

# LETTER XIII

## Death, Arcanum of Subtraction

### *Spiritual Exercise: Memento Mori*



*Forgetting is to sleep as sleep is to death. Or again: forgetting is to memory as sleep is to consciousness, and sleep is to consciousness as death is to life. (page 342)*

”Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” This classic gospel tune by Loretta Lynn pretty much sums up a universal quality of the human experience: we want the gain, but not the pain. And I don’t believe this is necessarily a bad thing: we all like to get shortcuts, special offers, sale prices, that unexpected find at an antique shop or thrift store. Every now and then a rare work of art turns up at a Goodwill store, someone pays \$30 for it and then sells it for thousands (or more).

But the corollary to this is “There’s no such thing as a free lunch” (this even has its own acronym, TINSTAAFL, and [its own Wikipedia page](#)). Everything has a cost, nothing ultimately is free (it may be free for you, but in that case someone else bears the expense). So while it may be human nature to seek maximum profit for the

minimum investment, the spiritual life — which, among other things, is about telling the truth and facing the reality of things squarely — acknowledges that both wisdom and compassion necessitate a willingness to bear the burden of life — if not for our own sake, then for the sake of others.

We go to sleep to rejuvenate our bodies, even if it means leaving the party early. We forget life's trivial details in order to more securely cherish the memories that most fully define who we are. And we die, so that we create space for new life here on earth, while we trustingly consign our spirit to the Holy Spirit: the source of all life.

The ancient monastic practice of *Memento Mori* — remember your mortality — is not meant to be macabre or morbid. Remembering one's death is a way of affirming the precious beauty of life, here and now. Some of us may die soon; others may have decades to go. May we all live long, happy, and prosperous lives — and yet, even after such a blessed existence, the day will come when it ends. Faith offers us a lifeline both when we die and when we grieve the loss of a loved one. Like remembering a forgotten fact, or waking up after a restful night of sleep, we can trust that resurrection awaits those who die.

In her luminous book *The Grace in Dying*, Kathleen Dowland Singh writes, “There appears to be a universal, sequential progression into deeper, subtler, and more enveloping dimensions of awareness, identity, and being as we begin to die—a movement from the periphery into the Center. Further, I realized that the transformation I was observing in people who were nearing death was the same psychoalchemy—in a greatly accelerated mode—that I had noticed in myself through two and a half decades of practicing contemplative disciplines and in the people with whom I had worked as a psychospiritual counselor.” (Page 14)

It's a powerful and liberating insight: *contemplative practice gently prepares us to die*. Most teachers of contemplative prayer will not lead their presentations with this little factoid, however! Everybody wants to go to heaven (experience the bliss of union with God), but no one wants to die — including the gesture of surrendering our ego into the objectless awareness of contemplative silence, allowing all thoughts, feelings, images, etc. to come and go as we rest in the silent cloud of unknowing.

It's not a “sexy” concept, so it will never make for a marketing headline. But it's honest, it's real, it's true. And if we accept it, it has the power to liberate us. Singh is very candid about how contemplative does not erase the fear of death, which is ultimately a biological, instinctual reality of being embodied. But it does give us the resiliency and the deep interior trust to ride the wave of that fear and find the freeing

calm on the other side. When we practice a contemplative discipline, we not only deepen our capacity to recognize the presence of God in the here-and-now, but we also slowly train our body, mind and soul to be ready for the gift of death when it eventually will come. And again: we do this not to be morbid or macabre, but to liberate us to live more fully in the precious life we are given in the present moment.

### **Spiritual Exercise: Forgetting/Remembering; Sleep/Awake; Death/Life**

For this exercise, begin by reflecting on the universal human experience of falling asleep and waking up. Even if you are someone with difficulty sleeping, imagine times when you were so tired that sleep met you as a welcome place of rest and release. And then recall the joy of waking up after a rejuvenating night, filled with renewed energy and raring to go. Reflect on how the gift of sleep and the gift of awakening go together, and indeed rely on and require each other.

Then turn your attention to a time when you have forgotten something: maybe the name of a meaningful person, or an important commitment, or even just a key idea or fact that helps you to know who you are. Remember what it was like to finally recall that important memory — what a relief it was (even if the forgetting itself was embarrassing or difficult). Reflect on how the forgotten memory seemed simply *gone*, even if it felt like it was on the tip of your tongue. And then recall how the act of remembering made this bit of information seem like the most real memory you possess. Consider how forgetting and remembering does not change the fact in question: but the experience may have truly and dramatically changed you.

Finally, pray for the gift of trust as you reflect on your own mortality. May it be long in the future! But whenever it comes, it may feel too soon. Acknowledge that this though might be scary or anxiety-producing; if you need to, imagine Christ or an Archangel holding you gently to protect you as you face this scary reality. Be mindful that “remembering” your future death also means placing yourself in touch with your future life, a resurrected life held forever in the love and light of God. Trust that the life your death will bring you to is just as real as a new dawn or a remembered fact.

After reflecting on these three universal human experiences, gently move into a period of Centering Prayer (or some other discipline of prayerful silence). Allow any feelings or thoughts that arise to gently float away. Be present now. Be still and know that God is. The God who lives is the God who loves you, the God who gives you awareness and wakefulness and life even in and beyond death. Allow a spirit of gratitude and love to well up in your heart for this God who is Love.