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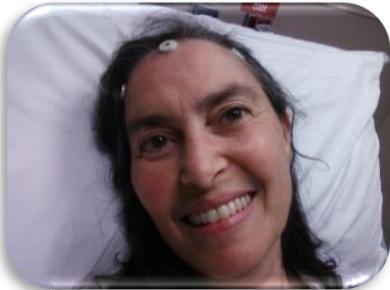
Enhancing Life by Embracing Death

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What My Sister's Death Taught Me About Navigating the Coronavirus

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My sister, Lois, had her first brain tumor removed when she was forty-six years old. During her recovery she had a dream. It was one of those *big dreams* that left her with a powerful feeling of portent. In it she was in the jungle searching for a sacred white snake, then fell into a pit of quicksand, sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness below. Suddenly she was lifted from her struggling body into a vast sky from which she gazed down at a still, pristine blue lake. Lois woke up filled with peace. Fourteen years later, when she lay dying, having succumbed to four more brain tumors and two in her breasts, she reminded me what I'd said to her back then, "Lo, you are going to have a long, difficult journey with this cancer." What I hadn't said out-loud, but felt in the heaviness of my heart, was that brain cancer would take her life. She died at fifty-nine.



Lois's cancer taught me to walk with death. To hold its hand. To make friends with it. To know that amid a life of busily searching for whatever we hold dear—love, acceptance, relationships, meaningful work, a way of honoring earth, family, and so much more—we all face a struggle with the quicksand of life. Eventually I relished the release of resentments in favor of expressing love. It was easier than I ever imagined.

Her death, and ushering her across the threshold to whatever lay beyond this life, taught me to be present in every precious moment, even during the agitated days of her active-dying when tensions mounted. I learned, in the face of Lois being-here-no-more, that the life we shared, with all its trauma and trials, was, and is, sacred. As is death. I came to know the deep angst of letting go and the equally deep relief of surrender. I learned that beauty and vastness and peace are possible, even knowing—*especially* knowing—Lois's outcome. The same, eventual outcome is certain for all of us. And I learned that she was right all along, love *is* all that matters.

As painful as it was, Lois's death initiated me into a more authentic life. I changed, inside and out, becoming kinder, moving away from the city and into the mountains, and committed my life to sharing the spiritual power of stories. I found new purpose by making meaning of Lois's death, starting *Spirit of Resh Foundation* with my still living and breathing sister, Sally. Together we help others initiate new lives, enhancing life by embracing death. Today I choose to navigate these COVID-19 waters in much the same way I navigated Lois's life with cancer and her death. With heart. With acceptance. With presence.

COVID-19 offers an initiation. To all of us. We need to call on our courageous hearts to take that on. To consider what *really* matters most. To relinquish the status quo. To accept that there is no returning to normal. To accept surrender. To treat this life, with all its pain and beauty, as sacred. All of it. I call upon all of these lessons as I navigate this pandemic. As I witness this unraveling

of normal. As I embrace this in-our-face-reality in which the rug is pulled back and we begin to see what has been underneath all along—that while we've been pretending to have control, Life has had other plans for humanity. Other plans that include the coronavirus's demand that we consider death, our own and one another's, along with considering what truly makes life precious. When we do that we can grow in ways beyond ordinary, everyday coping.

Death isn't easy. It's not for the faint of heart. Yet, as one way of life dies, the possibility for a new one—perhaps a more balanced, more whole, or more inclusive one becomes possible. What might that look like? And what might that ask of us? To be patient? To be kind? Certainly, to be present with all of it. I believe we are being asked to consciously choose how we will be, how we will act toward ourselves, our fellow humans, the wide and wilder world, and the other-than-human world, going forward.

Initiation isn't an easy path. Not for us individually or personally, and it's even more challenging for a collective, especially a culture that's become addicted to instant gratification—to easy, fast, and a focus on self rather than the whole. I struggle with this, with giving up comforts in the name of being a part of the solution and a change-agent standing for a new way. But every day I contemplate acceptance of change. I do my best to say yes to the initiation. Like death, it's not easy. Not for the faint of heart. Still, I look for the beauty hidden beneath the surface of whatever is no more. All initiations require this of us. All growth asks us to let go of the old to make room for the new. If we are to go beyond surviving and find our way to thriving, as individuals and as a people, we must ask ourselves to contemplate this disruption—and these losses—as paving the path for our collective initiation.

What my sister's death taught me about navigating the coronavirus is, essentially, this: Look death in the eye. Remember that within death's darkness there is inordinate light. Be courageous. Lead from the heart, whatever the circumstances, no matter what it looks like on the outside. Be compassionate for everything. And everyone. Including my own personal failures, but especially for the failures of others. Forgive. And embrace this moment, whatever it is. Because being alive is a precious gift.



Thank you, Lois, for all you taught me. I miss you. I strive, today and every day, to bring meaning to your death. And I invite each of us to make meaning of our struggles and sorrows. Today, may we all take a big breath, celebrate life in all its messiness and beauty, grow deep and wide through our sorrows, and choose to say yes to being a part of this great, collective initiation.