

# Releasing Death from Fear and Pain

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Cats are among my greatest teachers. They have been sacred witness and sacrifice to the opening of my feelings and the insight into the infinite that followed. This is one of the stories of how I moved from fear of pain and death through suffering to acceptance.



My youth was spent working on farms and living in rural villages. I directly experienced living from the land. I tilled ground and planted seed. I cultivated and harvested vegetables, fruits, and grains. I hunted wild animals. I caught fish. I cut timber. I raised and butchered domesticated animals.

In living this way, I neither thought about nor felt the sacred relationship of life giving life through death. Life just was. Rituals, if any, were unconscious or universal like Thanksgiving. There was no explicit honoring of the gifts between life forms. There were no blessings at meals.

I was taught to believe that man was in charge and that he could do what he wanted with very limited fear of consequence. The one thing beyond man's reach was death, but we didn't discuss that. Nor did we openly consider any sacredness between man and the others who share this planet.

Today, I believe, behave and worship differently. I recognize, celebrate, honor, and ritualize the life processes of one form surrendering to another. And, I've experienced gifts from some of nature's other creatures. Several of the lessons that have led to my present world view did not come from man. They appeared quite unexpectedly. Some took traumatic form.

On the farm, my uncle determined what it was that we were going to eat. He would tell me what and how many to kill. I was told that killing was a manly thing to do. I certainly did not want to shrink from doing what men do. Questioning usually met with anger or belittling comments that totally discounted my feelings.

All slaughtering unsettled me, yet some were easier than others. That which required separating life from the body at close range, in my own hands, was especially difficult. Since society has its butchers, most people are distanced from the dying process.

One day, my uncle returned from a morning of cutting hay. He was upset and called out to me. "I hit a cat with the mower blade. It's in the bed of the pickup. It's not dead. You need to go kill it. I can't." He walked away. I've since learned the difference between can't and won't. But, back then, this was my role and I had not yet learned how to say no. Challenging directions was not popular. I headed to where the truck was parked to see what was to be done.

The cat's eyes, in my eyes, spoke fright and pain. The body was immobile, the back broken, the tail missing. Yet, life clung to the rigid form. I began to internalize the cat's pain. I started transferring its agony into me. I saw that its body could not be repaired. And, on farms, cats were expendable, often drowned at birth and never taken to a vet. That would be a waste of money.

As the intensity of my identification with this animal grew, I was in a panic to end its pain, its life. I could not shoot it, as it lay in the truck. When I attempted to move it, the screams caused me to quickly let go. I finally deduced a way to kill it. Yet, my first attempt failed as the reaction of the cat caused me to wince and tremble so much that I could not complete the act.

The second attempt succeeded. I was left shaking, crying and disoriented. Spirit had parted the body, but the trauma of dying was still raging in my mind. I removed its body from the truck. I took one more action to be sure, in my mind, that its pain was over.

It was years before my conscious mind would grasp and retain how much I had transferred the cat's pain to my own, my fear of death to its dying and my internal screams to its external ones. I was too young at the time to fully comprehend the learning.

Not wanting to be seen in my condition, I walked to the hay mow in the barn and emoted until I became quiet. I just sat there emotionally and physically wasted, hollow in my stomach, and spaced out in my mind. The events reverberated to my core.

Conversations throughout my extended family were generally devoid of feelings, except when rage inevitably erupted from momentary lapses in suppression. My early messages were mostly about not feeling, being in control, and accepting denial. I could not, in this moment, be in denial. I was not in control. I was feeling at an intensity that was exploding my programming and immobilizing my body.

Thirty-five years later, after spending a decade of involvement in death and rebirth experiential practices, I embrace death as a birth. I believe that the nature of one's death is an opportunity for learning. I accept that the full understanding lies outside this world. I also believe that there can be profound learning for those who participate in creating a safe emotional space for individuals who are in the process of dying.

Though I do not seek death, I am preparing to embrace it. I was taught to fear death. Yet, even in near-death experiences I recall many more painful episodes in my life. During times that I was close to dying, I came back enlightened beyond my dreams. My spiritual seeking has convinced me to surrender to death, not to struggle.



It is now clear how I literally transferred my reality onto this animal. I was not caring for the animal despite my momentary projections of doing so. I wanted to shut out my pain and fears. I was not into love with this fellow creation of God. I was out of love with myself. I was blinded by my own processes.

What would I do today? I believe that I would sit with this injured animal in the reverence of accepting what on earth seems unacceptable. I would warmly hold this fellow creature allowing it to drop its body when it chose to do so. I would prayerfully ask that at my final

letting go, I be allowed to go through any agony or peace necessary to make my time here complete in its learning. This is my intention. One day I will know.

I am, of course, projecting again. The difference can be seen in how I now want to be treated and in how I now treat others. Today, I feel and express more spontaneously. I am in much less denial. I am more fully into love. I want for myself and provide to others the space to be one's own true self. I am dedicated to "Thy will be done."

I offer a blessing to the spirit of each and every broken body which I see on or beside the highways that I travel. I honor the animal powers and cherish their teachings.

I resonate with the beliefs that someone expressed in the following verse:

I have killed the deer.  
I have crushed the grasshopper  
And the plants he feeds upon.  
I have cut through the heart  
Of trees growing old and straight.  
I have taken fish from water  
And birds from the sky.  
In my life I have needed death  
So that my life can be.  
When I die, I must give life  
To what has nourished me.  
The earth receives my body,  
And gives it to the plants  
And to the caterpillars,

To the birds  
And to the coyotes,  
Each in its own turn so that  
The circle of life is not broken.