

THIS MOST INTENSE PASSAGE

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Here we are, the supremely selfish Pluto in Leo generation, having to learn how to work with the immanent death and dying of our own Pluto in Cancer parents. The generation which gave us everything they never had and then felt puzzled and upset by our ingratitude, our supreme indifference to their sacrifice, is leaving us. One by one, our mothers and our fathers are undergoing the final initiation, the mystery of mysteries, the transformation so all-consuming that only those who are accustomed to moving between the worlds can follow them where they now go, or attune to their occasional return visits.

I speak here as a member of my generation, born between 1938 and 1958, when the planet Pluto was in the sign of Leo. We are the "me" generation, destined, among other things, to learn to deal with death differently.

Carlos Casteneda's sorcerer Don Juan gave us our first hint, back in the fabled '60s, of what was lying in wait for us: "Walk," he admonished, "as if death walks by your left side." We didn't know what he was talking about then, though the phrase resonated eerily, burrowed its way into the recesses of consciousness, and crouched there, waiting to be born.

Now we do know. We know very well. Birth pangs began in 1983-84, with Pluto's entrance into Scorpio, the years during which the specter of AIDS began to seep into public consciousness. Our former carefree expression of sexuality suddenly shut down, as the fear of AIDS loomed to haunt our entire generation, making each of our bodies a possible walking time bomb, and endowing us with an early preternatural awareness of death.

For seven years this awareness has been with us. For seven years we have been processing this altered way of being in the world, in which

we are not only aware of our inescapable mortality, but shrouded in shame. The ancient primordial guilt surrounding sexuality since the advent of the patriarchy has percolated up from the deep to infect our daily lives.

Many of us have already died. Most of us have friends, or friends of friends, who are gone. Some of these deaths were miracles in healing, regenerative love. Some were not. Some died in their denial, frozen into separation from both their families and friends.

Our continued encounter with Death is changing us. We are filled with a new feeling for the extraordinary preciousness of life. Our glimpse into what lies beyond opens us to wonder and awe. We want to learn how to move from this world to the next in a new way.

And now our parents are dying. They don't experience their process the way we do, or would like to hope to, if we were to be chosen to guide others by our example in this new/old how-to process of dying consciously, with grace.

Our parents' generation doesn't speak as we do or would like to be able to about death; indeed, they try not to speak of death at all. Death, for them--and for the culture at large--is viewed as the ultimate winner in the final inevitable battle. A battle which they fight with the same technological brilliance that they aim at military targets. A battle which, despite all their expensive and intrusive mechanical and electronic expertise, they know they will lose in the end.

We always knew we were different from them, special. They thought we were special and we agreed. They made life as easy as possible for us as children, and then chided us, later on, for our narcissism, our utopian idealism. In turn, we ridiculed their parochial values, their love of family and country, of Victorian hard work and moral codes. Indeed, we despised their values, and as Freud or Jung could have predicted, we were destined to live out their repressed unconscious sexual and other desires with sheer--and for a time, joyful--abandon.

Even so, our parents remained our own best audience. Leo must have its audience. Though we shocked them time and again with our exploits, and they pretended to "not want to hear about it," they lived through us vicariously, they followed our wanderings until

sometime in the early '70s, when our early utopian and revolutionary ideas began to transform. Slowly, we began to “take back our projections,” to realize that we do “create our own realities,” that indeed “thoughts are things.”

Our new (ancient) “metaphysical” assumption turned what we had thought of as reality on its ear. The usual cause and effect of science was thereby reversed. No longer was it all taking place “out there,” and no longer was it our job to be “objective observers” and to record it. Now we knew that whatever takes place out there is the effect of what is taking place in here, that the ancient saying is true: “In the Beginning was the Word.”

Our questions then became: “If we do create our own reality, then what really do we want to create?” This question gave us pause, and initiated a strange and subtle inward turning which then spiraled into something so entirely other, so interior that our parents literally didn't know what we were talking about.

So, in the last few years, they truly haven't wanted to hear about it because it sounds like nonsense to them, they literally can't understand. We have moved a long way from acting out their repressed unconscious. Our desires have mutated, we are now deeply recessed within a moving process which is yielding, little by little, a total transformation in our deepest values, values which determine the felt context within which we experience our lives--and our deaths.

We now speak to our parents from a foreign country, where they do things differently. We are living our lives in ways so foreign to their comfortable middle-class values that whatever common ground we all shared when we stopped acting out has long retreated into the safely bounded space of old family recall: massaging fond memories from our childhoods or theirs.

The generation we fought so long and hard against is the '60s and early '70s is dying. Leaving us. They were our best audience all along, even if much of the time they did throw eggs. They were the ones whom we felt most safe in decrying, in pushing against, as we tested our wings and launched ourselves, Icarus all, from their cozy, toy-strewn nests.

Our parents are dying, as in the nature of things. One by one and two by two they are abandoning us to our future, our fate.

We don't want them to go. What is Leo without the audience? Or, if they must go, then we want to turn them into mirror images of ourselves, to learn what we have learned, before going. Leo seeks ever to expand itself. Leo "adapts" to its environment through conquest.

The fact that this most natural phenomenon should be occurring just as Pluto travels through Scorpio, sign of death and dying, is no accident, and colors this final intergenerational scene with our current Leo/Scorpio struggle. [*Author's note: Pluto entered Scorpio in 1984 and will leave that sign in 1995. During this time period Pluto lies 90 degrees from where it was at our birth. In astrology, this angle is said to be "critical": it signifies a challenge: to integrate the qualities of Leo with those of Scorpio. Our generation has named that challenge "empowerment," a word which entered the vernacular precisely as Pluto entered Scorpio.*]

Our encounter with the death and dying of our contemporaries during the 1980s has moved us. We have been changed. If Leo lives dramatically, so, too, would be the way Leo dies. Death as the final drama, the grand climax. No longer tragedy, but glory, ecstasy, better than LSD, the ultimate transcendence, release. We know this. We know this in our hearts. Our hearts are open, they have been opened by death. The death of our friends. The death and dying now, of our parents.

Only, in the case of our parents' dying there is a lesson for us, the same lesson we have been learning all along and over and over, since we are so stubborn: our parents must be allowed to die on their own terms. Our drama is not theirs. Our need for conscious dying is an evolutionary advance, something not in their generational lexicon. Of course there are exceptions, and when such miracles do come true we ought to pray we have learned another Leo lesson, that of humility. Holding their bony, fragile hands, we weep with love and gratitude. Tentative, trembling, those hands reach for us, not just as their biological children, but as their spiritual inheritors.

We are the sons and daughters of a generation destined not to know us, but they have loved us, all along, in their own Pluto in Cancer way. We were destined to learn how to love them as well, not for

who we want them to be, but for who they are. People for whom death has a different cast than it does for us. People for whom death is death, and that's it. Beyond is either heaven or hell, or nothing.

Ah, we cry, feeling this in them, when feeling their fear, their denial, their resignation. We don't want them to suffer so. We want to help them be at ease, at peace. Yet, in our wanting, we create discord through force. We want them to be happy. We make them unhappy, and ourselves too, in our attempts to heal wounds which are not ours, which are a part of the otherness of their lives that we must acknowledge, and honor, sooner or later, in life or in death.

This is hard. It's hard not to try to force another to consciousness of larger life when we know it is their unconsciousness which makes them suffer so.

As our parents attempted to control us in youth, so do we, in the remnants of our own unconsciousness, sometimes mirror that back to them in their dying.

As they attempted to prevent us from expressing the extremes of our youthful exuberance, so do we now attempt to prevent them from dying on their own terms.

We want them to die consciously, and with grace. We wish them a beautiful death. As usual, they foil our attempts to "do what is best for them." Riddled with cancer, paralyzed by stroke, tripping off into the la-la-land of Alzheimer's, they too are "doing their own thing" in trying to "hold on to life" for as long as possible, no matter how paltry or how impoverished in spirit.

As I witness my contemporaries going through agony with dying parents, I notice how we attempt to bring to them what we have learned from Pluto. We want to teach them how death and life are intertwined, how we have not only one life to live, but many, how the greatest challenge of life is to die a conscious death, to sail through this most intense passage with awareness, to voluntarily decide when and where to pass from this more limited dimension to the other side, its promise of limitless bliss.

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting.*

*And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And now in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.*

--Wordsworth

Yes, we know this, and we rejoice. We are all one in the larger reality of Spirit. And soon our parents will know too, and they too will rejoice. We do not have to teach them. We have only to release them.

A friend tells me of some friends of his. This spring when their baby was born, their other child, three years old, asked to spend some time alone with the new baby. At first they ignored his request, but he persisted. Finally, after installing a planned intercom in the baby's room, they allowed the three-year-old in with the newborn, and settled down to hear what went on.

"Baby," they heard their little boy whisper, "teach me about God again. I'm beginning to forget."