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Arlington Street Church
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Life Before Death

After her son's death, a grieving mother said to me, "When he came out to me, I convinced myself it wasn't the end of the world. I was wrong." Pastorally, this was such a tricky moment. "Mrs. P.," I said, hoping she could hear me through her tears. "AIDS killed John. Living as an openly gay man saved his life. He died happy."

I had known John since junior high. He was classic: delicate featured, soft-spoken, artistic but not athletic. Unable to fake it in the world of boys, he had a wonderful circle of girlfriends. We were lab partners in freshman biology class; out of respect for the modesty of the frog we were dissecting, he made it a little outfit. He had a wonderful, silly laugh, though sometimes, I know, he was very sad.

From what I've pieced-together, John got a lot sadder after we graduated, and I hate to think of what happened to him out there in the world. But eventually, one holiday season, we met again at a party, and he didn't have to

tell me that he had finally come out. He was radiant. My last memory of him is of singing Christmas carols, snowflakes clinging to his long lashes, his voice high and exultant on the *Gloria!*

That's how I like to remember him, my friend John. I don't like to think of how long it took him to get there, but in reflecting on the Day of the Dead, I know that the lesson is in the whole story. And so I would ask you this, as I ask myself, a kind of question from John to all of us. Just this: Is there any way in which you're waiting to be happy? Is there some disowned part of you, some life that wants you to live it, something in the way of you and happiness?

When they were little, and naughty, I used to say to my daughters, "You know better." For some reason, it seemed appropriate to remind them that they had more common sense, or better moral values, or whatever it was the transgression signaled. I doubt my scolding was more than empty air to them, but I actually rather like the concept, like the idea that usually, when we fall short, we know better. And especially, we know better than to do things or – to the point – *not* do things we know we will regret.

I am a huge fan of Oprah Winfrey, and I'm fascinated by Dr. Phil McGraw. Since I don't watch TV, my entire experience of Dr. Phil is through his articles and books; I have no idea what I'm missing, and some of you might think that's a good thing. But I was moved by something he wrote on the topic of what he calls "authentic self," and want to share a little of that with you. "Fantasize with me for a moment," he writes. "I wonder what you might choose for yourself if, all

of a sudden, you could just rewrite the script of your life from as early as you might want, right up until now....

“If you weren’t ... buried so deep that you seemed to have no choices, what would you choose?.... If instead of [feeling] trapped, you had the opportunity to shape your life around who you really are and what really ... matters to you, what would your life be like? How and what would you change?”

“...[And] would you grab [a] second chance, or would you [stall] at the last minute, afraid to venture into something new? Would you settle for what you have, because you fear that there is nothing else out there for you?”

Dr. Phil continues, “... Fact: ...Life is not a dress rehearsal. If it's true that there is more to [us] than [we] are living, [we] need to be asking [ourselves], 'Why aren't [we] living it?' – and [we] need to be asking that right now.... Maybe [we're] not requiring enough of [ourselves] because ... [we] think we have no choice.... Whatever [our] circumstance[s], [we] cannot let [our] 'reasons' become 'excuses.'”

“Easy or hard,” he concludes, “...[we] have the responsibility to be all that [we] can be ... for the world.”¹

With these words, Dr. Phil issues a mythic challenge. Are we going to put

1 Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*, pp. 39-40 and 64-65

in our four score and ten – or however long we are given – and settle for pretty good, good enough – whatever that means – or are we going to grab the ring and really *live* this precious ride?

We know how poet Mary Oliver frames that question:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do
 with your one wild and precious life?²

I'm sure this is a famous story, but I have no idea how to find it, so I'll tell it to you as I remember it from many, many years ago (please tell me if you know it!).

A man was challenged to choose to give up years and years of his life, and live alone in a jail cell, in exchange for spectacular riches at the end of his voluntary incarceration. He readily agreed, thinking nothing of it, and went to jail of his own free will. And either the cell was unlocked, or the key was completely within his reach, always tempting him with a full life. Then, one day short of, say, twenty years, the very day before he was to walk free and very, very rich, he opened the door himself and walked away.

I think that's the whole story, actually – no commentary – although it has

² Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *New and Selected Poems*

stayed with me like a koan. I fancy that the man concluded, in the hardest-won lesson imaginable, that riches without happiness are empty, and it's freedom that's priceless. He had been wrong, and refused to give the victory to all those years he'd lost.

When I was near the end of a terrible relationship, this story kept me awake in the night. I kept thinking about that key *inside* the jail cell, and was deeply troubled by the full knowledge that so much of the prison in which I found myself was of my own making. Though I thought it might kill me to let myself out and walk away, I had to acknowledge that to stay was my own choosing.

Note: According to research conducted by Dr. Michael Roizen and detailed in his book *Real Age*, if we're not living life to the fullest, if we're allowing our lives to be derailed and drained rather than channeled into passions that bring us joy, the cost is a full six years of life.

I have sat at more death beds and conducted more memorial services, funerals, and graveside ceremonies than anyone I know. Needless to say, this intimacy with death has affected my intimacy with life. Three truths lie along that fault-line:

First, we are often surprised by death and far-too-rarely surprised by life. It's up to us to cultivate wonder at life and a wonder-full life.

Second, love is our legacy; devotion is the only immortality. We know the

names John D. and Catherine T. McArthur, for example, from from their support of National Public Radio and from the mysterious MacArthur genius awards that fund spectacularly creative and life-saving projects. But do we know who Mr. and Mrs. MacArthur were? Probably not. We can conclude that they were philanthropic visionaries, but their passion, rather than the details of their lives, is their spectacular legacy.

And finally, third, if we befriend our regrets, they will guide us to better choices and a fuller life. I can guarantee you that no one has ever arrived at the end of their lives wishing they'd spent less time with beloved family or friends, less time appreciating good food and beautiful music and art, less time in nature, less time feeling grateful.

I think of Mary Oliver again, her poem called *When Death Comes*. Speaking of life, she concludes:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.³

My spiritual companions, the Day of the Dead comes to remind us of the preciousness of life – not waiting to be happy, but choosing to live fully and deeply, even in the face of broken promises and dreams deferred. May we cultivate the courage to release ourselves from the prisons to which we hold the keys. Let us marry amazement and take life in our arms. Let us honor our dead by *living* life.

To life!

3 Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*