

## **HOW TO DEAL WITH ILLNESS AND DEATH**

by

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After spending much time contemplating about life, the Buddha came up with what have subsequently been called the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth is that life is suffering. This seems depressing to say the first thing we have to understand about life is that it inevitably involves suffering. While it may not be a cheery thought, it is without a doubt true. No one, no matter how fortunate or lucky, can go through life without experiencing some suffering.

Even a person who has a perfect life, with happiness abounding, will eventually experience illness and death. Even a person who may have no suffering him or her self will know others who experience illness and death, and will suffer in sadness at the illness of their friend or relative. Suffering is indeed unavoidable.

Given this reality that every person we know, and including ourselves, will eventually get sick and die, the question is how we react to these realities. Let me tell you a few things about my experiences when people in my life have gotten sick and /or died. I hope you can think about these things, and maybe some of this might be helpful for you.

When I was a child growing up in a small mill town in North Carolina I was raised as much by my mother's parents as I was by my parents. I always felt lucky that I had four "parents," instead of just two. I was extremely close to my grandparents. When I was age 23 my grandmother, who was still relatively young at age 65 and in good health, suddenly had a heart attack. As she lay on the hospital bed, I could not believe that her life was under threat. I talked with her and was so worried because I knew she was very sick. I was afraid that she would be an invalid after this, and would not be able to do the kinds of travel we had talked about. But I knew for certain that she would pull through. She had to.

Instead, shortly after I had left her hospital room she had another heart attack, and she died before a doctor could revive her. I was the last person to talk to her. I literally could not believe that she had died. It seemed not

possible. How could she be talking lucidly with me one minute, and a few minutes later be gone forever?

I was so angry I did not know what to do. I was mad, not sad. She had worked hard all her life, as a mill worker in a textile factory, she had sacrificed to help her family, and had only retired from her job a few months before. She was going to travel, to visit us more, to really grab hold of life. She was all set to enjoy her retirement. But now all that was suddenly taken away. I was livid. I was mad as the people all around seemed to accept her death. I was infuriated at people for making jokes in the funeral home while her body lay in state. I was disgusted at the funeral director for being late in getting her casket to the church.

I was so incredibly angry at her funeral, I sat on the front row literally with clinched fists. I was enraged by the ugly pathetic flower arrangement that someone had carelessly thrown together in the church. For years she had gotten up early every Sunday morning and without fail had carefully prepared beautiful flower arrangements for this very same church. And now the others did not care enough to provide an equally beautiful arrangement for her. Everyone just seemed to sit there sedately as the lifeless funeral wound on. I was angry that the heat made the flowers wilt on her casket. I was furious at the preacher, who had known my grandmother for years as she devotedly did all kinds of work in the church, and singing in the choir each Sunday. In his vapid sermon he hardly mentioned anything at all about her many wonderful qualities and contributions as a person. He just gave a generic sermon about how great god is, that seemed so devoid of true sorrow. If god is so great, I fumed to myself, then why did he rob my grandmother so suddenly of her golden years? I was so incensed I fairly stormed out of the church at the end of the service, and I never spoke to that preacher again. I had a deep, deep rage that I could not get beyond.

Even more than I realized, I used this anger to bottle up my emotions and suppress my sadness. I could not accept her death, it was so unfair. It was so unjust. I was miserable.

A month later, I could not stand it anymore and I had to get away from living in my grandparents' house. Every day reminded me how much I missed my grandmother, and every single day I had to force myself to accept the fact that she was not waiting in the next room to come out and interact with us. In my desire to get away, I decided to move to the Eastern

Cherokee Indian reservation to begin my anthropological field research. My family always talked about my Cherokee great, great grandmother, and when I was a boy we used to visit the Eastern Cherokee Qualla reservation in the Great Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina. We had pictures of her, showing a dark-skinned shriveled-up little old lady sedately sitting wrapped in a blanket and smoking a corncob pipe. My mother remembered that she seemed to observe everything but said hardly a word. But when she did speak, everyone rushed to do exactly as she directed. She died in the 1930s, at age 94.

When I was a child, my great grandmother died, also at age 94. And also my father's father, and my father's mother. At that young age, I could not really register what those deaths meant, and going to those funerals did not affect me the way my grandmother's sudden death did. I felt that her death, in a sense, had shattered my world when I was 23. Though I had no known relatives at Cherokee after the death of my great, great grandmother, and I did not know a soul there, I think I chose to go back to the reservation as an attempt to recapture something from my family history.

When I moved to the Snowbird Indian community and rented a small house from a kind Cherokee family, I worried that the Indian people would not accept me. Though they were not hostile, they remained distant and wary of this new person who had come into their mountainside settlement. I did not feel at all a part of the little isolated community that I had moved into. I felt isolated and alone. Then, about three weeks after I moved in, a prominent Cherokee woman died. In the past, women had very high status in Cherokee society, and despite the influence of numerous white male supremacist Christian missionaries who have come into these mountain settlements over the years, that high status remains even today among Cherokees who value their culture.

My Cherokee neighbors asked me to attend the funeral of this highly respected woman. I told them there was no way I could go through another funeral. But they insisted, saying that it was only right that I should pay my respects, and that if I did not attend people would interpret that as my rejection of them. I certainly did not want them to feel that way, because it was not them but my personal demons I was dealing with. So, with extremely great reluctance, I went to the little country church down the road from where I was living.

As soon as I got inside I was shocked by what I saw. In sharp contrast to the

quite, sedate, suppressed atmosphere at my grandmother's funeral, in this little church the people were openly expressing their grief. Men as well as women, young as well as old, were sobbing loudly. The Cherokee preacher talked at length in very moving and personal terms about the many contributions that this strong woman had made to her family and to the community. Even he broke down crying as he spoke.

At the climax of the ceremony, each person filed in front of the casket, as the tears flowed from all eyes in the room. I could not fail to be emotionally moved. Then the dead woman's elderly sister was brought to the open casket, and in her sorrow she threw herself onto the body screaming, "sister, sister, how can I live without you!" She lay there on top of the dead body for a long time, sobbing uncontrollably, and no one made a move to remove her. "Sister, take me with you," she yelled over and over again, at full voice. At last, she fell down, exhausted and emotionally spent, onto the floor. Only then did her relatives, also crying without restraint, help to carry her away.

I could not remain unaffected by this display of love and emotion. There were tears in my eyes also. I wondered in awe about this woman's life, that she would inspire such sorrow in so many people in this isolated rural Indian community. After going row by row to escort the mourners to a last viewing, the usher at last came to me. I was resistant to standing up, but a Cherokee man behind me gently pushed me forward, toward the line of people waiting to view the open casket. As the line of mourners moved forward, I felt totally awkward and out of place. As I approached the open bier, the contrast with the emotionally suppressed closed casket at my grandmother's funeral could not have been starker. When I reluctantly stood in front of the dead woman I looked down and saw the body of a person I had never seen before.

And then something very strange happened to me. As I stared down into the face of this very Indian-looking person, the face was transformed into the face of my grandmother. My grandmother was very light-skinned, and she did not look at all like an Indian. But as I stood there I actually saw my grandmother as clearly as I had ever seen her when she was alive. I could not believe it. The face in the casket was not like my grandmother, or similar to my grandmother. It was my grandmother.

And then all of the anger that I had suppressed during the past months since

that fateful heart attack, all of the rage that I had felt, and the resentment, and the sheer fury came suddenly tumbling out of me. At a level so deep I was not aware of how much I had repressed myself, I let loose with an intensity of sorrow that I had never been able to express before. That I had never felt so intensely in my entire life. I did not, I could not, restrain my tears. But more than that, a deep and guttural sound came out of me that I had never heard before. I broke down completely, and lost myself in a sorrow as equally intense as that of anyone else in the room.

And then, after I don't know how much time had passed, I jumped back into the reality that here I was, crying into the casket of a person I had never seen before. I suddenly realized that all the eyes in the room were staring at me. I quickly wiped my wet face with the sleeve of my shirt, and slunk back to a pew in the back row. As I sat there with my head bent down, I forced myself back into a rational mindset. I thought about how much a fool I had made of myself. What was going on in my head, these Cherokees must be wondering, that a stranger would cry like that over a person he had never met?

As soon as people turned back to dealing with their own sadness, and stopped looking at me, I quietly slunk out of the church and ran all the way home. I was so ashamed of the way I had acted. What a fool I had made of myself. The Cherokees would probably never accept me now that they saw what a blithering idiot I was. And yet, as the days passed, I started noticing two things.

First, I noticed that the emotional catharsis that I had experienced at the Cherokee funeral had, much more than the emotionally repressed experience of my grandmother's funeral, allowed me finally to let out the feelings that I had bottled up inside myself. I needed that release more than I had ever realized. I had always absorbed that lesson that all males in our culture are expected to absorb, that says that real men don't cry. That to be a real man I must not let emotionalism overtake me. That I must not let my emotions get out of control. Control, that is the essence of what a real man is supposed to be, always in control.

And yet, gradually I came dimly to perceive that if I was going to get beyond the grief of my grandmother's death I had to go through a very different set of feelings from the barely repressed anger that I felt before. I learned an important life lesson then, about the need to release my feelings

instead of suppressing them. I learned to question what it means to be a “real man,” and to wonder if I even wanted any part of this particular kind of “realness.” This was to be the first of many times while living with Native people that I was brought to question the particular reality, the rational thought, that mainstream American culture had taught was the only way to approach life. Only later did I begin to realize how very narrowly limited that view of rational thought truly was.

The second surprising result of that funeral was the way the Cherokee people treated me. Far from seeing me as an uncontrolled idiot, they started looking at me not as some cold analytical scientist who had come there to study their exotic customs, but as a real live human being. The Indians, I later learned, judge people not by their formal educational credentials or by their material prosperity, but by how closely they are in touch with their emotions. A person who can show their feelings, I later found out, is highly valued by the Cherokees. The losing control of my emotions that I had so feared would doom me to a marginal place in the Snowbird community was exactly the incident that insured my incorporation into that community. No lesson I had learned in an academic class on ethnographic techniques had prepared me for this kind of response. Emotion, not reason, had been the most important factor in their evaluation of me.

As much as I did not want to admit it, I began to understand that death had been the mechanism for my inclusion into a community of people who ended up becoming one of the most meaningful groups of people in my life. I think I learned more from the Cherokees than anyone else learned from my articles and the book that I later published on these Southern Indians. Now I look back on this time living in Snowbird, and realize that I could not have dealt with my grandmother’s death if I had not had the experience of living as a part of this small community of people. Even though I have not been back to Snowbird for many years, I have never forgotten the Cherokee people, and they are always in my heart.

At last I was able to accept the fact that my grandmother was not coming back. Years later, after I started practicing Buddhism, I had an experience that released whatever doubts of resentment remained. I had been doing intensive chanting, for about an hour, of a mantra popularized by the 13th century Japanese reformer monk Nichiren Daishonin. A rough translation of this mantra, “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo,” is to give devotion to the mystic law of the universe. And that mystic law is karma. As I chanted the phrase over

and over and over, I went deep into a space that freed my mind from the limits of surface logical, rational thought.

Suddenly, I had what I can only describe as a vision of my grandmother. She came to me in a very matter-of-fact way. It did not seem mystical at all, but simply a direct conversation, communicating mind to mind, without the use of words. She communicated to me that life is much better after you die, and that I should not fear death. Death's main effect, she said, is the release from all the petty problems we get so caught up in during our little pathetic lifetime. Where she is, she told me, none of our human controversies mean much of anything. The important thing, she said, is to not let those problems and controversies get to me. Differences of people, in terms of race and sex and sexuality and all the other things that people like to focus upon, are so ephemeral as to be ridiculous. It's like people getting upset and feeling inferior because they cannot wiggle their ears like some people can do. Ultimately, it all really means nothing.

This message from my grandmother, as real to me as any lesson she taught me when she was alive, helped me begin to live life with a different attitude. I found that life, indeed, does continue on, despite the death of our loved ones or the many problems and sorrows that occur along the way. But beyond that, I found that life also offers many happy times and wonderful benefits as well. And I found myself cleaving ever more strongly to my relatives, my friends, my sexual partners, and anyone else who managed to touch my soul or my body in a way that brought about a spiritual connection between us. I learned that I could achieve an enlightened state of being, perhaps similar to what the Christians call "finding god," in many different kinds of spiritual experiences. This state of enlightenment, of peace, of fulfillment could come from inspiring music, or from viewing a beautiful scene in nature, or an orgasmic body-to-body and soul-to-soul connection with another person in a fleeting sexual encounter. I learned to value, and appreciate, all the wonderful experiences that life offers.

Yet, despite this spiritual growth, I was not able to learn all the lessons that life would teach me about illness and death. Years later, I was not emotionally prepared for what happened to my grandfather in 1984. After beginning his life in a hard way, as part of a dirt-poor sharecropping family in Copper Hill, Tennessee, just over the Carolina border, as a young man my grandfather had moved to West Virginia and was almost killed in a coal-mining explosion. In a fateful decision, he left the mines and moved back to

work as a sawmill laborer in North Carolina. After gradually building up from abject poverty during the Depression, he and my grandmother skimped and saved and were able to start a small convenience store. They built up the store, made it profitable, and then put their profits into a nice house. But then, when my mother was in college, their house burned to the ground and they had to convert their chickenhouse into living quarters. I grew up in that house that we still referred to as “the chickenhouse.” Then, several years later, my grandparents’ store itself burned to the ground. Despite these setbacks, they started over, again skimping and saving until they could rebuild the store and rebuild their lives. Depending on my grandmother’s salary from the textile mill as much as my grandfather’s income from the store, I don’t know exactly how but they ended up with a decently comfortable life.

After my grandmother died, my grandfather had even adapted amazingly well. He cooked and cleaned and took care of himself, kept the house in repairs, and had some good years. In fact, he was amazingly healthy for a man approaching eighty. Then, one night, while walking to the bathroom inside his house, he somehow twisted his leg and fell, and seriously injured his spinal cord. When he did not answer the telephone the next morning, my sister and I went over to his house and discovered him lying helplessly on the floor.

As the ambulance came and the volunteer firemen loaded him onto the stretcher, his chances did not look good. Once inside the emergency room of the hospital at the University of North Carolina, the doctors said he would most likely die within a day. I found myself right back to the emotional place I was in the same hospital years before, with my grandmother. I spent the whole day, praying very hard for hours without a break, that he would not die. After what I had been through with my grandmother, I did not feel that I could deal with my grandfather’s sudden death.

On the next day, it seemed that my prayers had worked. The doctor said it was amazing but my grandfather was still alive and that he would probably not die soon. My family and I were very happy. My grandfather lived. However, he was in constant pain. As time passed, he got no better. He was paralyzed from the neck down, and he could not move any part of his body. Someone had to feed him, and bath him, and turn him over, and do everything for him. As time went on, it got worse. He was so miserable, all he could do was to lie in bed and watch TV. But he could not even turn the



channel. He had always been an active healthy man, and now he was so sad all the time. It was like taking a perfectly healthy person and encasing him in concrete so he could not move.

Finally, after dealing with this for several months my grandfather went crazy. He would invent stories that he had gone out for a ride in his pickup truck, or that he had gone fishing and caught enough catfish to invite the neighbors over for dinner. He did not even know what he was saying. It was so terrible to watch. But then I changed my attitude. I decided that it was good that he was having these experiences, taking him back to the pleasant times of his life that he could remember. I saw his hallucinations as a blessing, to release him from the confines of his paralyzed body. I played along as he spoke.

Then, after two years of being in pain and torment, he died. I learned from this that there are some things that are worse than death. I felt guilty that I prayed so hard for my grandfather to live, because in my selfish desire to keep him close to me I did not think about the quality of what suffering he would go through in those two years after he fell.

The next time I faced this kind of problem was in 1987 when I had a good friend who developed AIDS. He got sicker and sicker. Every day I worried about him, and I prayed for him to get well. But he did not, and after months of illness he died. I was very very sad. He was my closest friend. I went to a wise Buddhist monk, and I said, "why did he die, when I was praying so hard every day for him to live." The monk, who was normally very empathetic, looked at me almost in a scolding way. He told me, almost curtly, that I was praying for the wrong thing. The monk said I should not be praying for him to **live**, but I should be praying for him to have the happiest life possible. Maybe, the monk said, my friend would have a happier life if he died quickly and his suffering ended, so that he could be reborn into a better life the next time.

I learned from this that, even though I was sad to lose my friend, it was better for him to end his suffering. The monk said I would be of absolutely no help to my friend by being miserable about his death. The monk said I should be strong, so that I could send powerful prayers for my friend to be reborn into the best life possible. I have to say that this helped me more than anything else that anyone said to me at the time. After that, instead of making myself despondent, I forced myself with sheer determination to get

over my sadness in order to send strong and positive prayers for my friend to be reborn in a happy life. Thinking about his happiness made me happier.

In 1994, when my father was 72 years old, he got very sick with lung cancer, as a result of his many years of addiction to tobacco. The doctor said he had about three months to live. I flew from Los Angeles to North Carolina to be with him. But to my shock my father was not sad in the least. He was completely tranquil about the end of his life.

I never considered my father to be inclined toward philosophical analysis, but as I sat by his bedside he said something profoundly philosophical. I was surprised when he stated, "I believe a life is like a candle. When you're born, it's like the candle is lit. As it burns, there are so many chances that the flame might be blown out, either by a random gust of wind, or snuffed out intentionally. But if the candle keeps burning, over time it keeps using up the wax until it gets down to the base. As the last of the wax evaporates into the atmosphere, the flame goes out. It's the same at the end of a life. Like a candle, the flame burns out, and life is just gone. There is no more."

Looking back, I can understand why my father had this view. When he was young, he was an infantryman in General Patton's Third Army in World War II. In intense fighting across France and Belgium he was almost killed many times. During the Battle of the Bulge he was knocked unconscious in fierce hand-to-hand fighting, and when he regained consciousness his wrists were tied with rope. He was held captive by German troops, who were marching many prisoners toward the German border. But that night he managed to crawl undetected into a culvert and hide. He remained there in the shivering cold for three days. When hunger finally drove him to search for food, he wandered in forests until a kindly French farmer found him and hid him in his farmhouse attic. After American troops reached the area, they thought my father was a deserter. General Dwight Eisenhower signed the order for him to be shot, but at the last moment he was able to persuade an officer to believe him. After narrowly avoiding execution, he was sent back into the ranks, and again almost died on several occasions.

My father told me the first time his platoon came under fire from German artillery, he made a pact with himself, to promise that if he managed to get through the war alive, that he would treat every year alive as a blessing. So he said he was not sad that he was dying at age 72, but that he was grateful

he lived a long life, to reach 72. He never forgot seeing so many of his friends dying so young.

I remember when I was a boy, he always talked about how much he hated war. He particularly despised Eisenhower, and worked strongly for the election of Democrat Adlai Stevenson. Years later, on my first trip to Europe, I managed to locate the daughter of the French farmer who saved him, and she verified that everything my father said was true. So, in this context, it was understandable why he was so grateful to be able to live the rest of his life in peace. After returning to the United States in 1946, he vowed never to leave American shores again. In 1985 I persuaded him to visit me in Hawai'i, which he did reluctantly, but only because it was part of the United States.

Thus, after receiving his diagnosis, he was not dejected. Instead, he felt lucky that he survived the war and was able to live a long life. He told me he felt gratitude for a wonderful wife, and he was very proud that his son was a professor and his daughter was a talented artist. He was not afraid of death in the least. I was there beside him when he breathed his last, and I will always remember what a brave and good way that he approached the end of his life. I admire my father very much for that.

I am grateful that my mother was able to live a very long life. Though my father refused to go abroad, he did not object when I paid for my mother's trip to tour Europe with me in 1987, and again a year later when I invited her to visit me for a month while I was Fulbright Professor at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia. She had a blast, and I got great joy taking her to see magnificent thousand-year-old Hindu and Buddhist temples dotting the tropical landscapes.

After my father's death I brought my mother to live with me at my house in Palm Springs. Her health improved in the Southern California desert climate, and she enjoyed an active social life at the city's senior center. She met a man there who had recently lost his wife, and they married in 1997. They both loved to travel, and visited me when I was doing ethnographic research in China, Thailand, and Peru. They enjoyed several long cruises, across every ocean of the world.

When I had to be away for an extended period, I was so afraid that she would die before I could return to California. A week after I did return, in

2017, she went in for an eye treatment, but it made her blind for over a month. Fortunately, I was able to give her eye drops every three hours, which gradually restored sight in one eye. Her second husband died in 2020, at age 93. She and I survived the COVID pandemic by staying home together, but in 2021 she fell and broke her hip. After getting out of rehab, she wanted to stay at home, so I put her on home hospice care.

It was wonderful to have so much time together, but her short term memory deteriorated and then she became increasingly frail and disoriented. It was difficult for her to eat without throwing up, so she had to go onto a mainly liquid diet. Though I hated to see her not being able to enjoy food, it got worse as her pain increased. I had to give syringes of morpheme, at first every four hours, then every three hours, then every two hours, then every hour, and at last twice the dose every hour. She would wake up in pain, I would give her a syringe, which would soon put her to sleep, and then later when she woke up again in pain I repeated the process.

One unfortunate effect of morpheme is that it relaxes the muscles of the tongue, so she could no longer talk. It was so difficult for both of us, not being able to understand her when she needed something. The last words I could understand was when I was adjusting her pillows and she looked up at me and said, "You're wonderful." My mother was always so sweet, but I especially treasure that.

Each day her condition got a bit worse, and at the last she was emaciated and nearly comatose. She reached her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, the longest lifespan of anyone in her extended family. A few days later, her breathing became so labored and her hands were so cold, I lay down beside her and held her hands in mine. I fell asleep sometime around midnight, and when I woke up at 3am she was gone. But I was glad I was still holding her hands.

I could not have survived that last two years without the help of excellent caregivers I hired, and grateful for the dependability of my sister in calling three times a day from her home in the East Coast, to remind Mom to take her medicines. I wanted very much to respect Mom's wishes to remain at home and in the bed she found so comfortable. And I'm proud of what I did to care for her. But at the same time I felt very inadequate. Having seen firsthand the pain that both my parents had to endure in their last weeks, I think we as a society need to change how we deal with the inevitable end that each of us must face.

My parents and I agree that we do not like pain, and though the medicines are more effective than in the past, it still seems cruel for people to have to endure such suffering at the end. My mother was such a wonderful person, so sweet to everyone, that she did not deserve to have to go through what she did.

Last year my closest friend, only a few years older than me, decided to kill himself after finding out he had incurable prostate cancer. I tried to argue him out of it, saying he should at least wait until he was in pain. He adamantly refused my attempt, saying that he wanted to go BEFORE the inevitable pain started. We had a long conversation, recounting many shared memories. And that night he took the pills that ended his life.

California law allows physicians to prescribe pills that put one to sleep, permanently, but only when there is a diagnosis of less than three months to live. That is better than most state laws. But it does not allow flexibility for those who suffer a gradual decline, or a sudden traumatic death. Having seen what happens up close, I know I do not want to have to be in harsh pain in my last days and hours. I would like to have the option of pills at the ready, for me to use them if and when I choose.

I state these things forthrightly, so that you may be better able to deal with illness and death when it does come. Every living thing, both plant and animal, eventually dies. When people are young, they have often not had to deal with these things very much. But as you get older, more and more people that you love get sick and they may suffer terribly. The Buddha taught us that suffering is unavoidable as we go through life. Not one person can ever escape it. And every single person will die.

The Buddha's teaching that nothing is permanent, that everything is impermanent, has helped me a lot as I have had to deal with these realities. Instead of lamenting, "why me," when something bad happens, I have to recognize that bad things happen in all lives. Illness and suffering and death can make us miserable. We cannot escape them. But our attitude toward them can make a big difference in how we react toward these inevitabilities.

My parents, thankfully, were able to enjoy their retirement years much better than my grandmother, who had an extremely painful heart attack only a few months after her retirement. My parents, thankfully, did not spend years

paralyzed from the neck down, as my grandfather suffered, in a bleak nursing home with no activities other than watching TV. Seeing what happened to my relatives, has given me a strong determination to enjoy every day of my retirement to the max. When my father retired, he wanted to buy a camper van. He admitted to me that he really liked it, but felt it was too expensive. He said he did not want to spend all their money, because he wanted to leave something to my sister and me. I shot back at him, “Dad, don’t think like that. My sister and I both have our fulltime jobs, and our own retirement plans. We can take care of ourselves. You buy whatever you can afford. And then enjoy it to the max.” Saying that, I think, gave him the permission to buy the van, and they were going off on camping trips across the South, for years of happiness. Ironically, I eventually inherited that van, and I also got years of enjoyment out of it.

When I had my job, of 36 years of teaching and research, at five universities, I feared that I would be bored and miserable when I had to retire. Instead, my parents were my inspiration. When I first brought my mother to live with me, I feared that she would be sitting around the house, bored with nothing to do. I encouraged her to do some volunteer work for a charitable organization. No, Mom stated with firmness, she had worked hard all her life as a teacher, and she did not want to do any more work. Then she became so involved at the Senior Center that she was gone more than I was. I started complaining that she was always gone, and I hardly got a chance to see her. When I retired, the inspiration of my parents taught me to treasure my new free time. I thoroughly enjoy my retirement, and I stay just as busy as ever, but on my schedule instead of someone else’s. I cannot remember even one day that I have felt bored and miserable. Frankly, I don’t really know how I possibly ever had time to have a job.

My grandparents did not get the opportunity that my father told me before he died. He said he did not want us to be sad about him. In fact, he said that he did not want a sad funeral at all. He wanted people to have a delicious banquet to remember him, and to eat and drink and laugh and have fun. At his funeral we did exactly as he instructed, and all his friends came and we had a big happy celebration in memory of his life. The longer I live, the more I know he was right. When the Senior Center asked me what to do as a memorial for my mother, I said the same thing: throw a party. No matter how sad we are, life goes on. We don't forget our loved one, but we try to live our life with happiness. Being worried and miserable all the time does no one any good, and certainly not ourself.

When a loved one dies we must take time to grieve. After my mother's death I felt so lethargic. Though I had multiple things to be done, a friend wisely pressured me to allow myself time, to do nothing if I did not feel like it. That was good advice. Then, whenever we can, we tackle the duties that must be completed. We slowly pick up the pieces of our life and go on, hopefully to experience new times of joy and happiness. We still remember our loved ones fondly, of course, but we must not let that memory destroy our present enjoyment of life.

They say that wisdom comes with age. I don't know if that is true or not, but I have learned over the years that life is always a series of ups and downs. It is so important, when you are in a down period, to remember that this too will change.

When I hit 50, I thought it was just going to be downhill from there. I developed a severe case of sleep apnea. I had no energy, and it seemed all I wanted to do was to sleep or just lie in bed. I had to take a medical leave from my job for three months, because I had so little energy. I felt life looked bad, and I wondered what the point of it was. Fortunately, a year later, my health returned, and I started feeling lively again. A year after that, when I was traveling around Thailand, dragging the C-PAP machine around with me, for my sleep apnea, I decided it was just too much trouble. I ditched it, and never needed it again. Whenever I get suddenly sleepy, guess what. I just lie down and take a nap. I can do that because I am retired. Problem solved.

But beyond that, I have to say that even with the fulltime job I had taking care of my mother for the last five years of her life, during my 70s I am feeling a great happiness with life. I like my house, swimming in my pool, and spending time with my writing. The simple pleasures of the day mean more to me now, and I feel a great contentment. On the few times I go out shopping, I spend most of my time marveling at all the things I see on the shelves that I do NOT want. Besides, where would I put it all? We Americans have so much STUFF crammed into our ever-larger homes. And for what? Material goods are not the secret to happiness.

What I have found in life is contentment, recognizing that I really do not need much more than what I have already. I have seen good times and bad times, victories and catastrophes. But even in the bad times, I can see from

experience that things can change drastically. If I am in a bad time, I am confident that it will not last. Because the only constant in life is change. Nothing is permanent. Knowing this, it is so important to try to focus on the positives of life, and not let ourselves get dragged down into negativity.

Cultivate happiness as you go through each day. If you will let yourself relax and enjoy life you will be able to create reserves of happiness, which will fortify you to get through whatever tough times lie ahead. I hope these words can help you think about these things and go forth with your life in a positive way.