

To Live

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"To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else."
Emily Dickinson

Four Lives: 2010

My friend Terri lives. My friend Randy lives. My friend Deanne lives. My mother Barbara lives. Living means different things and happens on different levels. It can be anything from just being alive, as in not dead, to experiencing everything possible in a lifetime, as in living life to its fullest. I think of the biological level: the heart beats, the blood flows, the liver works, the brain is busy. The physical level: the arms and hands and legs and feet move and work and take us from one place to another. The mental level: the mind is aware, holds and processes whole worlds, figures things out, helps us know right from wrong. The spiritual level: we contemplate and live the things of the spirit—understanding an eternal perspective, loving, serving, obeying a higher law. According to the Oxford dictionary, life is “the condition, quality, or fact of being a living person or animal . . . a condition of power, activity, or happiness . . . [a person’s] animate existence, viewed as a possession of which one is deprived by death; the cause or source of living, the animating principle . . . which makes or keeps a thing alive.”¹

For my friend Terri, living appears to be only on the biological level. She sits in a wheelchair during the day and is laid in a bed at night. She

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 8:910, s.v. “life.”

has the quality of being a living organism. Her heart beats, her blood flows, her liver works, but her brain has, for the most part, gone into remission or hibernation. She is not at home, so to speak. Her eyes, once full of direct gaze, smiles, intelligence, are blank; no more are they windows into her soul. Her body, though functioning biologically, is not *her* anymore. It has become a stranger to her and to her family. They love who she once was and care for her body, but she—the mother, wife, and friend—is not in attendance. Terri had a brain aneurism. After suffering two weeks of unremitting severe headaches, she returned to her teaching job, still suffering. One day after school, she walked into a colleague's classroom, speaking incomprehensibly. He rose to go to her as she babbled more sounds and then crumpled to the floor unconscious. That was seven years ago, and I have wondered many times over those years where Terri *is*—the essence of her. Is she beating with her mental fists against the closed windows of her eyes trying to get our attention? I saw her a couple of years ago at her daughter's wedding reception. She had a nurse attendant, who pointed out to me what a pretty dress Terri had on, then turning to Terri said, "She picked it out herself, didn't you?" Terri's face remained as it always is—blank, expressionless. It's a bit frightening to be face to face with someone you've known and have her look right through you. No, not even as much as that. She isn't looking at all anymore. Can she hear? I wondered again, where are *you*, Terri? What do you see through those eyes of yours?



For my friend Randy, living is much more than it is for Terri, but I don't always remember that. Randy lives on all levels except the physical. He is a quadriplegic. Four years ago, on a spring break trip to Hawaii with his wife, Carol, he was riding the surf close to the beach when a wave flipped him over onto his head and his neck broke. Randy was in his mid-forties, was a successful businessman with a lovely family of four kids. He is now in his late forties, is again a successful businessman, and still has a lovely family. But Randy can move only his head. His voice is not strong because some of the muscles he uses to speak—we use around one hundred muscles in the chest, neck, jaw, tongue, and lips to create speech—are not connected anymore to his brain. He is strapped into a wheelchair each morning after being lifted by a powered sling attached to the ceiling above his bed and carried to his shower. A nurse shaves him, dresses him, and gets him ready to go to work with his wife. They now run his insurance business together. I visited them several weeks ago at their office. As Randy was explaining something to me about the

policy, Carol reached over and scratched his eyebrow for him. A simple thing. Last month at church, I sat next to him during Sunday school. He asked me once to turn the page of his scriptures for him and then later to raise my hand for him because he had a comment to make. Simple things. But he cannot perform them anymore. He lives from the neck up. Randy told a friend of mine when they were discussing losses that he simply can't go back in his mind and run through the "what ifs" and the "if onlys" anymore. It's far too wrenching for him emotionally. But how often does his mind strive to lift that lifeless body from the chair and run and jump for joy? Even to lift his hand to scratch his own eyebrow? These little things are on a level he doesn't have access to anymore. But he knows he doesn't. Terri doesn't appear to know—even that she *can* lift her arms. But *knowing* he can't lift his arms may be the greatest blessing of Randy's life now. Why? Because these levels of living do not exist in equal proportions. Knowing, being aware of "the cause or source of living . . . the animating principle . . . which makes or keeps a thing alive" may rise above all the other levels of living as the one that means we *are*, we exist, and we know the reason why. Randy knows. Does Terri?



For my friend Deanne, all levels of living are slipping from her grasp. Biologically, she is dying. Cancers have attacked her breast and brain and bone until there is nowhere for her body to turn except to death. Yet she holds on to life. She is not ready yet to give over her "animate existence, viewed as a possession of which one is deprived only by death." In her forties still, confined to a bed now because she is too weak and ill to walk, chemo and radiation efforts now ended, she lives on. She called me last month to tell me she had not sent her letters to the women on her list for visiting teaching. "It's important," she said when I told her not to worry about it. "I'll do it next month." After her first brain surgery to remove the fourteen tumors, I went to visit her in the hospital. Her head was swathed in gauze, and she turned it very carefully on the pillow as she joked with us about her looks. Her humor has not left her throughout this more than ten years of surgeries and treatments. Thin as a stick, she came to church until she could not drive—her eyesight was failing—or walk. I wonder if she wants to welcome death because she knows where she is going next. I wonder if she is beginning to be aware of how earthbound all these life levels are—except the spiritual. But her life is *hers*, a possession she will not yet give up.



For my mother, life goes on at all levels, although she turned ninety-three in February 2010. Her hair is still brown with a bit of gray at the temples, her biological life is strong and healthy—blood pressure in March 105 over 70—and her mental and social and spiritual lives are not diminished by a little less than a century of living. She said, on her ninetieth birthday, “I cannot seem to grasp that I am *ninety*. It doesn’t seem like I could be that old.” She feels to be the same person she was at twenty when she wrote long letters home from college, filled with tales of sewing her own winter coat and going on field trips to the pueblos. Her eyes still see the same way they did seventy years ago—better actually, because she had cataract surgery recently and went around gleefully pointing out all the things she could now see without her glasses. Her mind thinks, her memory remembers, her feelings feel the same way they always did. She has, of course, grown in knowledge and experience and wisdom over those years, and that growth is reflected in her approach to life and living. But the little girl who had to wear glasses at age ten in 1927 is still in there. The young woman who went to college to have fun first and maybe learn something on the way is still in there. The mother who birthed and raised three children is still in there. She has access to all of these things, these eras of her life. She could, in her mind, experience again any of them if she chose. Her life is full. She is fulfilled in living. Hers is “a condition of power, activity, and happiness.”



So, all this said, what is living after all? From whence comes this “animating principle . . . which makes or keeps a thing alive?” Does it lie in getting up each day, seeing the sunrise, hearing the early-morning joy in birdsongs, walking to work, talking to others, sharing lunch, reading a good book, traveling to Brazil, loving and serving and moving and caring? Some of us lose the ability to experience all of these things. For those, enduring to the end takes on an aspect the rest of us can only guess at. Think of enduring the rest of your life without just one of the things in the list above. How could you do it? What sustains you, Terri, through the days and nights? Randy, with your HAPPI license plate, how often is it harder than you think you can bear to be without movement? Deanne, is the pain of the last decade worth your time on this earth? And my mother, what joy she must have in each day that she is able to live to the fullest—is her challenge just getting on to the next day? The answer may lie in that animating principle which I call faith. A principle that keeps us going, putting one foot in front of the other, one day in front of the others. There is no way for us to know all that life

is, all that it can be, because we will not experience everything there is to experience. We cannot and do not “know the meaning of all things” (1 Ne. 11:17). But we rely on faith, that principle of action and of power, which exists in all of us by birth, to take us up to and then on through the unimaginable trials—and joys—of living.

Perhaps what we can do is turn to Dickinson’s statement for the answer to our question, what is living all about? Consider the miracle of birth. I know, a trite phrase, but consider the spirit body finally enclosed within the boundaries of flesh. How does that happen? How do we become the combined, the two into one, of spirit and flesh? Is anything in this life more startling than this? Perhaps this very miracle, the one we speak of so casually and often, is the reason Terri and Randy and Deanne stay here. Stay in their bodies that seem so completely useless to them now. They are still able to view life as so startling and dear that they have no time for anything else but to live it. They don’t want to let go of the miracle of their lives, don’t want to let go until the last option has played out, until the final note of “Taps” has echoed and re-echoed from the hills, rising in ever fainter refrains into the stars.



Epilogue: 2015

Terri gave in to physical death ten years after suffering her brain aneurism. Ten years she lived inside her body, a body useful only for the housing of her soul. Hers must have been a release so filled with joy there could hardly be a containing of it.

Deanne did give up her life not long after I last spoke with her. I think she may have received confirmation from the Lord that she had fought the good fight and had finished her course.

Randy goes on, smiling, doing good with the help of his wife and friends, testifying of the gospel. I believe he counts fully and completely on the verse from “How Firm a Foundation”: “I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.”

And my dear mother, after finding out she had lung cancer two years after my father died, said to me with her wide, joyful smile: “This is what I’ve been waiting for!”

After all, it is such a personal thing, one’s life.