
Living with Lou: Dudley Clendinen on a Good, Short Life
Jan. 30, 2012: I Wouldn't Have Missed It

- Tom Hall:* On 88.1, WYPR, it's Maryland Morning. I'm TH. For almost a year now, I've been speaking every couple of weeks with the writer and journalist Dudley Clendinen. He is a former national correspondent and editorial writer for the NY Times, and the author of four books. In November of 2010, he was diagnosed with ALS, or Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. On January 6th, I spoke with Dudley in his apartment near the Johns Hopkins University. His disease is progressing intractably. At this stage, he is still able to walk, although the muscles throughout his body are deteriorating. His speech is very difficult to understand, so, as you'll hear, I sometimes repeated what he said, to try to clarify his words for you. As we began, Dudley acknowledged that this would have to be our last conversation in this series.
- Dudley Clendinen:* I'm getting steadily weaker and it is very hard to understand me. Even I couldn't understand me when I listened to the last tape of our conversation.
- TH:* Even you had trouble understanding yourself when you listened to that last recording that we did together.
- DC:* Yes, I think that you and I both agree it is time to wind this up, to say thank you and goodbye. Not because I'm going now, I'm not. I have things to do. I'll be around for several months; I have to be.
- TH:* You have to be around for several months because, well, among other things you have a book to write.
- DC:* That's right. I have entered what I've called the dead zone or the killing fields. The point at which I should just turn off the lights and truthfully if I didn't feel I had things to finish I think I would turn off the lights. But I do have things to complete. I've had some major fun since you and I talked.
- TH:* You've had some major fun since we talked last and I was honored to be part of some of that fun. You had a big party here in your apartment for an artist whose work that you've championed for quite a while, a man named Morgan Monceaux.
- DC:* It was a great party and a wonderful weekend in New York. [I] did two of the things you asked me to name that I wanted to do. I was in the audience for Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* and for Jon Stewart on the *Daily Show*.
- TH:* So, we talked about that months ago, about the things you'd like to do and seeing Garrison Keillor and Jon Stewart do their performances were on the list and you knocked them off. Good.
- DC:* I've discovered a new pleasure. I'm always the last in line but Joshua (Dudley's housemate) bought the first season of *The Wire*—.
- TH:* You've started to become a *Wire* fan, huh?

DC: I now know why it has gotten so much critical acclaim. I'm thoroughly addicted. I have to live long enough to finish it.

TH: *You're addicted and you have to live long enough to finish The Wire.*

DC: And *Homicide* and *The Corner*. There are things that all of us carry in our heads under the category of unfinished business.

TH: *Unfinished business. Yes, we've talked about that a few times. At this juncture, what are your most important pieces of unfinished business? I know, for example, that you hope to finish writing your book by April 1. How's that coming?*

DC: It is about 45% done. But we talked enough about that. The other main thing, and the first thing, is people.

When you get close to dying, I think what's clear in the later part of life is, what is important day by day, on any day, is one's own most basic relationships.

And the state of them. I'm lucky. I have many relationships, with all kinds of people.

I have family, a sister, cousins, in-laws.

And one child, Whitney. And I've had many, many conversations with all of them. I've had perhaps [like] many people. I've had a list in my head of unresolved issues with some people that date back years.

They've been resolved a little bit. So that's the equivalent of forgiveness.

But the one conversation that of course most matters to me is with Whitney.

TH: *Whitney, of course, we will remind folks, is your daughter. She is 31 years old now.*

DC: We have various things to talk about. Of course, the hardest thing for her is me and I probably can do only so much to help her prepare for that.

TH: *Yeah, there is only so much you can do for a daughter to prepare her for your passing.*

DC: I used to... I think [that] father's, maybe especially divorced fathers, worry about with daughters is, what is the role of a father for a daughter?

Mothers have maybe an easier time. When I first became divorced I started asking strong women, articulate, forceful, smart women that I knew, or men, what they were glad that their fathers had told them.

Finally someone, one of them, said to me, this took years, and finally after five or eight years, one of them said to me, Dudley, it's not what you tell her, it's how you act, it's how you live, it's the example you give her.

So the choice is, I will probably die feeling that the conversation with Whitney is unfinished.

I mean it will feel that way to me.

The truth is also, by this point, whatever she carries away from having me as her father she already has in her.

Whatever more I might say isn't going to change that.

We're very close. She has my genes so of course she is hardheaded, and independent, and does not like to be told how to feel or what to do. Big surprise!

TH: This is a time, a stage of life, that a lot of people in your position think in terms of regrets. You've thought about this in so many interesting and illuminating ways. Do you put this in the context of what you regret and what you don't regret?

DC: Well, definitely. The question is whether you learn from it.

If you regret it, then what did you do wrong? And, if you know what you did wrong, then you can learn from the mistake so you won't make that kind of mistake in the future. Then you have something to be glad about, not regretful.

TH: To be glad about, not regretful, if you've learned from your mistakes. Sure.

DC: I have no regrets. I mean, it is all a matter of how you see it. I made a great many mistakes but they have all, they all gave me rich experiences.

TH: You made some mistakes, a great many mistakes you say, but they've all given you great experience.

Let's talk about the immediate future here. Most of your family, other than Whitney, Whitney is in this area, but most of your family lives out of town. You have a number of friends, lots and lots and lots of friends, all of whom would be very happy to come and help and take shifts and spend time with you and be with you and do whatever we could to make you comfortable. How do you feel about people performing that role?

DC: I'm not sure. I've thought about it. I do have good friends. I have friends who want me to come home to Tampa and die. I have friends who want to fly in and be here when I die.

I'm lucky. I have all these people who want to help me feel nurtured and surrounded and supported. I'm not sure. The polite boy in me thinks that's an imposition on people.

I would rather be in a room by myself and have them outside with a full bar if they don't want to be there. Great.

Basically I need to feel comfortable in myself. I think the most important thing is to be ready yourself. When the voice inside my head says enough, is enough.

Then I'll know I'm ready. I'm not going to have any last words because you couldn't understand me.

TH: You've told me that you've thought a little about what you might want on your tombstone, and you said it comes from the title of an anthology by Ogden Nash.

DC: I used to give the book as presents for people whose wives or husbands had died. The title is—*I wouldn't have missed it.*¹

You can't do better than that.

TH: *You can't do better than that. You're right.*

So Dudley, you've written a prayer. And it's a prayer that you've said not just in this period when you've been ill with ALS but a prayer that you have said for a while.

DC: Yes, I did it after I got sober and realized that I should be thankful and I should use the change to better my life. It's not a religious prayer. I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual. So it is not Catholic, or Muslim or Jewish, or Protestant. It goes like this. It is just particular to me.

Oh God who art the center of all things, thank you for the sobriety of today and of yesterday and of the day before, and all the days of my new life. Help me to keep that life fresh and to view its precious possibility and its purpose, and to use it to loving ends and in important ways to me and to those I love and who love me. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

TH: *Amen. Thank you, good friend. Thank you.*

DC: Thank you. Everybody has to die but not many of us are asked to talk about it.

TH: *Everybody has to die, but not many of us are asked to talk about it. Well, Dudley, thank you so much for talking to us about it.*

DC: Bless you my friend.

TH: *Bless you. I love you, my friend.*

DC: Ditto. Bye-bye.

TH: *The writer Dudley Clendenin. I spoke with him in his home, on January 6th. An update on Dudley's condition since then: He is planning to have a feeding tube inserted in his stomach. Because it is so difficult for him to eat, he's been losing a lot of weight. At one time, he had talked about not taking the step of having a feeding tube, but he's changed his mind. He's determined, among other things, to finish the book he began writing last summer. Over the next weeks and months, we'll keep you posted on Dudley's condition.*

As Dudley mentioned, this will be the final conversation in our series, which began nearly a year ago, shortly after he received his diagnosis. All of our conversations are available on our website in a special section called Living with Lou: Dudley Clendenin on a Good Short, Life. We've also included written transcripts of the last two conversations. You can find it all at WYPR.ORG. Click on the MM link.

On 88.1, I'm TH. Thanks for joining us.

¹ Here lies my past, Goodbye I have kissed it; Thank you kids, I wouldn't have missed it.
- Ogdan Nash