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Intimations of Mortality—Rev. Rita Capezzi

The poet says: “To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go.” How on earth are we to do these three things, when we know the pain of losing loved ones and fear the pain of loved ones losing us? How do we do these three things when, in some ways, we want never to die, we want to live on? What kind of life can we have with death a constant companion, still managing to live with hope, guided by love? All this we ask today.

When I was a little girl, my father would talk to me while he was occupied with other tasks, like polishing his shoes or cleaning his shotgun after a hunting trip. He could talk about hard truths without looking me in the eye, and I suppose that made such conversations more fluid. Once he asked, “How do you know that we are not living on a speck of dust in the pocket of a giant?” I don’t know where he came up with that one. He was not an educated man, he watched a lot of TV Westerns, and we did not have many books in our house. *Horton Hears a Who* was not one of the few. But he picked up things from talk radio, and he was thoughtful. Maybe we all *were* just minuscule motes living in the blink of an eye on infinitesimal specks. I don’t remember answering that question, or his answer for that matter, but the question has remained with me.

Lately, I have been spending time, like many of you I am sure, with the images coming from the James Webb telescope. So mind-boggling to witness events of a past beyond any human experience in space or time. So astonishing, the human technology making such images possible. I was born before the 1969 moon landing. How often we look at the night sky and know ourselves to be living on a pinpoint of reflected light, even before the moon landing, even before the Webb telescope. The vastness can make us feel small and inconsequential, our short lives and our inevitable deaths meaningless. Yet even though Copernicus and Galileo had already taught us that the sun, and not the earth, was the center of our galaxy, it sure doesn’t always feel like it to me. I have felt myself to be the center of things. **My** hopes and dreams. **My** grief and sorrow. The living and dying most affecting **me**. My shadows. The microcosm of our own selfhood so easily and naturally slips into the center, so easily becomes the macrocosm.

While my father polished his shoes and cleaned his guns, among other things, I grew up in the valley of the shadow of death. Some of you grew up in the same valley, the 1960s version, though perhaps without the same pre-occupations. We watched the Vietnam war on TV, on the nightly news. I watched my father’s Selective Service number **not** be drawn in the lottery, as the numbers of other fathers were drawn. We watched the urban riots in Compton and Miami and Chicago, or uprisings for justice, another way to name those events. Along with the rest of the neighborhood kids, I played **not** Cowboys and Indians but War, with realistic-looking toy rifles, running amok through small woodlots and open grassy yards, fake-shooting at some enemy I couldn’t confidently name but who looked a lot like the annoying, pushy boy from across the street. Our family buried many pets on our property, several cats and more dogs and the occasional wild robin. Maybe some of this feels familiar to you.

Some things, are perhaps, more particular to me and my journey through the shadowy valley. In addition to “the speck in the pocket of a giant” question, my father laid another startling and unsettling truth on me. He told me, “We are dying from the moment we are born.” Not technically accurate, of course, but true, nonetheless. In 1968, I saw the original George Romero zombie movie, *Night of the*

Living Dead, at a drive-in theatre. Some things did not seem to die, though they were not quite alive, either. I was seven. At about the same age, I practiced *being* dead by lying on the grave, my head up against the tombstone, of a six-year-old child long gone before I ever explored that particular cemetery, one among many. When I was nine years old, my neighbor and friend Annie died at aged 10 of a horrible congenital illness that shaped her entire short life and that of her family and all who loved her.

We little girls would play séance, four or five of us all crammed into a dark closet in Annie's bedroom. We practiced calling spirits of grandparents and elderly aunties. We practiced levitating Annie on just our fingertips. My parents would not permit me to attend Annie's funeral, possibly, but not kindly, because they could not face the fact of a child dying, could not face her grieving parents, never quite prepared for what they knew would happen to Annie. After she died, we didn't try any more séances. Maybe were afraid to. And we knew they didn't work, anyway. We all had to learn, instead, how to live with Annie's absence as now her only presence.

Those of us born before the 1960s, those of us born after the 1960s, we all have our own versions of the valley of the shadow of death. The Great Depression and World War II. Endless wars and street violence. 9/11. Mass shootings in malls and schools. Our own neighbors and loved ones, dying regardless of our need for them to stay. There is no end to the death. There seems no end to our apparent smallness in the vastness of the Universe's time and space, what some might call the eternity and infinity of God. And still, echoing, the poet says: "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go."

What I had once worried might be an obsession with death, a wise spiritual guide suggested instead that I am living closely with thoughts of mortality. That sounds better, maybe. Through my first profession, I studied the English Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Keats, and then later the American Romantics, Whitman and Dickinson. All culminating in Mary Oliver, you could say. These poets all helped shift us from a notion of the Divine apart from the physical reality to the presence of the Divine within, a part of, the natural world—not simply the creator of a beautiful planet and a marvelous universe but inhabiting this beautiful material beingness. These poets showed us a way to die and also to live more closely to the material beingness that is the Divine as well. They opened a pathway with the truths of science, with our own intimate and shared knowledge that we are made of the same cosmic dust of the stars, that the elements of Universe infuse our earthly home and our own bodies, both when we live and when we are dead.

In the child is visible the tiger. In the child is visible the stream, in the swallow. In you I see all that is and ever will be, in forms newly manifesting all the time, even as other forms are dying away. I find that comforting. It helps me to be less afraid of my eventual death. It helps me to remember that my dying will have more meaning if I have lived well. It helps me be more at peace with my father's death in December of 2020, and with my brother-in-law's death just this past April. Not simply my memories of them live on, but their particles echo through the material elements of the starry heavens and the transforming earth. Do you find comfort in such thought, too?

We are all of us living into a mystery, that everyone we love and who we ever will love will die, as will we ourselves. And at the same time our human reality, the knowledge we have of reality as it has been through countless eons of change and transformation, that reality so beautiful and so lively, worth celebrating and cherishing and sharing. How might we learn, with both wonder and humility, to bear the unbearable? I find for myself, that I must simply accept it. Name it as the truth. We know all too well the

physical fact of dying, and yet our spirits are lonely for our departed loved ones. Another part of the mystery—knowing the inevitability does not change the sense of loss. The hurt remains. Short lives of six years or 10 or 22, long lives of 82, of 95—they are all short, too short. That is the truth. And so, we search for and we share the stories that can comfort us: We will go to live in a realm of eternal bliss with a God who loves us, as some Christians and Muslims believe. We will be reincarnated until we reach human perfection, as Hindus believe. Some of us are not so sure of that eternal life in a heavenly realm or that there is any other way to reach perfection. But we don't know. In some ways, we know less about our ultimate place in the cosmos than we do about the birth of the stars themselves.

Buddhists teach that we will change and emerge in new manifestation, perhaps like returning to the star dust from which we are made. And in a way, we are already there, returning to another state made of the same elements. I take comfort in living on in the elements that make the entire universe. And, I learned early the lesson that I have had to learn again and again: that which overwhelms, even frightens, us also teaches us, if we are willing to learn. The universe is an impersonal void which seems not to care about the happiness of any of us. The positive feedback loops of earth's climate, amplifying more extreme weather and withering the diversity of species, create a scenario ripe for nightmares. My father will never again ask me an imponderable question, nor give me his answer.

But I will continue, maybe you will too, to explore the mystery, the conundrum that none of us can escape: I will love what will die. I cannot live without loving. I will suffer loss. And I will do all of this not as a tiny microcosmic entity alone in the void on a terrifying planet over which I have no control. I will not love and live and suffer as a particle of dust. I will choose to spend my little time with love, that little thing. I will choose to spend little time with hatred so that it does not grow even larger than it already is. My living and loving and suffering will take place, in the blink of a cosmic eye and still held tenderly within the macrocosm of the community I foster from the microcosm of human existence. We will all live and love and suffer, cushioned and comforted by the communities we choose to create and which we embrace and tend with loving care, with all the loving care we can bring to bear as if our very lives depend upon it, because they do. They do. We all depend on communities of care, and we are all bound also to create them, if we are to live with that which is impossible to bear alone.

The poet says, "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go, to let it go," both awful and beautiful as that is. This ever-spinning universe is our home. We are both in it and of it. We will pass out of consciousness of it, and we will grieve and mourn and be not reconciled with this great truth. Yet there is hope, because we have each other, because we all suffer in this same way, because we share and lift the burden of this human inevitability for each other, each in our turn.

May we listen to that eternal voice, small inside us, that reminds us that we are all connected to everything and to each other. May we gather together in this mystery, strong, and open our hearts to our reality, gathering strength by bearing the truth together. May we continue to say "yes" to life, meeting each mysterious and lively day with hope and love, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and Amen.