

Is There Life After Death?
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Since it is the peak of summer, nature is not reminding us of death at this moment. It's a break for me, because fall, winter and spring have a way of making me contemplate mortality. It is spring that reminds me most of death. -- In spring it seems there is more to lose. Those buds bursting from slender barren sticks always remind me of the transience of life. I agree that "April is the cruelest month." I am always moved by the awakening of the cherry trees in our neighborhood: the blooms soft, fragile and dazzling. I try to just experience the display, in denial as to what happens next. The puffy white blossoms one day turn to snow. It is snowing petals... and then they drift into the street and then they melt into the ground and are gone.

Every year this happens. And every year, as the petals fall, I must remind myself that there is always next year. Letting things go is hard. Especially things that bring so much joy. In the words of William Blake, "The one who can kiss the joy as it flies will live in eternity's sunrise."

There is no joy without pain. I found a quote the other day: "The pain of becoming is essential for the joy of being." Life is full of goodbyes. Fortunately it is also full of hellos.

Everything ends in time. The condition of life is death, a fact that I've heard described as similar to looking at the sun. You just can't take direct contemplation of it for too long. Because everything ends. Every relationship eventually ends, so reaching out and making friends is a risk. Everyone you ever say hello to you will eventually, in some way, have to say goodbye to. Even though our life expectancy is longer than in the past, we move around a lot. We have come from other communities and will go on to others.

The thing that brings me to this topic has been the death of my father last November. This was not a tragic death but a peaceful one, and for that I am grateful. He lived a good long life and, with increasing dementia, was ready to go.

In recent decades I had been very conscious of his coming death, of course not knowing when that death would occur. So each phone call, visit or note took on a feeling of intensity. I would be wondering if this could be the last time. And what I realized is that the preoccupation with a future loss was taking away from my enjoyment of the passing moment. Being fully present to the passing moment is our call to a richer life. I feel a kind of letting go in your body thinking of that. Do you? Loss is a constant in life, yet each moment brings its beauty, its gifts.

We each experience losses on our own internal scale of one to ten. Some losses affect us more than others. Suicide, sudden death, or the death of a child are brutal losses. Shocking or gentle, "Death is always a robbery," Rabbi Earl Grollman once said in a talk I attended. "Death is always a robbery." Something precious, something we count on that is part of the structure of our lives, is gone. Some losses we may never fully recover from. We can only pray for a returning peace over time.

The most mysterious loss we all face is our own death. Here again, this may be like looking at the sun. You can't take it for too long. I'd like to share with you briefly an experience I had which changed my relationship with death and dying. This was long ago when I was in seminary. I was first a participant and then a facilitator in a series of workshops called "Eight Weeks to Live, Eight Weeks to Die." The purpose of the program was to give medical, social work, nursing and ministry graduate students a little practice for the real life situations they would face in their chosen professions. This was especially good for helping professionals to see what it is like from the patient's point of view. Participants in the program go through a simulation of having a terminal illness. Through role-playing, guided imagery and simulated interviews with doctors, nurses and chaplains, we experienced what dying might be like.

At the first session, we were asked to draw a picture of death. Most people drew scenes of funerals, caskets and mourners. After going through the eight weeks, each week receiving a description of a worsening symptom, going through exercises of loss and saying goodbye to significant others, we ended with a guided fantasy which led us to actually cross over from life to death. The leader's voice said "Now your life ends." My experience of this was a sensation of being led into the sun. I flew toward an all-embracing light. My feeling was of peace and joy. This parallels the testimony of many people's near-death experiences. When we were then asked to draw another picture of death, after this final guided imagery, the new drawings were abstract images of light with an overall impression of acceptance and peace. I don't mean to minimize the difficulty of going through the process of getting to that point. But it was very powerful and effective and what I felt afterwards was that dying is a very different thing from death. Dying can be very difficult and painful, but death can be peaceful and unifying.

This group experience changed me in some fundamental way. Now I do have a sense of the on-going-ness of life and energy. I don't always remember that, but when I remind myself of it, I am able to enjoy each day a little more, despite the difficulties and losses inherent in living. And whenever I leave a place or some people I have grown fond of, I do have faith in some essential on-going-ness as well. If we have taken the risk to engage, to care, to say hello, we inevitably take memories with us that enrich our lives. We are always shaped by those we have known and in that sense we continue to know them.

I mentioned faith a moment ago. I understand faith to be the active principle that allows us to keep saying hello, to keep risking the pain of future loss, knowing that the gain is worth the pain. Faith is knowing that life is meaningful in spite of death. Faith is not the same as belief. Belief refers to concepts that we agree with. Faith is a life stance of saying yes, in spite of suffering, loss and death. We can have faith in life without faith in a deity. I believe that everyone who keeps getting up every day and engaging in life has faith.

The most authentic sermons are those which arise from the deeper places inside the preacher. I have changed a lot in my understanding of death since I took that course long ago.

What has happened for me, especially in recent years, is a growing confidence in some kind of spiritual continuation after our physical death. It was my dad who once told me he believed in life after death and he would be watching over me afterwards. I find that many people, even

some UUs of my acquaintance, have a sense of this as well. No, it cannot be proven in a worldly sense, but the intuition that this is so is widespread. Millions, or perhaps billions, of people believe in the survival of the spirit. Reincarnation is an accepted belief in Asian traditions. In my experience, this kind of thing is outside the scientific model. Once I heard a guru ask “How do you tell someone what a banana tastes like?” How do you tell? You can’t. You just have to tell them to go taste a banana for him or herself.

Just the same way, mystical experiences cannot be proved objectively. That being said, I have been reading books about life after death. Once I read a book about Unitarians in Canada in which a minister after World War I met with many people who had experienced what is called a “crisis apparition” -- that is, a visit from a dying loved one. These visits were later found to have happened right at the moment of death. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers died during the Civil War, and it was in part the frequency of crisis apparitions that led to the Spiritualist movement in the late nineteenth century.

The famous scholar William James, Harvard professor and theologian, was one of the founders of the American Society for Psychical Research in the 1890s. (There was also a British Society. They are still active. Check their website.) Over many years of many attempts, those researchers agreed that only crisis apparitions and telepathy could be demonstrated empirically. To learn more about this, you may want to read a comprehensive book by Debra Blum called *The Ghost Hunters* about James and his fellow researchers. Blum, a journalist, went into the subject a skeptic and came out humbled, if not a true believer.

Once you have had your own experience you will perhaps begin a journey of further discovery. My word of caution is to reserve judgment and stay open. As Hamlet remarked, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our little philosophy.”

Experiences such as these have multiplied in my life of late and so I have been looking into the many cultural variants in the understanding of the survival of the soul or spirit: Native American Shamanism, Jewish mysticism, the Shinto tradition, with food altars prepared for hungry ancestors, beliefs and stories about angels. I try to stay grounded, open but not gullible. What I know is I am getting more drawn into this world, respecting it for the first time. This is not all superstition.

The most helpful source for me on this subject so far has been Deepak Chopra’s *Life After Death*, published in 2006. Since he is widely read, respected and trained in Western medicine as a doctor, it is hard to discount Chopra’s voice. He draws on the Hindu Vedanta tradition, describing how Eastern traditions view the material world as illusory, while Western societies since the Enlightenment view everything but the material world as illusory.

Since Einstein, physicists have come to understand that there are invisible worlds. The concept of the unity of time and space challenges our understanding of everyday reality. In his excellent way of explaining these abstract concepts of physics, Deepak Chopra says “Modern physics finds it easy to make the material world disappear into nothingness....matter and energy are constantly emerging and vanishing back into the void” (p 198). We know that matter and energy cannot be destroyed, but now we understand more about subtle and constant oscillations back

and forth. Is the soul the energy that brings the body to life and then leaves it upon death? The possibility that souls migrate through stages of evolution, returning to the material world for new lessons, is not necessarily pure science fiction. Have you had mysterious experiences that you cannot explain?

Recently, my dad's widow told me that she was about to make a turn while driving the car, when his voice came to her loud and clear saying "Watch out. Stop." And just then, the car coming the other way turned unexpectedly in front of her. These things happen every day, but we dismiss them because they don't fit with our understanding of reality. I believe that someday, science will be able to explain some of these mysteries. It is not about being gullible, but about being open to mystery and having an awareness that we simply don't have all the answers.

Death is not the end. It is indeed a kind of beginning for the dead and the living. Life rearranges itself; new things are possible. The same is true of any loss. There is the necessary time of mourning. It varies in intensity and duration. Finally, life takes on a new pattern. Until the next change and the next. May we kiss the joy as it flies, and live in eternity's sunrise. We can have faith that even though goodbye is lifelong, hello is eternal.

Amen

Closing Words by Alla Bozarth Campbell from a collection called *Life Is Goodbye, Life Is Hello*

*The future is like death, unknown,
and requires as much faith.
So becoming is like dying,
The lapse between a single in breath and out breath.
A slash or a question mark in time.
The act of transformation.
A monarch butterfly knows.
It flies alone.
Sometimes the dead do not know they are dead.
Some times the winged one dreams itself a cocoon.
Everlasting change comes all the same.*