

Fifty Shades of Dying Deirdre Hanna

There are several roads named 'Shades of Death' in America.

I'm surprised I'm not living in one of them. They are swampy, murky, forested and hard to navigate with clarity. I find them wonderful images for my life journey that seems in-formed and shadowed by death, a companion who is always peering over my shoulder to see where my next steps are heading.

My life has been inspired by books about miracles, spirituality and death. From very early childhood I seem to have been obsessed, haunted, followed, and led by curiosity about death and the afterlife.

As an only child I was 'spoilt to death' according to my Mum, until my twin brothers appeared when I was six. Most attention passed from me to them, my parents were exhausted and, in hindsight, I experienced my first big loss through the death of being an only child. I then started having terrible nightmares about dying and woke up screaming every night, which made Mum even more tired and cranky. As a little child I thought she was angry with ME.

And so she sent me away on holidays with my Nana, (to give Mum a break they said,) but I had loneliness and separation anxiety as friends. I also started having 'out of body experiences.'

I remember once having trouble getting back into my body in the dead of night, and woke disoriented, upside down, and of course screaming. This didn't seem to disturb my deaf Nana so somehow I must have eventually found my way back into my body. Nana hardly relieved my fears by day either, as she was fond of showing me her fingers; yellowing at the tips and told me she was dying from the hands up. These weren't exactly the sorts of holiday destined to fulfil their purpose, which was to make me a happier child and to sleep better when I got home.

I was a strange unsettled child and seemed fated to be unhappy.

Even my given name, 'Deirdre,' means sorrow. I was very relieved to read elsewhere in these notes, Andrew Cohen's article, 'I Have Seen the Mountaintop', that visionaries live in a state of perpetual discontent because they live for the promise of the possible. All I knew as a child was that it was possible, indeed inevitable, that I would die. It was just a matter of how. My son Justin gave me a book for Christmas when he was ten, called '*How We Die*,' so I've passed my morbidity onto him. As a teenager I also talked relentlessly about death to students at High School and in College. 'Do you realise we are one meal closer to dying?' I would ask them over lunch. They hadn't noticed and thereafter I often spent lunch alone. I've now learned to dine with books as my dearest companions.

As compensation for being sent away from my family, I read constantly and was content to escape my solitude through entering different lives without having to exit my body. My first tutor was a Great-Aunt who was both a Deacon in the Church of England and an avid reader of spiritual books. She gave me books about inspiring people, such as St Francis of Assisi, a man who seemed happy to get bleeding wounds on his hands, flayed himself and called Death his sister. But he also loved animals and nature and led me forty years later to the University of Creation Spirituality and St Francis' Theological College. I was mesmerised by Joan of Arc, who came to a horrible and fiery end, and my nightmares returned as I re-lived her death in my dreams and was nightly consumed by her flames.

I was also given *The Illustrated Children's Bible* complete with lurid images of death through stabbing by your own father, being thrown into fiery furnaces to please God, hung tragically from a cross surrounded by weeping women and, at the end of the book, to rise eerily en masse from coffins.

Another big loss in my early years was the death of my beloved cocker spaniel Bimbo. I was then given books about animals to cheer me up, and sobbed through *Bambi*, *Lassie*, *Dusty*, *Black Beauty*, then graduated to Paul Gallico's works.

I can still remember vividly the story where the hero died gallantly after rescuing men from Dunkirk and a lone Snow Goose saluted his empty boat. *Little Women*, *Seven Little Australians*, *The Littlest Angel* and other books, in which death appears too soon to the beautiful and the good, piled up in my bookshelves.

I moved on to books on Spirituality, including *The Road Less Travelled*, which inspired me in the middle of the very painful death of a marriage.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - /I took the one less travelled by, /and that has made all the difference said Robert Frost, quoted by Scott Peck in his book. I loved the concept and I felt more at ease for taking this road.

I've had many psychic experiences throughout my life, leading toward the founding of Hopewell Hospice, but my busy chattering mind is slow to pick up signs and synchronicities except when I am asleep. Hence I was shaken awake one night by a loud voice with the sharp instruction to 'Find out about Cicely Saunders.'

I tracked her down and once I had read her biography of how she started the modern hospice movement I was off and running hotly in pursuit of a vocation in death and dying.

It seemed such a simple thing to do. Invite friends around to start a hospice. It is 19 years since we called together a small group of committed people on the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi. Margaret Mead, the great anthropologist said, 'Never think that a small group of committed people can't change the world, indeed it's the only way the world has ever changed.' That first meeting was to change our world.

Another loud shaking of my foundations in 1996 was the voice which said 'You need to do something for children and call it 'Paradise Kids.' and so we did. This year we provided over 400 children with grief, loss and illness support.

Today we sit in beautiful healing gardens, in a place of hospitality for those who are ending their life journey and who are moving into the unknown beyond this life. We offer comfort to their loved ones and hope to the little ones of God, who Jesus so loved and who represented his Father's Kingdom - the children. St Francis of Assisi, our Patron Saint says it well: *'Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.'* We have all done the seeming impossible.

I still talk about death and dying to anyone who will listen and they now pay for it, through our College of Transformative Education. Only those who are called will come and yet we are changing the world and living like all visionaries do, for God's future on the planet and, most likely, beyond.

I'm still full of curiosity about death, and feel that time is no more than an idea, but I'm not sure I'm ready to take that next step through the doorway of the cottage of darkness. I am just showing up and noticing my journey, and keeping the door to my soul ajar so that when the light grows brighter and beckons me it will be easier to open without creaking and groaning.

I'm glad now my name is linked to 'sorrow,' and 'dark night of the soul experiences' that are the liminal and shadowed parts of the path. I'm glad I haven't settled for superficial values. Once I might have changed my name to 'Felicity' or 'Joy' but as I deepen my reading and my spiritual life, I am both challenged and appeased by the lives of our inspired visionaries.

Because, it seems that to live only for personal gratification and happiness, negates the lives of our sung and unsung saints, people inspired by God who make great sacrifices to fulfil their vision of what our world can truly become. What our future can and will be like if we progress ever forward toward higher consciousness and love. In the last resort, that's really all there is. Maybe there are shades in between but I'm glad now I don't settle for travelling on roads, that while easier to navigate, stop us becoming more than we think we are. I'm so privileged to be with you all on this journey to who we can truly become together as a sacred community committed to evolving the planet according to its deepest needs.

When Death Comes Mary Oliver

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn
when death comes and takes all the bright coins
from his purse
to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.
When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*