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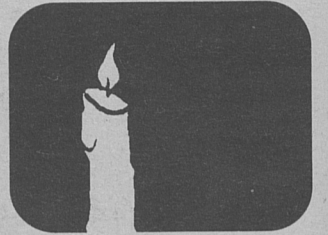
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FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie



Faith Matters and Memory Matters

The longer I live and the more I do the work that God has called me to do, the more I have come to believe that life goes on after we leave our earthly selves behind. I have also come to believe that none of us really want to leave this earth with unresolved, negative feelings either in ourselves or with other people. However, many of us do choose to ignore this important work only to suffer all the more from festering emotional wounds that make living happily in the here and now virtually impossible.

Living this way can cause our inner selves to become dangerous, scary, painful places we avoid like the plague. It helps to explain why there are so many people so focused on the externals rather than the internals of life. The sad truth is there is no amount of money, power, possession, or any kind of external pursuit that can ameliorate our spiritual and emotional pain. We just can't make up on the outside for what we lack on the inside.

Every day we are here we have the choice to address and resolve painful experiences or ignore them. The more we do the work of resolving our emotional and spiritual wounds while we are here the less we have to deal with when we die. We can ignore anything we choose to ignore while we are here but it doesn't mean we are off the hook, which is what I tell clients I counsel who think suicide will bring blissful, pain-free oblivion.

When we die, I believe we are faced with the task of doing the healing work we didn't do while on earth. From what I have gleaned over the years, this work begins as soon as we cross over death's threshold. This process is often described as going to a movie of our lives. It's a movie in which we experience what others felt in response to our treatment of them. While watching the movie of our lives, we feel from the inside out what it was like to be the recipient of our own attitudes and actions. We also feel what it was like to be the people who loved us and harmed us. It is the ultimate experience in

mutual empathy.

The only drawback about putting all this resolution work off until we die means that we miss out on experiencing the joy, freedom, and healing that comes from doing this work sooner rather than later. We also tend to suffer terribly from the pain of living with festering, emotional wounds that often cause us to self-medicate in self-destructive ways, which only tends to make matters worse.

Carolyn Myss, in her book, *Anatomy of the Spirit*, describes this with the phrase "biography becomes biology." Many people choose to park unresolved, painful experiences in some part of their body. This can then cause the demise of that part of their body. This can get so bad that sometimes the wear and tear can cause us to get sick and die. Having come to this conclusion even before I had it affirmed by Carolyn Myss, I've been threatening for years to print a bumper sticker that says, "Nice people don't get angry — they get sick instead."

Frederick Buechner in his book, *Telling Secrets*, has written one of the best explanations for why doing memory work matters as much as it does. After his teenage daughter nearly died from her anorexia, Buechner finally began to come to terms with how his father's suicide had impacted his life. Buechner learned first-hand that once you adopt the practice of burying painful experiences, pretending they have had no impact on your life, dealing courageously and honestly with all those that follow is almost impossible.

Painful, unresolved experiences piled one on top of the other, ultimately closes down our ability to feel any emotions. This, in turn, shuts off our ability to be close to other people and ourselves in the ways that make life worth living.

Here's what Buechner has to say: "I am inclined to believe that God's chief purpose in giving us memory is to enable us to go back in time — We cannot undo our old

mistakes or their consequences any more that we can erase old wounds that we have both suffered and inflicted, but through the power that memory gives us of thinking, feeling, imagining our way back through time we can at long last finally finish with the past in the sense of removing its power to hurt us and other people and to stunt our growth as human beings."

Buechner continues, "Memory makes it possible for us both to bless the past, even those parts of it that we have always felt cursed by, and also to be blessed by it. If this kind of remembering sounds like what psychotherapy is all about, it is — but I think it is also what the forgiveness of sins is all about—the interplay of God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of God and each other. It is in the experiences of such healing that I believe we experience God's loving forgiveness of us, and insofar as memory is the doorway to both experiences, it becomes not just therapeutic but sacred."

As we ponder the close of yet another year, I hope that all of us will ask God for the courage to share our memories that matter, especially the ones we have least wanted to recall, with someone we trust and for whom hearing our memories is a sacred trust. When we do this, we will deepen our faith that matters in a healing process that can only stream into our lives when the dams holding back our crippling secrets are let go. If we have to do this work eventually anyway, why not get on with it and glean the gifts that that doing this memory work can bring into our lives. I can't think of a better way to spend the first year of the next millennium, can you? ▼

Rev. Christine Leslie,
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