, I and our children had been accepted into the family. During his last illness in hospital, I was with my mother-in-law on a visit when she discovered that his prayer-shawl was all wet. Somehow it emerged that he had been

trying to do his ritual ablutions before prayer. He confessed (to me, because I questioned him when my mother-in-law was preoccupied) that he couldn't do the ablutions properly and hadn't been able to pray. As no one else seemed bothered by this, before leaving the hospital, I impressed upon the nurse in charge that he was to be given water or assisted as needed. Next time I visited I asked him privately about it, and although my intervention in his religious life was unusual and bizarre to say the least, at this critical phase of his life and death, he didn't seem surprised either. He nodded conspiratorially at my question, and took it in good part when I told him to be sure and keep up his prayers. I mention all this, because it may account for what followed.

Shortly after, having woken unusually early on a mild autumn morning, I was sitting outside with my cup of coffee. Suddenly I seemed to hear a voice calling softly; "Abraham. Abraham." (My father-in-law was always known as Alf, but his birth name was Abraham)

Naturally, I began to think about him, and words formed which I repeated over and over as a kind of prayer: "I shall ascend the mountains of the Lord..." I can't remember other words, but I entered a prayerful state, as if words from the Psalms were drifting towards the trees in the morning mist, and I honoured through them my father-in-law: irascible, annoying, but a good man of simple faith.

Half an hour later, my husband took the call to say his father had passed half an hour before. It was Rosh-hashanah, the Day of the New Year, and of great significance because it was my father-in-law's birthday; he was born on Rosh-hashanah exactly eighty-nine years before. The nurses said he had woken up, been given some tea, but when they returned a little later, he had departed this life. I like to think he had been saying his morning prayers.

It was a superb death. A simple man and a magnificent end. For days he had been agitating and plaguing family and staff to be allowed home for Rosh-hashanah, as if he knew..... He did not get his way. So it was in the hospital, when that day dawned, that he ascended those Mountains.

Postscript: Later, accompanying my husband in to begin his period of Vigil, for some not-entirely conscious reason I took the Jewish Prayer-book out of the cabinet where it rested, and put it in my bag. I happened to glance at the prayers for the dead. 'For a Man' they read: "Who may ascend the mountains of the Lord? ...He that hath clean hands and a pure heart...He shall receive a blessing from the Lord..."

Blessing indeed, even to the appropriate prayer summoned from the shiksa daughter-in-law! Also it was lucky I had actually carried the book; being a High Holy Day, others could not carry anything.....it was useful.

Father 3

With a few others, I had been for hours by the deathbed of the man who had shaped our lives in Inner Work for thirty years; by guiding, challenging, opening worlds and landscapes of the

Beyond, and making manifest to all who might be interested the intricate order of the invisible, the laws of the intangible. About 2 am, my husband and I left. This was my account at the time:

‘Returning late from the Hospice on Monday morning, sleep was impossible. But I must have fallen into a light doze, because suddenly I was pummelled awake by a pounding on my back, and rose up in confusion: What ? What? Is he gone?’

I lay awhile and then -

I saw two massive Gates in verdigris (the grey-green of old bronze) which were opening slowly. To the clanging of chains was added the deep rumble of big wheels, of processional wagon and casket, as if bearing a great warrior home to his rest. As the procession passed through the Gates, two vast angels of verdigris raised their trumpets high. The gates slowly closed, and the wheels rumbled away to Eternity.

I wept, and fell into another light doze, but suddenly was awake again. I looked at the clock: exactly a quarter to six.

Just silence. Nothing.

Presently I got up and walked in the garden of a new day in early Spring.’

A little later I saw my husband’s face through the window when he heard the news on the phone. As he came into the garden to tell me, I was engulfed by a wave of sheer exultation, of overwhelming joy at such a passing. Only afterwards, the grief.

It had occurred, of course, at a quarter to six.

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Lucy Oliver 2011