

give & take how we live my view on location on gardening

Living the Life You Wish to Live

Stephen and Ondrea Levine, counselors and meditation teachers, sit down with psychotherapist Barbara Platek to speak about easing the transition from life to death.



Stephen and Ondrea Levine in New Mexico. Stephen tells us that when we turn “mindfully to the idea that we are going to die, we stop delaying our lives.”

Drawing on their roots in Vipassana meditation techniques, Stephen and Ondrea Levine have helped thousands approach death with equanimity and an open heart over the last 30 years. Now, they are learning to bring the same openness to their own lives—Ondrea is living with leukemia and lupus, while Stephen lives with a neurological degenerative condition. Recently, the Levines retired to the mountains of New Mexico to deepen their practice in the silence of the woods. Returning to an initial passion, Stephen devotes much of his energy to poetry, and his most recent publication, *Breaking the Drought*, channels his healing and insight into verse. Last year, the Levines spoke with psychotherapist and author Barbara Platek about death, dying, and conscious living.

Why is it important for us to think about dying?

Stephen Levine: Because we are all going to die. If we could bring that reality into our heart, that would be a practice unto itself. The last time Ondrea and I spoke with the Dalai Lama, he asked us what were working on. I told him we were writing a book called *A Year To Live*, which explores the practice of living as if the present year were our last. He wondered whether people who started this practice would run amok. In other words, if they imagined the end was coming, wouldn't they just grab a lady or a guy and a bottle of tequila and head for the beach? And that's what we thought as well. But the truth is, when people know they are going to die, that last year is often the most loving, most conscious, and most caring—even under conditions of poor concentration, the side effects of medication, and so on. So don't wait to die until you die. Start practicing now.

You actually spent an entire year doing this formal practice—living as though it were your last. How did the experience affect you?

SL: One of the things one notices in getting older or doing the year-to-live practice is how vain we are. We are so attached to how we appear in the world, in relationships. Simple embarrassment so often guides the way we

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHEN AND ONDREA LEVINE

interact with others. But when we do this practice of turning mindfully to the idea that we are going to die, we stop delaying our lives. We start catching up with ourselves.

Part of this process involves attending to the fear of death. When it is simply *my* fear, or *my* pain, we feel terribly isolated. But when it becomes *the* fear, *the* pain, there can be an expansion, an opening. If, when we are on our deathbed, we can think of ourselves as one of the ten thousand people who are dying, we can have a more universal experience, and this frees us from the terrible isolation of our suffering.

Ondrea Levine: I think the greatest benefit of the year-to-live practice is the opportunity it provides to reassess our priorities. When we worked with people on their deathbed, we would often hear the following three complaints: I wish I had gotten divorced earlier; I wish I had taken a job for love of the work, not money; I wish I had played and enjoyed myself more. So the beauty of the practice is that we can evaluate our lives even before we are on our deathbed. If we are not living the life we wish to live, how can we change that now, while there is still time?

I can say this, because I have cancer. And I know that once you get that diagnosis, no matter how much you already know, something happens,

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everything becomes much more real. Ironically, it brings greater permission to be fully alive. I find it very exciting.

We have so few guides or myths to help us through the dying process. And yet the fact that we die is intimately related to our experience on this earth. Rather than honor or acknowledge what is essentially a great mystery, we are almost, as you put it, embarrassed by it somehow. How can we overcome this feeling?

SL: I think we are embarrassed by how much pain we have been in throughout our entire lives. Because we are embarrassed, we don't share this truth with one another. Of course there is fear there, too. We have fear around dying. That is natural. But the embarrassment is just that—embarrassment. We need to have mercy on ourselves. We all feel embarrassed. Actually, when we do speak about these things, when we do share our embarrassment, we experience relief. The holding back is what is hard.

We have seen people die without ever telling their families what was the matter with them, without ever sharing a single doctor's appointment, without ever even giving their loved ones a sense that they were near death. We need to be able to trust relationships. If two people can share their embarrassments, what a bond that creates.

You suggest that much of our fear of dying is actually a fear of pain or of losing control. Death, you say, is perfectly safe.

SL: Yes, people are mostly afraid of the negative things they have heard or learned about death. First of all, we have much better pain medication than we ever had before. It really can

be adjusted to provide relief and comfort. So that aspect—dying in pain—has been mitigated to a certain degree. There is less of that extreme discomfort to face. But we are afraid of the images and ideas we have created about death.

OL: People are also afraid of the embarrassment of having someone bathe them or wipe their ass. They are concerned about this level of exposure, this lack of control. Most of us never have this experience in the course of our lives. So this can feel humiliating, and the thought of it can cause great concern. That's why it is helpful to have a best friend or a nurse we can trust. We have heard people say that as soon as they can't wipe their own ass they are going to kill themselves. They usually don't—but that just shows how deep the concern can be.

How useful are the Buddha's teachings as you now deal with Ondrea's cancer and your own illness?

SL: They are everything. That's what we are saying. If we do a practice, then when we come to a hard place we have something to build on. Love is the bridge.

How do you face the prospect of losing each other?

OL: It is sad. We cry. We are everything to each other. That's what keeps me eating well, taking supplements. As much love as we have, we know we will have to face the other side of it—which is horrible pain. But if we are not willing to go for the love because of our fear of the pain—well, we're never going to get the love we seek. When one of us dies, it is going to break our hearts.

But you know, we have had the experience of people coming to us after they were dead—people come in

dreams and in meditations. In fact, if someone you love has died, talk to him or her. Hear their voice in your head and tell them all the things you wanted to say. Don't be too rational, try it. Some part of us believes we will still be able to be in touch. Who knows? All we know is that we will love as well as we can.

What advice would you give to someone who is currently facing death—either her own or a loved one's?

SL: Be mindful. Be loving. Practice forgiveness.

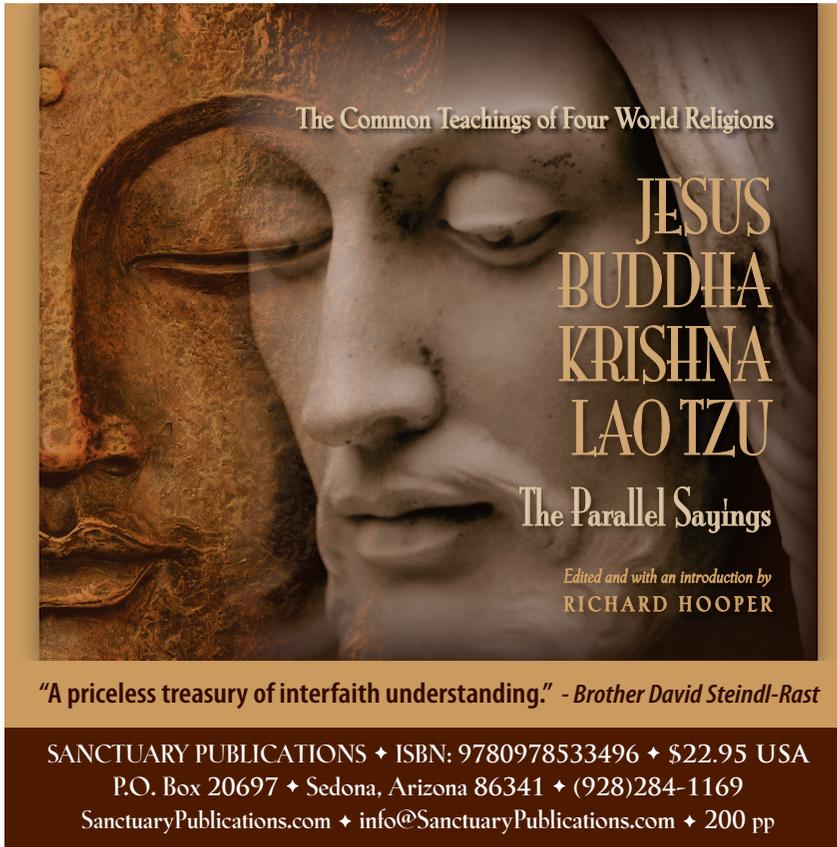
OL: Don't put off anything. Any dream you have, anything that you always wanted to do—do it. I can't tell you how many doctors have said to me, "Stop thinking about it." Of course I can't stop. The mind is going to think, "I am going to die." But when those thoughts come up, we can go to the body, go to sensation—breathe in and out of the heart.

We are going to go through a lot. If you think you are going to die with angels around, God bless. But if you have one good friend who can be with you, that is a true blessing. We have heard of so many people dying alone.

What is the greatest lesson about living you have learned from the dying?

OL: Follow your heart and be as present as you can. Don't think that life is going to happen when you retire. Live your life now. Enjoy it now. You know that wonderful line from John Lennon: Life is what's happening while we're busy making other plans. Don't wait to live your life.

SL: Buddha said that we could look the whole world over and never find anyone more deserving of love than ourselves. That is what we should be working with. There is no one more deserving of love than you. ▼



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