

Philosophical Discussion

There is No Death

by Teri Daniel

Abstract: In this article, a discussion is given about: a dying youngster facing death; basic ideas about death; near-death experiences; after-death contacts; how we learn about death; and concepts about the afterlife

The way we perceive death is a *choice*.

When my 10 year-old son Danny was diagnosed with a degenerative illness that would end his life sometime within the next 10 years, we began a sacred, transcendent journey that led us through disability, death and beyond. A large piece of this process involved my helping him to understand life and death in a way that would give meaning to his life and help him face his death without fear.

As his illness progressed, he lost the ability to speak, and by age 12 was unable to talk in full sentences. We were never able to have an "adult" discussion about death, so I had to feel my way intuitively through his perceptions, emotions and life experience in the hope of discovering whatever beliefs and images he held about the end of physical life.

Like most American children, the only information Danny had about death came from television, movies and video games. Although he couldn't verbalize this, I imagined that he thought of death as a violent, angry, terrifying event. He'd never known anybody who'd died, not even a pet. His grandparents were alive and well, and although some of the elders in our family had died, they were virtual strangers to him.

Once, when Danny was about six years old, he told me that when people die they go to "Ghost City," a magical place "where kids can drive cars and go to school to learn about fun stuff." When Danny began facing his own death, I wondered if this precious image was still in his mind. Thankfully, our family legacy was not a religious one, so we were free from visions of everlasting torture in hell or a Heaven filled exclusively with saved Christians. Danny's mind was completely open, which gave me a rare opportunity to fill it with beautiful, peaceful images, free of fear and judgment.

During the last years of Danny's life I searched libraries and websites for material on positive, non-judgmental traditions and mythologies about death, and was particularly drawn to Buddhist and Native American stories. I read these stories to Danny, and imparted to him a vision of death and the afterlife that resonated with my own heart, incorporating my personal belief in reincarnation, the essence of our spirits and the possibility of communication between dimensions.

As I wrote in my previous book, *A Swan in Heaven*, "At night I lay by his side singing to him and telling him that I would be OK on earth without him and would see him very soon. I told him that in the spirit realms he could have any kind of body he wanted, and he could visit me anytime, and neither of us would be lonely because our souls would still be together. I explained how there was no such thing as linear time on the other side, and that people can be in more than one place at the same time. I told him everything I knew, everything I'd learned in my metaphysical studies, hoping he'd understand and wouldn't be afraid of dying."

Religious doctrine, literature, sacred hymns and ageless folk songs impart nightmarish imagery of a "cold, lonesome grave," the "icy hand of death" and "the dreary regions of the dead." Add images of turning to dust, being eaten by worms and a 50/50 chance of an eternity in hell, and the fear of death is securely seated in the minds of many children by the age of six.

Even the blissful images of death keep us from a meaningful understanding of the sacred transition from physical to non-physical existence. Sitting next to Jesus on a throne or floating on a cloud playing a harp for eternity doesn't explain or justify our purpose on Earth, and offers us a stagnant, rather pointless afterlife. This leaves us with three basic ideas about death (which will be explored in more detail later in this chapter):

1. Judgment - We'll go to a good place or a bad place depending on our behavior.
2. Separation - We'll be away from loved ones, where we can't be contacted.

3. Permanence- We're gone forever, and all life experience stops.

An innate fear of death is at the root of all neurosis. The ego's terror of extinction is the driving force behind extreme behaviors that are designed to establish dominance and control, such as violence, war, abuse, corruption and bigotry. This is not only true for individuals; it's true for families, governments, religions, corporations and nations. The ego cries out, "What will become of ME?" and acts from an instinctive fear of disappearance and loss of identity. One could think of this as a survival instinct, but it begs the question... what, exactly, is trying to survive?

I talked with a woman recently whose teenage daughter was dying from a rare disease. She said to me unapologetically, "I *like* my separateness. I don't want to merge into the void. I don't want to relinquish my individual identity."

That's the voice of the human ego talking. It's the *personality* wanting to survive, to be recognized and to be in control. The soul knows that it can't disappear, but the ego -- the personality -- lives in fear of annihilation. On the soul level we are eternal; we are parts of the whole, like a blob of mercury from which pieces can pull away but are always magnetically drawn back to their source. Our souls have individual paths, histories and intentions that are acted out when we break off from the source into separate bodies during our incarnations. Our bodies are the "experiential" aspects of that source, but we are never actually separate, and always return to Source via dreams, visions, meditation or death. Because we live in a multi-dimensional reality, we don't disappear after death, but continue to resonate on a higher frequency. Embracing this view can help us release fear-based notions of punishment rather than correction, judgment rather than support, and an eternity of idleness rather than limitless opportunity for growth.

This view also gives us a new way of understanding and processing grief. I know a man whose son died in a train collision at age 16. The boy was a talented actor and compassionate animal activist. The father laments that his son died before he could fulfill his potential in these areas, and sees his son's death as the tragic "waste" of a life that could have contributed so much to the world. But our existence can never be wasted if the work of our souls continues after death. It's as if we worked for a company and got transferred to a branch office in a new city, doing the same work in a different location. This young man's love of art and animals, along with the gifts, lessons and growth tools he provided to his loved ones, continues now in another form, and his life is far from over. The guidance, love and energy he radiates from the Other Side provides boundless gifts of awareness and expansion for his loved ones on earth as well as members of his soul family in the non-physical.

We've all heard the cliché, "nobody's ever come back from death to tell us about it, so there's no proof that the soul lives on." But that's not true. Countless people have had near-death experiences and communication with departed loved ones, and there are hundreds of books on the subject. The Gallup poll reports that between 72% and 83% of Americans believe in Heaven,¹ 21% communicate mentally with someone who has died,² 78% believe in angels³ and 20% believe in reincarnation.⁴ Some reports indicate that between 5 and 30 percent of people have had near-death experiences.⁵ When you consider how many people that is (and the numbers are likely to be much higher than surveys actually record), there's actually more proof in favor of a world beyond the body than against it.

I began receiving "interdimensional" messages from my son less than an hour after his death. These dialogs continue to this day, and they guide the work I'm now doing as an author and spiritual teacher. I'm certain that the conversations Danny and I had about death during the last years of his life are what made this possible. We looked at death a certain way and it became our reality. *The way we perceive death is a choice.* If we believe in hell and judgment, we will carry that belief to our deaths and to the deaths of our loved ones, and the death experience will be filled with stress and fear. If we believe that death is the continuation of a rich, expansive journey, then the experience can be understood and enlightening for everyone involved.

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/Eternal-Destinations-Americans-Believe-Heaven-Hell.aspx>

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/Three-Four-Americans-Believe-Paranormal.aspx>

³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/Eternal-Destinations-Americans-Believe-Heaven-Hell.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/Three-Four-Americans-Believe-Paranormal.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.metaphysical-news-and-views.com/near-death-experiences.html>

How We Learn About Death

Most urban Americans never see a dead body unless it's embalmed and dressed up for a funeral. But in many other cultures and in rural communities, people are exposed to death throughout their lives. In countries suffering from war or famine, in tribal societies, in cultures that accept death and in places where people live close to the land, death is neither hidden nor sanitized.

During my childhood, when an aged relative died, the younger children weren't allowed to go to the funerals because the adults thought it would be too upsetting. When I became a mother I could see the flaw in this logic, and true to my role as the black sheep of the family, I encouraged my adult siblings and cousins to take their little ones to these funerals, recognizing these events as opportunities to teach children about the cycles of life and death. My family's preference for avoidance and suppression did more to create fear and superstition in the children than to protect them from it.

It's probably fair to say that most people view death in one of these three ways:

1. Heaven and Hell

We have one life to live on earth but our souls live on after death, and if we follow the rules of our culture and our religion, we will be rewarded after death with a conflict-free eternity, recognized by our god and our peers as a good or righteous person. If we don't follow these rules, we will be judged for our sins and sentenced to an eternity in a place of terror from which there is no return or redemption. *When dying or grieving, this view leaves us terrified that we may have failed in life, and gives no reason for our experiences on earth other than an ultimate reward or punishment after death.*

2. There is nothing beyond physical existence

This view holds that there is no such thing as a non-physical world. When we die, our bodies decompose and we're gone forever. There is no soul or spirit, and no afterlife. The physical body is all there is, and after it dies, there is nothing left. A lifetime of achievements, relationships, growth experiences and creations remains frozen in time, because this one lifetime was our only encounter with existence. *When dying or grieving, this view leaves us feeling utterly abandoned as victims of random chaos in a finite system. It also exacerbates the feeling of permanent loss for the bereaved, making the grief process more difficult.*

3. The soul lives on for the exclusive purpose of growth and awakening

The soul continues to broadcast its energy after the body dies. It moves along its journey, sometimes embodied during incarnations and at other times disembodied, continuing its work from non-physical realms. The soul lives on as part of the human panorama, but in an unseen dimension. *When dying or grieving, this view gives purpose to one's life on earth, and provides limitless opportunities for expansion, correction and creation, no matter how short or how tragic the current physical life might have been.*

Whatever your belief system may be, the ideas you absorbed as a child were handed down by your family, your culture, your social circle and your religion (your tribe). This includes information gleaned from television, movies, books, art, educational institutions and other sources. But as you evolved as an individual and were exposed to new information, you used your free will and critical thinking skills to blend new ideas with your childhood beliefs, thus creating your own personal theology. When I was a child, my tribe told me that God punishes bad people and rewards good people. Observation, education and experience eventually showed me that this wasn't true, and I gradually moved out of that belief. It's an evolutionary process in which we choose to keep some ideas and reject others according to where we are along our spiritual paths. But in the beginning of each earthly incarnation, these beliefs are *given* to us according to tribal tradition.

The other day while waiting in my dentist's office, I flipped through a beautifully illustrated book about the human body. The book was published by a worldwide mega-publisher, and I was delighted -- for a moment -- to find that it contained a section on near-death experiences (NDEs). It quoted various scientific

theories about how NDEs might be the result of either the brain's neurotransmitters shutting down, a lack of oxygen to the brain, or REM and dream activity. One theory suggests that the tunnel experienced by many NDEers is simply a memory of coming through the birth canal. The writer summarized by saying that NDEs are probably just a spectacular final fireworks show produced by the brain in the last seconds before we go into oblivion.

If there is not a consciousness that lives beyond physical life and we have only one lifetime on Earth (even if we only live for a few seconds after birth), then what's the point in even examining these questions? If we come from oblivion and return to oblivion with a short span of time in between, then we aren't actually coming or going *anywhere* on this journey. The whole journey would be pointless.

In David Staume's marvelous book, *The Atheist Afterlife*, he explains the energetic changes that occur when we go from physical to non-physical existence. He asks us to imagine that we are in a car that has just lost control and is sailing off the edge of a cliff. Using a basic rule of physics that "any energy unable to express itself in its current form will transition into another form," the energy of the car hurling toward the ground will, upon impact, be transformed into fire, heat, debris, dust and sound... other forms of energy. Meanwhile, assuming you die in this crash, your non-physical self (your soul, essence, consciousness, mind, spirit, life force, astral body or whatever you choose to call it) will follow the same law of physics and will not disappear, but will *transform*.

Staume says: "If the relationship between your body and your consciousness is the same as that between the car and the energy of movement, your consciousness wouldn't be extinguished either; it would behave like every other energy in the universe; it would obey the law of Conservation of Energy⁶ and it would *transition*."

An analogy even an atheist could love, assuming said atheist believes that there *is* a consciousness separate from the body. But when we start to question where the consciousness actually *goes*, the going gets tough, because this is where theology comes in and drives everybody to their respective corners.

The problem with talking about an afterlife is that most people see it as exclusively enmeshed with religion, and this causes instant contention. There are two reasons why the idea of life after death is always tied to religion: because all religious doctrines talk about an afterlife, and because the only information we ever get about an afterlife is within the context of religion. It's hopelessly tied up in circular reasoning; a perpetual myth-making machine. The idea of a *non-religious* afterlife would do wonders for helping humanity lose its fear of death, but as long as the idea is only understood in a fear-based religious context, it will continue to frighten us. If the soul is eternal and we live over and over again in different bodies, locations, cultures and environments specifically chosen to help our souls grow, then life actually *means something*. If we are allowed endless "do-overs" and endless time for correction (rather than a one-and-only final punishment or reward), and if we're not graded on performance, then perhaps our primal fear of death wouldn't be so pervasive and we could stop living our lives like nervous kids getting ready to take their college entrance exams. If the clock isn't ticking and we're not being watched and judged, maybe we wouldn't be so panicked about competing with each other, being right, clinging to people, possessions and ideas, forcing our will onto others and fighting desperately for a secure foothold on earth and in Heaven.

Most of us have experienced dreams, visions and impressions that feel as if we've been contacted by loved ones on the Other Side. Many of us have experienced flashes of thought, sounds, verbal phrases, kinetic events, music or scents that we felt were sent by some sort of "higher" force, be it departed loved ones, angels or guides. And although the majority of people believe in an afterlife and in angels, most don't believe that contact is possible, and they dismiss these experiences as coincidences, oddities or freak events.

But if we trust these experiences, if we trust what *feels true*, we can be led to a whole new way of seeing our world, including the world beyond the physical. What's the point of spiritual work -- seeking, praying, meditating and studying -- if not to help ourselves find peace? We are just as able to choose a theology of fear as a theology of love, and in doing so, we can begin to see that in death there is no disappearance and no

⁶ From Wikipedia: The law of conservation of energy states that the total amount of energy in an isolated system remains constant. A consequence of this law is that energy cannot be created or destroyed. The only thing that can happen with energy in an isolated system is that it can change form, that is to say for instance kinetic energy can become thermal energy.

loss of identity. And in seeing that, a great peace, grace and acceptance can come into our lives, changing the way we live *and* die.

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