

How to Recover the Lost Art of Dying Well: What Kara Tippetts Taught Us

[A Holy Experience](#)

She'd said it brave into the camera, the liquid of her heart brimming like light in her eyes:

“I feel like I’m a kid at a party, whose Father said it’s time to leave and go Home already.....”

And I am not afraid of dying — I just don’t want to go.”

Her wondrous little boy, Lake, had curled into her in bed and he had looked into her eyes and whispered: “**I don’t want you to go...**”

Kara hadn’t wavered, [she was 38 years old and the mother of 4 children, dying of cancer, and she hadn’t looked away](#) — She nodded and stroked his cheek with the palm of her hand, like she could etch her love right into his grief.

I had choked it out last night before I turned the last light out:

“I feel like I am a kid still left at the party — and I’m at the window watching her go... watching the life of the party go.”

The strange hush about things now, in the wake of her really going, feels like a lingering holy.







“Death is the mother of beauty,” Wallace Stevens wrote.

I don’t think I agree with him, but I wonder if death gives a frame to our life on this side of forever? I wonder if death is this gold frame, the gilded boundary around every life that makes it its own work of art. Without death, would our lives lose its very shape?

The frame around life, the death boundary around life, makes us appreciate every life as art.

We are in awe of breathing, of the gift of being, because it’s fleeting.

We love life more, the more we realize all this lovely life is transient.

[Before I flew to Iraq a few weeks ago](#), I sat with Kara’s words, read them over and over again until I memorized them and they began to form me, words Kara told her Jason when they sat at the edge of the ocean together one last time:

“I tell him it won’t be any time before we are reunited — [but for the mortal it feels impossible to understand the close distance of eternity.](#)”

For the mortal, it feels impossible to understand the close distance of eternity.

I tell Kara I will sit with this, fly with this.

And Kara tells me: “I will be praying for your travels — There is so much that makes us finite, *but the gift of wonder we have been given over the infinite is amazing.*”

Kara wrote me and told me — **We must always have an imagination for the grace that will meet us.**

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She told me: *Safe travels, friend.*

Kara taught us all that: How to have an imagination for the grace that will meet us, how to unwrap the gift of wonder over the infinite, all this that has no finite end — *how to travel well, right through to the end...to the end that ushers us into the beginning forever.*

[Kara had said that:](#) “**When you come to the end of yourself, that’s when something else can begin.**”



What does it matter if we know how to live well — *but not know how to die well? Especially when dying is our last act of living here?*

Our kids ask each other that sometimes, ask us that: ***“How do you want to die?”***

(Nobody gets to avoid that question— we are all 100% destined to die.) It’s a question we should ask from our pulpits, across our tables, on our pillows staring up in the dark, feeling the length of the night’s quiet.

One of our boys always answers the same: “I want to die quick, die painlessly, die in my sleep.” My father tells me often, he wants to die without being a burden.

It’s painfully poignant: **We want to die any way that we keeps us from knowing that we’re actually dying.**

In The Book of Common Prayer in the Great Litany, there’s this prayer that prays the opposite, “Save me from all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence, battle, and murder; *and from dying suddenly and unprepared.*”

It used to be that people feared a sudden, unprepared death, because they feared meeting God sudden and unprepared.

Now, we only fear death —

because we don’t fear God.

* * *

Turn on any street corner, walk through any airport, sit on the edge of any hospital bed, and you can see the glorious wonder of it:

All the faces of humanity carry the image of God.

What if deciding to end a human life is somehow the desecration of God’s image?

What if a human life is not only a gift of grace right till the end – but is a *reflection of God’s face right till the end?*

What if we are not at liberty to end or destroy human life, no matter how noble the motive, because all of life is impressed with the noble image of God?

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None of us get out of life alive.

And in everything in life — *we have to learn*. [People who live well, teach us the art of living well](#). And people who die well, teach us the art of dying well.

We needed someone to show us how and Kara taught us how to die.

Kara recovered for us the lost art of dying well.

[Because she'd recovered the art of living well](#) —she had an imagination to trust that the love and beauty she had found in life would be the love and beauty that would meet her in the end.

Kara taught us to live is Christ and to die is gain — *and she didn't mean that as cliché, she lived it as conviction.*

Kara taught us that:

In our efforts to terminate suffering — too often we can be forced to *terminate the sufferer* — when we were meant to *liberate* the aloneness of the sufferer, by choosing to *participate in the sufferings* — choosing to stand with the suffering, stay with the suffering, *let the suffering be shaped into meaning that transcends the suffering.*

The staggering truth is: **Suffering is never a meaningless waste of your life, but a meaningful way through your life.**

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Sometimes the most painful chapters of our lives — *are the most meaningful chapters of our lives.*

Suffering doesn't have to destroy our ultimate life purpose, but can ultimately achieve our purpose in life.

The word “suffer,” it comes from the Latin that literally means to ‘bear under’ — suffering is an act of surrender, to bear under that which is *not* under our control — *but beyond our control.*

That is why suffering is an affront to an autonomous society:

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And for many of us, maybe that can be too much to bear? **More than we can't stand physical suffering** — *we can't stand not having unequivocal control.*

And that's what suffering does:

Suffering quietly begs us to *surrender* — so we can win a greater wisdom, a deeper strength, a closer intimacy.

Suffering says we cannot bear under this cross alone — *we can only bear it, if we can bear depending on others.*

If we can bear depending on Him.

Kara suffered and chose to bear under that which was beyond her control — *because she knew under her were the everlasting arms of the One who was in control and He would never let her go.*

[She chose to bear under the suffering](#) — *because she humbly chose to bear depending on others.... being a community, being a body, being human beings who belong to each other and will carry each other as much as humanly possible.*

If suffering is about bearing under — suffering is a call for us all to be a community to stand together and carry the weight of bearing under — only to find that we are all being carried by a Greater Love.

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And medicine is not a substitute for presence.

Medicine is about offering us care till death, not about curing us from death; Christ is about carrying our cares *through death* and being *our only cure of death.*

Kara taught us that: **Perhaps one of our key life tasks is not to avoid suffering — because we don't want to *avoid the gift of more God* that we can receive in the midst of suffering.**

Where there is suffering, there is God. And where there is God, there is redemption.

God isn't only passively with us in our suffering; God is proactively with us in our suffering, redeeming the weight of the suffering — *into the weight of glory.*

Kara's brave smile won us over:

Dying doesn't have to be a tragedy — *if we have avoided the tragedy of living for the wrong things.*

[Since Kara wrote her story here, her open letter regarding “death with dignity”](#) — I have leaned in and listened to a thousand stories and turned it all over countless ways and I am left with this:

The only way to ever really die with dignity — is to have lived with dignity.

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It's our living well that determines our dying well.

Kara sang with her babies and loved them large and relentlessly beyond the limits of herself, and was present and insisted that suffering didn't mean the absence of goodness but rather the presence of God, and she fought to stay tender and keep a soft heart and let the echo of her laughter live long in all their souls....

No one wants to die; [life is a luminous gift that we get to take with unabashed joy instead of taking it for granted.](#)

But the gifts of life and living are not life's ultimate good.

Friendship with the Giver — friendship with God — is the ultimate gift that forms and transforms how we live and how we die.

When we learn what it means to keep company with God, we learn how to leave the company of earth and we learn how to live into our dying well — right into the company of forever.

Kara's miraculous life whispered the miracle to all of us:

There is meaning around all of us. We could stop and feel the humming peace of something sacred in our veins, enlarging our lungs.

Even in the darkest places — look for it, feel along for it — there is the light of Christ's graces.











Kara is part of a transformation, our transformation. *Loss is always transformative.*

Loss is our air; we, like the last falling flakes of snow, are always falling toward the waiting earth, but most of the time we try to forget this. The beauty that is Kara, she remembered — *and taught us how to fall into His arms.*

I had told Kara once that I didn't want to say goodbye to her — *I only wanted to say "Soon! Soon!"*

Kara had said to me: *"I like that — soon."*

She had said that too: ["What better way could I spend my last breaths than in thanksgiving?"](#)

And I stand today at the window and remember this, on these first newborn days of spring.

While Kara escapes winter, and crosses our minds and hearts like that robin that's a fluttering of wings just past the edge of our eyes: singing of lovely things coming, coming — just before it flies away, lovely and gone.

Just before we too will soon feel His warming Love directly on our faces —

soon, soon.

