

Life As It Is

Episode #3 with Barbara Becker

“Accepting Death to Live More Fully”

September 22, 2021



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Barbara Becker: “I have learned that being open to death is a powerful way to learn about living. That when we stop pretending we will live forever, a certain tightness begins to loosen. Slowly, as we give ourselves permission to relax the vise grip we use to try to control our circumstances, a sense of freedom emerges from within. Though little may have changed on the outside, and loss will continue to be our companion, our internal landscape is renewed. Just as we will cherish ourselves more, we will cherish others more as well. Sometimes, as the great masters have taught, we have to die before we die if we want to truly live.”

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. You’ve just heard writer and interfaith minister Barbara Becker reading from her new book, *Heartwood: The Art of Living with the End in Mind*. When her closest childhood friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Becker set out on a quest to live a year of her life as if it were her last. Drawing from a variety of wisdom traditions, Becker pursued the questions of what it means to be mortal and how turning towards death can allow us to live more fully. This journey eventually led her to train as a hospice volunteer and interfaith minister, accompanying patients at the bedside and helping families make sense of their loss.

In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Becker to discuss some of the Buddhist teachings that help her turn towards death, the power of ritual in coping with loss, and how the pandemic has changed the way we grieve.

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James Shaheen: I’m here with Barbara Becker, a writer and interfaith minister, and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Barbara. Hi, Sharon.

Barbara Becker: It’s great to be here.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi there.

James Shaheen: So, Barbara, we’re here today to talk about your new book, *Heartwood: The Art of Living with the End in Mind*. First, can you talk about the title? What is heartwood?

Barbara Becker: Heartwood is a metaphor that I discovered while walking through an old-growth forest. Inside the pillar of every tree is the durable, strength-filled part of the tree around which the growth rings grow. But what most people don’t know about heartwood is that it’s inert. It’s dead. It no longer participates in the flow of water and nutrients up and down the tree. I love this because it turns out we as people are a lot like the trees and a lot like heartwood. The people who we have loved and lost form the core, the essence of who we are, and our growth grows around that memory.

James Shaheen: In the introduction, you offer your own definition of heartwood. You write “a reminder to embrace the inseparability of life and death, the growth rings and the heartwood...a message of wholeness.” Can you say something about this message of wholeness and inseparability?

Barbara Becker: I think in our culture, we view death as an ending. We will never see this person again. That is physically quite true. But there is a sense of wholeness that develops when we begin to take in those lessons of mortality and we wrap them into our lives and we use them to expand our own growth rings and to just grow into the most fulfilling lives that we can

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possibly live.

James Shaheen: And this book emerged out of an experiment where you decided to live a year of your life as if it were your last. Do you want to say something about the lessons you learned from that experiment and what that experiment was like?

Barbara Becker: Sure. When my earliest childhood friend, whose name was Marisa, turned 30, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was stage IV, and she knew she didn't have a lot of time to live. But Marisa lived that time with such beauty and intention. I was incredibly anxious during that time. I would find myself up at three in the morning every day thinking about my own mortality, about Marisa's, about my kids', my husband's. I really wound myself into a tight ball thinking about death. But Marisa went to Italy between chemo treatments. That was her family's ancestral home. She spent quality time with her own friends and family and really did what she could in the remaining time that she had. And I wondered what it would be like to live my life as if I had a year left to live. I had really been influenced by the saints and sages throughout the ages, from the Prophet Mohammed to the Buddha to the Stoic philosophers like Marcus Aurelius, even to modern-day people like Steve Jobs, who said that you really can find a gift in the end of your life.

So I took that on: what would it be like for me to live as if I had a year? I went on a meditation retreat, I planted flowers in this very sooty, shady spot under the Williamsburg Bridge in New York City, and I spent that kind of deep time with family and friends that took on a quality that had been unlike any I had experienced before. While it is hard to maintain that 365-day attitude when the time period is over, I do feel that it gave me a new lease on life.

James Shaheen: That reminds me, a friend of mine, who's a childhood friend just as Marisa was to you, died in 2019, and he likewise had a bucket list. We went to Italy together, we went

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upstate together, we went to lots of different places together, and I remember kind of committing to continuing to live in that way, but it fades.

Barbara Becker: It does fade, which is why some of the Buddhist practices, I find, are quite helpful in terms of taking them on in a more daily way. I recently studied the *Satipatthana Sutta* with Bhikkhu Analayo, and we did the contemplations on death. We worked our way through body sensations until we realized that at the core of our being, much like the heartwood of a tree, is our skeleton. To be aware of your skeleton is a subtle but important practice.

James Shaheen: Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: You write that you grew up in a home that was frequented by a ghost, and as soon as I saw that, I thought, “Ooh, I did too.” In many ways you were surrounded by death as a child. My mother died when I was nine. I went to live with my father’s parents, and they were Eastern European immigrants with their own cultural influences, and they decided the kindest thing to do for me was just not to mention my mother again, and so I had tremendous conditioning about death. I’m curious what you would say about how your own upbringing influenced how you related to death.

Barbara Becker: I think my earliest upbringing was fundamental in terms of how I think about mortality. When I was just in third grade, I was snooping around in my father’s belongings. He was out for the day, and my mom was out, and I discovered his wallet. Inside was a photograph of my mom, and behind it I could see the frayed edges of another photograph, which I plucked out, and there was a picture of a woman I had never seen before. I had no idea who she was.

Just as I stood there with my mouth open, my mom reentered the house and caught me in the act. I demanded in my young way, “Who is this?” She revealed that my father had been

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married before he married her and that his first wife had died tragically in a boating accident shortly after their honeymoon. She was pregnant at the time. Her name was Maureen, and my parents revealed more and more of the story about her in age-appropriate tidbits. When I expressed curiosity, they would give me a little bit more information.

But Maureen really did have a presence in our home. I never stopped snooping, as it turns out, and I discovered that she and my dad had written this beautiful treasure trove of love letters, and my father kept those, and I, of course, read all of them when they were not home. I really just understood that this woman who had died had never fully left. In a sense, Maureen was our family’s earliest heartwood.

Sharon Salzberg: Do you think it’s informed the way you speak to your own children about death or about loss of any kind?

Barbara Becker: It does. In the course of writing *Heartwood*, both of my parents became ill. My dad had Alzheimer’s disease. He had been a neurosurgeon in his life, and it was really hard to watch a man whose practice was the brain have his own brain unravel before us. And my kids had a lot of questions about that. We had a lot of anticipatory grief, knowing that at some point we would lose him just as we were losing him slowly. So we talked about that a lot. We talked about our feelings about my father and the sadness that we felt and also how he might be feeling.

When it came time for my mother to die—she died just a few months after my father—we gave our sons the option of coming and being at her bedside, and they came right away, but as soon as they saw her failing body, they kind of ran out of the room. My husband and I went to be with them and to tell them that they could take their time, they could stay in another place, or they could come back into the space with us. But I think it’s a moment-by-moment decision, how to talk about and be present with death with young people.

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Sharon Salzberg: There are really so many kinds of loss as you write about, including those that are often much less openly discussed, like loss of pregnancy and miscarriage. I’m wondering about your experience of speaking and writing so openly about your own miscarriages.

Barbara Becker: I had two miscarriages, one between each of my children. When I had these miscarriages, we just did not talk about miscarriage in this society. I mean, this was about 20 years ago. It wasn’t all over social media. I mean, there really wasn’t social media. We were completely silent about this kind of loss, so much so that I hadn’t known that my own mother had lost a pregnancy very late in the process. And as time went on, I found out that that was the story of both of my grandmothers as well and the story of my great grandmother who died in childbirth with a child after my grandmother.

This long chain of interconnected loss I was completely cut off from because we do isolate ourselves in silence. October 15 is the national day of pregnancy and infant loss, and I decided to put it up on Facebook years later. I decided to name the daughters that I had lost, Arden and Adele, and I was surprised because in the comments so many of my friends, men and women, wrote the names of their own losses, and I think we all needed that space to finally say what had happened. There’s such community in loss, and it comes sometimes as a great relief to just know that what we experienced is a common occurrence and that we’re not alone.

Sharon Salzberg: So after your first miscarriage, you signed up for a meditation retreat. I’m curious about the nature of that retreat and how it might have changed your relationship to loss.

Barbara Becker: Yes, I was at the Insight Meditation Society, right next door to you, Sharon, and I was aware of the mindfulness movement writ large, but I wasn’t deeply aware of Buddhism at that point in my life. I would say that retreat was a game changer. I had the sense that I really needed to walk towards the loss I had experienced and the hardship rather than run away from it,

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and I couldn't think of a better way to do it than to go on a meditation retreat.

So at that time, my mind, of course, was like everybody's mind, like monkey mind jumping all over the place, even reliving experiences of the miscarriages and the procedure to empty the contents of my uterus. Everything—all the gore, the heartbreak—was being relived. It was during that time that I spoke to one of the teachers who gave me the important guidance of understanding that this was OK, but the real key to it all was to watch it without judgment. And it was the very first time that I had that space of compassion towards myself.

I felt like doors opened during that time. I sometimes think that it's the hardships of our life that bring us closer to the big understandings, and it has now been 25 years that I've been practicing, and I really give thanks to Arden and Adele, the children I never had, for bringing me to the dharma.

Sharon Salzberg: You know, I've written so much and thought so much about the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and the stories others tell about who we are. But listening to you, I'm thinking a lot about the stories we don't hear and the stories we don't tell and what an issue that is, what a challenge that is because it's whole parts of life. And I think the consequence is that we do feel very alone.

Barbara Becker: I think that's absolutely right. During COVID, as an interfaith minister, I performed some ceremonies at Heart Island, which is the potter's field of New York City. There were burials happening there every day for people whose bodies would be unclaimed. Talk about people whose stories are not told. Often these individuals have family members overseas, or there was no way to even know their names. So I think this is where ritual comes in and the importance of holding space for people whose lives we might not know that much about. It is important to commemorate them all.

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James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned, or Sharon mentioned, stories that aren't told, and one of our writers, Mindy Newman, wrote about miscarriage and the fact that it wasn't talked about and that often women sat with it alone and had nowhere to take it or talk about it. When we published that, the response was immediate. So many people, so many women and men wrote about the loss that they felt and they didn't feel there was really a proper place to discuss it. Many people were dismissive: “Oh, that's nothing.” Some of them wouldn't even hear, which was very hurtful to them. But you also turn to a Japanese ritual. Do you want to talk about that?

Barbara Becker: There is a practice in Japan, where I had lived for a while after college, called *mizuko kuyo*, which is a ceremony honoring the water children. The idea is that we are very much of the water, from conception to bathing in the womb waters to being a very flexible little baby, and then over time we solidify and become hardened adults. In Japan, there are often ceremonies using the bodhisattva Jizo, who is a being who has decided to come back to life for the benefit of lost children and travelers and to guide them into the next realm. So you'll go to temples, and you'll see all of these little Jizo statues where women have brought the image to the temple and even dressed them up in little outfits and treats. They symbolize their losses, whether that's from abortion or miscarriage, stillbirth or a young child.

At the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care one year, we did a *mizuko kuyo* ritual by folding origami cranes in honor of all of our losses. It was such a moving experience. There were Jizo in the room, and there were also these cranes that we individually folded. I went with my husband, Dave, and we each folded one, one for each of our children, and the act of slowly creasing and uncreasing this little piece of paper brought focus and attention to the loss we had experienced years before. There was a lot of silence and a lot of tears in the room that day, and even to this day, those little paper cranes are strung up on strings and hang across the entrance to the zendo, and it's another reminder of how the dead are truly still a part of our life.

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James Shaheen: You talk a lot about ritual. This is one of them, but you also write about ceremonies of bearing witness, memorials, monuments, and spaces themselves that can hold grief. Could you speak to the power more generally that ritual provides in coping with loss?

Barbara Becker: I think the primary benefit of ritual is that it slows us down in a world that is moving at warp speed. It invites us to be quiet and to be still. I've had the privilege of participating in rituals in many different cultures. One that I wrote about a bit in the book is a ritual I participated in with Lakota elders at the cemetery for the Wounded Knee Massacre. Every year, elders come together to commemorate the losses of elders who were killed by US cavalry. This happened well over a hundred years ago, but what they are doing is they are calling forth these names and honoring the people who are really at the heart of their tradition.

Interestingly enough, I learned that there was a massacre site near the place I live on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was a place where an indigenous encampment was happening and the Dutch officers during that time came and slaughtered men, women, and children. This was never commemorated before. So taking an example from Wounded Knee, I took a Muskogee elder who lives on the Lower East Side over to the massacre site with me, and he guided me and a couple of other people in laying down tobacco and honoring the people who had been killed.

I think that these things are important. It teaches us that we are connected through time and place. That elder tells me that when he goes out and looks at the stars at night, he sees them as the campfires of the ancestors. To be that connected to a sense of history and deep time changes us on an elemental basis.

James Shaheen: You know, one of the reasons this podcast came about at all, actually the primary driver, was Sharon's question, "How are people getting through the pandemic?" Not famous or well-known people, but just people. One of the things that we talked about early on

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was how are people coping with not being able to gather when they lose a loved one? They've found ways. But how do you see the pandemic changing the way we grieve collectively in the wake of loss?

Barbara Becker: There's so much loss with this pandemic that is both the loss of human life and the loss of homes for many people, of jobs, the loss of unemployment, the loss of my son's high school graduation and prom. There are so many ways that we need to grieve as a society, and we're still not done. My dear aunt Beverly, who I wrote about in the book, died of COVID during the pandemic, and my final goodbye to her was on the telephone. I could hear her raspy breath, and my brother and I guided her with a sort of gentleness and ease. Taking the idea of the ancestors, we reminded her of my parents, who she loved dearly, and how they were somehow, in essence, around her as she died so she didn't feel so alone.

But I have to say that Lincoln Center did an incredible memorial service with Wynton Marsalis to honor people who had died. He did a traditional New Orleans-style funeral dirge, which is a very upbeat jazz composition, and across the screen were names of people who had died, hundreds every week. I think that music and the arts have played an important part in being able to commemorate, even when we're not able to gather face to face.

I think of small rituals that individual families have done, sitting around the fire pit out back, telling stories of loved ones. I think it's important to pause. We're so eager to get over this and to jump into the next phase. But slowing down a bit and finding the ways that speak to us is critical.

James Shaheen: So last year you participated as an interfaith minister in a virtual memorial service for New Yorkers who had died of COVID. How did you find that? Did you feel that was effective or cathartic?

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Barbara Becker: I have been trained as a disaster chaplain for the city of New York, and as part of that, I've been asked to participate in some memorial services. They're interfaith services because we are there to represent all of the many, many traditions of a very diverse city, and I think the services have been extremely meaningful for people who both participate as ones who have lost people but also for us. There's a very high rate of depression among chaplains and ministers and rabbis and leaders of many traditions because they are dealing with so much loss, and they often don't have a forum in which to talk about it.

In some ways, I feel like some of that benefit has transferred right to the people who are leading services so that they can turn around and offer comfort to their congregations. One minister I know lost 44 congregants to COVID. He serves an underserved community very vulnerable to the virus. And wow, imagine that, to be the person that everyone is looking towards in a community with so much loss.

James Shaheen: So, Sharon, have you been asked to participate in virtual memorials at all?

Sharon Salzberg: I have participated in virtual memorials. I mean, that's sort of the nature of our time, isn't it? Virtual weddings also, but definitely memorials. I was really struck when you said we have to grieve. My own sense and acquaintance with how difficult that can be for us because of all kinds of conditioning. I remember the time when somebody that I knew more or less distantly got ill and ultimately died, and people around them started behaving very badly. They turned on one another, and it was not a good scene.

I was talking to a friend sort of puzzled, like, “What's that about?” And she said, “Don't you understand? Everybody's grieving, and we don't know how to grieve.” And I think that is such a loss for us as people. I also know that you began working as a hospice volunteer, and sometimes the people I know, my friends, or when I've gone in to teach different groups of hospice volunteers, sometimes there's a strange radiance about these people. There's some

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confrontation or there's some opening that is very impressive. I'm wondering if you can speak about what led you to the decision to do that and something of what you've seen, what you've learned. Have you been surprised by anything?

Barbara Becker: In this form of going towards death rather than away from it, I decided to become trained in how to be with the dying. I participated in a program with the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care and was placed on a hospice floor at Bellevue Hospital, which is our largest public hospital in New York City. Every week, I would visit patients and have visited nearly a thousand patients over time. But I remember those earliest days of feeling completely intimidated by being in that space, by taking on all of that grief.

I remember some of the best advice came from my teachers of that program who said, “The real trick is to meet people where they are now. You might think you go in there with all of these ideas, existential thoughts, and the dying person will really want to engage in them with you. But they might really just want to watch Jeopardy. And if that's what they're doing, just pull up a chair and watch Jeopardy with them.” So it actually turns out to be a lot simpler. When we get our thoughts all tangled up in how to do this right, we're sort of missing the point, which is to just be thoroughly present and truly to meet people where they are at that moment.

That might look, as you said, really messy, full of doubt and fury. I once encountered a hospice patient who was just so angry, he actually demanded that I leave the room. It's sort of a rite of passage that hospice volunteers and chaplains and social workers talk about all the time, where we are the ones at the bottom of the totem pole. Nobody's going to tell the doctor to leave the room, but they absolutely will say that to a hospice volunteer or somebody they think is lower on the totem pole. It's a rite of passage to not take that personally, to really begin to understand what it's like to lose control, what it's like to be at the end of your life.

Sharon Salzberg: Do you think that work has changed how you approach your day-to-day life?

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Barbara Becker: It has. I would tell you that I feel more present to the everyday goodbyes. I just sent my kids off for the day, and I will never again just be on my computer and sort of yelling “goodbye” over my shoulder because we don’t know. We don’t know what we have in store for us at any moment. I learned from Maureen and my father and her accident that accidents happen. Long illnesses happen, short illnesses happen. We simply don’t know. So that is one way in which this has changed me.

The other way in which it changed me is that I’ve been working in the field of international human rights for 25 years before I started really contemplating all of this loss, and in the process especially of meeting these hospice patients at Bellevue from all over the world, I decided that I wanted to go back to school and learn where people derive their sense of meaning. That’s how I decided to become an ordained interfaith minister. It hadn’t been on my bucket list, but when I saw this chance to really get in deep with the questions of people’s lives, I credit these practices around death for taking me in a new life direction.

Sharon Salzberg: I was actually going to ask you about being an interfaith minister. Do you look at different traditions for ways of trying to describe what is coming up from your own personal experience? I’m curious about what led you to that particular path of drawing from different traditions.

Barbara Becker: We have such an interesting spirituality in this country. More and more people define themselves as “nones” or “spiritual but not religious,” but it really doesn’t mean that they don’t believe in anything, just that we need new vocabulary for reaching them. There are also so many interfaith families in this country or people who have been influenced by different religious and spiritual traditions. There is this burgeoning field of interfaith, interspiritual ministry in which we learn to work with and honor people’s traditions across the span.

We come to it in different ways. I have an interfaith family. My husband is Jewish. Both

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of my sons have been bar mitzvahed. I grew up in a Christian home with a lot of influence of Quakerism in my education, and that's a practice with a strong meditative core of seeing the inner light in everyone. And Buddhism has been such a strong foundational part of my experience. So I, in learning about all of these different traditions, have gleaned some ideas and practices that can be useful sometimes to people hopefully in their dying process from widely disparate traditions.

James Shaheen: I'd like to get back to the book for a moment. Of course, it's about end-of-life care and our approach to the end of life and appreciating our lives more with death in mind, so much so that when there's a sea turtle, I think, "Uh oh, that sea turtle is going to die." But there's also a lot of joy in the book too. In the introduction you quote a passage from Virginia Woolf's diary, which reads, "I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual." What are some of the ways that life came breaking back in?

Barbara Becker: An interesting thing has happened to me right as I was releasing this book, *Heartwood*, which is that I was diagnosed with breast cancer myself. Talk about a where-the-rubber-meets-the-road moment. Here I was releasing a book on love and loss and then needing it for my own guidance to go back and to think about the people I had lost and loved. I would say that I feel like when life comes breaking back in, I think of the Taoist expression that this is a world of 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows, so it's never purely about the rah-rah happiness that we so desire in our culture, and neither is it about the death and the loss and the mortality questions that can really consume us. But being able to sway between both of them, there is a space of joy, of ease, of comfort. And to me that's the heart of all of this.

James Shaheen: That reminds me of the radiance that Sharon mentioned earlier. I also wonder whether writing this book has been a form of grieving or a ritual in itself.

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Barbara Becker: That’s a great question. Early on in the writing process, I decided that this wasn’t just going to be a straight-out writing project, forcing myself to put my fingers on the keyboard and sweat it out every day, but believing in ritual as much as I do, how could I turn writing into a ritual in and of itself? So every time, for every single chapter in this book, I have a little candle at the side of my desk, which I would light, and I would spend some time in meditation thinking about the person who I was writing about.

To me, that’s really a way of commemorating the loss, and it was tough. Writing in community with a sangha of other writers who are on a journey together is another way to go through the type of writing that gets right to your soul. We really shouldn’t do these things alone.

Sharon Salzberg: I’m writing a book right now, and I’m sweating it out. I’ve just been looking around for a candle, honestly. Oh, here, I found one—there’s one on my desk.

Barbara Becker: My editor laughed at me because my acknowledgments for the book are almost as long as any of the chapters, and I do believe that the people we write with and are grateful for also during the process is helpful.

Sharon Salzberg: So funny. I really didn’t even know I had a candle. Look at that. So you were diagnosed just as *Heartwood* was being released, is that right?

Barbara Becker: That’s right. I was actually having a second surgery the day the book came out, so I am completely oblivious to what happened on the launch day of the book because I was under anesthesia.

Sharon Salzberg: And how are you doing now?

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Barbara Becker: I was quite lucky that this cancer was discovered early, and I have been through a month of radiation, which just ended, daily radiation. I am now beginning a hormone therapy for the next five years to keep this at bay. One of the best pieces of advice I got for all of the catastrophizing that I was doing at the beginning of my diagnosis came from a friend who has multiple sclerosis. I was telling him about all the “what ifs” and “I won’t be able to do this,” and he said, “You know, it sure sounds like you’re writing chapter 21 of your life when you’re only on chapter 4.”

It really had the power of bringing me back to chapter 4, to where I am right now. It’s like that principle of shooting the second arrow, which we talk about in Buddhism, you know. The first arrows are the arrows that get us in life, the illnesses, the losses, the things that happen that we have no control over. But the second arrow is the space where we do have control. Can we cut those stories to the core and really live in the more present moment?

Sharon Salzberg: In a blog post, you wrote that you wrote this book to help others, and now you’re reading it to help yourself, which reminded me of how my first book was *Lovingkindness*, and some time afterwards, I was having a conversation with a friend on the phone. The conversation turned toward unwholesome speculation about somebody else or some kind of gossipy thing, and I said, “I don’t feel really good about the tone that this conversation has taken, and maybe we can just take a step back and not get involved in that.” And there was a silence. And then this woman said in this kind of accusing voice, “Have you been reading your book?” That’s what I thought of when I thought of that.

Barbara Becker: There’s a relatively new area of psychology called psychological richness. It’s a little bit in opposition to the idea of seeking pure happiness in that it’s about living with all of it, the parts that bring us joy but also the parts that are really intensely difficult. It’s in that space where we find depth and fullness. I’m really beginning to test that out as a place to live into

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myself. The mess of it all, the yin, the yang, not denying the parts of life, like being a parent, where there are great, great highs of family vacation, but there are great, great lows when your kid is struggling. Can we learn to take it all in? It's almost a paradigm shift in our culture to think like that.

James Shaheen: You know, I was thinking as you were just talking about how much you saw this as a preparation because when I read it, I began thinking, how would I like to be when it's my turn? I wonder how much of a preparation this book can be for all of us and how was it for you?

Barbara Becker: The strangest thing happened when my doctor called to tell me that I had breast cancer. Right now, during the time of COVID, I wasn't even in the office face to face with her. So we were on the phone, and she told me what they had found in the biopsy pathology, and she asked if I was OK. In that very quick moment, I had a thought that it wasn't so much “why me?” but “why not me?” This kind of stuff is inevitable, and I feel that I only arrived at that moment because I had been thinking about all of these people, these loved ones in my life, who I have written about in *Heartwood*.

It's not to say that I could hold on to that forever, but to me, there really is a feeling of this also includes me. This is not just about other people's deaths but about my own as well. I have no true understanding of what happens to us as we die, after we die, but I do know in contemplating this book that I'm OK with mystery. I'm OK with not knowing. That great space of the unknown is pretty beautiful.

James Shaheen: Well, Barbara, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners. Barbara's book, *Heartwood: The Art of Living with the End in Mind*, is on sale now. We have a special way of closing, as we do with all these podcasts: Sharon is going to guide us through a short meditation.

Life As It Is

Episode #3 with Barbara Becker

“Accepting Death to Live More Fully”

September 22, 2021



Sharon Salzberg: Let's sit for a few minutes. Just close your eyes or not, however you feel most at ease. Let's just feel the fullness of life which we are experiencing right now. You can start by listening to sound. It could be the sound of my voice or other sounds. Allow the sounds to arise and pass away. Of course, we like certain sounds, we don't like others, but we don't have to chase after them to hold on or push away. Just let the sounds wash through you, and bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting.

See if you can feel the earth supporting you and feel space touching you. Usually when we think about touching space, we think about picking up a finger and poking it in the air. But space is already touching us. It's always touching us. We just need to receive it.

Bring your attention to your hands, and as you move from the more conceptual level, like “oh, fingers,” to the world of direct sensation, you're picking up the immediacy of constant change. Warmth, coolness, pressure, tingling, whatever it might be coming and going and coming and going.

This is a living reality. Bring your attention to the feeling of your breath, wherever you feel it most strongly, the nostrils, chest, or the abdomen. Here is life. One breath. Now be with this breath as though it were your very first breath, as though it might be your last. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Barbara.

Barbara Becker: Thank you both.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to Barbara Becker and Sharon Salzberg on *Life As It Is*. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be, Sarah Fleming, and Julia Hirsch. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!