

Musings about Death
by Ivan Backer

I stare at the photograph. There is Half Dome. And to the right Vernal and Nevada Falls. Snow covered peaks even in June dominate the horizon surveying the rugged terrain below. The picture takes me back forty years to our first visit to Yosemite National Park when our son Tim was with us and took the picture.

Before Carolyn and I drove into the Yosemite valley we stopped at a lookout. A pristine landscape of tall fir trees, mountains in the background, and waterfalls feeding a meandering stream lay in front of us. We drove into the magical scene full of wonder as if entering a cathedral, but being too poor stayed at a motel outside of the park. Tim came later by bus and stayed with us.

We led our dog Snowball to the animal shelter one last time and saw her disappear walking down the corridor to her demise.

Why is death such a terrible misfortune for the person who dies?

What is death?

The memory of that first visit became a magnet for subsequent ones until the fateful family reunion years later. Before the opening dinner Carolyn and I went for a short walk on the valley floor and on our return when we reached the parking lot she suddenly said, "I am dizzy – hold me". I couldn't support her and she collapsed. Those were the last words she uttered.

Aunt Louise described how her husband used to put his hand on her face while still in bed every morning, until one day he didn't.

Peoples all over the world, no matter how ancient or modern, make a fuss about death.

Death mystifies me.

He walked up the steps carrying his two suitcases and when he arrived on the porch he keeled over and was dead.

I looked into the open coffin and was surprised when the corpse looked nothing like my friend Al used to.

I don't understand why we don't find the bodies of dead animals more often.

I laid on the bed in the lodge's bedroom and dialed my kids one by one to tell them their mother was dead.

Nine years later I visited Yosemite once more with an Elderhostel group. I felt lonely, alone with my painful memories, as I visited familiar scenes. I fled quickly, intending never to return.

Class Exercise, February 18, 2015