

Actively Dying

The first time I heard the term “actively dying” was from the Hospice nurse attending my 19-year-old son Danny, whose life was being cut short due to brain cancer. It struck me then, and still does, because it seemed to connote action in the context of the loss of vital activities. I know the Hospice meaning is that the person is in the last days, moments of life. However, when you hear it referring to a loved one, the words almost have a reverence/mystery due to the seeming contradiction in terms. As difficult as it was, I acknowledged that my wonderful son was going to die. Hearing that he was “actively dying” made every moment more precious, and almost gave me the cues to say to him: “It’s okay, you can take your journey now”- to let him go, even at 19.

While I shared Danny’s almost twenty years in every way that I could, I never felt as alive with him as when he was “actively dying.” As sad as it was, the intensity of those days by his side, with very close family and friends, seemed to create sacred space in which I felt fully alive to the depth of life, especially the gift of my son’s life.

Danny died on October 31, 2007, Halloween, a day when we celebrate, mock, and disguise death, which is maybe as it should be because in some sense we are all “actively dying.” From the moment of birth, we are vulnerable to what gives as well as takes life. We should celebrate all the meaningful moments of our lives, because someday we may die suddenly or be “actively dying.” Either way, the gifts of our life and the lives of those we love and/or who love us will end. This does not have to be a maudlin preoccupation but a simple acceptance that leads us to appreciate each person and opportunity that comes our way. During the almost three years that Danny had brain cancer, he tried to continue his normal activities and, in the midst of these activities, he wrote songs, poems, sang, and played his guitar: www.dannyriley.com. One of his poems seems to share his awareness of dying:

**when im dead
and they write about me in retrospect
i dont want the writing to be about
my accomplishments
but rather
my loves.
all those i have loved
and all those who have loved me. –Danny**

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