Reading:
“Now I Become Myself” by May Sarton

Now I become myself. It’s taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces,
Run madly as if Time were there
Terribly old, crying a warning,
“Hurry, you will be dead before — ”
(What? Before you reach the morning
Or the end of the poem is clear
Or love safe in the walled city.)

Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density.

All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence.
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.

As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted so by love.

Now there is time and Time is young.

O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

IN THIS SINGLE HOUR I LIVE
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls New York City
July 10, 2022

"That was the best ice cream soda I ever tasted."

Those were the famous last words of Lou Costello, of Abbot & Costello.

At the end of our lives, our experience is heightened—we cherish our senses, our relationships. It's all so much more meaningful, even an ice cream soda. A surge of awakening can happen, an appreciation for beauty, a willingness to let go of pride, a willingness to forgive, and an enriched capacity to love and to be loved. One of the reasons I appreciate my work as a chaplain and pastor is because I have the opportunity to witness this awakening among the dying, and it's profoundly inspiring. Here's the good news: if the possibility for cherishing life more deeply exists at the time of dying, that means it exists here and now.

Many traditions teach us to contemplate our mortality for this reason, so that we can live a more ethical, a more loving, a more connected life all along. Plato told his students to practice dying. Medieval Christian monks regularly recited "memento mori" (remember, you will die). One of the teachings of the Buddha is "Of all footprints, that of the elephant's is supreme. Of all meditations, that on death is supreme."

16th Century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote "To prepare oneself for death is to prepare oneself for freedom. The one who has learned to die has unlearned to be a slave." He believed that if we don't acknowledge our death, we flit about in response to circumstances beyond our control, trying to adjust things to our liking, and we are therefore in a state of chronic dissatisfaction. He believed that preparing for death keeps us humble and clarifies our priorities. He wrote "I want death to find me planting my cabbages, worrying about neither it nor my perfect garden."

I like the idea of death finding me planting cabbages. I'd much prefer that to almost any alternative. But the fact is, we don't know how death will find us or when. Most of us

picture death waiting for us way off on the horizon. We know it's happening all around us, but we choose not to internalize that it will happen to us. We are missing out on the gift of making the most of our time if we don't pay attention to the inevitability of our own death.

We don't have to change radically to internalize this. We just have to get out of our own way and be curious about who we are underneath all the work of being a personality, a fixed identity, stuck on the stories we tell ourselves.

In Tolstoy's short story "Master and Man", the protagonist, Vasili, whose identity is firmly "the master," a self-aggrandizing, greedy, superior, man who mistreats his servant, Nikita (even though he sees himself as a great benefactor). Vasili and Nikita set out in a blinding snowstorm so Vasili can beat his less courageous competitors to a business deal. They get lost repeatedly, despite opportunities to seek shelter and rest, because the assiduous and relentless Vasili is driven by his self-image as a success story. Eventually Vasili sets off on his own and leaves Nikita behind to freeze to death. As Vasili takes off yet again into the unnavigable snowscape, he meanders in a state of increasing fear that he will die.

In *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*, American writer George Saunders reflects that, at this point in the story, Vasili's fear of death transforms into a fear of meaninglessness. Vasili ends up traveling in circles and lands back at the half-frozen Nikita. Vasili then proceeds to open his fur coat and lie on top of Nikita in order to keep his servant alive while his own life comes to an end. Saunders describes Vasili's change of heart: "he knows what to do. His natural energy, which for so long has been used to benefit only himself, gets redirected…And then, observing himself in action, seeing a charitable, selfless person, he is moved and feels a 'peculiar joy,' a joy associated with his relief at finally *shucking off a way of being that has always impeded him*." Saunders concludes, "[Vasili] would have been a good man if there'd been someone to freeze him to death every day of his life."

Saunders likens Vasili's transformation to Scrooge's. The ghosts don't convert Scrooge into a new person; they help him see who he used to be, and he then shucks off ways of being that impede him.

Sometimes we read a story like Tolstoy's or we encounter a work of art that inspires us to reckon with death, or perhaps we have a serious health incident, or someone we love dies. We make promises to live life with a deep realization that our time is limited. But it's hard to keep these promises because we don't have the tools to stay focused on our newfound deep awareness, and we fall back into our habitual ways. Saunders writes, "If we could reverse the process (let [Vasili] come alive again, warm that body up, melt away the snow, cause him to forget all he's learned…) what we would see would be a mind gradually reasserting a series of lies: 'You are separate' and 'You are central' and 'You are correct' and 'Go forth and prove that you are better, that you are the best.'" These phrases are familiar to me, I hear them in my own head—they are built into our conditioning. It takes intention and constant practice to remind ourselves of the meaning that Vasili found in his last hours.

Frank Ostaseski, co-founder of the Zen Hospice Project, tells his own story of how a heart attack led him to shuck off ways of being that impeded him. He writes, ""In the months following my heart attack, I realized that the more I allowed my vulnerability to emerge, the less wedded I felt to being somebody. I became less occupied with the full-time job of self-generation. I could feel the exhaustion of propping up my personality…As I accepted the fragility of my life, it opened me. I felt myself to be a porous thing, more transparent, more permeable."

He describes a scene some months after his heart surgery, at home. A friend rang the doorbell, and he went to answer it--carefully, slowly, painfully, aware of the healing that enabled him to get up from his chair and walk—and he felt his old pre heart attack self suddenly arise. He described it as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." He was suddenly conscious of propping up his personality as he prepared to greet his friend. He became aware of how easily he could abandon the wisdom and vulnerability he had discovered.

Ostaseski's book, *The Five Invitations, Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*, tells his own story and the stories of many hospice patients whom he cared for. He describes practices that can help make the most of life by facing death. I've slightly reshaped them into four practices:

- Be here now
- Let go of judgment
- Welcome the whole (imperfect) self
- Cultivate don't know mind

One) Be here now, because all things will end. This is an invitation to be more present and more honest with ourselves. When time is short—whether referring to our whole lives or periods of our lives—we are more likely to appreciate our surroundings and connections. Of all his ice cream sodas, Lou Costello's last was his best. On the last night of a wonderful vacation when the sunset is the most glorious we've seen all week, we linger even longer over dinner with our fellow travelers (and leave our phones behind). We immerse ourselves in the experience, aware that it will end.

Two) Let go of judgment. This means catching ourselves in self-judgment, not to mention all the people we spend so much time sizing up.

I was getting my haircut a couple of weeks ago, in late June. I was brimming with summer cheer, feeling grateful for the pleasant weather, lighter schedules, vacation plans. The customer next to me said to the man cutting her hair, "Can you believe it's almost July 4th already? Summer might as well be over." Suddenly I felt cheated. Was she right? Was I fooling myself with my summer cheerfulness? After some reflection I got my wits about me, and I realized *she* was the problem. *She* was a typical New Yorker rushing headlong into her busy schedule without an ability to savor summer.

I was on a roll, judging every whichaway. First I found myself in this state of what's-wrong-with-me which is always an experience of isolation. Then I found myself blaming her, also an experience of disconnect. And all this criticism is aggressive, and it takes up

a lot of energy. When we free up the judgment, we have more capacity for love and connection, we have more clarity because we're not so worried about protecting our identities and views.

Three) Welcome the whole (imperfect) self.

Ostaseski suggests imagining a photo printed of yourself as a jigsaw puzzle. The photo represents you completely, your personality, your whole being. The pieces are all spread out, and you start to assemble the puzzle. Are you tempted to leave pieces out (your funny looking toes, your fear of deep water, or the time you cut off someone in line and pretended you didn't notice)? If you leave out all the pieces you don't want, you probably won't recognize yourself because the picture will be so fragmented. The invitation is to include all the pieces of the puzzle, to be our whole selves. When we die we face our life story in its entirety, to whatever extent we've accepted all the pieces, so why not benefit from accepting them now?

Spiritual teacher Ram Dass said late in his life, "After many years of undergoing psychoanalysis, teaching psychology, working as a psychotherapist, taking drugs, being in India, being a yogi, having a guru, and meditating for decades, as far as I can see I haven't gotten rid of one neurosis. Not one. The only thing that changed is that they don't define me anymore. There is less energy invested in my personality, so it is easier to change. My neuroses are not huge monsters anymore. Now they are like little shmoos that I invite over for tea."

Four) Cultivate Don't Know Mind, a mind of curiosity and wonder which relies less on the intellect and more on opening the heart.

The Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are very few." We have this yearning to know "the truth," to be experts in as many topics as possible, and yet we know there are limitations. The striving is Sisyphean because the more we know, the more we see that we don't know. Curiosity and wonder about the world and about each other--not for the sake of

knowledge accumulation but for the sake of connection--decenters us and humbles us. We are finite in this universe that is large beyond our imagination. If we don't insist on mastering it, maybe we can find some peace of mind.

These practices—be here now, let go of judgment, welcome the whole self, cultivate don't know mind—reveal to us the wisdom we have beneath the fear and denial of death. They're not about changing who we are, they're about revealing to ourselves who we are. Acknowledging our mortality can free us and help us shuck off ways of being that impede us.

May Sarton's poem reminds us of what such a life could look like:

Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!

All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.

Now there is time and Time is young.

O, in this single hour I live
All of myself…

Are you waiting for death to be imminent to discover a deeper understanding of the love in your life, of the wonder of life? Why not now? Why do we wait to figure out how to live fully until we have no life left? Why not see now the great teacher we have in our mortality?

May you be happy, may you be safe, may you be healthy, may you live a long life, and may death find you worrying about neither it nor your perfect garden.