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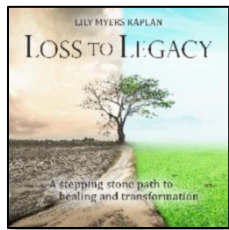
Enhancing Life by Embracing Death

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## Befriending Death, Loss and Uncertainty: A Loss to Legacy Map for Navigating the Coronavirus

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At Spirit of Resh Foundation, we envision a world in which people embrace death as a way of enhancing their lives and we believe that the coronavirus has initiated a moment in which this vision is more important than ever. The coronavirus is—for us individually and collectively—an initiation, should we choose to accept it.



The image on the cover of our recently published book, *Loss to Legacy* shows what we're involved with now. Death in the form of winter on the left and rebirth in the form of spring on the right. This is what an initiation requires. Death must precede rebirth, just as winter always comes before spring.

I had no idea, when writing the book, of the kinds of collective losses we'd be facing today. And I had no clue that we'd be living in a virtual reality—that we'd be confined to our own four walls. It's a confinement we can choose to relate to in myriad ways. I read something in the journal, *Lion's Roar*, that resonated with my own experience at the time. *"In a pandemic, self-isolation is called quarantine. In Buddhism, it is called retreat. From the cave of our home, like the meditators of ancient times, we can consciously kindle the lamp of compassion and connection."*

I propose that we consider looking at the coronavirus as a time of retreat, reflection, and revision or *re-visioning* or reordering of priorities. If we do so, then the *Loss to Legacy* stepping stone path is all the more timely. It offers a map, a healing path through loss. And loss is something we're all undergoing right now. We need help, as an entire culture, navigating these losses. The coronavirus is exacting many deaths, myriad losses, and much uncertainty. We are undergoing the death of treasured ways of life: safety, freedom, access to loved ones, groceries, or supplies, ability to travel, and our treasured independence to act in whatever way we choose. We're being called upon to move away from our sometimes necessary, yet sometimes narcissistic focus on ourselves. And it's no longer possible to rely on our habit of taking everyday resources for granted...to name just a few.

The key themes of the *Loss to Legacy* map can help. Its two key tenets are *acceptance of death* and the understanding that *loss has an initiatory potential*. To initiate is to surrender to one's true reality—beyond any denial, to accept that change requires a letting go, and to be open to previously unseen potentials. This means we must allow for a wide spectrum of responses including emotional turmoil and uncertainty. Initiation means to begin something anew. Initiation invites us to examine the many opposite forces we are may be experiencing, seeing each of them with new eyes or willingness to re-frame our experiences. We might consider that

angst or anxiety is asking us to focus on peace. That fear elicits our courage. Perhaps our sorrow invites us to hope, albeit, for something far different today than what we wanted last month. We may reframe aloneness into a time of sacred solitude in which we revisit what's most important. And perhaps the experience of disconnection, when looked at from a different vantage point, can awaken us to the inter-connectedness of all beings, what we all have in common—our vulnerability to these circumstances. With these opposites at our fingertips, we find ourselves face to face, each to our own capacity, with the question of what we will choose.

Today, life is uncertain. But in truth, it's always been so. In the past we've been able to pull the wool over our own eyes, pretending to have control. But now we are reminded of a deeper truth. We are not in control. This is something my now mother in law reminded me of when, on my very first Thanksgiving in her home, I stuffed too many celery stalks down the disposal. With a stopped up sink just before the rush of putting a meal on the table (and deep embarrassment rising red in my cheeks) she turned to me, grasped me by my shoulders and quoted John Lennon, who said, "Life is what happens when we are busy making other plans." It just so happens that our plans have been demolished. And maybe that's a good thing. Because, in spite of the fact that it may look *otherwise*, we are smack dab right in the middle of Life. We've been brought face to face with the reality that, no matter how much we wish it were different, no matter how much we want to control, mold, or fashion our lives in our own image—to suit our desires—we *are not in control*.

One tiny, microscopic cell, multiplying at an alarming rate has shown us that. Coronavirus is our teacher, giving us a lesson in humility, compassion, connection, and service to the greater good. It's a lesson that challenges us to accept change. To embrace loss and befriend death. Death is not simply death of one's physical being—we all go through many small metaphorical deaths throughout our lives. And this moment is one of those times. Coronavirus invites us to surrender our will.

Of course, we always have the option to resist or reject that lesson. To go about our daily lives glibly ignoring the news or the wisdom of the CDC. To blissfully deny that our lives have changed. To turn away from the greater good in egoic commitment to oneself, continuing to search for our next entertaining purchase or good feeling, holding to our treasured habitual ways of living, or hoarding supplies without concern for others. Or, most insidious, we can stay committed to maintaining the status quo. We can persist in demanding life to be as we want. We can pretend we have control. To do so is not only at our own peril—it is to deny our inherent vulnerability, to reject our inter-connectedness, and to rebuff the opportunity for growth that death, loss, illness, and now the coronavirus (with all its attendant social outcomes) offers.

What does death, loss, uncertainty and the coronavirus have in common? They are all great equalizers; we are each vulnerable to their universality. They level the playing field by pulling back the veil, revealing, *not* the Great Oz, but the humble, small, sometimes needy, other-times inspiring, always present, *inner self*. We are left, when confined to our own four walls, with ourselves. Hopefully with stillness and quiet we will begin to hear the voice of wisdom rising from within. In my opinion, we are being asked by this tiny, invisible force to listen to that voice,

then allow ourselves to be changed. To be initiated. To begin anew. Like with the death of a beloved, there is no going back. There is no more normal.

We are flooded with newscasters laying out what we need to do to return to the status quo. Cultural approaches bear upon us to seek a return to the old way, the old self, the old lifestyle. They prod us toward restoration of an economy that idolizes infinite growth on a finite planet. This is the opposite of initiation. But if I learned anything from the deaths of my family, one after the other, in a few short years, it is that there is no returning to what was. This, I propose, is the good news.

The Loss to Legacy path gives us a way of taking an initiatory approach to the coronavirus, going beyond surviving the individual and collective traumas or deaths, whether they include loss of a beloved, an identity, or way of life. There are Four Standing Stones marking the Loss to Legacy path of healing: Story, Reflection, Vision and Action. With two stepping stones linking each, the book offers practices and exercises for building a conscious relationship with loss, uncertainty, life, and death. Here's a brief synopsis of these four Standing Stones and how they invite us to engage with the unfolding outcomes of coronavirus that are determining how we should live *right now*.

The first Standing Stone is *Story*. When we allow ourselves to fully embrace the stories we've been given, we come to see that there is often more than meets the eye. Ancient mythologies show us this with engaging stories and symbolism that offers life lessons. Similarly, family stories tell us how we belong and what we value. When we turn our eyes and ears to our own stories through deep inquiry, we are able to broaden understanding of our experiences. The story we are given right now reveals many things to many people. To me it reveals that separateness is an illusion. That we are inter-connected in ways that are invisible to the naked eye. That our physical and social fabric is woven together as one. Our well-being depends on one another's actions and inactions.

The second Standing Stone is *Reflection*. As we unpack our stories, we begin to recognize what they've taught us—or are teaching us now. Are we being asked, by COVID-19, to live differently? To care for the earth in new ways? To care for one another in more heartfelt ways? Once we discover a new view from reflecting on our story, we're led to the third Standing Stone, *Vision*. Here we are asked to identify what we want to change, how our lives or communities might be bettered. Like you, I hear the skies are blue in Wuhan after being smoggy for decades. That the waters in Venice are running clear. That people are singing to one another from balconies. What values are waking in you during this time of physical-distancing? What do you want to stand for? In your home and in your community? Generosity in the face of hoarding? Taking your time instead of rushing through each day? The importance of reaching out to your people to tell them you love them? Expressing gratitude for what you have rather than lamenting whatever you don't? Whatever your new values are, bringing them to life is the fourth and final Standing Stone, *Action*, which is about living in a way that reflects what matters to you most. In this final phase of the map you are asked to practice new behaviors or adopt attitudes that exemplify those values, building what we, at Spirit of Resh Foundation, call a *living legacy*.

Spirit of Resh Foundation is dedicated to my sister, Lois and brother in law, Dave, whose lives with cancer inspired an abundant awakening to love and whose untimely deaths showed us the importance of appreciating life and living it fully. With the wisdom of a person bravely confronting illness and death, my sister often said, "This moment is all we have." It's true. We are here one day and gone the next. We live in a safe world and then we don't. We think we know the fabric of everyday, and then it's ripped out from beneath our feet. This moment *is* all we have. What will we do with it? Being grateful for life, living it fully in this moment (*wherever* you are, *whoever* is beside you, and *whatever* you're doing) is a way of becoming present, honoring the story you've been given, growing from it, choosing new actions that express the values it's revealed, and building a living legacy for those you love.

Ten years ago, as I was leaving the hospital after Lois's fifth and final brain surgery Lois said, tearfully, "I just don't know if I can go through this one more time." I knew in my heart that she was dying even though no doctor had said so. Quietly, I responded with the words, "Well, Lo, you'd better drink it all in, then." She was quiet. I asked her what she was thinking. She said, "I'm drinking you in." COVID-19 asks us to drink it all in. To be fully present. To listen for birdsong. To hug a tree when hugging a friend is off limits. To sing. To cry. To love ourselves. To love each other. To love our planet. To listen to our hearts for what matters and then live accordingly. To be initiated into a new view of life on this planet. Whatever you choose, I hope that you will, in this moment and all the big and small moments that follow, drink it all in.