

When Do You Say I Love You?

Thomas Merton Brightman

Life is the greatest therapist. It can be slow and expensive, but it does teach when we pay attention and stay mindful of what is really going on in and around us. The events that follow occurred twenty years before I consciously allowed my full pain to surface and be processed. This is a natural learning about not waiting to say, "I love you."

A constellation of deaths occurred over a short time. The first was expected, as the person was 97. The last in the series was the totally unexpected death of a person who was only twenty. At the end of this rash of deaths, I made an internal pledge to express feelings of love, now! This passing of people from my life graphically demonstrated that tomorrow is not guaranteed to anyone. I wished I'd said, "I love you" more often.

On my mother's side, I lost my Great Grandmother, Grandfather and Grandmother. I had met my maternal Great Grandmother only a few years before her death. It was like losing a new friend before you get to know them. I was blessed to finally be with this tough and independent spirit before she dropped her body at age ninety-seven. I still see her sitting and spitting snuff on her porch in the Valley of Texas.

My maternal Grandfather was my Grandmother's third husband. He was a sensitive and loving man who died after a long bout with cancer. He was so much into all of our minds and hearts that I went deeply into family genealogy along his family line before I remembered he was a relative of the heart. My mother barely knew her natural father and has lost all those Alabama connections.

My Grandmother truly died over grieving the loss of her husband. He was one of God's greatest gifts in her otherwise demanding and turbulent life. She was lost without him. In grief, she wandered, searching for someone or something to fill the void. She finally found disease and she left to search beyond life. I took a week of vacation to visit her as she lay dying in Mississippi. She didn't surrender life until I returned home to Pennsylvania.



The phone call came at work and I broke into involuntary tears without regard for where I was at the time. This was the first instance, in my adult life, that grief for the loss of another person erupted from my heart. I had no choice about letting my feelings go out of control. It dawned on me just how deeply I loved this woman. For a long time, I carried regrets about not being with her more during her last years.

On my paternal side, my dad's father and then his mother died during their eighties from apparent old age. Many of these deaths were expected because of age. Yet my mother's mother and step father died very young from disease and grief.

My mother's family openly expressed emotion and was into hugging. My father's family was into coolness, control, and non-touching. I spent most of my youth around my father's relatives, so I had almost no modeling for healthy emoting or physical nurturing.



My maternal Grandparents were evangelists much into love of God. My paternal Grandparents were Methodists into sprinkling at birth, then Christmas and Easter Sunday thereafter. I remember a line from a recent movie when a Presbyterian minister remarked that Methodists were Baptists who could read. That may be, but I sure like the feeling and expressing world of evangelists.

In the ten Brightman generations from England via Rhode Island to today, my religious heritage was Puritan and Quaker until the

Revolutionary and Civil Wars led some to choose to fight. Through the influences of both sides of the family, I participated in many Protestant churches before returning to Quaker Meeting and then to Mysticism. Yet, many of my mystical openings have come in Catholic motif and metaphor, a religion of which I know little.

My mother tells of my paternal grandfather almost severing his thumb in a carpenter's accident. He carried the barely attached thumb into the house and asked her to take a needle and thread and sew it back on. She did. The Brightmans didn't say much and they took care of themselves. Dad was born at home and had never been to a hospital until his appendix erupted in his sixties.

The deaths that were most upsetting were those of my brother at age 20 and an uncle in his fifties. I could foresee my uncle's heart attack because of his weight and personal behaviors. But my brother's death took me into a dark night of the soul.

I detailed this event in another story entitled “I Don’t Have Time.” Those were the last words that I said to my brother. I assumed that there would always be time to spend with a younger brother. Then he was dead. There was to be no more time. I felt so guilty about this remark that whenever anyone asked me to spend time with them I could not say no.

It took a long time to work through this wound and learn to set time boundaries again. A few years later a young woman asked if I’d spend some time with her over coffee after a meeting. I told her very specifically and carefully that I was leaving town the next day, that I would take time if it was really important, and that I would like to go home and pack if it could wait. She said it could wait. I asked if she was sure. “Yes, I am sure. Thank you.”

She called me two days later at my hotel in Florida. She had been raped and beaten the night before. I cancelled my Florida plans and flew back to Baltimore, Maryland. The old issues surfaced but in a more healthy way. I didn’t feel responsible for the rape as I did for my brother’s death. However, my history had prepared me to be more sensitive to others and to make very conscious decisions on how I use my time and express my feelings.