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COUNSELING CENTER OF NORTHERN VERMONT

## FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie



# Faith Matters and Dying Matters

It will probably come as no surprise to many of you that I have chosen "Dying Matters" as the theme for this, my last Faith Matters article. I have been writing these articles on a monthly basis for almost four years and have now come to a place of needing to step away. This is true for several reasons. First, I think its time for me to rest from this rigorous process, and secondly, I think its time that others who have much to share about the spiritual aspects of our lives do so in this wonderful newspaper of ours. Last but not least, this is one of the "necessary losses," or prunings if you will that will make it possible for me to grow and change in ways that won't happen if I don't let this part of my life go.

This monthly process has proven to be an amazing time of reflection and soul searching for me that has helped to change my life. I highly recommend it. Like any risks we take, writing these articles has not been without its heartaches. However, even the heartaches have provided me the opportunity to grow and change as have the glorious moments that have come from writing these articles. I am grateful for both sides of the overall experience.

I don't know about you, but I have come to find that facing death, in all of its guises, is a big piece of our work while we are here as spiritual beings having a human experience. Facing the fact that losses are inevitable and even necessary just seems to make coming to terms with them a little easier. Facing them is no less painful, though, just a little easier I think. Trying to hold on to something or someone that needs to be let go of is not good for the one doing the holding, or that which is being held on to. So many of us struggle with this concept for all kinds of reasons. We often have a very hard time imagining that by letting go we are actually making room for new possibilities in our lives that need to be given the opportunity to blossom. An exercise that can help with this is to allow ourselves the opportunity to imagine having only one year to live so we can ask ourselves, "What do I want to be feeling about how I lived my life one year from now as I lie dying?" We can also then ask ourselves, "What changes would I make in my life so the next year

would be the best year of my life?" What's interesting about this exercise is what we would actually say to ourselves that we might not otherwise have the courage to say? The question then becomes, what do we do with what we find out when we ask ourselves such honest and challenging question? If we find out that we are currently not living our lives as we really need to be living them, we are faced with one of two choices. We either choose to live out of the pain of staying where we are, only to lay dying with a heart full of regret and remorse, or live out of the pain of doing what it would take to make the changes in our lives that would have us lay dying with a heart and soul full of joy and peace.

So the choices are not really about whether to be in pain or not. The choices are about whether or not we want to be alive until we are dead or be dead until we are really dead. There is a wonderful bumper sticker out and about these days that says, "Don't die wondering." This speaks to the heart of this issue for me. Now this is not a manifesto calling for reckless abandonment of good sense and propriety. It is, however, a call to those of us imprisoned in cells of our own making in which we do not deserve to spend our precious, God given lives.

Cells like the cells of drug and alcohol abuse. Cells like the cells of jobs that are sucking the very life out of us. Cells like the cells of relationships begun and maintained for the wrong reasons that slowly erode the hearts and souls of both people rather than strengthening them and lifting them up. Cells like the cells of self-loathing that have their roots in all manor of negative life experiences, both those imposed upon us and those we have colluded with ourselves. Cells of false pride that keep us from looking at the truth of who we have become and how we are choosing to live our lives.

It is these kinds of cells and so many more from which we deserve to be freed by virtue of asking ourselves, "What do I want to be feeling and cherishing about my life one year from now were I lying on my death bed?" It is very powerful to sit down and have the courage to make a list in response to these questions and then ask ourselves "What am I

going to do with what I have learned?" It is also comforting to me to know that, "Once our heart finds out what it really needs, whether we live or die, the work is the same." (From Stephen Levine's book, *A Year to Live*.)

It takes a leap of faith to engage ourselves in such questioning but it is a leap that's worth taking in my book. It's a leap of faith because we don't know where we are going to land when we take it, which is so hard for so many of us. It seems that its the "not knowing where I am going to land" thing that keeps so many of us from taking the leap in the first place.

This is where faith matters, or the notion of "letting go and letting God" comes into the picture, which I will grant you is a big challenge for many of us. Who wants to risk this with a God who allegedly believes Her GLBT folks to be "abominations?" I believe letting this notion of God die is very healthy especially since it's just not true. The God I have come to know and love with all my being is a God of amazing love, grace, and compassion, who longs to be the God of Resource and Renewal in our lives that She is. She is not the aberrant and cruel God of Rewards and Punishment promoted far too long by ignorant and power-hungry people in charge of the world over the last 2000 years. I couldn't end this part of the journey without saying this: having a God such as this makes having a faith that matters desirable and a life that matters livable.

I want to close by thanking you for allowing me the privilege of sharing my thoughts and feelings with you. If my monthly musings have been a way for the Beloved Holy One of Resource and Renewal to touch your lives and strengthen your faith, then my writing will not have been in vain for me or for you.

Blessed Be!

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