

# Before the browning of the leaves

---

*Father Dn Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ, OSL*

A cold breeze blows the aroma of prebrowning leaves across the surface of the lake. As I see the bright sun riding high in the clear blue sky and catch the wafting of the leaves in my nose, there is now no doubt, autumn is here.

The calendar has not yet marked the shift to autumn, but there is a knowing the soul has that marks shifts and changes differently than numbers and

books. Just because we have not passed the line of the proper equinox or the dated threshold of a new season does not mean that change is not present with us.

This is a sort of ambling antenna that picks up signals about things based—somehow—on the frequency we have experienced the event in the past. However, I am also beginning to realize that there are smaller signs that are perceived and really just below the cognitive and conscious radars of the soul.

This detection device lives strong in the dying. Somehow the dying process heightens the abilities of the dying person's perception. They know which things are most important, which people need the most attention, and how much time they have left and what they must accomplish.

I know that part of this knowing is honed over the years. We live with people for years and we begin to pick up their subtle communications. Today she is happy, today she is angry, today she is tired—these kinds of things. We can figure out what is changing in the landscape by perceiving the events around us and adding up all the variables.

However, the dying have another knowing. It is a knowing that goes beyond the simple remembering of people's facial responses and personal moods. It is a knowing that borders a bit on the paranormal. A lot of the time, these special moments of grace or knowing are FANTASTICAL to the folks just beginning to work with dying patients. They make marvelous stories at cocktail parties and really open up people's inner ears to deeper truths.

---

*Father Dn Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ, OSL, is the Chief Information Officer for Lighthouse Hospice Inc. He has worked in hospice care for 12 years. Tom is ordained in both the Greek and Russian Orthodox Church. He has written 8 books and over 40 articles. He lives in the Poconos with his wife, Glinda and two sons, Zachary Aidan and Josiah Gabriel.*

DOI: 10.5055/hm.2012.0000

For the people who have been tending the dying for years, these things are common. Somehow, they have shaped our understanding of dying and also taught us to listen differently to the things of life and living.

I will never forget a woman I visited who was dying of Alzheimer's disease. She was still ambulatory and really in the pre-decline phase of the disease. She was about two hours from my home and living in a facility. I received an intake form and decided I would leave to see her the next morning. I did not call to make an appointment as this facility was huge and difficult to get through to; I knew she would be there.

In the morning, I had trouble starting my truck. The battery seemed to be getting ready to die. I worked on it a bit, went in to clean my hands, and left a half an hour late. When I arrived at the home, I introduced myself to Angel, the patient, and she said: "Having car troubles today?"

I looked at her in complete disbelief. I really had no idea what to think. I was new to hospice work so I really did not have enough of these experiences under my belt to recognize them as commonplace. WOW.

The rest of the session was difficult at best. She kept changing the conversation and steering things around to nonsense. I still had not become comfortable working with folks who had dementia-related disease, so it

was driving me crazy. I was not sure whether I was supposed to pursue any of the conversations she started or just listen. I began to realize that the absurdity of our conversation reminded me a bit my early days of meditation practice.

There is a whole period of time at the beginning of meditation practice in which you have to become comfortable with the many shifts and variations of thought that arise and subside in a mind that is trying to become still. It is often called monkey mind because of the erratic nature of its swinging from cognitive branch to branch. Once I made this connection—well after this first visit—I was able to settle into the times I spent with her (and other patients) and overhear the process that was going on—despite the dementia.

Before I left, she looked me straight in the eye, and for a split second, she looked completely sane. She kept staring and said, "Don't worry. You'll get a house."

What she could not have known was that my wife and I had looked at a house the day before. We really liked the house and wanted to buy it until it was disclosed to us that there was a leaking oil tank in the yard. We had been all set to make an offer as this was not the first time we had looked at the house. When we heard about the tank, our hearts sank. We were so tired of looking at houses.

For the little old demented woman from north Jersey to have known, and offer me consolation was further out on any paranormal limb than I had ever gone or even dreamed people could go. There I was, thanking her, in utter shock; and feeling like she had somehow been spying on me. It was like the CIA had violated my privacy.

She was right; however, in two weeks, we had an offer accepted on a house around the corner from the leaking oil tank. We moved in while the patient was still alive. Within three months discovered that this house, too, had a leaking oil tank. Go figure. When I found out about the leak, I smiled and thought of Angel. I wondered if she knew that, too.

This sort of extra-sensory antenna is something that has come up over and over again in hospice work. How should we look at it, is there a way to bring some sort of order to the apparent chaos of its appearance, and is it a skill that we can hone in the nondying times of our lives? I am not sure.

I do believe that we can become much more perceptive in life than we are. I believe we can do this by opening up our inner awareness through stillness, meditation, and reflection. However, is there some veil or boundary that the dying cross and are able to come back and forth through just before they die.

In our Scottish heritage—and most of the Celtic experience—there are times that are called the THIN TIMES. These times are when there is a greater chance of communication between the spirit world and the physical plain. Things thin out around Halloween and again in the spring. In the mental health fields, we used to joke that things always got a little bit crazier around “full moons and holidays.”

We have all cared for dying folks who have pointed to or spoken with some disincarnate entity that was in the room, but out of our sight. Most of us have had encounters with people who knew things that they really could not or should not have known.

Perhaps dying people are able to become more familiar with

life. Just the same as when you can sense autumn's arrival because you have lived 48 of them already and sense or recognize the familiar pattern of prebrowning leaves. Maybe the idea of dying or just dying itself opens up some portal to being in touch with things that are going on and have been going on all around you.

I am saying all this, and pondering all this to get to one point and one point only. The dying, although they have many needs that we can assist them with—help them to accomplish before they die—really deserve to be listened to. The dying have something to teach us. The dying have something to say. As professionals who work with the dying, it is an ominous task before us to teach the people all around the dying to listen to what they have to say.

There is a lot of awkward posturing around death and around the dying. Because people do not know what to say or do, they avoid people or “do things around the dying” or “speak AT ‘dying’ people.” We are called to model the behavior of listening to the dying. If we take what they have to say seriously, then we will teach friends and families to become more comfortable with dying and the dying and just sit down and spend some time with each other.

Then, and only then we may all hear the valuable messages that the dying have to offer. The messages about how important love is, the messages of how central forgiveness is, and the countless stories of how much meaning we have had in each others' lives over the many days we have spent together.