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Lessons in Dying

January 14, 2007

By LIZ JANES-BROWN, Staff writer

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The main room of The Studio Maui in Haiku was packed with expectant human beings sitting on chairs, on cushions, leaning against the walls – waiting to hear about “Dying into Grace.”

The audience included Hospice workers, caregivers, those who recently lost loved ones and, since death is a part of life, those who were interested in their own process of dying. After all, we all had something in common; we are all going to die.

“Birth has come out of the closet in our culture,” said Ram Dass, spiritual leader and author and one of the presenters at the workshop, “And it’s about time death comes out of the closet, too.”

“Any life that doesn’t include death is half a life,” said the other presenter, Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Alaya Institute and the San Francisco Zen Hospice, established at the height of the AIDS epidemic.

The two men were able guides through the four-hour encounter. Ram Dass, who has worked with living/dying projects for some three decades, sat in his wheelchair smiling with inner joy and intermittently picking up his wooden prayer beads as he spoke. Frank Ostaseski with his white shock of hair, benevolent energy and a rich store of experience of working with the end of life process was spiritual yet practical.

“To care for someone who is dying is the hardest work you’ll ever do,” Ostaseski said.

It causes a person to face his or her own mortality, he went on, and shows how “absolutely precarious” life is, how precious it is, and that insight results in jumping into life with two feet.

“Contact with death ? causes kindness,” he said. “We should keep death as our adviser.”

Ram Dass, who began life as Richard Alpert, is a spiritual teacher who now lives on Maui after suffering a stroke in 1997. A major figure in our culture, he received his doctorate from Stanford University and was teaching at Harvard where he became friends with colleague Timothy Leary. The two began experiments with hallucinogens and were dismissed from the university. A borrowed mansion in New York became one of the centers of the counterculture of the ‘60s with devotees like Allen Ginsberg, the Grateful Dead and Ken Kesey.

In 1967, Alpert traveled to India and his life changed. He studied with Maharaj-ji, the man who became his guru and gave him the name Ram Dass, which means “servant of God.” His experiences in India with several teachers and the Hindu ideology of helping others led him to write the spiritual classic “Be Here Now.” He has written a



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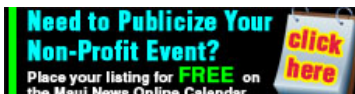
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total of 13 books in his lifetime including "Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying" and "Paths to God: Living the Bhagavad Gita."

Ram Dass told of the attitude surrounding death in India. "Death is an integral part of life there," he said. "Death is very much a part of the family structure."

He told of going to Benarus, the Hindu city of death soon after he arrived. It was full of wasted, ill people who carried a pouch of money to buy wood for their funeral pyres.

"I couldn't stand so much suffering," Ram Dass said. "I went back to the hotel and hid under my bed, this was so horrible."

Six years later, after studying with his guru, he returned to Benarus.

"I looked through the eyes of these people," Ram Dass said. "They were strong and they were looking at me with pity. They were in the city of dying ? They knew where they should be ? harmonious with this world."

In six years, he had gone from pitying the dying to being the object of their pity.

When someone dies in India, it's said "they dropped their body," he told the group.

"I was ashamed of my Western culture, they were so frightened of death ? that fear permeated our whole culture. The attitudes of our culture had made us suffer and I had gone into this work to help end suffering," he said.

"I have the same horror here," Ostaseski said. "We put our elders away in institutions so we don't have to deal with their pain.

"What's most important at this moment is that we know how to do it (die). We've forgotten what we know and so we become frightened."

Ostaseski continued with three truths to be considered.

"Dying is at its heart a sacred event. We tend to treat it as a medical event. The process of dying is a process of uncovering what was already there," he said. "The sacred is not seeing new things, but seeing things in a new way."

To be compassionate in the presence of suffering means bringing oneself to the process. "We have to value suffering," he said.

The second is "the willingness to free ourselves from roles."

There are many – the dutiful daughter, the kindly gentleman, the priest, the concerned friend. The roles distance us from reality.

You need someone willing to grapple, willing to hang out in unknown territory, Ostaseski said.

And the last precept is a "deep and abiding trust in the process of dying itself," he concluded.

He cautioned not to have any romantic ideas about dying. It can be a messy and chaotic process, at times frustrating, but the doorway to an awakening or a change as well.

He remembered his father's death in which he assumed the role of dutiful son. The roles disappeared quickly at the end.

Ostaseski's last memory was holding hands with his father as they watched a sunset.

"We sat soul to soul," he said. "When I walked out of his room for the last time, I felt privileged to see that shift in two human beings."

Ram Dass said he became quite good at visiting AIDS patients as a kindly older man but the soul connection came when he visited a man who had no family and was alone in the hospice. Ram Dass had

been unable to reach him.

"I opened the door and I said, 'How's your incarnation?' I looked at him as a soul, a being of spirit, not an AIDS case," Ram Dass said. "I was being an environment that let him see himself? We're so frightened of death, we hide behind our roles."

"There isn't any distance," he said about being with someone at the end of life. "Here we are and we're all dying – and you're going first."

"The ego stops at death, a sacred act which will end the ego," he said. "In this sacred moment you can go from ego to soul. ? Sitting at a bedside can be a soul meeting another soul. ? Souls are loving beings."

"We can lend the stability of our minds like caregivers give support with their bodies," Ostaseski added. "Dying is something that's happening. It's not the person. Know how to make boundaries, but know how to fall in love."

"Service at its heart is beneficial, if we leave ourselves out of the equation, if we stay present in the place of unanswered questions. We guide by listening. Let them lead."

The large group then divided into four circles to look at photographs of people who are now dead. All those pictured were under hospice care. The black and white images were of those near death – hugging loved ones, writing furiously, laughing, showing anger; one was of a woman who had died, the death poem she had written pinned to the sheet of her bed.

Those of us looking at the pictures were to focus on our bodies and find what elements drew us in and what elements caused us to pull away. The photos were passed around the circles at varying speeds until at the end they afforded no more than a glimpse before being handed to the next viewer.

Small discussion groups of three followed and finally members of the entire audience shared feelings and reactions with the entire room. Some spoke of the death of a loved one saying the photos reminded them of the process, some had comments about the photos themselves – what was inspiring, what was off-putting. The insights were personal, heartfelt.

"This afternoon we're all cracked open," said Ram Dass. "And we are cracked open to our compassion. Having compassion relieves their suffering and yours because it brings people together."

"It has to be okay with us that they're suffering. There's a value to it," Ostaseski said. "Stay with them, tell the truth."

"I have to remind myself, this is her death, not my death. I'm to be a loving stone, something to push against," said Ram Dass.

Remembering the many people he has been present with through the dying process, he said, "Every one of them has enriched my heart."

Following up on 'Dying into Grace':

"Dying into Grace" was presented by Hospice Maui and Ipuka i ke ao.

The afternoon was a benefit for Hospice Maui not only financially, but according to Greg LaGoy, director of the organization, aimed "to build a larger and larger community who help those at the end of their time here."

Some senior staff members of Hospice Maui have attended the Alaya Institute as a part of their professional/personal development.

Hospice Maui's mission statement:

Our purpose: To enrich our community by helping people make the most of the great gifts that preparing them for death can bring: compassion, insight, courage, humility, inspiration, confidence and growth.

Our work: Providing physical comfort and emotional and spiritual support for people who are terminally ill. Supporting and assisting their families, before death and while they are grieving.

To find out more about Hospice Maui, call 244-5555 or visit hospicemaui.org

To find out more about the Alaya Institute, log on to www.alayainstitute.org

To find out more about the hospice project Ram Dass helped develop in San Francisco, visit www.livingdying.org

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