

Turn to wonder

by Andrew Norton



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The grace of dying

Written by Andrew Norton, 16 July 2019

There is a returning, a homecoming, a movement from the unknown to the known, incomplete to complete, fragmented to whole. This returning is what I call the grace of dying.

"The spirit returns unto God who gave it." – Ecclesiastes 12.7

This is not in any way new to us; we have experienced this cycle through the seasons every year of our lives.

Summer, autumn, winter and spring; each announce nature's cycle of death and resurrection.

Each season returns and in returning everything turns.

"There is a time for every season . . .

"A time to be born and a time to die."

"A time to throw away and a time to gather in."

These have been our companions all these years and yet we have not held them in our hands long enough for them to speak into our lives or to realise that one day we too may be called to withdraw, let go and to die.

A quality of relaxation

Thomas More refers to this as *"the emptying of self into the fullness of life"*.

Surrender comes with an unexpected gift at the end of the struggle.

A quality of withdrawal

There is a time to embrace and a time to let go. To withdraw is to place a new set of priorities around relationships, giving priority to some over others.

Of all that could hold our attention or distract us, there is a sharpening of the participants' senses and of the ego that can capture the focus of our being, or not.

Once you have passed through the grief of letting go, the quality of withdrawal becomes a cleansing process. It is like the Marie Kondo method; where you hold everything in your hands and ask what brings you joy. This becomes what T.S. Eliot called the still point of the turning world.

A quality of radiance

People who visit me refer to how well I am looking. I think I can't possibly be looking so well when I am in the process of dying and yet the word that continues to arise is the sense of radiance. It's a stillness, a calmness, a peace within that comes together to form this thing call radiance.

A quality of silence

During this time, you are left alone to yourself for many hours in the day, especially what they call the wee, or long still hours of the night. It is in these times of silence that you learn to embrace the silence and let it comfort rather than torment. There's a quality of interiority where you learn to be comfortable in your own thoughts.

A quality of interiority

This may sound strange, but as you turn inwards – in on yourself – at first your world becomes much smaller. But as you continue this process it becomes so much bigger. The interior world becomes incredibly spacious, wide, deep and beyond anything you would have ever imagined.

A quality of the sacred

Finding God amid the dying experience is not at all clear, not at all straight-forward for God can come as the enemy, the one who inflicts this disease.

I don't see God as the one I can't wait to see on the other side. Even that idea is too narrowing or too limiting.

What I do get excited about is that I can meet God now, on this side, without any judgement and in complete freedom.

We need to stop living life in reverse – wishing God would somehow, should or could have given me a better life, would have got this sorted out sooner. Why God have You come so late to the party? It's living life in the present that becomes the sacred gift.

A quality of transcendence

My dream life is one of complete transcendence and wholeness. It is not a dream of the wishful – it's not of desire, it's all in the present. E.g. My dream of the tree of life is in the transcendent now.

A quality knowing

There's a strange space where you transcend between being lucid and clear minded, and lost in drug-induced fuzziness. And yet there are breakthrough points where you see and hear things with absolute clarity. It's like, 'boom, where did that come from'. It's an intense clarity, almost frightening. You see it and you say it. It's a gift. I'm not wanting to be insensitive, but I am not going to let people off the hook.

From tragedy to grace

There's so much about what I'm going through and experiencing I want to yell at the top of my lungs and say 'no', protest at the tragedy of one's own dying; and yet as I go through this process I realise that dying comes not as a tragic event but as a gracious gift. To be gifted with this is nothing other than grace.

Time and transcendence

While we live off this cliché 'time is short', for some it is shorter than others, and in my case there's a growing awareness that – for me – time is very short.

"We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time." – T. S. Eliot

Postscript

These thoughts are part of a reflective process over the last weeks as I have contemplated cancer and death. Anything I have said is solely my perspective, as I have tried to make peace in the darkness. – 4 September 2019

Surrender

Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone wishes to come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save their life will lose it ; but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. – Matthew 16:24-25

Have you come
to the end
of yourself
where
even
the white flag
lies
still
on the ground beside you?

This
ending you
knew,
feared,
dreaded,
struggled against
and
ultimately
defeated you
is nothing more than a
lie.

The
truth
of
all
life is:
the
seed must
die.
The
poor
in spirit
know what
happiness
is.
Those who fall
to the ground;
the humble,
stand
strong.

Ask me

Ask me,
one day in the available light,
"What lies ahead?"

We'll go for a walk.
We'll follow the ridge line track
there and back.
We'll drink with our eyes.
We'll speak with our hearts.
We'll delight in the clouds.

And I'll ask you,
"What lies within?"

We'll listen in silence
for the echoe's return.

That is what lies ahead.

Hello

I search the horizon but cannot
see beyond today's unfolding
- Hello to the unknown.

My bones ache, my breath is
short, my feet and hands hurt
- Hello to pain.

The grace of fear
- Hello to love.

Light painting an azure sky with
puffs of white clouds
- Hello to wonder.

A pathway into the mist
- Hello to mystery.

Now you have it, now you don't
- Hello to loss.

A hand written card, pure gift
- Hello to kindness.

Thicker than blood because
it is a choice
- Hello to friendship.

Stories of endings
- Hello to grief.

As champagne to a weary heart
- Hello to laughter.

"Hosanna" fades as the
crowd turns
- Hello to forsaken.

I ask God "why?" so I may
gain wisdom
- Hello to silence.

In the shadows I'm at home in
the womb of creation
- Hello to darkness.

Sunlight through the rain
- Hello to hope.

Hello to life,
yes,
to all of it!

Hello!

Turn to wonder

When
the going gets
tough,
turn to
wonder;
a crack that
catches
the light
by
a
sideways glance,
invading
the darkness of
questions
that only make
sense
from the
other side.

Wonder,
like the burning bush
frees you
from
all
names
spoken
over your
life.

Wonder,
like sky,
once held
every
drop
that became
an ocean,
a well
to quench
the deepest of
thirst.

Wonders'
weight
turning gravity
into
gravitas
of heart,
mind
and
soul.

Magnolia

The magnolia outside my window
is pregnant with hope
The buds are swelling
looking for a day of appearance
I too am looking for that day
A sign in the grey of winter
that tells of another season to come.

If today you are caught in winter's grey grip,
go find a magnolia pregnant with hope.

Bewildered

Be
wildered
by the elements
and
a life that refuses
to be
tamed.

Go to the
frontier
of your
wild imaginings
and
get thoroughly
lost.

It is in
exile
you find the
consolation
of home
and
a pathway
that leads you
back.

Winter willows

The winter willows'
naked
blush
caught my
gaze,
forsaken
of leaves
but not of
hope.

Hope
waits
till
all
is
laid
bare.

Hope, like
branches
ripening;
twice reflected
on water
and
within
my
eyes.

Pieces of love

And
when I
fall
I want to
break
into
ten thousand
pieces
of
love

more
than enough
to
feed
a hungry world.

In another room

You speak
of God
as
if
in
another room.

Brave and cowardice
words
easily
spoken
when not
face
to
face.

I'd rather
no God
than
one who
plays
hide 'n seek.

Heaven's
door
is
bolted
open
in the name
of
Emmanuel.

Tired eyes

Tired eyes
weigh thimbles in lead
abandoned by sight
seeking the horizon
searching the edges for light
close for relief.



Andrew Norton: husband, father, preacher,
priest, prophet, photographer and poet.
He embraced life, faith, family, friends and work
with keen perception and vigorous passion.

26 May 1958 – 9 September 2019

For more of Andrew's creative works,
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