

Introduction

Death is the universal ending of all living things. It is the absence of life. So what then is life? Your life is your personal diary, your case history, your experiences. Your life is the life of your mind as you look out in the world and reflect upon yourself. Our history has given us many meanings of the word “death”—the grim reaper; a sleep from which the sleeper never wakes; nonbeing; transition to another life; the end; the loss of loved ones. It is the evitable part of the human experience (Raphael, 1983). How can society help us to understand the meaning of death?

A good beginning would be the experiences from our past. It is known that concepts and feelings about death are directly related to what is perceived and understood about the nature of life and the afterlife. Attitudes about death mirror our attitudes held throughout life. Death is simply the extension of the life process (Margolis et al., 1985). Any understanding of dying and death must begin with ourselves. Whatever actions we take begin with our own understanding. The Self is an understanding of who we are. It is what we mean when we say “I” or “Me.” From this understanding, we see all experience as filtered through the Self. For that reason, the reader can understand why encountering dying and death in the Self is such an important aspect of any resource in death education. Beyond the academics, of course, is the concern of every person with living a life which is meaningful and productive. For this to happen, one must come to an understanding of death and make peace with it. Therefore, a rational, sensible, and right way to begin the search for peace with dying and death is to begin with the Self.

By discussing death you will not invite it. The knot in your stomach or uncomfortable feeling you experience when the topic arises is because of your over or underexposure to death. You may be surprised that when you discuss death or acknowledge death, you in fact do not invite death, but rather invite life! So, why do we call it “dying and death”? It could be because death comes so suddenly and dying is uncertain. We are more comfortable with the finality of death than we are with the process of dying. I like to call it “living and life” because I believe death is part of life and if one fears death, I truly believe one is not living.

Each of us holds fears, doubts, and questions about dying and death. This is not an uncomfortable assertion to make. What is more difficult for many of us is that the fears and doubts, left unchallenged, end up directing our behavior negatively. The fears come to rule our daily lives. This is nowhere more important than in the peculiar relationships which can be profoundly affected by the fears, doubts, and questions each of us has about death. If we are so fearful of our own death, then reaching out to others when they are dying can be even more difficult and almost impossible to do. Many of us fear death and yet overcome that fear by an act of courage to talk and to comfort someone who is facing death. Others of us cannot. For those of us who do not come to an understanding about our fear, the people we love might die alone and without our companionship and comfort. Thus, what becomes clear is that confronting one’s own fears can have a direct effect on relationships. The difference may be between being and not being physically present and emotionally available for one’s family or friends during the dying process. Overcoming our fear of death may mean being the kind of friend who can be of comfort

rather than a representative of a death-denying-culture who retreats into silence and absence. That is the importance of encountering death in the Self as it relates to others.

Another reason for confronting death in the Self is to live a more productive life. Some may see this as a selfish desire. We suppose that could occur and would be a negative aspect, but we need to recognize that we cannot be of much help to others unless we first take care of ourselves.

If we have the courage to face and accept our own mortality and our own death, then we, our children, and those who follow us will better be able to have the courage to embrace life. I wish you success in learning about and understanding death. Good luck on your journey through grief and the rest of your life!

There is no place on earth where death cannot find us—even if we constantly twist our heads about in all directions as in a dubious and suspect land. If there were any way of sheltering from death's blows—I am not the man to recoil from it . . . but it is madness to think that you can succeed.

Men come and they go and they trot and they dance, and never a word about death. All well and good. Yet when death does come—to them, their wives, their children, their friends—catching them unawares and unprepared, then what storms of passion overwhelm them, what cries, what fury, what despair!

To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death. We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.

—Montaigne (cited in Rinpoche, 1994, p. 15)

The clock of life is wound but once, and no man has the power
To tell just when the hands will stop, at late or early hour.
Now is the only time you own, live, love, toil with a will;
Place no faith in tomorrow, for the hands may then be still.

—Author Unknown