

Each of my dyings

I'm in a stage of life where I find myself praying the same prayer again and again.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Martha Park)

The Anima Christi is said to have been a favorite prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In it, Jesus is asked to “call” and “bid me come” when the hour of death draws near. In a contemporary reworking of the prayer, David Fleming makes a more expansive supplication: “On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.”

I prefer Fleming’s version. Of course I hope that I will know Christ’s intimate presence on my deathbed. But in the life I live now, I hunger for so much more. I need God to attend and enliven each of my dyings—and there are many. So many

endings before the Ending, so many farewells before the Farewell. On every dream, hope, wound, or wondering that needs to die within me, oh Lord, shed your light and your love.

I'm praying this prayer often these days. My father has dementia and is slowly becoming a person I don't recognize. My mother is a stroke survivor who has lost her hearing and much of her mental acuity. My parents are very much alive; I can sit next to them and hold their hands. I can listen to Dad's preacherly voice and smell the rose-scented lotion on Mom's skin. I am not, at this moment, facing an hour of death. But I am dwelling in the land of many dyings. I've started keeping track of them, because I want to notice any glimmer of light or love God chooses to send to these gravesides.

There's the dying of childhood. Not my literal childhood, but the comforting illusion that I am still the child in my relationship with my parents. For so long, they have been the grown-ups, the wise ones, the heroes I could depend on to come crashing in and save the world when push came to shove. Now our roles have reversed: my brother and I are the adults in charge of our increasingly childlike parents. So many deaths are nested in this reversal. I'm dying to my parents' immunity, immortality, invincibility. I'm dying to my fear of being the responsible one. I am coming alive to a new iteration of adulthood, in all of its risk and possibility.

There's the dying of the future. Specifically, the future I wanted and fully expected to enjoy, in which my parents remain sharp, strong, and healthy for many more years, long enough to enjoy their grandchildren's weddings, to bounce great-grandbabies on their knees, to travel across the country unaccompanied to spend holidays with me. I'm dying to the entitled assumption that our time together is mine to wrest and control. I'm coming alive to finitude, my parents' and my own. I'm awakening to the poignant graces of the present.

There's the dying of memory. My father is beginning to mix up his grandchildren's names. My mother is starting to repeat her stories. Their inner worlds are shrinking, losing color, going gray. All my life, I've taken for granted that my parents are the record keepers for the family, the repository of memories going back generations. I've assumed that I can draw the richness of the past from them like cash from an ATM. I'm dying to this assumption. I'm coming alive to a new vocation: the vocation of ancestor. I'm coming alive to the sacred art of remembrance.

There's the dying of a particular vision of wholeness, restoration, and healing. I'm realizing that my parents and I will not revisit—much less resolve—the deepest wounds and traumas from our collective past. As my mother's capacity to communicate shrinks, as my father's world grows fuzzy and disjointed, so too fades the possibility that we'll "really talk" someday. That I'll say the hard, jagged things and finally feel heard. That I'll elicit their explanations, their defenses, their apologies, and find beautiful, healing ways to put them to rest. That together we'll work our way toward authenticity in all the ways I long for. I'm dying to the clenched and self-protective heart of unforgiveness. I'm dying to my need for vindication, understanding, resolution. I'm coming alive to grace, which is only truly grace when it is unconditional, unmerited, and free.

"On each of my dyings shed your light and your love." Perhaps this is just another way of honoring Jesus' invitation to take up my cross and follow him. These days, I wonder how many crosses Jesus carried in his lifetime, how many dyings he endured before he shouldered that final instrument of death up to Calvary. Did he have to die many times to his family of origin—to his cocooned boyhood, to whatever vision of adolescence or adulthood his parents held out for him, to the safety and anonymity of being the carpenter's son rather than the Messiah? How many selves did he have to shed, how many versions of a preferred life did he have to surrender, before he conquered the grave once and for all?

This business of death and resurrection is supposed to be squarely in our wheelhouse as Christians. This is what we do. We plant our seeds in the ground, knowing they will crack open and die before new life will spring forth. We walk through the shadowy realms of death, trusting our shepherd to protect us from evil. We stand in the valley of dry bones and say, *Yes, I believe these bones will live.*

I believe all of this. I am also felled each time another dying presents itself in my life. Hence the prayer, spoken again and again: "Shed your light and your love." I cannot consent to die unless Christ calls and bids me come. I will live again only if each of these dyings—every small and singular one—is soaked in the love and the light of God, the perpetual giver of life.