

Reflection on Deuteronomy 34:1–12
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After forty-years in the wilderness, the Hebrew people are on the last leg of their journey. But Moses will not travel these final steps with them. Here, on the plains of Moab, Moses will die. From the plateau of Mount Nebo, God says to Moses, “I will let you see [the land] with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” I am moved by these words. Moses has come *so far*, he has endured much and given himself faithfully to this calling from God, and yet, it seems he will not reach his destination, the land flowing with milk and honey.

The awareness that a faithful servant like Moses experienced an incompleteness to his journey suggests that our endings might not always signal misfortune and unfairness as we sometimes conclude. Bringing something to a close is not always evidence of failure and it is certainly not well-deserved punishment for our missteps. Though one strand of tradition speaks of Moses’ death in this way, scripture and life experience overwhelmingly point to a more wholistic perspective. A story that came across my desk recently illuminates the given-ness of endings and the life-giving power they can have if we dare to view them through the lens of faith and trust.

On the cusp of a new year, writer and performing artist Sally Lewry embarked on a project inspired by a chance conversation with another young mum in a Melbourne bookstore. Though Sally had never worked with visual arts before, this project was something she felt she could manage while caring for her newborn son. So, on January 1st, Sally moulded a mini-tomb stone out of clay, a kind of three-dimensional journal entry—the first of 365 she would create that year.

Sadly, death moved from being a concept to a reality for Sally when a few months later, her beloved husband was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Together, they agreed to do everything they could to keep Miklos at home to the end. This, of course, brought the dying process and death itself into the midst of their lives and those closest to them.

Though death is part of life and, whether we choose to be aware of it or not, an everyday occurrence, its reality is largely pushed from our minds most of the time. In an article in *The Guardian*, Irish author Kevin Toolis points out:

In the Anglo-Saxon world, death is a whisper. Instinctively we feel we should dim the lights, lower our voices and draw the screens. We want to give the dead, dying and the grieving room. We say we do so because we don’t want to intrude. And that is true but not for these reasons. We don’t want to intrude because we don’t want to look at the mirror of our own death. We have lost our way with death.



Sally and Miklos’ story is profound because of its non-aversion and brave engagement with death. As a writer, Sally is able to share

her experiences of this time, thus inviting us into a sacred but painful space many of us tend to avoid.

Two months after Miklos was diagnosed, Sally became pregnant with their second child. Since she felt she had little energy to bear another life, she told the child to “hang on” and promised to do the best she could. Miklos’ tumour was incredibly fast growing and, six months after the diagnoses, he died. In a recent interview in *Dumbo Feather*, Sally shared:

[W]hile it was the hardest thing I have ever done, witnessing his death was one of the greatest privileges of my life. There was so much beauty and peace present at his death. ...In that moment I had no fear. I mean, I wanted to go. I wanted to follow him. I was lying with him and I was thinking, *I want to follow him to this incredible space that has opened*, and then I felt my baby kick inside me. I was literally lying with birth and death. And I saw that they’re the same passage, you just go one way or another.

As Sally's experience illustrates so beautifully, birth and death are part of the same pilgrimage. Just as the doors to both were opening for Sally at the same time, this is our reality as well, though we may not always realise it is so. For every day, stuff is dying and stuff is coming to birth, in us and around us. Our entire coat of skin regenerates every 27 days, for example, to say nothing of the intangible inner transfiguration happening slowly but consistently through our letting go of the old and our reception of the new. Therefore, our final theme in the journey towards freedom, love and life is best expressed by the Benedictine tradition that teaches us to keep death always before our eyes.

I think of the church I served in New York State. Like so many historic churches, the original village cemetery surrounded the church building including along the foot path leading to the front entrance of the sanctuary. In speaking about the possibility that comes from this experience, Joan Chittister says:

[We keep death before our eyes] not so that we become morbid but so that we come to see the value and the promise of every new moment. It is only when we forget death that we can delude ourselves into believing that what is must always be. Death, on the other hand, is proof that the God of Surprises has new things waiting for us always and that every new moment is a gift of new life.

As with so much of the Christian life, the saying "practice makes perfect" comes into play here. Daily we are given a multitude of opportunities to practice



dying—in letting go of the negative thought, in handing over our resources in a sacrificial (trusting) way for a cause beyond ourselves, in relinquishing long-held viewpoints and behaviours, and finally, at the end of each day, closing our eyes and entrusting ourselves to the good care of the One who does not sleep. For this reason, the final hour of prayer in the Christian tradition is understood to be a rehearsal for our death with some of the last words being: *May the Lord grant us a peaceful night and a good death.*

Being mindful of the transient nature of life can, of course, help us prioritise. "Life is short," we often say before explaining why we might choose to do one thing over another. But even more, keeping death before my eyes—especially now that it is beginning to feel more immanent—help me to see what really matters, inviting me to plumb for identity, meaning, security and hope in the Eternal and Love Everlasting.

With this deeper horizon in our sights, the opinions of others (good, bad or otherwise) are put in perspective. Material things and ego-bound markers do not hold the same power or appeal, for we realise the journey has more to do with self-giving and service than acquisition and self-satisfaction. And, as we come to know and trust the sacred rhythms of birth, life and death, we are freer to embrace our endings—even when there is pain and sadness—so that God's new thing can emerge from the dark unknown. May we learn to let go. May we give ourselves to the beating heart of the nascent life within and around us. May we be freed to love in this life and in the one to come.

Source of Life and Love:

you have been with me in the past,
are with and for me now,
will be my help and strength in the future.

Send your Spirit of peace to me
and help me loosen my grip
on that which is passing away,
on things that do not truly matter in the end.

*(Clench your fist and open your hand
as you name those things that are passing away.)*

Free of the weight that often binds me,
I am able to receive the gifts
you bring before me—
simple, ordinary,
daily things of beauty and wonder.

*(Hold your hands open
as you name the blessings at this time.)*

Thank you for your love—
steadfast and true, eternal and everlasting.

Amen

