

Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death: An Interview with Roshi Joan Halifax

By David Jay Brown



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Roshi Joan Halifax, Ph.D.—medical anthropologist, Zen priest, hospice caregiver, civil rights activist, ecologist, and renowned author—has an unusual talent for integrating scientific and spiritual disciplines. Halifax has done extensive work with the dying for over forty years. In 1994 she founded the Project on Being with Dying, which has trained hundreds of health-care professionals in the contemplative care of dying people.

Halifax served on the faculty of Columbia University, the University of Miami School of Medicine, the New School for Social Research, and Naropa University, and she has lectured at many other academic institutions, including Harvard Divinity School and Harvard Medical School. She is the founder of the Ojai Foundation—an educational and interfaith center in Southern California—which she led from 1979 to 1989. Halifax currently serves as abbot and guiding teacher of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a Zen Peacemaker community which she founded in 1990.

In the 1970s, Halifax and her ex-husband Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D. collaborated on a landmark LSD research project with terminally-ill cancer patients at the Spring Grove Hospital in Maryland, which we discuss in the following interview. (I also interviewed Grof about this research for this *Bulletin*.)

Halifax is the author or coauthor of seven books, including *Being with Dying*, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*, and *The Fruitful Darkness*. *Being with Dying* is the very best book that I've ever read about caring for people who are dying, and I can't recommend it more highly. It's a book that I think every human being should read. Halifax also coauthored *The Human Encounter with Death* with Grof. This important book discusses their LSD research, and describes a number of psychedelic experiences which in some ways resemble reports of near-death experiences. (*The Human Encounter with Death* has recently been revised and updated by Grof, and was republished by MAPS as *The Ultimate Journey*.)

Halifax is a Zen Buddhist roshi. She has received “Dharma transmissions” from both Bernard Glassman and Thich Nhat Hanh, and previously studied under the Korean master Seung Sahn. The procedure of “Dharma transmission” refers to the manner in which the teachings of Zen Buddhism are passed down from a Zen master to his or her disciple and heir. It establishes the disciple as a transmitting teacher and successor in an unbroken line of teachers and disciples, a spiritual “bloodline,” so to speak, that is said to be traced back to the Buddha himself.

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I interviewed Joan on December 16, 2009. I felt a lot of gratitude that she took time from her busy schedule to speak with me for this *Bulletin*, and she was very kind and gracious. We spoke about her work with people who are dying, some of the most important lessons that she learned from this work, and how the LSD research that she participated in during the early 70s helped to motivate her to do more work with dying people.

David: How did your experience with your grandmother's death as a child influence your motivation to work with dying people?

Joan: One of the people that I was closest to as a child was my grandmother, who worked as a sculptor carving tombstones for local people in Savannah. She was a remarkable woman who often served her community as someone comfortable around illness and death, someone who would sit with dying friends. And yet when she herself became ill, her own family could not offer her the same compassionate presence. When my grandmother suffered first from cancer, and then had a stroke, she was put into a nursing home and then left largely alone. Her death was long and hard. When she finally died, I felt deep ambivalence, both sorrow and relief. As I stood there looking at her gentle peaceful face in a coffin at the funeral home, I made the commitment to practice being there for others as they died.

David: What other factors led to your interest in helping to care for people who are dying, and how do you think that caregiving can be viewed as a spiritual path?

Joan: We all are facing our mortality. Plato clearly said the bedrock for spiritual experience is understanding death. And it is a very profound experience to contemplate one's own mortality, as is the experience of actually caring for a dying person.

David: Can you talk a little about the LSD research that you did with Stan Grof, and how this affected your perspective on death and dying?

Joan: Stan and I worked with dying people at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Prior to this, I had been at the University of Miami School of Medicine, where I saw that the most marginalized people in that medical setting were individuals who were dying. The physicians would say that medicine and drugs are about saving lives. So when Stan and I got married, and I moved up to the Baltimore area, I joined him in his project, working with dying people.

It was a very extraordinary project. It was really a contemporary rite of passage. I had

studied rites of passage as an anthropologist, and to engage in such a powerful one was very interesting. So he and I worked with a number of people who were dying of cancer. Subjects were referred to the project by social workers and physicians.

There was one patient, a doctor who had referred himself to the group. He was dying of pancreatic cancer, and through that work I had the opportunity to have a real experience in seeing that the human spirit, the human psyche, is profoundly underestimated. LSD is referred to as a "nonspecific amplifier of the psyche," and I felt very privileged to sit for many hours with a person dying of cancer, and share his or her psyche in the most intimate way—aspects of which that were, in general, not normally accessible in a non-altered state of consciousness.

David: How did this affect your perspective on death and dying?

Joan: It inspired me to continue the work. I began this work in 1970 feeling very concerned about dying people. Prior to that I'd been inspired by my grandmother, who was taking care of dying people, and then herself had a very difficult death. I made a vow that I would try to make a difference. Then I saw that the work with LSD was so effective in facilitating a deep psychological process for people who were dying, that actually it enhanced their quality of their life and their relationships. It enhanced their experience of dying and of death.

David: How do you think a psychedelic experience is similar to and different from the natural dying process, or a near-death experience?

Joan: I think that you can't really say. At least I can't say, although maybe Stan can. But the unbinding process that individuals go through on physiological and psychological levels, in the process of dying can be very powerful. From my point of view, sitting with many dying people over the years, has basically been a psychedelic experience. We had at least one patient tell us that he died, went through a near-death experience, and came back. He reported that he experienced what had happened to him in the LSD therapy. He didn't die in the end. Well, he died in the end, but in the middle he didn't die. However, he went through a clinical death experience, came back, and said it really transformed his view of death. In the end, he was much more accepting of his mortality as his death drew near.

David: How has your Buddhist perspective been helpful in working with people who are dying?

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Joan: Buddhism has many important perspectives on the truth of impermanence, the realization of the absence of an inherent self, or the experience of meditation and letting go, and on bearing witness to suffering, and the experience of compassion. Quite frankly, I think that if our patients at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center had had more of a Buddhist orientation, or Buddhist practice, they would have gotten a lot more out of their LSD experiences. It's not to say that their LSD experiences were not profound, but sometimes it's very hard for people to let go. That's just not what happens in our Western culture; Buddhism is about accepting and letting go. So it certainly has a profound parallel to what we had hoped to see happen in LSD experience when we were working with dying people.

David: How do you think the prevailing Western attitudes about death hinder our ability to properly care for, and learn from, people who are dying?

Joan: I think that we have not reconciled ourselves with the experience of dying, because people in Western cultures fear death so much. But I feel that Western cultures are coming along—in part through their insight from psychedelic experiences, and also through Buddhist forms of meditation.

David: What would you say are some of the most important lessons that you've learned from working with people who are dying?

Joan: As you can imagine, there are so many. I'd say read my book *Being with Dying*. But in essence, I think that the most important part of working with dying people is about encountering the sanctity of life—to see life in all of its richness in the present moment, to appreciate one's life, and share the fundamental joy of being alive and helping others. I think that it's really important to ask ourselves on a daily level—how do we serve people? And this is one of the frequent outcomes of people who have had the LSD experience. Stan and I often found that the psychedelic experience was a source of profound inspiration, which motivated people to want to be of service in the world, even if they were facing the end of their life.

David: What do you personally think happens to consciousness after death?

Joan: I have no idea.

David: Have you ever speculated or thought about what might happen?

Joan: No. I stay away from speculation.

David: So are you saying that you value not knowing?

Joan: It's not a matter of "not knowing". I really don't know! It's not theoretical, it's just pragmatic. I don't know what happens after death. When people ask me, I say "I don't know." And when a dying person asks me, I say, "I don't know, but what do you think happens after death?" I listen and learn from their perspectives, which I value. But from my own experience, I have no idea.

David: What do you think is the best preparation for death?

Joan: Meditation. No question about it.

David: I heard that years ago you had spoken with Laura Huxley about developing a concept called "dying healthy," which was about dying in a healthy and balanced way. Is this a concept that you could expand upon?

Joan: I feel that the work that I'm doing, and we're doing, in all these dimensions to better the care of the dying, is, in a certain way, very much in accord with what Laura was trying to establish at that time. My own work in the field of death and dying now, and for many decades, has been in the training of clinicians, in bringing more presence, more compassion, and more wisdom in their care of dying people.

David: Can you talk about the Project on Being with Dying, and what you're currently working on?

Joan: I've been working on a big project for many years that is engaged with training clinicians in compassionate and contemplative care of the dying. We work in four transformational areas: transforming the experience of the clinician, transforming the experience of the patient, transforming the and transforming the institutions that serve dying people. We do an intensive training program annually. We're also working on the development of regional projects throughout the country, where I teach in medical schools and medical settings.

David: Is there anything that we haven't spoken about that you would like to add?

Joan: Just that I feel very grateful for having met Stan, and having had the opportunity to engage in the LSD project at Spring Grove. It was a pivotal process in my life, where I saw a very deep kind of therapy, which was also a sacred therapy. It was a rite of passage, guiding individuals in the experience of living and dying. So my gratitude for working with Stan and having that opportunity, which opened up new doorways for me is really profound. •

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