

TRANSIENCE

1 Everything will change. The only question is growing up or decaying. **Nikki Giovanni**

2 If death teaches us anything, it teaches us that everything will someday end. The lesson is to wear suffering well, hold beauty lightly, and fear nothing. **Joan Chittister**

3 If you touch the leaf deeply, you will see that the leaf is smiling to you, "Hello, don't think that I am dead, I am going back into the form of a leaf next April. Come back and see me in my green color." **Thich Nhat Hanh**

4 I am running into a new year and the old years blow back like a wind that I catch in my hair like strong fingers like all my old promises and it will be hard to let go of what I said to myself about myself when I was sixteen and twenty-six and thirty-six but I am running into a new year and I beg what i love and I leave to forgive me.
— **Lucille Clifton**

5 I am living in solitude in a creaky old house. My desk is the old kitchen door, removed when we knocked out a wall fifteen years ago and now propped up on two sawhorses. I am aware of all the people who have been born in this house, quarreled in it, loved in it, eaten in it, died in it. I catch myself wondering who will sit next by my workroom window to watch the river and the road and the line of trees on the skyline. Will my desk become a door again, or will it be firewood? My melancholy at first took me by surprise, but there is a *rightness* about it. For a little while, I have stopped holding awareness of my mortality at bay; I have invited it to come in and make itself at home. **Margaret Guenther**

6 The Illusion of “Self”

When the Buddha confronted the question of identity on the night of his enlightenment, he came to the radical discovery that we do not exist as separate beings. He saw into the human tendency to identify with a limited sense of existence. Then he discovered

that this belief in an individual small self is a root illusion. It causes suffering and removes us from the freedom and mystery of life. He described this as *interdependent arising*, the cyclical process of consciousness creating identity by entering form, responding to contact of the senses, then attaching to certain forms, feelings, desires, images, and actions to create a sense of self.

In teaching, the Buddha never spoke of humans as persons existing in some fixed or static way. Instead, he described us as a collection of five changing processes: the processes of the physical body, of feelings, of perceptions, of responses, and of the flow of consciousness that experiences them all. Our sense of self arises whenever we grasp at or identify with these patterns. The process of identification, of selecting patterns to call "I," "me," "myself," is subtle and usually hidden from our awareness. We can identify with our body, feelings, or thoughts; we can identify with images, patterns, roles, and archetypes.

Thus, in our culture, we might fix and identify with the role of being a woman or a man, a parent or a child. We might take our family history, our genetics, and our heredity to be who we are. Sometimes we identify with our desires: sexual, aesthetic, or spiritual. In the same way we can focus on our intellect or take our astrological sign as an identity. We can choose the archetype of hero, lover, mother, ne'er-do-well, adventurer, clown, or thief as our identity and live a year or a whole lifetime based on that. To the extent that we grasp these false identities, we continually have to protect and defend ourselves, strive to fulfill what is limited or deficient in them, to fear their loss.

Yet, these are not our true identity. One master with whom I studied used to laugh at how easily and commonly we would grasp at new identities. As for his non-self, he would say, "I am none of that. I am not this body, so I was never born and will never die. I am nothing and I am everything. Your identities make all your problems. Discover what is beyond them, the delight of the timeless, the deathless. . . ."

Any identity we can grasp is transient, tentative. This is difficult to understand from words such as *selflessness* or *emptiness of self*. In fact, my own teacher Achaan Chah said, "If you try to understand it intellectually, your head will probably explode." However, the experience of no self in practice can bring us to great freedom.

Deep meditation can untangle the sense of identity. There are, in fact, many ways in which we can realize the emptiness of self. When we are silent and attentive, we can sense directly how we can never truly possess anything in the world. Clearly we do not possess outer things. We are in some relationship with our cars, our home, our family, our jobs, but whatever that relationship is, it is "ours" only for a short time. In the end, things, people, or tasks die or change or we lose them. Nothing is exempt.

**Jack Kornfield, “Identity and Selflessness in Buddhism: No Self or True Self?”
excerpt in Tricycle magazine from his book, The Path Is the Way**

7 The Moon

The day lengthens,
the old earth tips its hat
to the moon.

The changeful moon
goes through many phases
even in a single night,

though it is the same
moon as ever, we know this.
We are the changes.

--Frederick Smock

8 We do not die wholly at our deaths: we have moldered away gradually long before. Faculty after faculty, interest after interest, attachment after attachment disappear: we are torn from ourselves while living. **William Hazlitt**

9 Some periods of our growth are so confusing that we don't even recognize that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before. Whenever we grow, we tend to feel it, as a young seed must feel the weight and inertia of the earth as it seeks to break out of its shell on its way to becoming a plant. Often the feeling is anything but pleasant. But what is most unpleasant is the not knowing what is happening. Those long periods when something inside ourselves seems to be waiting, holding its breath, unsure about what the next step should be, eventually become the periods we wait for, for it is in those periods that we realize that we are being prepared for the next phase of our life and that, in all probability, a new level of the personality is about to be revealed.

— **Alice Walker (Living by the Word)**

For Reflection and Discussion

1 Does contemplation of transience comfort you?

2 Are there ways of identifying or labeling yourself that call out your best self? Are there some that cause pain?

3 How does your participation at All Souls influence your understanding and your experience of “transience”?

--Mary Beth Hatem, for All Souls, Unitarian covenant groups