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Introduction

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.
-Bedtime prayer for children

I have heard that we should never ruin a good question with an answer. "What happens when we die?" may be one such question. Indeed, it is unanswerable on this side of the grave, at least not with any certainty. Unanswerable questions are not paths to definitive destinations, however, but invitations to adventure. To engage such a question is to embark on a lengthy journey that may lead nowhere, which is exactly the point and purpose – not to arrive anywhere in particular or with definitive answers, but to inquisitively engage in an amorphous process of exploration solely for the purpose of exploration.

The *Star Trek* science-fiction television shows and movies began with a banner that boldly stated: *Space: The Final Frontier.* It was a nod to the belief that outer space was the last unexplored area in our physical world. In that same spirit, I propose that *death* is the final frontier of the non-physical world, at least from our vantage-point of material beings. We cannot know specifics about the moment of death or what is beyond until we make that journey for ourselves.

The fact that some questions are better left unanswered does not stop us from speculating, however, and the following pages contain much speculation and much exploration. My attempt is not to answer the question of what happens when we die but to stimulate thought about this *final frontier* and how and why the question impacts our lives so deeply and intimately.

In these pages I will reflect on topics related to death and dying. I intend to explore the various types of deaths we go through and witness during our lives on earth, as well as delving into speculation about heaven and hell, resurrection, an afterlife, and other related topics. I enter this discussion not as an expert, but as one intimately impacted by and interested in these issues; not as a seeker of fact but an explorer on a wide-eyed journey into the unknown.

The thought of death makes most of us squirm. We sometimes fear if we talk too much about it, we may invite it nearer. We know that everyone and everything on earth dies, and there is a sense in which we have been dying since taking our first breath. We joke that the only two certainties in life are death and taxes. One of my mentors, author and teacher Jim Finley, likes to say that our death is *in the mail*, meaning it is on its way. Even when death is likely decades away, each passing day draws it closer. Death is frightening because of its uncertainty and unknowability. We do not know when it will arrive, in what manner, under what circumstances, or what lies beyond, but we know it is approaching. Death often seems to hang like a dismal shroud over everything good, beautiful, and joyful in our lives.

Spiritual teacher Robert Brumet posted a blog titled, *Using Death as Your Advisor.*[1] He quotes the Yaqui Indian sorcerer, Don Juan (as recorded by Carlos Castaneda), in saying, "Death is our eternal companion. It is always at our left at arm's length. It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you."[2] Brumet advises, "The thing to do when you are impatient is to turn to your left

[1] Robert Brumet, *Using Death as Your Advisor*. May 2, 2019, www.RobertBrumet.com
[2] https://www.optimize.me/quotes/carlos-castaneda/18701-death-is-our-eternal-companion-it-is-al/#:~:text=Death%20is%20our%20eternal%20companion.%20It%20is%20always,his%20death%20and%20ask%20if%20that%20is%20so. Accessed January 25, 2021.

and ask advice from your death. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if you catch a glimpse of it."[3] He encourages us to assess our priorities in view of our impending demise. If this were my last week on earth, which of my typical worries and stressors would still matter? What activities are worthy of trading for any of my precious remaining moments? It is in this spirit of using our death as an advisor for living a fuller, richer life that I hope this book will remain true. It is not my purpose to be macabre or fatalistic, but I believe there is much to be gained from the consideration of death and dying before we know them to be imminent.

I have witnessed physical death in a close and personal way three time in my life thus far. I was at my father's side for his sudden death, and I was able to spend extended time with my mother and paternal grandmother as they went through a slower dying process. I am forever grateful for the few hours spent with my dad the night before he died. Neither of us knew, at least not consciously, how life was about to change. I am equally grateful for the days and weeks spent with my mother and grandmother during their gradual transitions toward whatever comes next. My grandmother shared a number of experiences she was having of the next world whenever she drifted back to conscious presence with me. Truly, time spent with the dying is a blessed gift, but we must be willing to be fully present with the dying to receive it. We must go deeper into the experience than our sadness at losing physical contact with one we love typically allows. Of course, this is easier said than done.

Brumet offers sage advice about death and dying: "Remembering that the span of my life is limited makes my remaining days all the more precious."[4] My hope is that these pages will encourage us to reconsider our priorities for our remaining days, treating each as a priceless gift. If that occurs, these reflections will be less about death and more about living this life to its fullest.

I am deeply humbled and honored to have you join me in this adventure.

Greg Hildenbrand
February 2021

[3] Robert Brumet, *Using Death as Your Advisor*. May 2, 2019, www.RobertBrumet.com
[4] Ibid.

Chapter 1: Embodiment

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing, Embody me.
Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.
Rainer Maria Rilke[5]

In order to reflect on our death and dying, I will share my view on how our earthly lives begin. I vainly claim this to be *my* view, although as with all of *my* thoughts, they are far from original to me. I borrow heavily from many contemplative authors and teachers, including Fr. Richard Rohr, James Finley, Cynthia Bourgeault, Thomas Merton, and others, as well as the teachings of Jesus, the biblical authors, and countless conversations with dear friends. My thoughts are shaped by my limited understanding of theirs, and that synthesis may not always be true to their insights nor helpful to others. Given that disclaimer, I offer the following pages as fodder for your own ruminations about life, dying, death, and the afterlife.

We have an eternal nature that was never born and will never die. We commonly name that part of us our *soul*. It is a unique expression of God, which is our name for the ineffable spirit that "swept over the face of the waters"[6] at the dawn of creation, as recorded in Genesis 1. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the word we translate as spirit is *rauch*, which also means *air, breath,* and *wind*. It is the entry of spirit into the material of the earth that causes creation to spring forth into what we know as life.

In the creation story at the beginning of the Gospel of John, the resulting creation is referred to as the *Logos*, which is Greek for *Word*. This *Word* is the spirit *in* an earthly body, or *embodiment*. The image of God's creating power as *Word* follows from the Genesis description of creation occurring at God's verbal command: "And God *said*, let there be…" This *Word* can perhaps be better understood as a strong, creative, vibratory impulse – an energy field – more than simply spoken words as we understand them. Our human ears only hear sounds in a limited vibrational frequency range, but waves of energy exist along an infinite continuum above and below our auditory boundaries. They arrange and rearrange matter in ways that we often consider destructive. Think, for example, of earthquakes, tsunamis, tidal waves, and storm fronts. These are powerful waves of raw energy pulsing across the earth, often *recreating* whatever existed before it. A small-scale example of this is often the theme of science fair projects where a student shows how different sound waves arrange grains of sand on a hard surface into different patterns. Those patterns are consistent with and unique to the frequency of the vibrational energy, rearranging the sand in a manner that harmonizes with the wave frequency.

[5] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours,* trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. Riverhead Books. 1996.
[6] Genesis 1:2

All of this leads me to conclude that a part of God's animating spirit – our soul – embodies itself in earthly garb in order to become the life we know as *us*. This is how our earthly journey begins. We are a perfect and unique blend of spirit embodied in matter, just as Christians believe about Jesus of Nazareth. Our physical body is animated by our soul, which is inseparably connected with and a part of the incomprehensible spirit of God. Unlike Jesus, however, we become so consumed in the physical nature of our being that we neglect, ignore, and even deny our spiritual nature. There is a story I have read in various forms where an older sibling, perhaps three or four years old, asks his younger sibling to tell him about God because he is starting to forget. By the time we begin school, by the time our intellectual functions of reason and logic begin to develop, we lose our conscious connection with the spirit and spiritual life which first animated our existence. Our ego takes root and focuses our attention on the seductive but deeply unsatisfying and impermanent material aspects of our lives, or on that which attempts to make us comfortable, rich, famous, or otherwise desirable to others. Of course, none of what makes us comfortable, rich, famous, and desirable is inherently bad, but it is all a part of the earth and will die with our body. It is all transitory.

This, then, creates much of our fear of death – that we will lose our *stuff* and our social standing, as well as everything else we come to identify with during our earthly existence. The seduction of the temporal things of the earth lead us to overly identify with what will necessarily be annihilated at our physical death, if not before. Like the folks at the funeral of a rich man wondering how much of his fortune he left behind – he left *all of it*. And so will we. When we forget about our eternal, spiritual nature, we fear there will be nothing left of *us* when we die. In actuality, our *true* self – our soul – will continue, as it always has. As we learn to identify more with our eternal, spiritual nature, our dread of physical death lessens.

Material Reformation

Things of the earth are temporal, but things of the spirit, like our souls, are eternal. Regarding things of the earth, this is only true of specific earthly forms, like our bodies. As we observe creation in our specific space and time, we are aware of people and things all around us that were once *alive* that are now *dead*. In the woods outside my window there is a dead tree that has fallen into the crook of another tree. I have seen the *dead* bodies of friends, family, and loved ones at funerals. The leaves of the maple trees in my back yard turn red and orange each autumn before they die and fall to the ground. But is any of this formerly embodied material really *dead?*

The answer to the question depends on what we consider to be alive. The specific earthly *form* that I knew as a loved one, a tree in the forest, or a maple leaf is no more. But the elements making up that body, tree trunk, or leaf are eternal. Bodies, tree trunks, and leaves, once vibrant with life, lose their old form as they go through the natural decomposition and re-formation process. When I was young, we would rake leaves from the yard into a pile and burn them, reducing their forms to a small pile of ash. Even so, their elements remained, either being released into the air in the smoke or becoming part of the ashes. Nothing of the earth is ever lost, only transformed. That is the nature of earthly immortality, as it has been for billions of years. Will we live forever in our current form? No, but the elements our bodies are made from will, as will the soul that coalesces and animates the earthly elements. Individuals die, but the lifetimes of their species and nations persist, at least for a much longer time. Even species and nations die eventually, however, because only their embodied elements are eternal.

We see this process of formation, destruction, and reformation all around us, although much of it occurs on a timeline that is imperceptible to us. There is geological evidence that my home state of Kansas was once a vast ocean, although it is hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean today. A

small Missouri town that once sat on the eastern banks of the Missouri River is now a small Kansas town on the western banks of the same river. As the floodwaters of decades past receded, the river changed its course and the town changed its resident state. Over the centuries, rocks crumble and mountains erode. Families, corporations, and dynasties come and go. Teacher and author Richard Rohr states that the natural course of everything in creation is *order, disorder, reorder*. Depending on the form, this life-cycle may occur in hours or eons. It is the fundamental nature of resurrection, and it plays out all around us all of the time.

We tend to think of our physical bodies as stable and unchanging, which is far from the truth. Approximately 50 to 70 billion of our cells die and are replaced each day. Every part of our body is replaced every seven years or so. We exchange elements with the world around us with every breath, and our bodies integrate elements from other earthly beings with everything we eat. Life's most basic building blocks came from the explosions of stars billions of years ago. There is a constant exchange happening between our bodies and the world around us. Over the course of a lifetime, our bodies will have integrated elements from all over the world, from all points in time, and even from the entire universe. The point, appearances aside, is that these bodies that seem so solid are actually fluid and dynamic.

The separation process of soul from body, which occurs at physical death, almost always requires some sort of major trauma to the body, rendering it uninhabitable. This is often the failure of a key bodily organ or some other traumatic event. Despite the advances in medical practice, and in spite of the constant renovation processes, physical bodies reach a point where the soul can no longer hold the form together. When that happens, the earthly elements of the form are returned to the earth, and the ethereal spirit returns to the realm of spirit.

This, then, is a view of the nature of our earthly lives and deaths. A portion of God's spirit – our soul – takes on elements of the earth and *embodies* itself for a time. When that time is finished, the elements of the body and the soul go their separate ways. Nothing of permanence, however, is lost or annihilated. The form is re-*form*-ulated, and the soul – the true essence of who we are – lives on.

Embodied Identity

Because this existence I identify as *me* is an eternal and shared spirit inhabiting a temporary and every-changing body, the entire concept of having an individual identity is suspect and certainly misleading. In the same way that *the same breath* produces different sounds from various brass and woodwind instruments according to their unique shapes and construction materials, so is our unique expression of the *one spirit* determined along an infinite spectrum of possibilities based on our unique shapes and combinations of materials, such as our genetic makeup and life experiences. Is the identifying essence of the instrument its shape and physical materials, which are unique but impermanent, or is it the eternal and shared breath that makes the instrument sing? In truth, we are one being expressing in an infinite variety of ways. And the physical ways we express are constantly changing. So, do we have a unique identity at all? I would definitively say, "Yes, we do," *and* "No, we do not." Our bodies are unique, but they are also temporary combinations of the shared elements making up all of creation. The fact that our bodies are made from constantly-shared and exchanged elements, along with my belief that a common spirit enlivens and animates us causes me to conclude that we are not unique in our essential being.

Focusing too heavily on our individual identity is the source of much suffering, perhaps *all* of earthly suffering. We identify as a particular skin color, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, profession, nationality, and various other identifiers our physical bodies adopt, and we use those traits to distinguish and separate ourselves from those who we deem as not like us. We form tribes, gangs,

cults, and exclusive clubs that accept certain people and reject others, all based on unstable traits that our eternal self only embodies for a fraction of a second in the unfathomable time-scheme of eternity. The personal *ego* that develops from our desire for uniqueness dedicates itself to maintaining what it believes to be our unique identity, thus causing us to attempt to set ourselves apart from the others who make up our shared being. Ultimately, such attempts at preserving our uniqueness leave us lonely and isolated.

Two of the philosophical underpinnings for humankind's relationship to God are *pantheism* and *panentheism.* Both grow out of the recognition that the one spirit of God is the source of all of creation. *Pantheism* states that everything is God. *Panentheism* states that God is *in* everything. What I am expressing in this reflection on embodiment is a *panentheistic* view – that God is in everything and *not* that everything is God. God's divine spirit inhabits all of creation in a gloriously infinite diversity of unique ways, none of which are permanent, at least not physically. Paradoxically, it is this impermanence that makes life's expressions so beautiful and valued – we know they will not last, so we should strive to be fully present to them while we can, regardless of whether that expression is a stunning sunset or a beloved partner.

The Animating Life Force

The broad meaning of the Hebrew word *rauch,* often translated as s*pirit,* gives us a clearer understanding of the intimate presence of God's spirit. It is also the Hebrew word for wind, air, and breath. That spirit was not just something that entered the earth in the beginning and then retreated to parts unknown. God's spirit continues to sweep over the face of the earth as breath, air, and wind. God's spirit enters and exits our bodies with every breath we take and envelopes our being with every breeze. That same spirit creates *and sustains* the life we know. When we take our last breath, that spirit leaves the body, carrying our soul with it. The specific form we once knew dies, but everything making up that form assumes a new, resurrected form.

The Hebrew people, in the time of Moses, believed God's name should not be spoken. The name of God, as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is YHWH, or what we translate as *Yahweh.* It means *I am.* Some believe we *breathe* the name of God with every inhale and exhale. We *breathe* God's spirit (as air) into our physical body with each inhale – *Yah* – and we return God's spirit into the world around us with each exhale – *weh.* Consciously breathing the name of God is a practice known as the Yahweh Prayer. *Yah* is the first and *weh* is the last word we utter in the earthly chapter of our lives. It is quite literally the spirit of God, manifesting as our breath, that keeps our earthly form alive.

Richard Rohr, in one of his Daily Meditations, wrote, "We are only afraid of death as long as we do not know who we are, but once we know ourselves objectively to be a child of God, we are already home and our inheritance is given to us ahead of time."[7] As the significance of the presence of God as our very breath begins to sink in, it becomes apparent that we are quite literally God's children. The moment God's *rauch* is removed from us, our physical existence ceases.

The life force flows from the spirit of God as our soul and animates our earthly embodiment. God enters us as Spirit, enlivens our physical form, and sees and works through us. Most of the time, we are unaware not only of the intimate nearness of God's presence, but also of the work God does in and through us. We feel closest to God when we become conscious co-creators with God in the world around us. This is how we develop a relationship with the Divine – by acknowledging God's presence and finding ways to listen for God's guidance through practices like centering prayer, presence to the moment, and mindfulness meditation. In the process of tuning in to the divine

[7] Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations.* Meditations.cac.org, October 3, 2019

presence with and in us, our fear of physical death lessens because we come to understand that our connection with the eternal transcends our physical existence. In Rilke's poem, reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, God encourages: "Don't let yourself lose me." Our body is the vehicle through which God's work is done through and with us on earth. Although we do not know how the relationship will look after our physical death, we are assured that the bond of our soul to God's spirit will continue because we know that we are inseparably united. This fact bears remembering.

This, then, is the beauty of embodiment, that our soul wraps itself in the substance of the earth for a time in order to experience the extraordinary beauty, depth, and change, as well as the pain and suffering of physical existence. And with us for every step of the journey is the spirit of God sweeping over the face of the earth as it continues to create, animate, experience, and lovingly claim us as the children of God. Through Rilke, God says, "Give me your hand."

Chapter 2: Resurrection

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.
John 3:8

One of the interesting features of our embodiment is that the *me* I consider as *my life* is not a single entity. My *life* is actually many lives held together loosely under a single identity. In order to understand our death and dying it is helpful to acknowledge that, at least on the physical plane, there is no specific *I am* that is *us* throughout our lives. Our bodies are constantly changing, with component parts being added and eliminated, dying and being reborn. In addition, who we are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually changes on a regular basis, too. There is a uniting force holding us together, but it is a spiritual force that remains mostly hidden and beyond our understanding. We often call this spiritual force our *soul*. When we equate our life with our body, we tend to see our physical death as an annihilation because the ever-changing form we know as our body will not last another moment, at least not exactly as it is in this moment, let alone forever.

In general, we prefer to keep most of the physical regeneration process out of view by covering our wounds and having dead animals removed from the sides of our roads. Some of our fear of death is from poorly understood projections about the recycling processes of our bodies. Our images are fueled by grotesque recreations like *The Living Dead* and *The Zombie Apocalypse*. Such theatrical productions are geared towards macabre entertainment, not reality. We fear what we do not understand and what is unfamiliar, and we clearly do not understand the amazing process of physical regeneration. The parts of creation that make resurrection possible by deconstructing old life forms – worms, maggots, mushrooms and other fungi, buzzards, and various types of bacteria – tend to be viewed with disgust. New life, however, would not be possible without them. The fact that nothing of the earth is ever annihilated, only reformed, should give us hope that our essential being will not be annihilated at our death, either.

Our lives consist of a never-ending series of deaths and rebirths, both physical and non-physical. Every night when we go to bed, a day in our life dies. We do not fear this death because we have confidence that we will wake up (be reborn) to a new day with the next morning. Every time we celebrate a birthday, wedding, birth of a child, or graduation we celebrate a death of something old and a birth of something new. Again, we do not fear these types of deaths because we see something familiar on the other side of them. We only fear letting go when what comes next is unclear or suspected to be unpleasant. For example, it is easier to let go of one home when we are moving into another home by choice than when we are forced to let go of a home not knowing where we will find shelter going forward. In the prolonged death journeys of my mother and grandmother, my sense was that the closer they got to death, the more they welcomed it. They began having visions of and experiences on the other side that made the transition more comfortable and familiar. It is the unknown nature of the life after this life that causes so much of our discomfort about death.

The Bible is not necessarily a helpful source of information about what happens after physical death, either. It is probably safe to assume that the biblical authors were as much in the dark on that topic as we are. Certainly, there are sporadic references to heaven and hell, but the fact that they make

up such a small portion of the Bible may indicate that these presumed afterlife destinations were not as concerning to them as they are to us today. There are many possible reasons for that, some of which I will reflect upon in the following pages. In short, I believe that their concerns about the afterlife were vastly different than ours. Jesus talked frequently about the kingdom of God, but there is good reason to believe he was talking about a present state of being in the here and now, more so than a possible future state after death.

While we have little ability to see or understand the afterlife with any certainty, we can take comfort in knowing that everything in God's creation is reborn and that only our temporary and specific physical forms are annihilated in order that they can be recreated. Resurrection is real and is all around us.

The Resurrected Body of Jesus

For Christians, the reference point for resurrection is found in the story of Jesus, as recorded in the Bible. Throughout the Gospels, he predicts that he will be killed and then raised on the third day, or resurrected. Near the end of each Gospel, that is exactly what happens. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is said to have brought dead people back to life, as in the story of Lazarus (John 11) and the son of the woman from Nain (Luke 7:11-17).

Interestingly, it appears that even Jesus' closest followers did not believe his resurrection narrative. They were clueless when they found his empty tomb on the morning of the third day after his death, suspecting that someone had stolen his body. It was only after Jesus began making post-death appearances that his disciples believed that he had, indeed, been resurrected. The biblical record, however, indicates that Jesus was not resurrected into the same form he had when he was Jesus of Nazareth. Although he retained some remnants of his former body, like the marks of the nails in his feet and hands (John 20:26-29), he was consistently not recognized until he spoke, and sometimes not even then. Mary Magdalene was the first to see his resurrected form as she visited the tomb on the morning of the third day. She mistook Jesus for the gardener (John 20:14-16), not recognizing him until he spoke her name. On another occasion, Jesus was standing on the beach of the Sea of Tiberias in the morning as seven of his disciples were returning from a night of fishing (John 21:1-14). Again, he was seen, but not recognized until he spoke. Even then, there was doubt. Jesus walked and talked with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, completely unrecognized until he broke and blessed bread with them at the evening meal (Luke 24:13-35). Even the most faithful among us must wonder how it was that those closest to Jesus did not recognize his resurrected form until he spoke or did something that revealed his identity.

The resurrected body of Jesus could pass through locked doors (John 20:19-21) even though his new body was apparently solid enough to be touched (Luke 24:38-40). Following a meal on the day of the walk to Emmaus, Jesus suddenly vanished from his disciples' sight (Luke 24:30-31), as if into thin air. It is clear, if the biblical record is to be believed, that Jesus was resurrected into something other than a typical human form. It is also clear that Jesus' resurrected form retained some similarities to his pre-death body. His scars remained, his voice was recognized by some, but his *presence*, once brought into focus, was clearly recognizable.

After appearing off and on for 40 days, Jesus' resurrected body was "taken up into heaven" (Mark 16:1). Jesus told his disciples that God would send the Holy Spirit after his death to "teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). So, even Jesus' resurrected form did not remain an obvious part of earthly life for long. Rather, Jesus was present with them through the Holy Spirit, meaning in the spiritual or non-physical realm.

I believe the story of Jesus' resurrection is our story, too. Jesus referred to himself as the *Son of Man* 78 times in the Gospels, usually in the third person. Others often referred to Jesus as the Son of God, but Jesus referred to himself as an enlightened or completed human. Once he awoke to his oneness with God, while still alive on this earth, he assumed his status as fully God and fully human and began his ministry.

The somewhat nebulous term, *Son of Man*, refers to a human who has been *reborn* to become Christ-like. *Son of man* is a title for a completed or awakened human being and is applicable, as should be obvious, to either gender. Such a rebirth is the conscious reunification of our physical and spiritual natures. Jesus was 100% spirit and 100% human, as are we, although few of us are conscious of it. This reuniting, or rebirth, is an awakening to a reality that is already present in all of us. Only after we awaken to it, however, can we consciously act from both our spiritual and human centers, as Jesus did, and become true followers of Christ. And once we have awakened to the spiritual side of our nature, we know that our spiritual nature – our *core essence* – is eternal and not dependent upon an earthly body.

Jesus not only set the example for us to follow in this life, Jesus also gave us a glimpse of what happens when we die. Perhaps at the most basic level of understanding, he demonstrated that there *is* an afterlife and that our essence lives on, although in a different sort of embodiment.

A Ghost Story

It is ironic, though not intentional, that I wrote what follows on Halloween. It may not be a coincidence, but it is interesting. This could be considered a ghost story, but I consider it a hopeful tale of resurrection.

My Grandma Hildenbrand's funeral was on the afternoon of Christmas Eve in 1982. Grandma was, and still is, a strong and inspiring influence in my life. She was an insightful and faithful soul who saw the good in me long before I could see it in myself. Her vision and example have been something of a strong thread running through my life, guiding me through my own blind stumblings, and encouraging me toward areas of light I could not otherwise see. The afternoon of her funeral was a grey, chilly day with a light mist falling, and at her graveside service I saw her. She was not *solid*, as she had been a few days earlier. She was more like a silent mist passing among those she loved, assuring us of her continued presence and of her unfailing love for us. I *felt* her hug me. She was there in some sort of resurrected body. If I looked directly at her, I could not see her. She was only visible in indirect glances. Some might say it was an illusory product of my grief, but no one will convince me otherwise. Grandma's form may have been ethereal, but her *presence* was unmistakable.

When I read the accounts of Jesus' post-death appearances, I cannot help but be reminded of my grandmother's post-death appearance. In Luke's account, Jesus' disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, and they were terrified. I think we may need to reassess our perceptions of ghosts. We have too easily fallen for the tag line that sells movies and other media that non-physical beings are somehow unnatural, dangerous, and frightening. Could it be that they frighten us only because we do not understand their nature? I was not frightened by the appearance of my grandmother because I *knew* her. The disciples and followers of Jesus were not frightened of his resurrected appearances, once they understood who it was, because they *knew* him. Indeed, his first words were often, "Do not be afraid." When we give in to our initial fears, we gain nothing from the experience except terror.

I believe one reason we do not have more frequent conscious encounters with non-physical beings is their understanding of and compassion for our uneasiness with such encounters. Even so, that does not mean that non-physical beings do not exist all around us. Many people recognize and name such presences as *guardian angels*. On the first Sunday of every November, churches celebrate

All Saints Day, a recognition of family and church members who have crossed over during the past year, affirming that they remain with us in spirit. Christians believe in the *Communion of Saints,* which is an affirmation that those who have gone before us continue to be present with and watch over us. These types of spiritual presences that have their being alongside ours are far from the Halloweenish stuff of nightmares and horror flicks. Rather, they are angels among us.

I do not wish to be overly casual about the loss of those we love. Grief and loss are real, life-altering, pain-inducing experiences that never fully resolve for us on earth. We wonder how those who loved us so much could leave us so completely. In the months after my father's death, I received a message in a dream that one day my time without him would seem no more significant than if he had only left to go to the grocery store. Clearly, that time will be after my earthly passing.

When Mary recognized Jesus, she reached for him and he said, "Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17). He explained that he would be ascending to the Father. I understand this to mean that his physical embodiment, as Mary knew it, had ended, even though he was still and would continue to be spiritually present with her. I believe our loved ones never actually leave us, although they disappear from our conscious, physical awareness. In time, most of us learn to adapt to not having the bodily forms of our loved ones with us and move on with our lives, often not realizing how much their influence and presence continues to impact our lives.

Vibrations and Perception

The reoccurring pattern of birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth is found all around us, from trees and shrubs to animals to mountains to the changing seasons to our daily, monthly, and annual cycles of being. It is so common that we take it for granted and barely notice. Physical life springs forth, thrives for a time, declines, and dies. We interpret that as the end, but it is only *an* ending, a necessary requirement for a new beginning. The physical form is broken down into its component parts so they can be reformed into a new life, and the cycle begins again. Detecting and believing in the resurrection of physical life is relatively easy because it is evident all around us. A walk through any forest reveals numerous dead trees in various states of decay, and new life springing forth from the remains. The resurrection of our spiritual essence is less obvious and therefore more difficult to imagine.

Remember, Jesus' followers did not recognize his resurrected form until he spoke to them. They had witnessed his physical death on the cross but could not recognize his new body without additional clues. In a similar way, I recognized my grandmother's post-death *presence.* They were not dead, as in annihilated, but they were changed. How can we reconcile such a change in a way consistent with other life experiences and with what we know from science? Here is one hypothesis that I find helpful.

The science of physics tells us that everything in the physical universe vibrates along particular frequencies. We experience these as light and sound received through our eyes and ears. We recognize various wavelengths of light as different colors, and other wavelengths of vibration as different sounds. Our senses, however, are only capable of detecting an infinitesimal range of the possible vibratory frequencies. For example, infrared and x-ray frequencies are invisible to us, as are radio waves, but we know of and use them anyway by transposing them into a frequency range we can perceive. Because frequencies exist along an infinite spectrum, we can be certain that there are infinite realms of vibratory realities – colors, sounds, and life – that seem not to exist in our reality because we are blind and deaf to them, at least without additional clues. Researchers have now learned that the sounds emitted by whales, which have been known for many years, have sub-frequencies within them that likely account for even more sophisticated communication than we ever imagined. The same is almost certainly true

for other animals and, I suspect, for trees, rocks, mountains, and everything in the created universe. The complexity and immensity of vibratory possibilities is simply too enormous to imagine or comprehend with our human understanding.

As we reflect upon the seemingly empty space around us – the air we breathe, the space between the furnishings in our homes, the vast distances between the planets – it seems not too much of a stretch to believe these areas are filled with all sorts of life we cannot detect because of our inability to perceive outside of our accessible vibration ranges. I suspect that when we die, in the absence of a physical body weighing it down, our soul vibrates at a level imperceptible to our human senses. It continues its life in a new *body* and environment, however, not completely unlike the one we know now, but existing in a frequency range that is imperceptible to us. This helps to explain why we can often *feel* the presence of departed loved ones, but not see them as we once did.

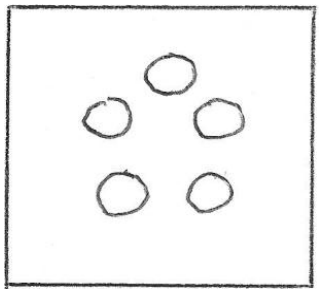
Because some of us have had encounters with those who have died, as did the disciples with Jesus, I suspect these encounters occur sometimes when we are receptive to them and when our departed loved ones are able to adjust their vibratory range to one we can perceive, albeit imperfectly. The fact that these encounters tend to be brief and do not necessarily happen immediately after the passing of our loved ones makes me think these dear, departed souls have entered a new life in a new world. They know we will rejoin them in what will then seem the briefest of instants, at least from their expanded perspective.

Which is to say that Jesus *conquered* death, saving us from the fear of annihilation, by providing a glimpse of what happens. He went through death's gate and revealed himself from the other side. He called himself the *Son* of Man, or the evolutionary descendant of humankind, because he was what we all are to become – a more perfected version of what we are today. Resurrection occurs, not as a copy of this life, but as a new version of this life in a resurrected form.

Dimensions and Perception

Another theory of what happens to those who die, perhaps a re-imagining of the last one, that of *dimensionality*. Basically, when we die, our new body and life may exist in a different dimension, one that we cannot perceive from our current three-dimensional existence. Interestingly, some physicists believe there are at least ten different dimensions of spatial reality, in addition to what we consider the fourth dimension of time.[8]

As embodied human beings, we perceive a three-dimensional world – height, width, and depth. We experience a fourth dimension – the movement of our three-dimensional reality – as time.



When my children were young, we made markings on the wall to show how they grew taller through time. That growth is a dimension we cannot experience in a single, three-dimensional moment, but it is no less real, influential upon, or important to our lives. Growth only becomes apparent though the passage of time.

In order to illustrate how imperceptible the next dimension is to us, consider the hypothetical world of a two-dimensional being. This being would only perceive height and width. It could only experience depth – forward and backward movement – in time, which it would consider the next, or third dimension. The world of a two-dimensional creature might look something like the

[8] https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/501926/how-many-dimensions-are-there, accessed August 21, 2020.

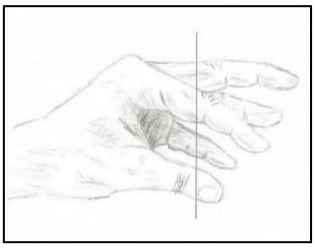


illustration to the left, where we see five, two-dimensional creatures. They perceive what is up, down, and beside their bodies, but nothing in front of or behind them.

When they die, assuming they enter a three-dimensional reality, their new world might look like the illustration to the left. Their former two-dimensional world is represented by the line across the fingers. When freed from the perceptual limitations of their two-dimensional existence, they are able to understand that what they perceived as five individual lives are actually frozen-in-time slices of five fingers connected in one hand. More than that, the hand is connected to a much larger body. What they thought was their individual, independent life is neither individual nor independent, but one part of a larger whole. Only by dying to their two-dimensional nature are they able to see their connectedness to the lives around them. In their new three-dimensional existence, they are still *there*, but imperceptible to the two-dimensional beings they left behind.

In a similar way, when we die to our three-dimensional existence and enter a new dimension, we become imperceptible to our former three-dimensional friends and family. Being freed from our three-dimensional body, our soul experiences life and reality in a dimension that is not yet accessible to our loved ones. This next dimension, which we formerly named as time, allows us to see and experience in a new way, as did the two-dimensional circle now perceiving itself as part of a three-dimensional hand. It is fascinating to me that one of the common reports from those who have had near-death experiences is an experience of their entire life flashing before them, not as a chronological series of events, but as a single image. I will have more to say about near-death experiences in a later chapter. This collapsing of time into a single moment allows us a glimpse of a new dimension where much is familiar, but the context is entirely new. What was once mysterious is now clear. I am reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully."

As this theory goes, our soul exists across all dimensions of space and time but is not limited by any of them. When it separates from this three-dimensional body, it resurrects in a new body in a new dimension. We may experience a sense of this freedom in dreams, where the rules of our physical existence often seem not to apply. The life we identify as our current life is but one part of the larger life of our soul. When we die to this life, that larger life reveals itself, perhaps still only in part, and we find ourselves not annihilated, but reborn into a freer and more inclusive existence. We become more of who we know ourselves to be, not less.

Biblical Resurrection

Finally, I will share a sampling of the biblical references to resurrection. As I mentioned earlier, I do not find the Bible particularly informative or definitive about issues of the afterlife and resurrection, outside of the resurrection of Jesus. It seems certain that these issues were not as top of mind to the biblical authors as they are for us today. Although I do not know the reason, I suspect it may have to do with our current obsession with ourselves as individuals, as opposed to our membership as part of a larger community. It is easier to see generations of people perpetuating into the future than it is to fathom an individual perpetuating beyond our typical 70 or 80 years. The individual seems to disappear while the community the individual was a part of continues. Two religious groups that Jesus often challenged, the Pharisees and the Sadducces, held opposite beliefs about the resurrection, with the Sadducces denying there was a resurrection. Clearly, humankind has disagreed about it for quite some time, and nothing I say here will resolve the disagreement.

In Isaiah 26:19, the prophet says the dead will rise, awaken, and sing for joy. The context of the passage is Isaiah's message that the long string of defeats and history of oppression experienced by the Israelites will end in victory. God will neither forget nor fail to redeem the people. Taken literally, these words point to a bodily resurrection. Taken metaphorically, the passage might refer to the rescuing of those who have been so beaten down by their life circumstances that they act as if they were dead. God will awaken them from their deathly stupor and restore them to a happier, livelier state of being. Either interpretation indicates a resurrection, with the former pointing to a resurrection after our physical death and the latter referring to a resurrection within this life.

In Psalm 49:15, it is written, "But God will ransom my soul from the powers of Sheol, for he will receive me." Sheol is a frequent biblical reference to the place of the dead. It is not usually referenced in either a positive or negative manner but simply as a place where the dead go. The context of this Psalm is that we should not trust in riches. The Psalmist seems to be saying that yes, we will go to Sheol, but that God will rescue or resurrect us from there.

In Hosea 6:2, the prophet writes, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." This verse is part of a call to repentance. It reminds us of how Jesus said he would be killed and raised on the third day. Later in Hosea, God, speaking through the prophet says, "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?" (Hosea 13:14a). The context of this latter verse is God expressing how Israel, the nation, will be judged. It implies that God may or may not resurrect people from the power of death.

Finally, in the 12th chapter of the book of Daniel: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" (12:2). This part of Daniel seems very much to address the resurrection of at least some of the dead, although not necessarily immediately after physical death. The section that precedes this one refers to "the time of the end" (Daniel 11:40). That "end" might be read as the end of time, the end of humanity, or the end of the reign of the ruling powers in Daniel's time.

In most of the biblical references to resurrection, as with many passages in the Bible, it is left to the reader to discern whether to interpret the words literally or metaphorically. For me, I usually find the metaphorical readings more informative, helpful, and broadly applicable. It is further left to the reader to decide if the resurrection is that of individuals or of a collective of people, like a race or a nation.

As threatening and frightening as many of the Bible's references to the end times and to our individual deaths are, there is good news in the readings. All the Bible's stories of death, judgement, and various threats of punishment end with God's assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation. No matter how frustrated or angry God becomes with the Israelites, God always offers a way out, a hand up, a loving acceptance back into the fold. Therein lies our hope for resurrection, regardless of its exact nature. Using the biblical stories of the nation of Israel as a metaphor for our lives today, God eventually rescues us from our shortcomings and assures our continuance.

Chapter 3: The Afterlife

The dead and the living remain connected. Communities tell stories of the dead not only to remember those who have died, but to hold on to what love has created and what cannot be destroyed. The beloved dead return in dreams, visions, memories, and stories told to their descendants.[9]
-Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock

The traditional belief about the *afterlife* is that it is a place of reward or punishment. Not only that, but it is believed to be a place of *eternal* reward or punishment. Not only that, but we cannot know with certainty whether we will be sent down the road of reward or the road of punishment until we have already and irreversibly been sent. It is a horrifying dilemma that is at the heart of much of our anxiety in facing our mortality – and by association, our daily lives. These evolved beliefs about the afterlife also, in my opinion, represent a flawed, unrealistic, unbiblical, and illogical expectation of what happens to us at the end of our earthly days.

Our core fear about the afterlife, perhaps, is that we will be annihilated, even though there is ample evidence, both biblical and scientific, to the contrary. It seems that a more accurate descriptor for the afterlife might be the *next phase of life* or *the next step in my journey toward union with God.* Certainly, part of the self we typically recognize as *us* will be annihilated or reformed because it, like our body, is of the earth. The true essence that underlies and supports that shallow or illusory self will remain, however. Our essence, which holds everything good and holy within us, was never born and will never die. It lives in and with God through whatever side adventures it decides to take, including the side adventure of our days on earth.

It is interesting that the almost maniacal concern about what happens to us when we die is a relatively recent development in Christianity, at least in terms of its intensity and importance. Many believers claim that being *saved,* or being assured of our entry into heaven, is *the* most important thing for us to attain on earth. Obsessing over being *saved* or being *born again* are what is new in our Christian practice but is far from an obsession in the biblical record. The speculation and rules about what one must do to enter *heaven* -- which words to say, prayers to pray, or actions to take – were not considered requirements for entry into a happy afterlife until the last few generations. Either we, as Christians, have gotten a whole lot smarter or we have allowed our neuroses and insecurities to guide our speculations about the nature of our relationship with and eternal connection to God. I suspect the latter is the reality. In our search for certainty we have fallen prey to false prophets that direct our attention away from the core spiritual issues of societal mercy and justice and onto the narrow issue of personal perpetuation, which I believe is a given, although not exactly in the way we imagine.

One key shift in Christianity has been in the evolving meaning of *eternity*, which is a term that has a significantly different meaning today than it did when the Bible was written. In biblical times it referred to a *long period of time* or to an *age.* Today it means *forever* or until the *end of time.* The original meaning could refer to a long time on the calendar or a relatively short time of very intense joy or suffering. In other words, it referred to a period of time that we today would hyperbolically say *felt* like an eternity. It is relatively easy to apply the traditional descriptors of heaven, as a place of eternal joy,

[9] Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, *Saving Paradise.* Beacon Press, Boston, 2008, p. 56.

and hell, as a place of eternal suffering, to our current lives when we adjust our understanding of eternity to *a long time*. We have stretches of good days, weeks, and months, and we have stretches of not-so-pleasant days, weeks, and months. They come and go like the seasons, but none of them last forever. This application brings our beliefs more into line with the teachings of Jesus, as I outline elsewhere in these chapters. Our recovery from a major surgery may feel like *forever*, but it is not. It does, however, take a long time. We may think we will *never* recover from a broken heart or the loss of a loved one, but we do, although we are changed by the experience.

Our *salvation* requires an understanding that God has already saved us as an inherent condition of our creation, regardless of any words we have said, prayers we have prayed, or actions we have taken. Of course, by the free will instilled in us we can reject that salvation, but sooner or later I believe we all come to receive it. Once we understand this foundational fact, then we are free to live and respond to others in love. Jesus' message, ultimately, is for us to live in such a way *now* that what we seek in an afterlife becomes our present reality. Once that is achieved we cannot help but slip peacefully and joyfully into whatever is next on the other side of the grave. What we seek is love, and love is always present when we learn to awaken to and receive it.

The Eternal Continuation

Yes, I believe that our experience of the *afterlife* may, in many ways, be more of a continuation of our experience of our present life than we wish and certainly more than we were taught. I was taught that after I died, assuming I was sent upon the heavenly path, that all of my troubles, weaknesses, and other sources of grief would simply disappear (never mind about the other, post-life option). True, the pain and suffering of our earthly bodies will almost certainly cease. The internal sufferings arising from issues that we ignored or otherwise failed to face and resolve, however, I suspect will follow us *there* as they do *here*. There are spiritual underpinnings to everything in our physical lives, and the fact that our soul is no longer connected to our body does not mean that those spiritual roots die, too. For example, if we chose to live an overly busy, controlling, and anxious life, we likely will carry the spiritual foundations of those insecure feelings with us. Typically, if we feel we must be busy all the time, we are most likely trying to cover for something within that frightens us, afraid that if we stop moving it will overtake us. When we attempt to control everything and everyone around us, we do not trust in the goodness or competence of others. Those who are anxious much of the time display a lack of faith that God, working through others, will make everything work out in time. Busyness, a need for control, and anxiety are three of the myriads of outward manifestations of internal states we all display to a greater or lesser degree. They reside in what is often called our *shadow self*, or that part of us we prefer to remain hidden.

The reason I believe these internal traits may follow us into the afterlife is because of the nature of the union of God we seek, often called *heaven* in Christianity. There can be nothing hidden from God – nothing standing between God and us – if we are to attain union or *oneness,* as Jesus refers to it in John 17. This is illustrated in the allegorical story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. With their new-found knowledge from eating the forbidden fruit of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* in the garden, Adam and Eve suddenly felt the need to hide from God. They recognized they were naked in the presence of God, and they were afraid. They felt they had something to hide and so they covered themselves. Never mind that they had existed just fine with God in the garden, naked and unafraid, for some time before they awakened to their nakedness. I propose that we cannot exist in the presence of God – in heaven or elsewhere – until we can exist in the presence of God naked, unafraid, and uninhibited. And for most of us, there is much work to be done prior to being so prepared. What we do not accomplish on earth, in terms of resolving what we think we must hide, we

will graciously be allowed to continue working on in the afterlife. Otherwise, we will never be able to fully enter the presence of the Divine.

Although some may consider having their shadow follow them into the afterlife as being a terrible and unfair punishment, it is actually grace. It is the act of facing, including, and reconciling the *shadows* of our being that is required for our ultimate freedom. That which separates us from God and others, which is sin, is what we must free ourselves from, and the issues being held in our shadow self maintain the barriers that support our experience of separateness. Depending on the actual nature of the afterlife, which we cannot know with any certainty in our earthly lives, some of our shadow work may be more easily and effectively worked out there, although that does not absolve us from working on what we can here.

This, in my opinion, is at the core of what we consider *heaven* and *hell*. What feels *hellish* to us in our earthly lives is a manifestation of our propensity to accept the illusion of separateness. We lose sight of our intimate interconnectedness with and responsibility for everything in God's creation. Such *blindness* makes us selfish, narcissistic, and even cruel. Hell on earth becomes hell in the afterlife because we must first be freed from that sense of separation, which can be a painful process until it is achieved. Once achieved, however, what was experienced as *hellish* becomes *heavenly*.

Chapter 4: Hell

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels…And these will go away into eternal punishment. Matthew 25:41,46

I grew up with the image of hell as a hot place where bad people went and were tortured for eternity. Eternity meant forever, and there was no hope of escape or redemption for those so condemned – ever. Perhaps the most uncomfortable thing about hell was the ambiguity about what would send one there. Certainly, bad actions would do it – but *how* bad? If you hurt someone but did not kill them, would you go to hell? Did bad thoughts count against you? What if you were sorry and promised never to act poorly again? Could you tell lies? If so, how many? Although there are some images and descriptions in the Bible about eternal punishments, the conclusions we draw are more in line with Dante's descriptions of hell than anything the biblical authors wrote. This is certainly true when we consider the Bible as a whole, which is more about reconciliation and ultimate redemption from a merciful God than about eternal punishment from an angry God. In his 14th Century work, *The Divine Comedy,* Italian writer Dante Alighieri described nine circles of hell, with the devil held in bondage at the center. Sinners were assigned a level based on the severity of their sin, and the eternal punishments grew worse the closer one got to the center.

Interestingly, hell is not mentioned in the Old Testament, at least not by name. In the New Testament, it is a minor theme at best. The most references to hell are in Matthew (7), with three in Mark (all in one passage), and one in Luke. The books of James and 2 Peter have a single mention each. None of Paul's letters mention hell, nor do any of the books attributed to John.

In Matthew 25, Jesus provides an image of sinners being sent into "the eternal fire" and mentions it as "eternal punishment." In context, Jesus is referring to those who mistreat the less fortunate, saying that what we do or do not do for them, we also do or do not do to him.

In Matthew 23:33, Jesus says, "You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" His remarks are directed at the scribes and Pharisees, religious leaders whom he accused of greed, hypocrisy, and misleading the people under the guise of piety.

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." In context, Jesus is warning his disciples whom to fear. In the verses that follow, he assures them their Father loves, cares for, and attends to each of them.

Mark describes hell as the place where the "worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:48). In this grotesque teaching, Jesus tells his followers that it is better to cut off a hand or foot that causes them to sin than to have their whole body thrown into hell. James' reference to hell (3:6) has to do with the firestorm of emotions our words can cause. The reference in 2 Peter (2:4) speaks about fallen angels being sent to hell until a future judgment. That is pretty much it for hell in the New Testament.

The Greek word translated as *hell* in the Bible refers to a place known as *Gehenna.* It was a small valley outside of Jerusalem that was used as a trash dump. Legend says that the fires there never stopped burning. This imagery reminds me of the city dump in the town where my grandparents lived. There were always fires going there, too, transforming much of the trash to smoke and ash. It was

great fun to poke through the stuff that others had thrown out. It was a place of intrigue, but I did not equate it with eternal damnation. Rather, it was where what was no longer wanted or useful was left to be burned or buried. It was a place of decomposition, which is the prerequisite for recomposition or recreation – a place of rebirth. It was what recycling looked like years ago.

It is interesting that the city dump was what Jesus chose as an image of the consequence for less-than-stellar living. It seems to me that if he were referring to a post-death destination, he might have used the more familiar Old Testament term *Sheol* (not mentioned at all in the New Testament) or the Greek *Hades* (referenced twice each in Matthew and Luke). One might think that a place of such eternal consequence, if it existed, might have warranted a more comprehensive treatment.

Sheol and Hades

The term *Sheol* is commonly used in the Old Testament as a synonym for what many consider as *Hell* today. *Hades* appears a handful of times in the New Testament and is the Greek translation of *Sheol*. As mentioned previously, our current concept of hell as a place of eternal misery and punishment is not necessarily biblical but is more of a human creation. Rather, Sheol and Hades refer to a place of the dead, the place where the souls of those who have died go until they are called to judgement. In most biblical references, *both* the righteous and unrighteous go to Sheol when they die.

Sheol is mentioned 65 times in the Old Testament. We find it 16 times in the Psalms, ten times in Isaiah, nine times in Proverbs, eight times in Job, and five times in Ezekiel, with a smattering of references elsewhere. In the New Testament there are 10 references to Hades, along with 13 to Hell. Even so, when considering the Bible as a whole, the topics of Sheol, Hades, and Hell are minor ones, at best.

One can see similarities between the biblical images of Sheol and contemporary concepts of hell, but there are also significant differences. Sheol is described as a place of darkness and was believed to be located under the earth. Being in Sheol is sometimes said to be a place apart from God, although there are verses that say God is there, too.

Here is a sampling of writings about Sheol:

> Numbers 16:30 – *"But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens up its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord."*
>
> 1 Samuel 2:6 – *"The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up."*
>
> Psalm 16:9-11 – *"Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices, my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."*
>
> Psalm 139:8 – *"If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."*

Hades is named after the Greek god of the underworld. It is mentioned two times each in Matthew, Luke, and Acts, and four times in Revelation. In addition, there are 23 references to Hades in the Apocrypha, which are books written in biblical times and included in Catholic bibles, but are excluded from most Protestant bibles. Like Sheol, Hades is the place of the dead.

Here is a sampling of writings about Hades:

> Matthew 11:23 – *"And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades."*
>
> Wisdom 16:13 – *"For you have power over life and death; you lead mortals down to the gates of Hades and back again."*
>
> Revelation 20:13 – *"Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done."*

Interestingly, most of the New Testament mentions of Hades are either in reference to *cities* (as opposed to individuals) that misused their power, or to the Messiah, over whom Hades holds no power.

That said, neither Sheol nor Hades seem like attractive vacation destinations. That the Bible passages are neither consistent nor clearly explanatory is understandable, given that the Bible, though inspired by God, was written by human writers. What can we humans possibly understand with certainty about after-death destinations? Certainly, our images of Hell, Sheol, and Hades today are shaped as much by how we feel those who act poorly *should* be treated in the afterlife than by what we know the actual reality to be.

Clearly, Sheol and Hades are described as holding places as the dead await judgement for their earthly actions. There is ample evidence in the life and teachings of Jesus that our righteousness for this judgement is attained as a community gathered in Christ as the family of God. It does not appear to be a matter of individual righteousness, which is good news for most of us. Throughout the Bible, individuals and groups of people are given many opportunities, perhaps endlessly so, to turn to God, to follow Jesus, and to find their life in Christ – all of which are biblical paths to redemption and salvation.

The Pit and Purgatory

One of the common biblical references to contemporary images of *Hell* today is the *Pit*. When we do not count the *pit* references that seem to refer to a regular hole in the ground (i.e., "the pit was empty; there was no water in it" – Genesis 37:24), there are 33 references to the Pit as an unpleasant, hellish destination. They are almost all in the Old Testament, with six in Job, nine in the Psalms, two in Proverbs, four in Isaiah, eleven in Ezekiel, and one in Jonah. The only New Testament references are in Revelation, with seven mentions of a "bottomless pit" into which the Devil is locked for a thousand years (Revelation 20:3).

Here is a sampling of references to the Pit:

> Job 33:17-18 *"That he may turn them aside from their deeds, and keep them from pride, to spare their souls from the Pit…"*
>
> Psalm 30:3 *"O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit."*
>
> Psalm 88:6 *"You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions of dark and deep."*
>
> Proverbs 28:18 *"One who walks in integrity will be safe, but whoever follows crooked ways will fall into the Pit."*
>
> Ezekiel 26:20-21 *"Then I will thrust you down with those who descend into the Pit, to the people of long ago, and I will make you live in the world below, among primeval ruins, with those who go down to the Pit, so that you will not be inhabited or have a place in the land of the living. I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though sought for, you will never be found again, says the Lord God."*

In addition to the references that seem clearly to refer to the Pit as a destination for the impure, there are 46 additional references throughout the Bible to *a* pit, which could refer either to a literal hole in the ground (as in a pit for a wine press) or to a destination for the dead. I suspect many of these references have dual inferences. In Luke 6:39, Jesus asks a question about one blind person leading another: "Will not both fall into a pit?" Assuming the blindness Jesus referred to was spiritual blindness, the pit fallen into would be spiritual and perhaps hellish in nature.

Purgatory is not a term used in the Bible, but certain religions, particularly Roman Catholics, refer to it in their doctrines. Like Sheol, Hades, the Pit, and Hell, purgatory is a place of the dead. In

general, however, our concept of purgatory has evolved into a place for dead persons who were "mostly" good but still have some sin issues to work through. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes purgatory as "the state of those who die in God's friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven."[10] The concept of purgatory is one that predates Christianity, although it has developed as formal church doctrine only over the past few centuries. The Catholic church draws a clear distinction between purgatory, which is a temporary place of cleansing, and hell, which is an eternal place of punishment.

As a non-Catholic, I find the concept of purgatory compelling. As earthly creatures, we identify with and attach to earthly matters and possessions, none of which are likely to cross into the next life at our earthly death. To the extent we are attached to what we must leave behind, to that same extent will we need to release those attachments in order to fully participate in the next phase of life. For example, when we move to a new town, we cannot fully participate in the life of that town until we let go of our attachments to the old. If purgatory is a place of transition between this world and the next, I find the concept of purgatory to be logical, even though it is neither biblical nor scientific.

I suspect the linguistic root of the word purgatory is *purge*, or to release. It is a painful process to have that which was so much a part of our earthly life unavailable to us, even when greater blessings may await. The more we attached to our earthly identities, the more *hellish* it will be to leave them. Our concepts of Purgatory, Hell, the Pit, Sheol, or Hades may just be necessary places of transition and release as opposed to places of eternal punishment.

Sin

The concept of hell that I carried with me from childhood was one of eternal punishment and misery. Humans were sent to hell for reasons that were not clear to me, but I understood it had to do with *sin*. Our sins were the bad things we did, but it was uncomfortably vague exactly how bad our sins could be, how often we could sin, if some sins were worse than others, and how we could *know* our sins had been forgiven. Getting sent to hell was a fate worse than a death of annihilation because there was no hope of getting out, and the punishment and torture lasted forever. I believe the typical questions raised about hell and sin are indicative of our collective misunderstanding of both.

First and foremost, the contemporary image of hell is completely inconsistent with the God portrayed in the Bible who, in spite of many threats and warnings, is forever reaching out to bring God's children back into the fold. Unfortunately, many churches stake their fortunes on our fear of going to an eternal hell because of our unforgiven sin. Although the God portrayed in the Bible seemingly doled out strong punishments on a regular basis, that same God also always offered healing, redemption, and a path back home. Interestingly, the very churches that lord the threat of hell over their parishioners often seem to downplay the redemption side, which God always offers without condition or price. Many churches do not offer redemption nearly so freely.

At its core, sin is that which separates us from God and others. Whatever we do that drives or perpetuates a wedge between us and anyone else is sin. If I say something hurtful about you, I have sinned against you. If you steal something of mine, you have sinned against me. The so-called *original sin,* found in Genesis 3, occurred when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That sin, according to the allegorical story, got them kicked out of the Garden of Eden, separating them from God. It can be seen as the story of our earthly embodiment – that for a time, the part of us in eternal union with God takes on earthly form where God can only be known indirectly, through faith. We experience the knowledge of good and

[10] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 2005, 210.

evil on earth, but we lose the conscious communion with God we had in the Garden. It is not a punishment so much as it is the nature of physical embodiment.

Our human condition is that we all sin. It is as natural to us as breathing because sin results from self-centeredness. A large part of what makes us human is our identification as unique beings, our perception of our self, separate and apart from others. It is both a blessing and a curse. Jesus summarized the law and commandments by telling us to (1) love God and (2) love others *as* we love ourselves. He did tell us *not* to love ourselves but rather to extend that same love to others. Our mission in our embodied state is to awaken to our conscious union with God and others in spite of the appearances of separation that are inherent features of our material existence. To love someone is to put ourselves back into a state of union or oneness with them. We do no harm to those we love because we understand that in our unity, harming others ultimately harms us.

God does not punish us for our sins; our sins punish us for our sins. It is the law of reaping and sowing. We harvest the seeds we have planted. When we plant seeds of separation and self-interest, we reap isolation and loneliness. It cannot be otherwise. When we plant seeds of unity and harmony, we reap conscious oneness and love with and from others. As long as we continue the very human tendency to consider ourselves special, better than, and set apart from others, we find ourselves in hell, in the sense that we feel alone, insecure, and unappreciated. True, we may be in close, physical proximity to many others, but we are just as isolated as if we had been cast into the outer darkness, fallen into the Pit, or thrown onto the trash heap of Gehenna.

My conclusion, shared with many authors much smarter than I over many centuries, is that Hell is a *present* state. It may also be a future state since our lives and at least some of what we are dealing with on earth will likely follow us after our death. But it is never a *permanent* state because God is forever reaching out to us, inviting us to reunite. The antidote to sin is reunification. It is also the exit from hell.

Suffering and Eternity

Rather than a destination where *bad* people go to be punished for eternity for their unforgiven sins, hell can perhaps be more reasonably seen, both biblically and logically, as a *present state of conscious suffering*. There is a very real sense that any given moment, when entered into with our entire being, *is* an eternity in and of itself. Time does not simply pass; time accumulates, so the past and future are contained within all of our moments. If we are overwhelmed by sadness or misery in one of our moments, we will feel as if we have been condemned to hell, at least for as long as we are focused on a painful, but limited portion of that particular moment.

Hell, when seen as a present state, is a shared experience for everyone because we all suffer at times in our lives. Indeed, this was a key insight of the Buddha as he observed human life in his day, that suffering is everywhere. Pain and suffering take many forms, from the skinned knees and fears of monsters under the bed of childhood to the broken hearts and emotional roller-coasters of adolescence to the aches and pains in our bodies as we grow older. At any age we can suffer from various illnesses, loneliness, betrayal, loss, and fear. Whether it is physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual in nature, all our suffering has at least a couple of things in common: (1) it hurts, and (2) it feels as if it may never end. Of course, normal earthly suffering does not fit into the contemporary vision of an eternal hell, and so it is often mistakenly discounted as of less consequence.

Pain and suffering can be divided into two categories. The first is pain we have brought upon ourselves. We may not enjoy self-inflicted suffering, as in the sore muscles from too aggressive of a workout, but we do not see that sort of suffering as unfair or unjust. A lifelong smoker who gets a lung cancer diagnosis may not like the diagnosis, but they cannot reasonably claim to have not been

aware of the strong link between smoking and serious health issues. A person suffering from a self-inflicted hellish state may be miserable, but they are not likely to believe that an unjust or randomly punishing God has sentenced them to hell. Even if the self-inflicted issue leads to physical death, they will be released from that hell as soon as the soul is released from its wounded body.

Pain and suffering that occur from no apparent fault of a person's own, however, are different. The person that is hit and seriously injured by a drunk driver, for example. A lung cancer diagnosis for someone who has never smoked or spent significant time around smokers is another. This type of suffering can feel like divine punishment, which adds an element of perplexity to the already rampant anxiety. Interestingly, the Bible does reference future generations being punished for the sins of past generations. We might wonder if we are paying the price for the sins of our ancestors. This type of suffering sparks many unanswerable questions about justice and fairness. It may feel like a banishment to hell for no apparent reason. Like the self-inflicted types of hell, however, this no-fault hell will end when our soul is released from its wounded body.

Whenever we feel we have lost control, when our life is not at all what we think we want or deserve, we have entered hell on earth – and we suffer. It is reminiscent of the 22nd Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the verse Jesus quoted in his agony on the cross. No doubt, Jesus was experiencing hell on earth, and knowing Jesus went through that degree of suffering should bring us some measure of comfort. The good news is that earthly suffering does not last. True, it may not end until our physical death, but it will end, and life will go on – just as Jesus demonstrated for us through his death and resurrection.

Although there are times when we suffer, there is always reason for hope. Hell on earth is not a permanent state. To the extent there may be hellish experiences in the next life, those, too, are not likely to be eternal. God is always reaching out to rescue anyone who will reach back. The only way to perpetuate our hellish states is to perpetually refuse God's on-going invitation to reenter a more unitive state of being.

Free Will

No series of reflections on hell would be complete without mentioning free will. Among the amazing gifts we are given as a part of our human experience, free will – the opportunity to make choices of our own volition – perhaps is of the greatest consequence. Our ability to choose is both a blessing and a curse because, for the most part, we do not have sufficient perspective to always make the best choices. We can, however, learn more from our poor choices than our good choices, so there are growth opportunities even in our short-sightedness.

Some consider our ability to freely make choices as a root of all kinds of evil because they believe we are self-centered and will always seek personal gain at the expense of others. There is sense in which that is true, too, at least for most of us and at least for a time. Most of us eventually learn that our narcissistic choices come back to harm us, however. Once we realize our lives are interconnected with the lives of others, we understand we cannot benefit at another's expense, at least not for long. We recognize that choices made to benefit others ultimately benefit us, too.

We see this perhaps most clearly in our relationships. If we do not freely choose to act in loving ways toward another, there can be no love for either of us. For example, a child who is forced to clean her room under the threat of being grounded is not obeying her mother's wishes out of love for her. Love expresses in the choices we do or do not make, in how we use our free will. We experience this, too, in our relationship with God. God likely does not want a forced obedience reluctantly given out of our fear of hell. God desires a willing participation in love and life that springs

from a genuine sense of self-interest – the type of self-interest that understands that what is good for God's creation is also good for us. In other words, our desires merge with God's.

I find it interesting to consider what has been called the *unpardonable sin,* found in Matthew 12:32. Essentially, the unpardonable sin is the refusal to acknowledge the presence of God's animating Spirit in our lives. We can only refuse God's presence because of our God-given free will to do so. The unpardonable sin is not unpardonable because it makes God mad enough to punish us for all eternity. It is unpardonable because by our refusal, the flow of love and care from God to us is blocked from our side. It is the integration of God's presence into our lives that *frees* us from living a shallow, self-centered, hellish life focused only the temporal things of the earth. Earthly matter that is not animated by Spirit is inert or dead. When we refuse to acknowledge God's life-enriching Spirit in our lives, we, too, become lifeless. We enter a hell on earth that will almost certainly become a hell after earth – at least until we finally use our free will to allow ourselves to be drawn back into God's inclusive circle of love. Unfortunately, this Bible passage is often misinterpreted to imply that if we speak against the Spirit *now,* we will pay for that transgression by spending *eternity* in hell. The Christian mystic, Teresa of Avila, is rumored to have said that she believed in hell, consistent with Catholic doctrine, but she did not believe anyone was there. Apparently, St. Teresa believed that everyone wakes up to accept the loving invitation of God eventually. Some are just slower than others.

A good example of our choices determining our present states is in those who chose to work long hours at the expense of being intimately involved in family life. Such people fall out of balance and not only miss the blessings a family can bring, but the family experiences they do have may become hellish because of their erratic presence. When we ignore or deny the spiritual side of our existence and the material side of life degrades, as it always does, we are left with nothing of substance from which to recover.

As author Richard Rohr writes, "God condemns no one to hell, unless they choose to live in hatred, evil, and disharmony. Then they are basically living in hell here and now. It's always our choice."[11] Denying our spiritual nature by denying God's Spirit within us casts us into a hellish outer darkness, where we are isolated and alone. Once we awaken to our spiritual center, however, and act from the knowledge that we are physical *and* spiritual beings intimately interconnected with all other beings, we are lovingly welcomed back into the fold.

[11] Richard Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love.* Orbis Books. 2018, p. 250.

Chapter 5: Heaven

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Psalm 139:7-8

Unlike the relatively few biblical references to hell and hellish places, references to heaven abound throughout the Bible. I find this to be good news and confirmation that God's plan for us has been recognized as good, inclusive, and forgiving for millennia. Heaven, as a place, is named 241 times in the Old Testament and 244 times in the New Testament, plus another 114 times in the Apocryphal books. These numbers do not include the numerous biblical references to the *heavens*, which refer to the sky, planets, or stars. The Gospel that refers to hell most often, Matthew (7 times), refers to heaven significantly more than any other book of the Bible, with 76 mentions. Equally surprising is that Revelation, often considered the book of doom and gloom, has the next most references to heaven with 48.

The Bible begins with two stories of creation that tell of God creating heaven and earth. The accounts are generally assumed to imply a division between heaven and earth, meaning they are described as places separate from each other. For example, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth…" (Genesis 1:1). Importantly, however, one can also read the accounts as if heaven and earth were a single creation, implying an intimate interrelationship between them, as if the two are actually one in origin. One affirmation of this connection is found in what is called the Lord's prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Numerous biblical references describe earthly life as being *under* heaven, as in Ecclesiastes 3:1: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." This can be read as being physically under the heavens or as being under the authority of heaven. Heaven is also called the place of God. For example, "…the Lord's throne is in heaven" (Psalm 11:4); "The Lord looks down from heaven" (Psalm 33:13); "O give thanks to the God of heaven…" (Psalm 136:26); and "…there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries…" (Daniel 2:28).

Heaven is also described as the place from which heavenly beings, like angels, reside. For example, in the story of Abraham and Isaac, "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven…" (Genesis 22:11), and the Christmas story, "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven…" (Luke 1:15). Interestingly, not all beings in heaven are recorded as acting in ways that are pleasing to God. The prophet Isaiah writes in 24:21: "On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven in heaven…" The book of Revelation describes an epic battle in heaven between the archangel, Michael and a dragon: "And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back…" (Revelation 12:7). This latter passage names the dragon as "the Devil and Satan," who is thrown down from heaven to earth along with his angels (Revelation 12:9).

References to *voices* from heaven abound throughout the Bible. For example, at Jesus' baptism, "And a voice from heaven said…" (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22); as Jesus ponders his impending death, "Then a voice came from heaven…" (John 12:28); and in Peter's second letter, "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven…" (2 Peter 1:18).

Despite the implication that heaven and earth are separate places, there is a common thread to both, which is God. Psalm 139 (verses 7-8) assures us that God is not only present in heaven and

on earth, but also in Sheol, the place of the dead. Not only is there a common thread, but there is on-going communication between heaven and earth from God, from angels, and from other unnamed sources. In prayer, we communicate *upward* to God. There is also apparently conflict in heaven, at least on occasion, just as there is on earth.

One could reasonably conclude that heaven is similar to any place on earth *other than* wherever we currently find ourselves, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. In other words, someone who is cold might describe heaven as a location that is warm. A lonely person might describe heaven as a place where they are a part of an intimate community. A person suffering from persistent illness may see heaven as a place of healing and health. In that sense, heaven may be the place that provides whatever we believe we lack while retaining that which we wish to keep. Our search for and vision of heaven, then, curiously equates to our search for and as a place of contentment.

The Heaven of Jesus

According to the Gospels, Jesus talked a lot about heaven. Consistent with his method of teaching, he neither gave concrete descriptions of nor direct answers about heaven. Rather, he provided thought-provoking images which allow us much leeway in imagining the nature of heaven. He referred to heaven as the *kingdom* of heaven or as the kingdom of God.

There are two primary qualities of heaven that Jesus notes repeatedly. They are recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: (1) *the kingdom is near* (Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Matthew 10:17, Mark 1:15, Luke 10:9, and Luke 21:31; and (2) *it is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom* (Matthew 19:23-24, Mark 10:23-24, and Luke 18:24-25). In addition to these two recurring themes, Jesus offers a number of interesting analogies.

The *nearness* of heaven is illustrated by sayings like "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17) and "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9). In a similar way, Jesus also said, "The kingdom of heaven is *among* you" (Luke 17:21). Clearly, Jesus saw heaven as a state of being that was close to his earthly followers, as if they could easily and quickly find it if they knew how and where to look. This is in contrast to the traditional view of heaven as being a distant place where we may or may not be allowed entry at our physical death. While I do not deny that heaven may be a post-death destination, I believe Jesus consistently referred to heaven as a state of being in *this* life, here and now. Thus, it is very near and among us.

The difficulty for rich people to get into heaven is summarized in Matthew 19:23-24, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'" In Mark 10:23, Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." Similar words are uttered in Luke 18:24-25. The difficulty for wealthy people lies not so much in their wealth as in their attachments to their material possessions. Such attachments bind us to that which has no permanence. Several centuries before to the birth of Jesus, the Buddha identified *attachment* as the source of all human suffering. Attachments consume much of our attention and identity in this life, and essentially everything we attach to will be lost to us at death. The kingdom of heaven, on the other hand, is about the eternal realm from which our soul came and to which it will return – a place of freedom from what binds us on earth. Our over-attachment to the seductive and temporary things of the earth makes it difficult for us to attend to spiritual matters.

Among the analogies Jesus uses to describe heaven are (1) someone sowing good seed in a field (Matthew 13:24), (2) a tiny mustard seed planted in a field that grows into a large tree (Matthew 13:31), and (3) yeast mixed with flour to leaven bread (Matthew 13:33). In each of these parables, Jesus

illustrates how the right actions of a person – sowing good seed or mixing yeast into flour – can produce fruitful results that multiply the initial action over time. One implication is that our experience of heaven is a future product of our intentional actions today. Interestingly, in Matthew 21:43 (Matthew is arguably the harshest of the four Gospels), Jesus says the kingdom will be taken from those who do not produce the fruits of the kingdom, another indication that our actions are important. Later in the same chapter, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to (1) treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44) and (2) a person finding a pearl of such great value that he sells everything else in order to possess that pearl (Matthew 13:45). These latter parables indicate that the experience of heaven is worth more than any material thing we can obtain on earth.

The heaven Jesus describes is a far cry from our traditional view of angels on clouds playing harps. The heaven of Jesus is a place where we reap what we have sown. If we do not sow good seed, what we receive may feel like hell. Our state of being today is a product of the choices we made and the actions we took in the past. They shape our present, just as today's actions will shape our future, both in this phase of life and, presumably, the next. In many eastern religions this principle is referred to as *karma*. How we shape and treat the world around us today determines the heavenly or hellish world we will experience tomorrow.

The good news is that it is never too late to change, to sow better seeds for a better life; thus Jesus' invitation: "Repent," which means to turn around or to change direction.

Allegories of Heaven

While the Bible has many references to heaven, both as an afterlife and as a present state of being, two of its most well-known stories can also be read as allegorical stories of heaven. The first is found in the creation story in the second chapter of Genesis. The Garden of Eden is portrayed as paradise or heaven. All the needs of every created being, including Adam and Eve, were provided for in the Garden, as well as there being direct communion with God. We often envision Heaven as a place where whatever we believe we lack is present, so equating the Garden with Heaven seems natural. The Garden of Eden is described as a place in which there is no lack. One can say our search for heaven, God, enlightenment, salvation, or liberation is fueled by our desire to get back to the Garden of Eden, the place of satisfaction and contentment where our theoretical ancestors, Adam and Eve, once resided.

Adam and Eve are kicked out of the Garden when they eat the forbidden fruit of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. This is called the *original sin*. I often wondered why God would plant a tree with forbidden fruit in a place like Eden where everything *except* that fruit was available to its inhabitants. As an allegorical story, there is certainly a lesson in that puzzling tree. When our soul decides to take on physical form and live for a time on earth, it does so in order to experience the realm of good and evil, which is our earthly existence. During that time we are separated from God, not because of anything bad we have done, but because our temporary, physical nature is incompatible with a direct experience of God, who is Spirit. A part of us, our soul, remembers our oneness with God in the Garden and longs to return. When we understand *sin* as separation, the original sin in the Garden of Eden becomes the *original separation* of the physical nature of humanity from the spiritual nature of God. Heaven is the place where that separation is no more.

A second heavenly allegory is the story of the Israelites passage from Egypt to the Promised Land. This is a story that is told in the Old Testament book of Exodus and then retold throughout the Bible. It is the signature story of the people of God (which includes us). The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for many generations under a long line of oppressive Pharaohs. God chose Moses to lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. It was a long, hard journey. Getting Pharaoh to let

them out of Egypt was no easy task. Once out, the people spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, a place so desolate and hopeless that many desired to return to Egypt and slavery. Finally, they were granted passage into their long-promised homeland.

The early descriptions of the Promised Land are allegories for heaven. In Exodus 3:8, this land is described as "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The implication was of a land of satisfaction and contentment. It was a land of freedom where the people of God could live and worship as they desired, not unlike the original vision of the early Europeans settling in what would become the United States of America. The fact that the Promised Land did not end up being the *heaven* they originally envisioned does not diminish the importance of the story as an archetype of our journey back to unity with God.

The point is that our passage to heaven is a *journey* of struggle, growth, and personal discovery. Yes, heaven is very near, as Jesus assured us, but to experience it we must mature into it, both individually and collectively. We grow into the realization that everything we need for our satisfaction and contentment *in this moment* is right here, right now. Our *attachments* to things of the earth, which is the experience of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, keep us bound to earthly matters until our physical death rips them away from us. The problem is not *eating* the fruit but in becoming attached to it, desiring it above all else, and believing it can provide lasting satisfaction and contentment. We believe our possessions will liberate us; instead, they imprison us, at least until we are liberated from them.

The journey to heaven is difficult not because it is far away, but because we tend to look back and long for what we think we have lost, as the Israelites did in the wilderness. Sometimes, even our former state as slaves to our attachments seems more desirable than our current state of affairs. We grow in unity by remembering our eternal spiritual nature and the limitations of physical bodies, even as we enjoy and care for everything on the earth for their amazing beauty and the momentary pains and pleasures we experience here. We grow in the knowledge of good and evil by living through these pains and pleasures and realizing they are not separate, but are vital parts of our earthly experience. To do so requires right focus and right action on our part, both of which are essential parts of Buddhist philosophy, too.

The Hidden Heaven

To this point, I have focused on images and descriptions of heaven, primarily those found in the Bible. I have attempted to point out that our traditional views of heaven are not necessarily biblical, nor are they consistent with the fingerprint of God that we witness elsewhere in creation. Heaven is described as the abode of God and of angels. Jesus calls heaven the *kingdom* and insists it is very near. Biblical allegories of heaven include the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land. Although some references to heaven imply it is a specific place, many references – particularly those from Jesus – describe it as a state of being that is here and now, in this life *and* as this life continues after death.

No biblical description of heaven satisfies our desire for certainty. There are no clear rules for getting into or being exiled from heaven, either here or in an afterlife. There are, however, cryptic hints that point us in a direction, not to a place, but to a state of being or a level of consciousness. I believe that state of being can be summed up in one word: *contentment*. In other words, learning to be content in the moment is the key to entering heaven. When we are discontent in the moment, heaven is not accessible to us – heaven is *near*, but we are not there. Obviously, this image of heaven is one in which we may enter and exit based on fluctuations in our level of contentment. An old proverb states, "If you cannot find contentment where you are standing, where do you expect to wander in search of it?" Ultimately, there is nowhere but here and no time but now.

Heaven is hidden because it is not a place we can see, touch, smell, hear, or taste. Rather, heaven is the degree of conscious presence and acceptance we bring to anything we see, touch, smell, hear, or taste. Our heavenly or hellish experience of our moments is dependent upon how we react to what our senses perceive. When we react negatively, we impose negative energy on the moment. An old guru was asked the secret of happiness. He replied, "Don't mind too much what happens." In the context of Jesus' teachings, this is *not* a call to inaction, apathy, or passivity. Rather, it is a call to non-attachment. It is not a justification for accepting that the current circumstances are acceptable going forward, only that what is now is *what is now*. Certainly, we should work towards improving circumstances that need improvement. We are better prepared to do so, however, when we receive what is with equanimity and non-attachment.

Teacher and author, Eckhardt Tolle, says that humans long for freedom from limitation. For most of us, the biggest limitation to contentment is not the current circumstances we find ourselves in but our belief that we need something different in order to be content. Our house is too small, our car has a dent, our children have not lived up to our expectations. When we feel limited by circumstances, we are not content and we long to be free. We feel victimized or trapped by outside forces when we ignore the *truth* that underlies contentment. In John 8:32, Jesus says to his followers, "…you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." As he testifies before Pilate, just prior to his crucifixion, he says, "My kingdom is not from this world…I came…to testify to the truth" (John 18:36-37), to which Pilate (representing us) responds, "What is truth?" The kingdom (heaven) to which Jesus refers seemingly runs parallel to this world. As we learn to be content with what is in this moment, the curtain between the worlds rips open and heaven is revealed *here*. This is the truth of which Jesus spoke.

The Israelites believed they would be happy once they reached the *Promised Land*, only to find that the land they expected – one in which they would be content – was not the physical area west of the Jordan River. Instead, it was the land between their ears. The problem was not the land but their internal level of discontent, which they carried with them wherever they went. As we mature into the understanding that our external discontentments are reflections of our internal states of being, the gates of heaven appear. The question is not what else I need in order to experience heaven in this moment, but what must I change *in myself* in order to experience the heaven hidden in this and every moment.

Chapter 6: Near Death Experiences

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." Revelation 4:1

When discussing near death experiences, many people think of the stories of those who went through an episode of clinical death and returned to life with memories of the experience. There are even more common *near-to-death* experiences, however, which include the experience of being near to one who is about to die, being near to death ourselves, and those situations in which we are not consciously aware of death's nearness. I want to discuss these more common types of *being-near-to-death* before exploring the types of reports of those who reportedly returned from the afterlife.

I have had three direct experiences with loved ones as they approached their physical death – my grandmother, my mother, and my father. My grandma Hildenbrand was born in 1900, the daughter of German immigrant farmers. A few months after my grandfather died of an extended illness, grandma grew weaker and began having trouble eating. She suspected her life on earth was ending, and she was, in her words, "ready to go." She was a deeply religious woman and had no doubt she would enter heaven after leaving this life and be reunited with loved ones.

Grandma was admitted to the hospital where I worked, so I was able to spend time with her most days when my shift ended. She always greeted me with a smile, anxious to tell me of the dreams she had been having. Her visions were very much along the lines of traditional views of heaven. She heard choirs of angels singing and could name the songs they sang. She saw long-gone friends and family, including both of her children who passed before her, one of whom was my father. She always seemed a little sad to wake up and find herself back in her earthly body. It appeared to me that she was regularly crossing over between this life and the next. She passed after a couple of weeks in the hospital, just before Christmas in 1982.

My mother was an active 82-year-old woman. She took good care of herself and was in amazing physical condition for her age. And then a stroke took away her ability to speak in intelligible ways, along with much of her mobility. For a time after the stroke she attempted to converse, but realizing that her vocalizations were coming out as gibberish, she soon stopped trying. Mom quickly became bed-ridden and was shuffled between a skilled nursing facility and a hospital.

My experience with mom was interesting because it was non-verbal. For a time after the stroke she appeared determined to recover. She brightened at my daily visits, and her therapists praised her efforts. A month or so later, she began to withdraw. She lost interest in all things of the earth. When I entered her room, she would open her eyes to acknowledge my presence, then turn away as if I were not there. She stopped eating and refused to be fed. Eventually, she ceased acknowledging my presence, and then she passed away. I believe two things about her final weeks. First, she longed for death. She believed that she was not going to physically recover to a degree acceptable to her, and death was preferable to her than a severely limited physical existence. Second, like grandma, she was experiencing glimpses of an afterlife prior to her death. Unlike grandma, she could not communicate what she experienced, but she clearly preferred to be left alone where she could more easily be in that land beyond her stroke.

My father's death was sudden and decisive. My *near-to-death* experience with him occurred the night before he died. There was no way of consciously knowing it would be his last night on earth, but he was unusually pensive, as if he knew something significant was about to change. He and I were in the car after a Boy Scout activity. He talked about his job and reflected on our family. It was an unusual conversation for us and was uncomfortable, in some ways, for me. He told me what he had bought mom for Christmas and where it was being kept, as if someone else needed to know where to find it. He asked if I wanted to go for another drive. I told him I was headed to a friend's house to play cards. I have often wondered what he would have said had I gone on that drive with him. I suspect he, like Jesus, did not wish to spend his final hours alone.

These are my three most vivid experiences with loved ones near death. The common theme is one of a significant shift in the placement of the dying person's attention as they seemingly began withdrawing from their earthly attachments.

I am aware of other similar, but less personally intimate experiences of those who were near death. My wife's uncle was hospitalized and being wheeled away for an MRI to help diagnose whatever was causing him pain. His wife said she would see him when his test was done. He looked at her and said, "I won't be here." He suffered a fatal medical condition during the procedure. How did he know? Was it a flippant remark that just happened to come true? I doubt it, because experiences like this, where someone seems to know they are about to die, are not uncommon.

My wife's cousin was in a horrible automobile accident many years ago. Thanks to the skilled efforts of numerous medical professionals, she survived, but she has no memory of the events from the day before the accident until about 10 days after. In her words, "I still remember…the feeling of the presence of God with me and being 'outside of myself.'" She said there was no fear of dying in this state, although she remembers wishing not to die at that time because of her two young children.

Dying people do not always reach a state of acceptance, however, at least not one observable to by-standers. My grandpa was a farmer – strong and somewhat aloof. He was not one to show his feelings, except for his occasional aggravation at the playful antics of his grandchildren, all of whom invaded his home for a week each summer. I know his relationships with his children, particularly his youngest son, were strained. Instead of staying at home after school and taking over their Kansas farm, Uncle Ken bolted from Kansas for California. For grandpa, it might as well have been the moon.

Grandpa contracted pneumonia one winter. The infection would clear in one lung only to reappear in the other. He fought hard to recover, but he weakened and was understandably distraught over the lack of control he had over his situation. His frustration led him to cry in front of us more than once, something he probably thought was the ultimate humiliation. He asked to see his children one last time. They all obliged with a visit, and then he recovered sufficiently to transfer to a nursing home. When he returned to the hospital and asked to see his children again, none were able and/or willing to travel back. He passed shortly thereafter.

As I reflect on grandpa's dying experience, it seems to me he was being *softened* in his final weeks on earth. I say this not because I knew grandpa's heart, but because I perceived him as a man in need of softening. I suspect being humbled while we are on earth, painful as it is, makes our passage to the next stage of life easier. In that sense, his apparently difficult passing may have been a blessing in disguise for him. Part of that softening could have included reconciling with his children, although I do not believe that happened.

One of my spiritual teachers had a physically abusive, alcoholic father. As his father neared death, my teacher traveled to see him. His father said, "I only wish I weren't so weak." My teacher responded, "Why is that, dad?" The response was, "So I could climb out of this bed and beat you one last time." When he passed a short time later, his son's farewell was, "Bon voyage, you *son-of-a-b****."* No doubt, the relentless and personal pain underlying the father's abusive behavior followed him into the next stage of his life. It also left unresolved scars on the loved ones he abused, just as he likely

bore scars of abuse by his own father. After leaving a hellish life on earth he was destined for a hellish next stage of life, hopefully one where his pain could be healed and transformed. That anger, no doubt, was a manifestation of anger at and disappointment in himself. I am reminded of Jesus' words to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love for self as a beloved child of God is required before we can properly love others.

The dying process often helps us release our earthly attachments, as was the case with my mother and grandmother, while providing opportunities for reconciliation, as with my grandfather and my teacher's father. It is up to us to recognize and utilize those opportunities, however, which is part of *dying well*, a topic for later in this book.

Near Death Experiences

The other category of near-death experiences (NDEs) are narratives told by those who have experienced clinical death, witnessed an afterlife, and returned to earthly life to tell about it. They are as varied as the people reporting them, although there are similarities among many of the stories. Many read like an account of an ultra-vivid dream or a psychedelic trip. I am reminded of author Ram Dass saying that God came to earth in the form of LSD.

In most NDEs there is a guide accompanying the person through the afterlife, answering questions and providing other information, often sharing their perspective of life on earth. As with any description of an intense event, everyone expresses frustration that there simply are no words to adequately describe their experience. Here are some of the common elements, not to all NDE accounts, but to many of them.

Out of body experience. Many NDEs begin with an experience of being transported outside of one's earthly body and looking down upon it. A common report is of watching medical personnel working on a body and realizing, somewhat dispassionately, that the body being worked on is theirs. In this state there is no fear and no pain. It is more a state of wonder and interest, as in, "How can it be that *I* am up here, but my body is down there?" These out-of-body experiences are the beginning of the common realization that we are more than our earthly bodies, and our life is more than what we experience on earth.

Brilliant light and colors. Many people see a brilliant light, often described as white. The light is not painfully bright, but warm, welcoming, and joyful. They may feel pulled by it, as through a vortex, or they may feel embraced by or bathed in it. Again, there is no fear of the light because it is perceived as pure love. Many reports describe the light as God or Christ. Others recall vivid and unearthly colors in the afterlife, indescribable in their beauty. Often this light seems to have carried them a distance away from their body, sometimes a very great distance.

Space and time warp. Many NDE reports are quite extensive and detailed in what was seen, in the conversations they had, and in the beings they met and communed with, even for those who were only *clinically dead* for a very short time, perhaps a few minutes or less of *earth*-time. Some people were carried to the edges of the universe in an instant. Others could see the earth in its entirety, yet also make out every detail of its surface. Clearly, our experience of time and space on earth is not the same as the experience beyond. I am reminded of Peter's writing (2 Peter 3:8), "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years." One person described the entire experience on the other side as happening all at once, as opposed to occurring chronologically or sequentially.

Unconditional love and acceptance. Regardless of the other details of their afterlife experience, most people reported a feeling of complete and unconditional love and acceptance. There was also an inherent respect for everyone and everything, both in the afterlife and on earth (as perceived from the afterlife). It was love of a nature completely different from anything they had experienced on earth. It was a personal love directed specifically at their unique being, often described as the love of a parent for a beloved child. Regardless of where they had been transported to, many had the distinct feeling that they had returned to their true *home*. Many experienced themselves sitting on the lap of God, others being lovingly escorted by Jesus.

Life review. Another common NDE is a life review. Sometimes these are experienced as seeing one's entire life in one image or a single instant. Other times it is more chronological. Some describe it as similar to watching a home movie or looking through a photo album. Others describe it more as a detailed reliving of every event of life in that they feel what they were feeling with each moment, but they see the events with more clarity and from a broader perspective. Sometimes there is a discussion with God, Jesus, or a spiritual guide about the events, although it is never described as guilt-producing in nature. Rather, the discussion is a matter-of-fact type of learning experience. Many people reported not only reliving what they were feeling, but also knowing what others felt, too. In other words, how their actions made others feel was revealed in this experience.

Alternate communication. Communication between beings is different in the afterlife. A common recollection is that although no earthly words are exchanged, there is no difficulty or ambiguity in understanding exactly what someone else is communicating. It is as if thoughts can be read, so once one thinks a message, it is delivered and received instantaneously and accurately. This is a frightening thought for most of us on earth, but the culture of mutual love and respect in the afterlife makes thought-reading an effective and safe means of communication.

Messages for the living. It was not uncommon for the person having the NDE to receive a message for a loved one, a message for humanity in general, or a task or tasks to work on when they returned. One man's late uncle told him to tell his father (the dead man's brother) to lighten up and not take life so seriously. Another person met (in the afterlife) the daughter of a living woman she had not previously known, but serendipitously met soon after returning from her NDE. Many people felt guided to spread the message that love underlies everything on earth and that we need not worry so much. Others, during their life review, committed to apologizing to and reconciling with those they had hurt from their past actions. Jeremy Kagan,[12] a filmmaker, returned to earthly life with three lessons to share:

1. Consciousness does not end with death.
2. We are not just our bodies.
3. We are all one being.

An emotional experience. Many of the NDE experiences remained deeply emotional and vivid for those experiencing them, even decades after the event. Some were reluctant to share their experience widely because it was so intensely personal and impossible to adequately put into words. Many felt vulnerable in telling of their experience, fearing others might think less of them, consider them deranged, or otherwise belittle the deeply intimate event.

[12] http://theneardeathandlifeofjeremykagan.com/, accessed February 24, 2020.

Influence of earthly beliefs. It appears to me that how one describes their NDE, and perhaps what they experience, is influenced by their earthly beliefs. It is common, though not exclusive, for Christians to describe the beings they encountered as God or Jesus or angels, sometimes following the traditional descriptions of heaven. One person described experiencing what he imagined to be hell, although once he realized his image of hell was just his idea of hell, his hellish experience transformed into something more consistent with other, more pleasant NDE accounts. My grandmother's experience, though not technically an NDE of the type currently under discussion, was one of angels singing on clouds and reunions with long-dead loved ones, which was consistent with her religious beliefs.

Distressing NDEs. Not all NDEs are a pleasant experience for the folks having them, although the reports of distressing NDEs are rare by comparison. One person had a sense of annihilation and being thrown into a deep, dark void. The most distressing part of the majority of reported NDEs came from the realization that they would be leaving the experience and returning to life on earth, however.

As one of the typical NDE characteristics, I mentioned the apparent warping of time and space. After my dad's sudden death I was plagued by a series of dreams where I would be aware that my dad was present, but out of my view. I would rush to where I knew him to be and find that he had just left. No one else in the dream was upset, as if my dad's disappearance were nothing out of the ordinary for them. For me, I desperately wanted to see my dad again, even if only in a dream. Several years later, I had another dream where my sister and I were sitting on the couch looking out the window when dad drove up and got out of the car with two bags of groceries. As I watched him approach, I woke up. I believe the message from this strange series of dreams is that from the time-perspective of one on the other side of this life, dying is no more significant than a trip to the grocery store in this life. In the scheme of eternity, the days, weeks, and decades we spend missing and grieving a deceased loved one are but the briefest of moments when experienced from the other side. This thought brings me comfort, as I hope it does for others.

I wish to share one more NDE before leaving the topic, a particularly powerful account because it comes from a neurosurgeon, Dr. Eben Alexander. He details his experience in the New York Times Bestselling book, *Proof of Heaven.*[13] As a dedicated scientist, he was particularly skeptical about NDEs, an afterlife, and anything religious. He believed that consciousness began and ended in the human brain, so once the brain was dead, individual consciousness ended. That was his belief, at least until the consciousness-producing part of his brain *died* for seven days. A rare bacterial infection caused his neocortex to shut down. I will not spoil his gripping story by paraphrasing it here, except to share a couple of elements to conclude these reflections on NDEs.

Dr. Alexander describes three distinct realms in the afterlife: the underworld, which he named the *Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View*; the Gateway, and the Core. He experienced what he described as direct communication with God. He writes, "My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us…"[14] He writes about something important he was taught in the afterlife, which he summarizes as follows:

1. You are loved and cherished.
2. You have nothing to fear.
3. There is nothing you can do wrong.[15]

[13] Eben Alexander, M.D., *Proof of Heaven.* Simon & Schuster, New York. 2012.
[14] Ibid, p. 9.
[15] Ibid, p. 71.

After Near Death Experiences

As interesting as NDE accounts are, the life changes occurring after many NDEs are equally interesting and enlightening. For those of us without a personal NDE to learn from, these reports provide possible glimpses into what awaits beyond the mysterious veil we all pass through one day and how that knowledge might influence how we live today. Here is some of what changed for these folks on returning to earthly *life* following their afterlife experience.

1. Many people gained a new-found recognition of the uniqueness of each individual being, including the uniqueness of their own being. This was an egoless awareness in that one recognized how special one is, but at the same time recognized that everyone else is equally special, so there was no pride or feeling of superiority accompanying the perception.
2. Many people experienced a disconnection from the daily concerns that caused much worry and anxiety prior to their NDE. They had greater clarity after their NDE as to what was and was not important in this life.
3. Related to the last change, they lightened up – not taking themselves or others so seriously – and they laughed more.
4. Many people became more compassionate, both to themselves and to others.
5. Some people desired to purge their lives of the possessions that now seemed only to weigh them down. They found themselves longing for a simpler, less encumbered life.
6. A change in religious beliefs was common. Some began attending church for the first time or for the first time on a regular basis. Others stopped participating in organized religion but became intensely focused on non-church-related spiritual activities.
7. Many people became acutely sensitive to and concerned about the impact of their actions on others.
8. Their knowledge and awareness of the spiritual aspects of life were magnified. Many reported now being able to sense the spiritual guides or guardian angels that accompany us on earth.
9. They believed with certainty that dead loved ones, God, Jesus, angels, and other spiritual beings are very near and surround us at all times.
10. They lost all fear of death.

Like Jacob's vision of a ladder extending from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending (Genesis 28:11), there appears to be a doorway between this life and the next through which beings come and go with regularity. Throughout my life I have had dreams of familiar homes, often that of a grandparent, where (in the dream) I enter rooms I never knew were there. Sometimes these perplexing rooms are frightening, sometimes they are wonderful, but they exist alongside familiar rooms. I will say more about these dreams in the chapter to come on *Dreams and Dying*.

In reflecting on NDEs it appears that at the time of our physical death, a doorway opens (as in a dream) to aspects of life that have always been here, but exist just outside of our earthly ability to perceive them. If we are to believe any of the thousands of NDE accounts, we must believe the realm of the spirit is a real and present influence on our earthly lives, today and always.

Reconciling NDEs and Religious Tradition

Can we reconcile the reports of Near-Death Experiences with scripture and religious traditions? I believe we can. I often comment on the interpretation challenges of translating scripture from its original languages and cultures into English and modern society. There are significant cultural

differences and shifts in societal norms and mores to be considered, not to mention the decades that passed between the life of Jesus, for example, and the written accounts of his life. All of this should be considered as a part of any attempted reconciliation of past and present realities.

An example of an interpretative challenge is the Greek (the original language of the New Testament) word *Anion*, which is commonly translated in today's Bibles as *eternal*. The word actually means *an age* or *a time*. The cultural norm in Jesus' day commonly referred to a time or an age as an eternity. It certainly did not refer to what we consider eternity, as in *all* of time, forever and ever. One particularly frightening aspect of the current understanding of *hell* is its supposed *eternal* nature, meaning there is no hope of release or salvation *ever*. It is as if there is an invisible threshold on earth, one side of which is for those who will be loved and cherished forever, but the other side results in condemnation and punishment forever. A more culturally-correct reading of the text would be to say we may have hellish experiences *for a time*, both in this life and the next.

As we compare one of the common NDEs, that of a life review, with the biblical concept of *judgement*, once we reconcile our definition of eternity with the Greek meaning and the understanding at the time, we can see a clear relationship between the two. In the reported life reviews, everything one did or said on earth was reviewed with another being – God, Jesus, an angel or guide – not only in great detail, but it included learning the impact that our words and actions had on others. In one of the common biblical passages about the judgement, the author of Matthew writes, "…you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter…" (Matthew 12:36). The area where the NDE reports help clarify this judgement that creates such fear in so many is that the life review, or judgement, in NDEs is not experienced as threatening or condemning; rather, it is a learning experience. It helps people understand how to become better participants in their relationships with others, both here and in the hereafter. In the belief systems taught by many religious leaders today, the judgement of God is terrifying because that judgement determines whether we spend eternity in heaven or in hell. I believe the reality is not nearly so dire, and that there is no place we will *ever* find ourselves with no hope of salvation, no matter how sinful we have been. Rather, our lives naturally take us through both heavenly and hellish experiences. Where we have sown seeds of discontent, we will reap discontent *for a time*. This reaping of what we have sown is how we learn and grow, and both positive and negative experiences are necessary and are completely within God's domain. NDEs help us understand the true nature of judgement as a learning and reconciling experience as opposed to never-ending torture and punishment.

Many NDE reports recall being in a sort of *holding* area, not fully in the afterlife, but certainly out of earthly life. From this area they catch glimpses of both places. It is not described as frightening, but only as a place of being held. This is consistent with the concept of *purgatory* and the biblical accounts of the places of the dead: Sheol and Hades. The areas are neither pleasant nor unpleasant; they are only what they are – places where people go when they die.

Finally, the rearranging of one's priorities that often occurs following an NDE is consistent with the concept of a *purging* area, where we learn to release our earthly attachments to free ourselves to fully enter our lives, both on and beyond earth. This experience often results in activities and possessions that were once a focus of one's life losing their importance.

The similarities between NDEs and biblical accounts are not surprising because NDEs are not new. The Bible is full of accounts of dreams, visions, and other communications from beyond this life. It is little wonder that many NDEs often read like something out of and consistent with experiences recorded in the Bible.

Chapter 7: Cultural Fear of Death

…it is appointed for mortals to die once... Hebrews 9:27

Our current culture is, in my opinion, unreasonably fearful of death. We even avoid the word, saying someone *passed away* or *crossed over*, as if they have simply gone into another room (which may be an apt analogy). We shelter dead bodies from view, at least until they have been cleaned, made up, surgically altered, and dressed to look as alive as possible. We have come to consider death as annihilation, and who wants to be annihilated? No wonder we fear death so. We celebrate those who exceed their predicted life expectancy as if they won the lottery. Death is an even less appropriate topic for family gatherings than religion or politics. It is not so much that our feelings about death are divisive, but that the topic itself is so frightening and unpleasant. Our cultural fear of death makes it difficult to find ways to embrace death as the inseparable part of life that it is. I confess here that I have no reason to believe I am close to death, other than relentlessly growing older. If I were in a precarious physical state, my feelings might well differ, so I offer these observations and speculations without judgement.

I do not wish to imply that we should not take reasonable measures to maximize our time on earth. We are here for a purpose, and we should continue to serve that purpose for whatever time is given us to serve. And our purpose, particularly as we age, has less to do with what we *do* than with *who we are* and how our *being* impacts others. My concern has to do with the irrational belief that death is the worst thing that can happen and must be avoided at *all* costs – financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual. In truth, death is expensive, and the longer it is prolonged once it comes knocking, the more expensive it becomes, both for those with the means to pay for it, and for society when individuals have insufficient resources of their own.

What bothers me most about our collective fear of death is not so much the actual fear of death itself, which I think is reasonable. What lies beyond the life we are familiar with on earth is largely unknown and unavailable to our most accessible levels of consciousness, so it is natural for the thought of death to be uncomfortable. What I believe is so damaging is the *sense of separation* that underlies our cultural fear of death. When we consider ourselves to be independently functioning and free of intimate bonds with others, we fall prey to many unhealthy beliefs and attitudes about life, love, and faith. Chief among these is an overvaluation of any individual life. All lives are valuable, of course, but none are irreplaceable. It is interesting to me that leaders of nations used to be at the front lines of battles, inspiring and fighting alongside the other soldiers. When a leader fell in battle, another leader emerged and took over. Now, of course, our leaders, including many of our generals, are well removed from the dangers of the front, and our political leaders are shielded from nearly every human act of violence. No doubt, the personal consequences of decisions about war are very different when one is weighing one's own life and livelihood with the other pros and cons of engaging others in warfare.

It is fine to consider ourselves uniquely special as long as we grant the same uniquely special tag to everyone and everything else in God's creation. It is fine to take some measure of pride in what we have accomplished as long as we understand and acknowledge that the part we played was only *one part* and that any successes we have were communal efforts. Whenever we overvalue our individual

lives we deny the interrelated web that makes up the tapestry of life on and beyond earth and act as though we are above it. If we were actually alone and irreplaceably unique, death would certainly be tragic. That attitude of separation is exactly what leads to our fear that the being we call *us* will be annihilated at our death. We cannot bear losing the only *me* we know, along with the attachments we so enjoy and depend upon.

What we can only know by faith, but that people of faith *should* know, is that our work, our relationships, and this being we call *me* do not end with the life of this physical body. Rather, we take on a resurrected body and continue living, albeit on another plane of existence. Life does not end, even life as we know it, but it does change forms.

The Cost of Death

The costs of death include financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual costs. In all but the rarest of cases, those costs go up when death is needlessly delayed in ways that are based more on the fear of dying – fear on the part of the patient and/or the patient's loved ones – than on what can be reasonably expected to prolong a decent quality of life.

I will begin by sharing some of the financial costs of dying in the United States. The costs vary by state, and I did not find a lot of specific detail about the costs, except that these cost averages include both funeral expenses and end-of-life healthcare costs. The most expensive state in which to die is Hawaii, which in 2019 was estimated to cost an average of $41,467. The least expensive state was Mississippi, which in 2019 was a mere $18,500. A measure of the high financial cost of prolonging imminent death came from a study several years ago estimating that an average of 80% of one's lifetime healthcare costs were accrued in the last two months of life. Although I am not certain of the accuracy of that figure today, I know that the average cost of being on life support is over $10,000 per day. In 2008, Medicare reported paying $50 billion in physician and hospital bills for patients during the last two months of their lives. No doubt, that number has increased exponentially since that time. My point is not so much the actual numbers, but that dying is expensive, both to individuals and to society, and unnecessarily prolonging death drives the costs even higher. As I noted previously, I am not arguing that reasonable steps to prolong life should not be taken. If, as I suspect, many of the financial resources spent at or near to death result from our unreasonable fear of death, then I think we as a society should carefully examine the sources of that fear. At some point we might ask if there are better uses for the money.

Clearly, the financial costs of dying are only one part of the equation of dying well, but when money is tight and the basic needs of the living are overwhelming, I believe the wisdom of extending life at any cost needs to be examined. With the many advances in medical science, our ability to preserve a life with little or no chance of recovery has increased dramatically, as has the financial cost of doing so.

Emotional Costs

Obviously, the emotional costs of dying are impossible to quantify, nor is such quantification necessary. Death is an emotional experience for all involved, so it is safe to assume the burden is high. The question, from a utilitarian standpoint, is whether the emotional costs go higher when the dying process is needlessly prolonged. My sense is that they probably do, although I think that is somewhat time-dependent. For example, if someone receives a terminal injury from a car accident or other immediate and unexpected cause and has been kept alive on life-support while medical professionals

assess the extent of the injuries and the prognosis for recovery, some amount of prolonging life is undoubtedly helpful for the family to emotionally process what has happened and to be counseled that the chances for their loved one to recover are essentially nil. And to say "Goodbye." At the other end of the spectrum is someone who slips into a coma from which they are unlikely to recover after being terminally ill for an extended period. In this latter case, the loved ones have (hopefully) had the opportunity to understand the course of the illness and to prepare themselves for the inevitable end. If they have not had that opportunity, the fault would probably point to a shortcoming in our care system. On the other hand, those who have had an extended amount of time to process the impending death and who still refuse to accept the medical reality of the situation may be of a nature such that they will never accept death as inevitable, regardless of any counseling or comfort measures offered. In the case of my grandfather, my sense was that he needlessly prolonged an emotional, extended, and painful dying process because of his own refusal to accept the end of his earthly existence. I hope I am not being unfair, but that is how it appeared to me after many months of being shuffled between the hospital and a nursing home. I write this not as a criticism of him, but as a reminder to myself that perhaps there comes a time to not hold on so tightly to that which is clearly being removed from us. It might ease the difficultly of the dying process.

Physical Costs

The physical costs of dying primarily have to do with the pain and suffering of the patient. No one wants a treatment to be worse than the disease, but that appears to happen in some cases. Again, we must distinguish between treatments that have been shown to have a reasonable chance of prolonging a reasonable quality of life from those that have shown little reason for such optimism. We must also give some leeway in the case of experimental treatments that may not help the current patient, but which may provide important information for developing effective treatment protocols for future patients. Aside from those qualifying factors, the physical costs of avoiding death can be agonizing.

Surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and even physical therapy can be painful and disruptive, making it increasingly difficult for the patient to be present to the joys that might otherwise be available in their remaining days. The increasing acceptance of palliative and hospice care reflects the cultural shift to allowing those with terminal conditions to die as comfortably as possible without complicating the dying process with unnecessary, ineffective, and uncomfortable treatments.

Unfortunately, many providers are forced into practicing *defensive medicine*, which is the practice of doing everything possible to extend the life of a patient, regardless of its expected efficacy. This is particularly prevalent in emergency medicine. Defensive medicine has been necessitated because of an overly aggressive legal system where providers can be sued for enormous sums of money for not ordering every possible treatment option. A case can sometimes be made, retrospectively, that a particular treatment *might* have made a difference in a particular instance, and so the second-guessing and arm-chair quarterbacking begins. Our cultural fear of death muddies the waters here. For example, if a certain terminal condition has been shown to result in a positive response in 1% of the cases where a certain treatment is attempted, should all patients receive that treatment? What if the percentage is 5% or 15%? What if the patient is over a certain age or has other serious health issues? What if the treatment's price is over $1,000,000? These are cultural and ethical issues without firm guidelines or clear answers. They are also ripe fodder for patient families and their attorneys to accuse health providers of unreasonably hastening death.

The largest physical costs of prolonging life in the face of death accrue to the patients, who in many cases are not deemed competent to participate in decision-making about their care because they are unconscious or in a medication-induced, altered state of consciousness.

Spiritual Costs

The spiritual costs of prolonging life, like the emotional costs, are impossible to quantify. They are largely dependent on the spiritual grounding of the patient and the patient's loved ones. Those with no belief in an afterlife may prefer to extend life at any financial, emotional, or physical cost. Atheists and others with a *this-is-all-there-is* mentality view death as annihilation and will likely desire to extend this life until annihilation becomes preferable to the pain and suffering of continuing to live.

In some religious belief systems, death under certain conditions such as martyrdom, is preferable to this life. For such believers, the underlying motivation is to get to the afterlife as opposed to extending this life. For Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is intended to show, among other things, that there is nothing to fear from death – that we die and are resurrected into a new life. Numerous scripture passages affirm this message. In addition, we see death and rebirth continuously in the world around us, as well as in our own lives. The evidence is everywhere – in the springtime, in each new day, in the regeneration of cells in our bodies. Creation has been ordered such that there should be little fear of death because it is always followed by and is a necessary prerequisite for rebirth. Physical forms die, but the essences live on. In that sense, an unreasonable fear of death reflects a lack of faith.

Our culture sends the message that death is to be avoided at *all* costs. It is a message we receive from an early age. One of the key lessons of initiation rites into adulthood, which were part of every culture until recent times, is that we are all going to die. Perhaps our cultural fear of death has grown as those initiation rites died out. We are no longer trained in how to deal with our mortality nor in how to face it as an inevitable reality. Our souls are immortal; our bodies are not.

Cultural Teachings

In the Christian calendar, the week beginning with Easter finds Jesus being bodily raised as the Christ. We often hold up the horrific suffering of Jesus in his final hours as an example of the type of death none of us would choose to experience. And rightly so. As reasonable as that conclusion should be, it also misses the point. Jesus willingly suffered and died because he was committed to a purpose greater than himself, and he was committed to achieving that purpose non-violently. He understood that his earthly life was just one life and that he could positively impact countless lives by living and dying as he did.

When our culture teaches us that we are the center of our universe, a death like Jesus' makes no sense at all. Who would do that? If everyone values their own life above other lives, the answer is that no one would willingly die as he did. The result? There would be no soldiers on the battlefields, no first responders ready and willing to respond to any disaster, and no Jesus hanging on the cross. As I have mentioned previously, our cultural fear of death corresponds to our cultural beliefs about the value of an individual life. The Bible, however, does not speak of the salvation of individuals but of groups of individuals, like nations. Of course we remember names like Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul, but it was the nations and the generations of believers to whom their lives and actions were directed, not their concern for self-preservation. They sought the perpetuation of a life much greater than their own. We fear being on the suffering side of life because our culture does not teach us the

larger view of having something bigger than ourselves to live and die for. My friend, Stan Hughes, writes, "Sometimes when confronted with the choice to suffer or move beyond suffering we think the choice obvious, but I can't help but think that love might direct us on a more difficult path for the sake of others."[16]

One area where we often feel inadequate as individuals is in doing meaningful work for the common good. With political power concentrated in the hands of politicians, social power held by members of the media, and religious authority flowing from pulpits, individuals often feel powerless and impotent in the face of social problems. Too often we settle for the *least bad* option presented to us instead of risking alienation by insisting on something better. When we look at the magnitude of the problems, we rightly wonder what one person can do. Again, this is a part of our cultural conditioning. A population that believes they are powerless is controlled more easily by those in power.

In Jesus' day, the Roman Empire kept individuals and groups of people feeling powerless by their shear brutality towards anyone who dared challenge them. Jesus' crucifixion was not because he claimed to be God's son, but because he was being called the *king* of the Jews, which was a threat to the Empire. He was considered an *insurrectionist* – one attempting to overthrow the governing authorities. Indeed, his followers hoped the kingdom he spoke of meant the end of their occupation by the Romans, but that was a gross misunderstanding on their part.

Those of us in most first world countries live in democracies and are not usually subject to the overt threat of physical violence in response to expressing our views and beliefs, at least for those of us in the ethnic majority. We can safely join with others of similar beliefs, we can peacefully protest public policies and structures that perpetuate injustice, and we can campaign and vote for political candidates who share our values. We can add our individual efforts to those of others on the front lines, fighting for mercy and justice for those in need. While the maintenance of our culture depends on citizens who do not threaten the status quo, we as Christians are called on *not* to perpetuate the status quo when injustice is present. Rather, we are called to rock the boat and stir up the waters when necessary to bring attention to the sad realities of the marginalized in society.

This is how we find a larger purpose for our lives, a purpose worthy of living and perhaps dying for. It is how we overcome the cultural message that our life is more important than anyone else's or that postponing our death at all costs should be the primary focus of our lives. It was the social structures and the supporters of the status quo of his day that crucified Jesus. By fearing that the suffering of Jesus might be inflicted upon us instead of expressing the love underlying his willingness to suffer, we betray his legacy.

[16] Personal correspondence between the author and his friend.

Chapter 8: Dying Before We Die

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12::24

The concept of dying before we die has nothing to do with unreasonably hastening our physical death. Rather, it has to do with recognizing and becoming more familiar and comfortable with the fact that death is a regular, common, and necessary part of this life. It requires acknowledgement of the reality of death, if not a particular fondness for it. Considering ways to consciously die before we die requires a significant expansion of what we identify as death and rebirth in order to understand and perhaps embrace our ever-present nearness to death. Indeed, much of this book is intended to do just that – remind us of how intimately death is already woven into our lives and how death, as in annihilation, never has the final word. The more we recognize and accept the numerous deaths and rebirths occurring in our lives, the more prepared and comfortable we will be as we face the end of this life as we know it, not to mention the rebirth into whatever lies ahead.

Although I have read much of what the Bible and other texts say of death, I do not consider myself an academic or biblical expert on the topic. Death and dying, however, are topics that have commanded a lot of my mental bandwidth for much of my life. Perhaps I am obsessed with death; or perhaps I have been given insights that could be helpful to others. It is in the spirit of the latter hope that I continue with this topic. My goal is not to convince anyone. My goal is to spark an open-minded consideration about the nearness of death – the little deaths we experience daily and the big death awaiting us all – and to help us become more comfortable with the reality.

One of the quickest cycles of birth and death is breathing – letting go of the breath we just held in our body, knowing it will never return as it was, and welcoming a new breath. Breathing in a conscious way is a helpful and centering exercise. Saying goodbye to each day as we lay down to sleep, expressing gratitude for the blessings it wrought, reviewing the lessons of what could be done better, is also a good practice of embracing a familiar type of death. We cannot see the constant deaths and rebirths occurring at the cellular level in our bodies, but all of our cells die and are reborn every seven or so years. Without that necessary cycle of life and death, we would attain senior citizen status upon entering elementary school. Whether we wish to observe our deaths in seconds, hours, days, months, or years in order to convince ourselves that death is an inseparable part of life, we must recognize that we die and are reborn countless times in whatever time is allotted to us on this earth. It is a natural rhythm that has existed since the dawn of creation. Animals, plants, mountains, rocks, planets, and stars are all subject to the same cycle of birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth.

In the scripture leading this chapter, Jesus provides an astute insight into the benefits of dying before we die. He uses a grain of wheat as an example. If a grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and *die*, i.e., die to the way it was as a seed and allow itself to be reborn into something new, it will remain a single grain of wheat. Its component parts will eventually break down and fall back into the earth to be recycled into something else. A grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies is transformed into a stock of wheat, however, producing many more grains of wheat, all of which are offspring of the original grain. We do not die for the sake of dying. We die for the sake of growing into something new.

Dying before we die is about consciously letting go of that in our lives which no longer serves a useful purpose and is holding us back. It might be cleaning out a closet or learning healthier habits of being. We can either wait until whatever needs to die is forcibly removed from us, as will inevitably happen at our physical death, or we can let go now – dying before we die – with intention and purpose. The latter option allows us to be co-creators with God in growing into the next phases of our life. It also helps us become more comfortable with the inevitable death awaiting us at the end of our earthly days.

A Learning Experience

Admittedly, the concept of *dying-before-we-die* is not easily grasped. It might better be titled *consciously-letting-go-before-we-are-forced-to-do-so.* Done right, it requires a well-developed intuition and a plan of attack. Without these two elements, allowing established aspects of our lives to *die-before-they-die* can become little more than careless risk-taking. While it is true that at some point in the process we have to trust that a higher power will provide guidance and grace, we should still strive for some degree of clarity regarding what we intend to accomplish in our dying and how we will begin to begin again.

To clarify what dying-before-we-die is about, I will describe an event from my own life where, ultimately, I decided *not* to *die before I died*, only to be *killed off* in a protracted and unpleasant death a few years later. Remember, dying-before-we-die is not something that leads to the physical death that ends life on earth as we know it. Rather, it is about growing into something more than we are today, which first requires giving up something – allowing something to die – in order to allow a rebirth to fill the void. Here is an example:

In my early fifties I had an opportunity to jump into a new profession. I became eligible to draw a modest pension from my long-time employer, providing a financial cushion to help ease the transition into a new professional life. A strong part of me felt like this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Another part felt it would be a crazy move. After all, I did not hate my job. It was steady, mostly meaningful work. It paid well. It was familiar, and I was comfortable. Even so, I had a persistent urge to explore new options – to let this profession die and allow myself to be reborn into something new. Perhaps I would get a teaching certificate or enroll in seminary. Perhaps I would try (again) to establish myself as an author or a songwriter.

Ultimately, I did nothing but cling to the security of a profession in which I had grown stagnant. I did nothing, that is, until the owner of the company I had managed for decades decided to sell the company to a corporation I did not wish to work for. I died a professional death not of my own choosing; and it was a difficult, protracted death. Remember, the life-cycle of all things of the earth is birth-growth-decline-death-rebirth. This is as true for companies and nations as it is for all living things. It is not in the nature of healthy life on earth to stagnate or remain unchanged. It is not so much that God forces an ugly *death-of-the-status-quo* upon us as it is that life itself forces difficult deaths upon us when we hold too tightly to that which has run its course. If we are not being reborn and growing, we are dying. The choice to orchestrate a rebirth as a co-creator or to have something forcibly removed from us is ours, under the free will God gives us. Dying before we die is about choosing the former option.

This lesson was especially timely as I was writing this due to the dramatic global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of lives were relentlessly uprooted with job losses, many of which did not return. There were empty shelves in stores. The ability of governments and non-profits to step into the *matter-of-life-and-death* gaps for marginalized persons was increasingly threatened by significant reductions in tax revenues and donations. And the numbers of marginalized people continued to rise.

Life as we knew it was evolving quickly and was unlikely to return to its former and familiar ways. Did we use that time and those changes to co-create a rebirth that allowed healthy growth in a new reality that we participated in creating? Did we proactively make the necessary changes based on our gut-instincts, or did we settle for whatever new reality was imposed upon us when the dust settled? Did we create our new life in a way that was just, fair, and sustainable for at least as long as anything remains just, fair, and sustainable? Did we hold loosely enough to our new life to be able to willingly let it go when the time came for another rebirth? These are questions that history will judge and are among the challenges of dying before we die. And they help prepare us for the death that will find us reborn on the other side of life's veil. In the words of an old proverb: "To die and be reborn is not easy."

The Physical Reality

As I close this chapter, I want to focus on the physical reality of the concept of dying before we die. It is all too easy to consider it strictly as an intellectual or spiritual exercise, which is certainly one form of the process. There are physical manifestations, too, however. Jesus illustrates this in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke by referencing wine and wineskins. The allusion is a little obscure to us because we store wine in bottles today. Jesus said no one would put new wine into old wineskins, because the old skins would burst and both the wine and the skin would be lost. This is because wine *breaths* as it ages, which is why most bottled wines are sealed with a cork, allowing gas exchange between bottle and atmosphere. Young skin is flexible and can stretch. Old skins are inflexible and dry, cracking or breaking when what is inside tries to expand. Jesus' lesson is that our old skin cannot hold our new self.

We see this manifested in snakes and other reptiles. In order to grow, they must shed their old skin. They *molt*, or squeeze themselves out of their old, inflexible, too-tight skin in order to be reborn into a new skin that will house their reborn selves. Although we do not know if the process is painful to reptiles, it does leave them vulnerable to predators during the process because they are less mobile. We do know the process of shedding our old skin – dying before we die – is often a painful process for us, sometimes lasting for months or years, and often leaves us feeling vulnerable, adrift, and alone.

There are a couple of sacraments in the church that are outward, physical affirmations that we are dying before we die, in the sense of leaving one life in order to enter another: *baptism* and *marriage*. The water of baptism symbolizes our being washed clean of our old self, allowing a new being in Christ to emerge. The baptism of infants symbolizes that the new life in Christ is actually granted to us from the beginning, that God choses us long before we are capable of consciously making a choice. I was baptized as an adolescent, which was meant to symbolize my passage into adulthood – leaving one's childlike self behind and becoming an adult in Christ.

Marriage is perhaps more of a conscious choice to die before we die than is baptism since most people are adults (at least legally) if and when they enter into it. Many marriage ceremonies include the symbolic giving up of one's previous life in order to enter a new life wedded to another. The lighting of a Unity Candle, the giving of the bride to the groom by her father, and the reciting of vows of commitment to the new union are among the physical acts that represent dying to life as a single person in order to be reborn into a new life in a married union.

This helps explain why divorce is often so painful. The divorcees allowed their old lives to die, so if and when their life together becomes intolerable, they have nothing to go back to and must begin yet another new life. So it is with dying before we die. We enter a period where we have given up something known and precious to us in order to enter a new something that has not yet solidified and is inaccessible. We may find ourselves in limbo for a time. St. John of the Cross called this the *dark*

night of the soul. The Old Testament metaphorically expresses this in the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt – they wandered in the "wilderness" for 40 years before finally arriving in the Promised Land.

The lesson of dying before we die is that life's transitions can be difficult, not unlike labor pains in the birthing process. It is a necessary passage, however, if we are to continue to grow. With prayer and reflection, we can discern where and when we are being led and *make the choice* to die to the old before we are forced to do so. This makes the transition to the new life easier by making us co-creators in rather than victims of the process.

Dying before we die consciously familiarizes us with the ever-present dying process. We learn to acknowledge its necessity. We may not enjoy every death in this life, but we learn to recognize and trust the cycle of birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth as it becomes more familiar to us. Ultimately, when our death to this world comes, we are better able to gently release this life, secure in the knowledge that a new adventure is ahead.

Chapter 9: Grief

"The dance of life finds its beginnings in grief…It is the way in which pain can be embraced, not out of a desire to suffer, but in the knowledge that something new will be born in the pain."[17] Henri Nouwen

No discussion of death and dying would be complete without a consideration of grief. Grief is a feeling of sadness that manifests when we have lost something precious. It runs the gamut from being aggravated at dropping one's mobile phone in the hot tub to putting down a beloved pet to losing one's child to cancer. Those are examples of actual losses that we grieve. There is also *anticipatory* grief that occurs when the prospects are great of losing something precious in the not-too-distant future. A loved one receiving a diagnosis of a terminal health condition, for example, or the loss of an income stream due to an upcoming job loss. There is also grief over personal issues, such as when it is we who receive the terminal diagnosis. In such cases, we grieve losing our close relationships or leaving important projects undone, not to mention the fear of personal annihilation. The common thread in these examples is the loss, or anticipated loss of something that is intimately woven into the fabric of our lives. Losing something or someone familiar and comfortable is difficult.

As has already been said numerous times in these pages, death is a natural and necessary part of life, and *all* of our deaths involve some sort of loss, even though most deaths fall short of ending our personal, earthly life. Even so, the death of something important to us will result in some measure of grief, from a momentary sadness to a crippling sense of despair lasting months or years. The point I have emphasized is that in the eternal cycle of life, death is *always* followed by rebirth: birth, growth, decline, death, rebirth. It is a relentless cycle, not intentionally cruel, but unyielding none the less. The way our rebirths manifest is often hidden from us, but there is *always* a rebirth. This is just as true for the regeneration of the cells in our bodies as it is for the death that ends the phase of our life on earth as we know it.

Twentieth century author, Henri Nouwen, expresses this point eloquently by writing that "the dance of life finds its beginnings in grief." Because grief results from loss or death, it is followed by new life. He says that in knowing something new will be born from our pain, we can learn to embrace the pain of loss. It is not that we seek out suffering, but we recognize suffering as the gateway through which new life enters. While such knowledge may or may not lessen our grief, it at least gives it purpose – that something must be lost before something new can emerge.

There are as many ways to grieve as there are people who grieve. Some express their sorrow outwardly while others hold it inside. Some people only express their grief behind closed doors, holding back the tears until they are alone or in a place that feels safe. Others fill their days with activities, as if trying to run fast enough to keep their grief from overtaking them. My first outward expression of grief over my mother's death did not occur until her memorial service, nearly a month after her passing. My daughter played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on the cello. The beauty of the melody and the rich tone of the instrument unleashed a stream of tears from me.

Of course, tears are a common expression of grief but certainly not the only one. Grief for some comes out in the way they treat others, perhaps being short-tempered or seemingly unable to

[17] https://www.azquotes.com/author/10905-Henri_Nouwen/tag/grief, accessed May 5, 2020.

focus on the present moment. However we do it, it is important to grieve. It is equally important to get professional help should one's grief become disabling. In retrospect, I do not believe I appropriately grieved the death of my father. When I was finally forced to enter psychological counseling as a requirement for a college course some years later, a flood of unresolved issues poured forth with a force and breadth that caught me off guard.

Ultimately, there is no cookie-cutter approach to grieving, nor is there a standard timeline. There is only what is right for a person given their situation following a particular loss. There are, however, common stages of grief that many people experience to a greater or lesser extent.

Stages of Grief

Swiss-American psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, authored the book *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy & Their Own Families.*[18] It was first published in 1969. I read it in the 1970's and was fascinated by her research with terminal patients, family members, and the staff caring for them. It was the first work I read, perhaps one of the first ever published, that was so up-front and matter-of-fact about the dying process. Contrary to popular belief, she found that many dying patients *wanted* to talk about what they were experiencing as their life on earth was winding down. Many people, including doctors and other care-givers, believed it was best to deny the nearness of death in the patient's presence. Whispered conversations about the gravity of the situation were reserved for hallways and meeting rooms out of ear-shot of the patient.

What most caught my attention about the book, and what I wish to focus on here are the stages of dying that she identified. The stages are *denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression,* and *acceptance.* It is important to understand that these stages do *not* represent a formulaic or chronological progression that everyone goes through as they approach physical death. Rather, they are common experiences Kubler-Ross observed in many of her patients and their loved ones. One person might go through all five stages, but in a different order. Another may keep returning to the anger stage. Another may have seemed to reach acceptance, only to revert to bargaining. Still others may skip one or more of the stages. The knowledge gained from her work is in identifying these as common, but not universal, stages we are likely to experience as our own death or the death of a loved one approaches. As we seek to support those nearing physical death, understanding the stages as normal experiences may help us better accept and love the patient as and where they are. Such understanding can help the patient navigate the dying process. It can also help us when our time comes.

Denial and Isolation

What Kubler-Ross identified as the first stage is *denial and isolation.* As the title implies, the patient refuses to believe that their condition is dire. Perhaps test results have been switched with another patient or there was a misreading of the findings. Another doctor might understand the results differently. Other countries might have treatments that have yet to be approved in the United States. Patients experiencing denial simply cannot believe this is happening to them. There is too much left undone, it is not a good time, or this must be someone's idea of a joke. Kubler-Ross describes temporary denial as an often-healthy way of dealing with the stress and discomfort of the initial diagnosis because it serves as a "buffer after unexpected shocking news, (and) allows the patient to

[18] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD, *On Death and Dying.* Scribner, New York, 1969.

collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less-radical defenses."[19] For most patients expressing denial of their condition, the disavowal is a temporary reaction that soon gives way to another stage.

While it is a common initial reaction to a fatal diagnosis, denial may reappear at various stages in the dying process, sometimes manifesting as *isolation*. Isolation may occur with the patient drawing a distinction between their condition and their self, as if they were twins. They may speak of their condition in the third person or may choose to discuss their condition only with different staff or family members than those in whom they confided earlier.

As I was writing this, the world was in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the wide-spread threat and how easily and quickly it could be passed to others became known, a common reaction was denial. Even many months and several millions of deaths after the world first witnessed its seriousness, and with many daily activities forbidden or discouraged, some people continued to deny the threat. The *social isolation* encouraged for all at that time was a prescribed defense mechanism to help protect everyone. Likewise, the isolation often shown by terminal patients in the denial stage is a defense mechanism to help them not be overrun by their condition – physically, emotionally, or psychologically.

Anger

The second stage of grief identified by Kubler-Ross is *anger*. After we have been convinced that this terminal condition is actually happening to us, it is natural to wonder why. Am I being punished by God? Did one or more of my sins bring this upon me? Was I cursed with bad genes from my parents? Did the power company place high-voltage lines too close to my house? When we feel out of control, as if something awful has been done to us, anger is a natural reaction. We need someone or something to blame or to strike back against. Obviously, this is a difficult stage for loved ones and care-givers to suffer through with the patient. What would normally be a minor annoyance can trigger a ferocious barrage of rage from the patient.

Anger is a secondary emotion, and that is clearly illustrated in the anger stage of a terminal patient. They are not irritated for the sake of being irritated. They are angry because they are in a situation they cannot control and that will almost certainly be fatal regardless of what they or anyone else does now. Anything that might have prevented the current situation is in the past. It is too late to reverse the inevitable fate awaiting them.

Because the stages of dying are *stages,* most people eventually find themselves moving out of one into another. This is as true for the *anger* stage as it was *denial and isolation* for the stage. Kubler-Ross writes, "A patient who is respected and understood, who is given attention and a little time, will soon lower his voice and reduce his angry demands. He will know that he is a valuable human being, cared for, allowed to function at the highest possible level as long as he can."[20] This description helps name some of the primary frustrations that are likely triggers behind the anger being displayed: not feeling respected, listened to, or understood. While these may or may not be the reality, if a patient perceives that is what is occurring, the patient will react as if it were happening. Most of us, given a similar perception, would also respond with anger.

Bargaining

[19] Ibid., p. 38.
[20] Ibid, p. 51.

The third stage of dying is *bargaining.* Kubler-Ross describes the succession of the first three stages in this way: "If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable…"[21] I remember my 14-year-old-self bargaining with God as I waited to hear from my mother after the ambulance took my unconscious father from our home to the hospital. "If you let my dad be okay, I will dedicate the rest of my life to you," or some such plea. God did not take me up on the offer, but I tried as a last-ditch effort.

Terminally ill patients and their loved ones often try something similar. The wish may be for their life to be extended or for their pain to be relieved, if only for a short time. Kubler-Ross describes the typical bargaining request as one for a *postponement* of death as opposed to a cure, such as to live long enough to see the birth of a grandchild or a temporary reprieve from the pain. In return, the patient's implicit offer is to submit to their fate peacefully after the wish has been granted. She notes that, in some cases, the patient's bargaining may be associated with guilt for something they wish to resolve but may not know where to begin. She cites the importance of staff and family training to help recognize such concerns, which are often unspoken, and to help the patient work through such issues. Some patients feel guilty about not attending church more often or of various estrangements from formerly close friends or family members. To the extent the patient is bargaining to cover their guilt, they will have a difficult time coming to grips with their situation and moving towards a more peaceful acceptance until their guilt is named and resolved, at least to whatever extent is possible in the time they have remaining.

Depression

The fourth stage of dying is *depression.* Kubler-Ross identifies two types of depression, each requiring different responses from care-givers. They are *reactive* and *preparatory* depressions. Reactive depression is activated by the various and increasingly uncomfortable changes occurring in one's physical health and environment as the terminal condition progresses. Some of these factors may include increases in pain – either in its intensity or frequency, decreased ability to function as one has always functioned, inability to visit with friends or care for family as one would like, and the often-crippling financial burden of the treatments. Changes in one's body from disfiguring surgeries or the unpleasant side-effects of powerful medications can also contribute to reactive depression. This understandable reaction to the difficult realities of some illnesses is often exacerbated by feelings of guilt – "I need to be fixing supper for my family" – or shame – "No one could possibly look at my disfigured body with anything but disgust."

Clearly, the hits taken to one's self-esteem and sense of self-worth are at play in reactive depression. It can be helpful for care-givers to identify and emphasize positive traits that remain while assisting in rearranging household duties or other areas of obligation that may be causing guilt or shame to the patient. Helping them understand that yes, their contributions are missed, but the world continues to function in their absence, albeit in a different way. They still belong and have an important place in the world. Care-givers can help them identify and focus on other sources of self-worth. No one's value is determined by what is happening to them.

Where reactive depression is caused by what one is losing and has actually lost, *preparatory depression* arises as one anticipates what they will lose in death – the objects and people they have known and loved for so long. Kubler-Ross writes, "Our initial reaction to sad people is usually to try to cheer them up, to tell them not to look at things so grimly or so hopelessly. We encourage them to look at

[21] Ibid, p. 79.

the bright side of life…"[22] While this type of response may be helpful with reactive depression, it is often detrimental in preparatory depression. At this point, sadness is a natural and appropriate response. Losing contact with those we love is difficult and that difficulty should not be minimized, trivialized, or denied. And the more deeply we have loved, the more painful will be the parting. Allowing the patient to express his or her sorrow or just sitting in silence beside them is often the best we can do for them and may help ease a transition into the final stage of *acceptance*. The best medicine I received after my father's sudden death was provided by my best friend. He came to my house a few hours after dad died and sat beside me on my bed while I cried. There was nothing to say, nor would any words have been helpful. There are no words for that type of suffering. He did, however, make sure I did not suffer alone.

The experience of depression, like the other stages of dying, is not limited to the person dying. Loved ones and friends may also fall into a reactive and/or preparatory depression for similar reasons. We may react to a parent's inability to care for us as they once did or a friend's inability to listen to our problems. We may miss being able to give a full-body hug, or we may be unable to hide our discomfort with the altered body or mental state of our loved one. The guilt and shame then falls on us, possibly plunging us into depression, too. We find ourselves unable to care for and support the person as we believe we should. Likewise, as the death of our loved one nears, we may find ourselves in a preparatory depression, knowing this person we have loved and depended upon so heavily is about to be taken from us.

Acceptance

The final stage of dying is *acceptance*. It is not a stage everyone achieves. Acceptance, when applied to dying and grief, is a form of surrender and brings a sense of peace. It is not a celebratory type of peace, but rather a quieter state that brings an end to the earthly battling of the condition or situation. This is when Hospice is likely called for the terminal patient. Kubler-Ross described what she witnessed in her patients in this way: "Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for 'the final rest before the long journey' as one patient phrased it."[23] She points out that the patient's family may need more support than the patient during this time since people seldom come to acceptance on the same timeline. Silence and in some cases solitude, may become more important to the patient. They care less about what is going on in the world than they once did because an important part of acceptance is dissociating from this world and its many superfluous activities.

Some philosophers say the only part of us that dies, other than our body, is our ego – that fractured, self-centered, thinking, and judging part of us that gets so wrapped up in and identified with the seductive pleasures of life on earth. This life, beautiful and painful as it can be, is a temporary stopping point for everyone because everything of the earth is subject to the law of birth, growth, decline, and death before being remade into a new expression of the Divine. This earthly life is a difficult place for the ego to leave willingly because the ego finds meaning and purpose in the dualistic appearances of life on earth, even though the meaning it finds is transient. As one nears death, it often happens that one's thoughts and focus turn toward that eternal part of us that existed before we were born and that will live on after we die. Our egos may have a place beyond this life, but it will not be the dominant role it thrives upon here. In that sense, the ego must relent before we can reach a stage of acceptance.

[22] Ibid, p. 85.
[23] Ibid, p. 110.

In the context of grief, acceptance is a stage where we conclude, "Enough is enough. It is time to move on." It does not signify hopelessness as much as a resignation that the path followed in the past is no longer an acceptable way forward. In the last weeks of my mother's life, she appeared to have given up, at least from my view. She ceased cooperating with her therapists. She stopped eating and refused to allow us to feed her, clinching her jaw shut with all her remaining might. Her doctor proposed having a feeding tube inserted but she made her opposition to that clear. She was done. She spent an increasing amount of time sleeping and appeared at peace with the solitude. At this point in her life, she seemed unafraid of death, and whatever was on the other side of death was preferable to her post-stroke state of being. Mom had reached a state of acceptance and bided her time peacefully until she quietly slipped away.

Attaining acceptance allows for a smoother transition into the next stage of life. Some people receive glimpses of what is next, as I have described elsewhere, that may help ease the fear of death's nearness. We cannot receive what is next with equanimity without first freeing ourselves from the bonds of this life. Acceptance is a choice, and not everyone choses to make it. Those who chose *not* to release this life willingly, however, will simply have it taken from them.

Meaning and Hope

Author David Kessler identified a sixth stage of grief: *meaning*. In his 2019 book, *"Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,"*[24] he draws from his own journey with grief following the loss of his 21-year-old son. Finding meaning in our grief is one way to help bring closure to the loss by encasing it in something more enduring. It is not that adding meaning resolves our grief, but transforming our grief into something consequential is one way to immortalize the value of what was lost. We can move forward in ways that honor those we loved, showing in tangible ways they have not been forgotten.

The search for meaning can also manifest as we approach our own death. What has my life meant? Will I be remembered and, if so, what for and in what ways? Will anything of my life endure? Jesus seemed to have some of the same questions on the night before he died. As he shared his last meal with his disciples, he asked that every time they eat and drink that they remember him. It is curious that he seemed to fear being forgotten. He was a person of great humility, and yet he seemingly worried about his earthly legacy. Would everything he worked for on earth be forgotten soon after his last breath? Was Jesus a closet narcissist?

Kubler-Ross talks about the *hope* that is present with many dying patients right up to the time of death. She writes, "In listening to our terminally ill patients we were always impressed that even the most accepting, the most realistic patients left the possibility open for some cure, for the discovery of a new drug…"[25] Author Orison Swett Marden wrote, "There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something tomorrow."[26] Holding onto hope may be one way patients and family members extend their search for meaning. Death appears to be such a conclusive end, and as long as there is hope for a tomorrow, purpose and meaning can still manifest. At some point, however, hope must transition from a hope for an earthly tomorrow to a hope in a non-earthly tomorrow. I wonder, however, how many people who did not find meaning in life prior to their terminal event will be able to find it in dying.

Personally, I doubt that Jesus was worried about being forgotten for selfish reasons. Rather, Jesus knew we would need to remember him and his life-path for *our* good, not for his legacy. He

[24] Kessler, David, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.* Scribner, 2019.
[25] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD, *On Death and Dying.* Scribner, New York, 1969, p. 134.
[26] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/orison_swett_marden_157900, accessed June 16, 2020.

realized that our natural tendency would be to revert to our old, self-centered, unneighborly ways. We would need constant reminders of the importance of serving others, particularly the poor, the sick, and those on the margins. We would need to remember we are loved and provided for so we need not horde or believe there is only so much goodness or love to go around. This was Jesus' legacy and his way to create lasting meaning and purpose for his life. We seek similar meaning from ours.

Perhaps above all else, we fear being forgotten. Sometimes I wonder if those who end their lives with a wave of public and tragic violence do not do so in order to transform an otherwise seemingly meaningless, non-descript life into something that will be remembered, if only for the horrible carnage left in its wake. It may be the only way some deranged people believe they can be acknowledged. Our never-ending search for meaning attempts to bring closure to our grief and to assign a meaningful purpose to our days on earth. It attempts to find expression for the importance we feel internally, even when it has not been acknowledged by others. From our own perspective, we are the center of the universe.

Finally, we can find meaning in our grief by standing in solidarity with the grieving of others. Everyone grieves. It is a common experience we all share regardless of our gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or social status. Knowing and acknowledging that my grief and pain unites me with others, honoring their struggle alongside my own, not only gives meaning to my state but helps to give meaning to theirs, too.

Chapter 10: Dreams and Dying

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Joel 2:28

I do not regularly journal about my dreams, although I believe it can be a helpful practice in personal and spiritual development. Much has been postulated about dreams over the centuries, but no one has comprehensively described or understood their nature, at least to my satisfaction, nor will I do so here. The reason for this, in my humble opinion, is because scientists view dreams as physiological processes of mental and emotional release, organization, and recovery for the brain. Theologians view dreams as something separate from and mostly unimportant to our spiritual life and development. I believe where both groups miss the mark is in their underlying belief that this life – what we experience during our waking hours – is the only life we are present to and thus is the sole source and focus of our consciousness. I believe our dreams demonstrate that neither view tells the entire story.

Consciousness is an interesting concept. It vaguely refers to our state of awakeness to or awareness of the *solid* world around us. I italicize *solid* because there is a wealth of scientific evidence, particularly in the field of physics, that the world around us in not solid at all. Rather, the foundational building blocks of our world are in constant motion through space and time, sometimes acting as waves and other times as particles, but never as solid bodies. The things we *consider* as solid, like our body, a chair, or a tree, are actually concentrations of energy in furious motion around a central, organizing point of consciousness. They resemble beams of light more than beams of steal. In fact, as far we can tell, even the basic elements of creation – atoms – are fields of energy vibrating in otherwise open space. What we perceive as solid may only be a mental projection, an illusion if you will. In other words, it is solid only because we believe and collectively agree it is solid.

This is important to understand in relation to death because the part of us we believe to be solid is the same part of us we believe dies to this earthly life. If something, such as our consciousness, is projecting that body, then the consciousness projecting it – perhaps *soul* is a better word – will continue to exist without the body, or at worst, will simply project a new body. The point I wish to make is that what we consider *me* is not dependent upon its physical body for its existence.

When we fall asleep, we lose consciousness to this aspect of reality that we know as our earthly life. Our body stays on our bed, but where does our consciousness go? Our dreams seem to indicate that, absent the body, our consciousness wanders to other places – sometimes new and beautiful, sometimes terrifying, but often familiar. Our consciousness is not welded to our bodies or our brains. Regardless of where our consciousness wanders when we sleep, those places seem every bit as real and *solid* as the places we experience in our waking hours. When we consider the consciousness of our earthly lives we see that it exists on a continuum that slides effortlessly between wakefulness and various dream states. It is the same individual consciousness – the same sense of *me* – existing in different states of being, not unlike water changing form from ice to liquid to steam. It can be interesting and informative to expand our awareness of a greater portion of the infinite continuum of consciousness along which we exist since we usually only focus on limited points upon it.

The Bible most often describes dreams as informative visions of heaven's relationship with earth, such as when Jacob dreamed of a ladder extending from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending (Genesis 28), or as warning messages given by God, such as when Joseph was warned in a dream to take Jesus and Mary and flee into Egypt to escape Herod (Mathew 2). Biblical references to dreams most often occur in the Old Testament books of Genesis and Daniel. Just as there are different types of dreams recorded in the Bible, so we experience different types of dreams, from mundane to dramatic, from entertaining to prophetic, and from awe-inspiring to terrifying. Some of our dreams may best be ignored, but others can be profoundly informative. When we consider our dreams we interpret something that happened in an alternate reality through the biased lens of this life, so what seemed real in the dream often seems unreal to our recollection when we awaken.

The main point I wish to make here is that our consciousness is not tied to our earthly bodies. I believe our dreams prove that. Dreams reveal our intimate connections with conscious realities far beyond what we experience in our waking hours. Our dreams even raise the possibility that our consciousness may not be an individual phenomenon at all, but something shared throughout creation.

Dreams of Dying

Many years ago I was told that if a person died in a dream they would die in real life, too. I am not sure how anyone would know, but the thought was memorable even though it was probably something I heard on the elementary school playground. I remember several dreams in which I was clearly dying, although just as I was about to breathe my last, I woke up to my earthly life. In one particularly vivid dream, I was on the downtown streets of a foreign city when a group of rebels drove by, shooting everyone on the sidewalks. I was hit numerous times in the torso and fell back against a building and onto the sidewalk. I watched blood ooze from my many wounds and felt myself becoming lightheaded as I progressively lost consciousness. There was no pain, only wonder that I seemed to be more an observer of my death than its victim. I knew I was dying, and (strangely) remembered hearing that if a person died in a dream, they died for real. Then I woke up, shaken, but very much alive.

In the dream of being shot, I was conscious of and could *feel* the bullets penetrating my body. I heard the loud, repetitive sounds of the semi-automatic weapons being fired and the people screaming in the chaos around me. The force of the bullets slammed my body against the building behind me. I remember the feel of the rough bricks scraping my back as I slid to the concrete walk. The only thing missing from what I would have expected from a *flesh and blood* experience was the pain. I remember thinking, "This should really hurt," but all I felt was a detached numbness.

Most of my dreams, particularly those that occur in the initial stages of sleep, occur in familiar territory. If I am awakened soon after falling sleep, I find that my consciousness has drifted seamlessly from my pre-sleep thoughts into familiar surroundings with people I know well. Sometimes I know them in my waking life, too, but not always. For example, I often find myself with my family in our "new" home, meaning a home we moved into some time ago, but it is not the home of my waking moments. In the dream I often remember my waking home and wonder why we ever decided to leave it. Even so, I have a history in this *dream* reality, exactly as I do in my waking reality, meaning I am aware in my dream of the transition of moving from my waking home to the home in my dream. I resume life-stories there in the same way I resume life-stories here, with people and places I share my life with. Recurring dreams happen often, where I experience similar events on a regular basis, just as I do in my waking hours.

I share details of these dreams to illustrate not only that our consciousness is not tied to our body, but it also is not tied to our waking reality. I also share them because everyone has dreams in

which they find themselves in settings that are familiar in the context of the dream, but that are very different from those of their waking hours. If our dreams demonstrate that our consciousness is not limited to a single point in space, such as our earthly body, then our dreams also demonstrate that our consciousness is not limited to a certain point in time, either. The concepts of space and time we have developed from our waking consciousness are severely limited when compared to space and time in our dreams. Although we often perceive our dreams as lasting for hours or days, the earth-time duration of most dreams, however, is a few minutes or less. I regularly have dreams where long-dead relatives are with me as if they had never left. Some of my dreams are with famous or historical folks I have never met here. Most encounters are with regular folks doing regular things, exactly like what I experience in my waking hours.

The point I wish to emphasize has nothing to do with the strangeness or diversity of our dreams but with their *realness.* Our consciousness experiences a vast array of seemingly real settings and people beyond what we experience in our waking hours. I think we write these off as *only dreams* to our own detriment. Our dreams give us inklings of the unlimited nature of the worlds our consciousness can and does inhabit. Our lives are so much more than what we experience here. It seems possible to me that at our moment of death to this life, we simply slip easily and comfortably into one or more of these other familiar worlds, just as we do when we fall asleep at night.

Realness and Transcendence

Up to this point I have presented dreams as if they can be interpreted literally, or that they can always be understood through the lens of our earthly lives. As with sacred texts, including the Bible and other timeless knowledge, that is seldom the case. Most often, we must look deeply into our dreams in order for them to release their mysteries. The language of dreams, as with the language of many sacred writings, is *symbolism.* Unfortunately, even a basic discussion of symbolism and/or the interpretation of dreams is beyond the scope of this work, not to mention beyond my current understanding. Suffice it to say, however, that we cannot always accept at face value what we remember from a dream because we reconstruct and judge it from our waking perspective. Because things happen in dreams that are not common or even possible in our waking reality they often seem phantasmal, terrifying, or ridiculous. But in the moment of the dream, they are real – as real as our waking lives, which for me is the important point. Even when we know we are dreaming, the vivid *realness* of what we are consciously experiencing remains.

A common experience with dreaming is to wake up in the morning and wonder if we are waking up from a dream or falling asleep into one. Indeed, the difference may not be as clear-cut as we assume. I find this to be particularly true whenever I find myself between my waking and dreaming realities. As I begin to drift into sleep, sometimes I awaken just enough to wonder how I got where I seem to be when I know I just laid down onto my bed for sleep. From the point of view of my conscious awareness, there is little or no difference in the *realness* of the two experiences.

Another fascinating element about dreams, aside from their *realness,* is their transcendence of time and space. It makes me question my experience of time and space from my waking awareness. I know there is a history in my dreams because I am always progressing *from* some experience. I also find myself moving forward towards some goal or objective, so there is a future, too. Some elements of my waking life, however, like the death of my father, are frequently absent. I have had many dreams in the decades since his death where he was very much alive and present in my life, even when I experience my dreaming self at the same age as my waking self *and* even when I remember that he died many years ago.

Time is different in our dreams. Space is different, too. I find myself living in different but familiar homes and locations. I have had dreams of the home of my maternal grandmother where there are rooms and passageways that did not exist in the house I remember from my childhood. Relationships are different, too. I often experience family members and friends in my dreams, people who I seemingly have a long-term relationship with, that I do not know in my waking life. Many of our limitations in wakefulness are absent in dreams. In one dream, when I realized I was dreaming, I felt that I should be able to fly, so I jumped off the ground and flew.

At a foundational level of reflection, our dreams affirm that life is not limited to the experiences we know from our waking hours. Yes, the dead are still with us. Yes, we do have a relationship with people we admire, past and present, who we seem only to know in our dreams. Yes, there is a sense that we are free from our earthly illnesses and heartaches. Yes, we can fly. As we reflect on the symbolism and happenings of our dreams we begin to realize how much of the richness that God built into our life experiences we have excluded. To the extent that our dreams are consciously real to us, to that same extent are our lives vaster than we imagine. Dreams provide glimpses into the experience of our soul – that in *us* which was never born and will never die, that which lives in union with God and every other being.

When we find ourselves dying in a dream, we wake up to a familiar life on earth. When we die to the life we call *this* life, will we wake up to a familiar, welcoming life elsewhere? I believe our dreams indicate that we will.

Chapter 11: Anxiety and Death

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Matthew 6:27

Everything that's good, everything that's abiding, everything that's worthy, everything that's generative about a human being arises on the other side of our fear of death. Cynthia Bourgeault[27]

Anxiety is rampant today. As I write this, we are eleven months into the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, which has increased the already toxic levels of anxiety. Our anxiety, however, began long before COVID. In the last generation or so, anxiety has become a pandemic of its own, as have the related issues of intestinal dysfunction, depression, and suicide. In the context of our mortality, anxiety has always been high, and the present time is no exception.

Anxiety is an issue of *out-of-the-present-moment-ness.* I do not mean to downplay the seriousness of anxiety. A number of people I dearly love suffer from it, but the truth is that there is seldom anything to be anxious about in the present moment. In other words, when we are fully immersed in the *now*, there is usually no cause for worry. Our worries originate in the guilt and embarrassment we retain from our interpretations of past events or about something that may or may not happen in the future. In that sense, anxiety is a triple-whammy to us. First, we have the mental and physical health issues brought on by worry. Second, there are numerous experiential losses that result from being out of the moment. Finally and contrary to experience, we exhibit a distinct lack of faith that whatever we need in any given moment will be provided to us.

Two-thousand years ago, Jesus commented on worry, asking if any of us could add a single hour to our lives by worrying. The question was rhetorical, but the obvious answer was "No, we cannot." In the 1980s, First Lady Nancy Reagan introduced the well-intentioned, but ultimately ineffective anti-drug slogan of "Just say No!" Anxious people know well that letting go of anxious thoughts is not as simple as saying, "No, I will not worry about this." Anxiety can become an addictive and habitual behavior that often requires professional assistance to manage.

A common focus of anxiety is the past. We regret something we did or did not say or do, and we seem unable to get beyond our very personal and present sense of inadequacy or shame. We know we cannot change the past, but we often overlook that we *can* change our interpretation of it, not to mention changing the impact it has on our present. We can reframe our past hurts in ways that allow us to move beyond them, accept ourselves as flawed beings, like everyone else, and free ourselves to move more fully into our present moments. We can affirm that we are worthy and deserving of love just the way we are, embarrassing warts and all.

The other common source of anxiety is the future. We may be on a picnic with one we love beside a beautiful, clear lake on a flawless day, yet all we can think about is the pending result of the test we had at the doctor's office this morning. Again, in the wise words of Jesus, "…do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:34). There is nothing good that comes from worrying about something that may or may

[27] Cynthia Bourgeault, "The Gateway to Freedom," *Wisdom in Times of Crisis* (Center for Action and Contemplation:2020), faculty presentation (May 4, 2020), Youtube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?y=b2gBJOCyxG4

not happen in a future moment. All the good, all the beauty, all the *life* is in the now – *right here, right now*.

Author and teacher Tilden Edwards, in his book *Living in the Presence,* writes, "When we are fully present in the flow of the moment, time and eternity have a way of collapsing into one another: eternity is sensed as the depth, the fullness of time."[28] Time does not simply pass; time accumulates. The past is present with us in the now, as are our projections about possible futures. When we carry inaccurate and hurtful interpretations of the past into our present and then add pessimistic visions of the future, we create a *fullness of time* that more resembles a millstone around our necks than the rich and beautiful tapestry that otherwise characterizes such fullness.

The physical and mental toll of prolonged anxiety is significant and well-known. There is also a sense, however, in which anxiety is its own dying process in that it causes us to die to or lose the present moment and the unexperienced blessings therein. We cannot enter into, nor fully experience the amazing moments of our lives when our anxiety refocuses our attention to the past or the future. Instead, we die a death by a thousand paper cuts, in the words of an old proverb. We lose many precious moments in exchange for reliving the past or projecting the future.

Unreasonable Expectations

While I do not wish to pile more guilt or shame onto the already overburdened shoulders of my anxious brothers and sisters, I believe the root of anxiety is a lack of faith. I do not blame those suffering from anxiety for this deficit, however. I believe the root causes of our skyrocketing anxiety are found in relatively recent social and cultural phenomenon that victimize large swaths of the population. And as I have mentioned, the percentage of the population suffering from anxiety has increased significantly in the current generation. It is almost the norm today. What sorts of changes have occurred over the past 30 or so years that are contributing to this lack of faith and loss of trust?

I will begin by clarifying what I mean by a lack of faith. Our fears of possible negative events in the future, which account for the lion's share of anxious thoughts, are rooted in the concern that something beyond our ability to handle or endure is on a near horizon. In other words, because we do not believe we have the resources to deal with a devastating catastrophe were it to happen now, we assume those necessary resources will not be there for us in the future either. Such reasoning is faulty on several fronts. First, we naturally tend to project worst-case-scenarios, which seldom actually happen. Second, because the crisis is only imaginary at the point of worry, we cannot know what resources will be required or that are even available to us. We enter a vicious cycle of pointless speculation about how we will handle something that probably will never happen with resources we do not know exist. I label this a lack of faith because all of us who have lived beyond early adulthood have experienced situations where whatever we truly *needed* to get through a given moment of crisis was provided, even if in ways we wish would have been otherwise, in ways we could not have imagined, and often not until it was most needed. It may seem a miraculous occurrence, but it is how the universe is structured, and it is trustworthy. Wherever there is a need, a way to meet that need presents itself, if not always in a way we prefer or appreciate. There are many biblical references to our being cared for in ways beyond our comprehension. One of my favorites is found in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God…" Finally, there is no way to prepare for anything that *might* happen in the future, but we can remember and trust that things have always worked out in time in the past, so we have no reason to believe the future will be any different. We know this intellectually, but convincing our worried mind otherwise is a challenge.

[28] Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence*. Harper One, 1987, p. 26.

There are several recent societal shifts that may be at the heart of our troubling uptick in anxiety, and most have to do with media – both the content of the media itself and our unimpeded access to it. Television, movies, books, and social media posts all promote or imply a mostly unattainable life and lifestyle. Homes are clean and orderly. Romance lasts forever in marriages. Relationships are strong, reliable, and stable. One's physical health is good. Although the media does illustrate challenges on the road to the perfect life, the perfect life is almost always attained and presumably sustained – which is never the case in real life. Those of us attending to these types of media wonder, "What is wrong with me that my house, my marriage, and my relationships do not look like that?" Even when we compare ourselves to our neighbors or friends, our life does not measure up. Of course, even with close friends we only witness small, unrepresentative slices of their total life experiences.

The national news media is particularly toxic. We have developed a 24/7 news cycle over the past generation that addicts, enthralls, and terrifies people of all ages and backgrounds. Most national news shows are increasingly geared more toward entertainment and shock-value – traits that sell advertising – than to providing information. Except for some local news shows and local newspapers, the information is always presented with a strong bias – a bias in *what* is told, *how* it is told, *who* tells it, and the conclusions drawn from the biased views of those determining what is newsworthy. We naturally gravitate toward those news sources whose biases align with our own, so our minds are never expanded, let alone changed or informed, except on the most superficial of levels. I recently heard a proverb that seems uncannily true today: *I do not want to hear your opinion. I want to hear my opinion come out of your mouth*. Our personal biases are simply reinforced, as is our belief that there are crazy people out there determined to destroy everything good in the world as we know and define it. And our anxiety soars along with the entrenched certainty that our view is the only correct one.

What does anxiety have to do with dying? Plenty, I think. For one, anxiety weakens our physical systems, which can hasten death over time. It also weakens our immune system, making it more difficult to fight off the toxins around us. Finally, as I will explore in a later chapter, *how* we die is important. If our dying process does not meet our uninformed or unrealistic expectations, it simply adds more stress to the already challenging and uncertain process of dying.

Science and Spirituality

Twenty-five times in the four Gospels, Jesus tells us not to worry or be afraid. There is another cause of anxiety that is less obvious, more nuanced, and fundamental to our communal discomfort. It has to do with the relationship between science and spirituality, most often expressed as religion, and our relatively recent tendency to accept one and be suspicious of the other.

Until a couple of centuries ago, science lacked the sophistication and reliability it generally enjoys today. The instruments and technologies available were poor by comparison, and many of the theories scientists postulated as *truth* were proven inaccurate with the next leap of technology. Religion was believed to be reliable and stable, if mysterious. It did not rely on physical evidence but on sacred writings, church traditions, and individual experiences for its conclusions about truth. As a society, there was far less demand for certainty about the nature of our world. In today's political climate of the United States (and being shamelessly and admittedly stereotypical) liberals, who primarily align with the Democratic party, embrace science as the path that will best lead us forward. Conservatives, who primarily align with the Republican party, hold to tradition, particularly religious tradition, and believe the unchanging message of God through the Bible (as they understand it) is the best guide for future action. Science relies on observable phenomenon. Spirituality ponders the unobservable. Science focuses on details and component parts; spirituality looks for the big picture and a unifying

vision. Science and spirituality are often treated as if they were mutually exclusive, so that one cannot exist in the same world view as the other. This conclusion, however, is a gross misunderstanding of both disciplines. Each, without the other, is blind to significant swaths of reality. It is by drawing from both, creating a transcendent perspective, that we find reliability, stability, and a worldview that feels safe. Short of that, we are left with uncertainty, conflict, and anxiety.

When religion was the dominant force in society, people took comfort in their *faith* that God would make everything work together for good in the end (Romans 8:28). It was a belief assured by the Bible and borne out by experience. As science improved its reliability and utility many people left the *ethereal ambiguity* of spirituality in favor of the *factual certainty* of science. This change in perspective offers no assurance that there is any power in the universe that loves and cares for us or makes all things work together for good. The meaning of life under scientific theory is often reduced to natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Our lives are random events originating from unlikely blobs of protoplasm that are annihilated at death.

Scientists know a great deal about specific aspects of life – say an individual trait of a particular virus – but most do not pretend to be able to expand that knowledge to hypothesize about the meaning of life. Spirituality focuses on a greater, unobservable whole and does not pretend to understand the minute details of individual manifestations of that whole. The worlds of science and spirituality are complementary, observing the same phenomena from different perspectives and with different methods of observation. A conclusion from one without the other reveals only part of the truth.

My conclusion is that the anxiety of the current age is an *anxiety of isolation*. We do not know where we fit or belong. Most of us do not understand politics, science, or spirituality well, although we cling to one as if to a life preserver in a raging sea. Few of us completely support either political party, but with only two options, where do we turn for political grounding? Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and author, Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "Once the wave realizes she is the ocean, her fear dissipates." And this is our dilemma: that we are *in* the seemingly chaotic ocean of life, but we also *are* that ocean. We project the isolating polarities of our social climate as something external to ourselves, but we forget we *are* those isolating polarities. Certainly, we are not the social climate in its entirety, but we are made of the same stuff. We belong here. We can heal and be healed by it.

There may seem to be no mutually agreeable, middle ground in today's divisive environment. We are polarized, entrenched, humorless, and reluctant to compromise. As a society, our confidence in science has grown, and with good reason, but concurrent with that has been a decrease in the perceived relevance of spirituality. No wonder we are so anxious! Until we allow science to be science and spirituality to be spirituality *and embrace both as worthy, informative, and important* we will continue to drift in our fearful isolation, and we will literally worry ourselves to death.

Unhealthy Comparisons

When we are anxious, we are dead to the moment. We may be physically alive, but we are separated from what makes us a living, conscious being. That is because anxiety refocuses our attention into the future or past. This is so common that many of us have forgotten what being in the moment even looks or feels like. We exist in a zombie-like state of non-presence. The tragedy is that all of the joy, all of the feeling, all of the *life*, and even the presence of God occurs *only* in the present moment. Everything else is an illusory creation of memory or imagination, which constantly fluctuates between wonderful and awful, but it is never stable. We are often anxious because we do not trust the sufficiency of the moment to sustain us, when in fact the sufficiency of the moment is the *only* sufficiency that exists.

Of the multiple roots of anxiety, one of the most common has to do with comparing ourselves to others. For good or evil, we are seemingly destined to compare. It is a basic function of our mind to distinguish one thing from another – this is safe, this is dangerous; this is hot, this is cold; this feels good, this hurts. Comparing is a useful and necessary function. Unfortunately, we tend to identify with our comparisons, and we inevitably judge ourselves inaccurately, harshly, and as being inferior to others. We feel inferior because our life does not seem as rich or blessed as that of another. Our tendency is to judge a small, positive slice of another's life with a small, negative slice of our own. We feel victimized by injustice because another person appears to have life's blessings come to them more easily than those same blessings come to us. Let me clarify that I am *not* referring to victims of systemic and social injustices that really do benefit some at the expense of others. Rather, I am referring to those persons who are victimized more by their imagined injustices than by anything external to themselves.

Through television, movies, novels, and all forms of social media our expectations of ourselves, others, and of what a "normal" human life looks like have become unrealistic and unsustainable. It is not enough to have a home, at least for those of us who do. Our homes must be as big, as well-kept, as well-furnished, and in as nice a neighborhood as the nicest home of others in our circle of friends and family. It is the same for our cars. If our children are not as athletic or do not do as well in school as others we know, we feel we have failed as parents. Somehow, our expectations have risen to a level of perceived perfection, and we *all* fall far short. It feels sinful to fail. We can no longer receive criticism with an open mind, even when it is constructive, well-intentioned, and respectful. We make certain our children get trophies for participation, which is not entirely negative, but does it teach our children that it is normal, healthy, and acceptable to not always be first or to *win*? Does it impart the message that our shortcomings and failures are often our best teachers?

Coveting the accomplishments, possessions, and status of our neighbor is not new. Moses warned against it in the Ten Commandments written centuries before the birth of Jesus. From the earliest stories of creation, humankind's desire for something forbidden, something missing, or something out of reach has run like an unbroken thread through our existence. And so it is with anxiety. Like forbidden or unfulfilled desire, the key is to redirect the object of our anxiety onto something that *is* present and available to us. That something is always contained in the present moment and we only find it by becoming attentive to it.

There is another facet of living an anxious life I wish to mention before closing this chapter. It has to do with holding earthly anxieties as we cross over into whatever lies beyond this life. I suspect that how we end this phase of our lives impacts how we enter the next, at least for a time. Granted, whatever lies beyond this life is a primary source of our anxiety in this life. Jesus, however, showed us how to die with equanimity, how to gently release this life and slip gracefully into the next, even while enduring an unspeakably painful death. He forgave those who wronged him so he was carrying no grudges. He accepted his fate so he had no regrets. He closed his affairs by leaving his mother in the care of his disciple, John. After that, there was nothing holding him here. And there was no anxiety. He was fully present, even in the moment of death.

Chapter 12: Rites of Passage

Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." He drove out the man and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.
Genesis 3:22, 24

Rites of passage, which used to be a common element in many cultures, are a form of dying before we die. They are methods of signaling the end of one phase of life while celebrating the entry into another. One common and sometimes brutal rite of passage occurred with males in their teenage years. The ceremony symbolized the passage from childhood into adulthood. There were often elaborate and extended procedures whereby the young person had to prove themselves worthy of the transition. A significant period of time alone in the wilderness, for example, might be required where the initiate would have to rely on his own resourcefulness to survive. Sometimes taking a *spirit journey* with psychedelics was a part of the process. Extended time alone to face one's fears, discover internal gifts and abilities they might not have known they possessed, and opportunities to assess how best to move forward into the new life was expected. It was also a time to determine what childish baggage would need to be left behind in order to make the transition into adulthood. These were serious, difficult, and often dangerous passages intended to kill off one's old, childish tendencies so the inner adult could emerge.

These types of rites of passage were typically only for the males in a culture. Childbirth was considered the rite of passage for females. The nine months of pregnancy, the increasing challenges to mobility, and the hours of labor pains culminating in the birth of another human being could not help but prepare a person for a new phase of life. The years of motherhood itself, typically concluding with menopause (a rite of passage of its own), was another phase of being where one's life was focused on the nurture and care of other lives at the sacrifice of one's own. Post-menopausal women were expected to become female elders for the younger females, which was yet another transition into a new phase of life. Each significant transition was marked by or as a rite of passage.

There are organizations today that require going through an *initiation* ceremony, but most are a far cry from what was required in more traditional rites of passage. Typically these organizational initiations require an oath that verbally aligns the intent of the initiate with that of the organization. Sometimes these oaths are accompanied by the learning of a secret password or some other private symbol of membership into an organization that serves to set itself apart from the rest of society in some meaningful way or purpose. Fraternities and sororities became notorious for *hazing ceremonies* for new pledges, although many of these more resembled excuses for excessive partying and humiliation of freshmen than legitimate representations of a passage into a new phase of life. The common thread among many initiations, as with other rites of passage, is the secrecy within which they are typically completed. Only other members are allowed to witness these ceremonies. Initiations are toned-down versions of traditional rites of passage that signify dying to one's former life as a non-member and being reborn into a new life as a member.

Rites of passage are not always secret, dangerous, or difficult, however. Nor are those elements always required to affirm one's passage from phase to phase in life. Indeed, in today's litigious society, conducting such ceremonies comes at the risk of bankrupting an organization, morally and financially. In religious ceremonies, for example, we regularly witness public and toned-down rites of passage with baptisms, confirmations, marriages, the issuing of last rites, and funerals, each of which signifies a death to the old and a birth of the new. Baptism symbolizes the washing away of the old self, allowing the beginning of a new self in God. Confirmations initiate a person into a new life as part of a worship community. Marriage symbolizes the death of life with one's parents or as a single person and the birth of life into a committed union. Funerals are a rite of passage for the living, signifying a passage into life without their departed loved one.

The ultimate symbolism and common thread of rites of passage are their representation of our physical death. Life after the initiation continues, albeit in a changed way, just as our lives continue after our physical death, albeit in a changed way. While we can usually imagine what our new life will be like post-initiation, our life after our physical death remains invisible and mysterious to us. Regardless, rites of passage are important milestones that mark one's growth and development, signifying an end and ushering in a new beginning.

The Original Rite of Passage

A fascinating account of a rite of passage occurs in the initial chapters of the Bible with the mythical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. I like to think of this as the original rite of passage, although tradition has named it the *original sin*. Adam and Eve, the first created human beings, live in the garden where all of their physical needs are met in abundance. They have a direct relationship with God. It is paradise. What more could they possibly want? Of course, they want the only thing forbidden to them in the entire garden – the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why was it forbidden to them? In Genesis 2:16-17, God tells Adam, "…but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." As one might expect, Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, but they did not die, at least not in the way we would have expected. What makes this story a rite of passage is the fact that they *did* die to their life in the Garden, even as they entered into a different life. Adam and Eve were thrown out of paradise and into their version of life on earth, where they had to work to survive and deal with the daily challenges of good and evil.

This story is symbolically meaningful in so many ways, one of which is as a representation of our passage from childhood to adulthood. As children, at least for most of us, everything needed for our physical well-being was provided. Particularly as we entered our teenage years, however, that provision became no longer sufficient or satisfying. We longed for forbidden fruit. We believed we could make a better life than our parents had provided. Eventually, we reached for the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and – *Poof!!!* – we became adults. Like Adam and Eve freeing themselves from living under God's rules, so we sought freedom from our parent's restrictions, not realizing those rules provided freedom from the worries and work of adulthood. Instead, we judged the rules of our parents as unreasonable chains binding us to old, tired ways and traditions. Relatively quickly as adults, we learned the freedom-restricting hardships of adulthood.

We can see the story of the garden of Eden as the passage from childhood to adulthood, but we can also see it as a passage from innocence to knowledge. The adage that *ignorance is bliss* is relevant because there is a sense that innocence *is* ignorance. Growing up is, in some ways, a trick. We desire the freedom to know and experience the joys and sorrows of good and evil, but we want that experience without giving up the relative safety of childhood. What we realize *after* we cross the

threshold into adulthood is that our ever-increasing knowledge comes at the expense of our innocence. Just as Adam and Eve were forbidden to return to the garden of Eden, so are we forbidden from returning to the innocence and relatively worry-free life of childhood. Mystical theologian Howard Thurman, referring to the story of Adam and Eve, wrote, "The transition from innocence to knowledge is always perilous and fraught with hazard…when knowledge comes, the whole world is turned upside down. Struggle emerges as the way of life."[29]

Transitioning into adulthood is not a rite of passage we choose in the same way we choose to join an organization. Rather, it is a necessary and unavoidable part of our progression toward death. Interestingly, as we age, at least for many of us, we begin to reclaim some of the innocence we left behind in childhood. Indeed, Jesus said, "…unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."[30] We lose some of the cynicism we developed in early adulthood and regain a measure of innocence that has been tempered by our knowledge of good and evil. We become more accepting and are more likely to believe in the inherent good of others. It is another rite of passage that leads to a kinder, gentler, and more mature state of being.

[29] Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Friends United Press: 2007, © 1961), 16-17.
[30] Matthew 18:3

Chapter 13: Before I Wake Up

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 1 Corinthians 13:11

In the bedtime prayer of my childhood, I prayed:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake*,*
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

My understanding was that dying before I woke meant dying in my sleep, consistent with how the reference is commonly understood. Dying in my *sleep* meant dying in bed as my body rested for the night. Dying in our sleep is often professed to be a preferred way to die as it is considered synonymous with experiencing a peaceful, as opposed to an extended and possibly painful death.

There is another way to think about the line *before I wake*, however, as well as what it means to sleep. I wish to consider alternate interpretations of these common references, particularly in the context of *spiritual awakening*, or awakening to our *created-in-the-image-of-God* nature. Many authors, including Ken Wilber and Richard Rohr, identify four stages of spiritual awakening, although they are not always presented in the same order, nor do all authors include all four stages. They are *cleaning up, showing up, growing up,* and *waking up*. They are intended to give names to common *gates* we pass through on our way to enlightenment, wholeness, unity, sainthood, awakening, nirvana, or whatever name we wish to give our growth toward becoming a more fully mature, complete spiritual *and* human being. Many Christians believe we go through this life and enter heaven (hopefully) when we die, and that is all that is required of our life in God – live life as a mostly good person and receive our eternal reward in the afterlife. Under that line of thinking, the sole goal in this life is to be *good enough* to qualify for entry into heaven. On the other hand, contemplative practitioners of Christianity and other world religions believe we consciously *evolve into* communion with the Divine as opposed to dying into it. This is where the concept of *reincarnation* comes into play, although many consider the concept as unsubstantiated heresy. The Christian equivalent of reincarnation is that God continues working with us toward our completion into Oneness before, during, *and after* our physical death. Jesus, however, spoke consistently of heaven as a place we enter in *this* life, not so much as a place we enter when we die to this life. The key point, at least for me, is that becoming One with God is a process – likely spanning more than a single lifetime on earth – and to grow towards it we must clean up, show up, grow up, and wake up.

Cleaning Up

Cleaning up occurs in response to the realization that we are dirty. Just as we take a shower to wash away the accumulated dirt and sweat of the day, so we clean up to wash away the stains on our emotional and spiritual natures. Indeed, this is what baptism symbolizes – the washing away of our sins or our old self to become a new, clean creation in Christ. Cleaning up is also one meaning behind *repentance* – to turn away from that in our former life that keeps us from entering a new life. Striving to become more spiritually aware helps us understand how much we need to clean up. Much of what needs to be cleaned in us involves unresolved, subconscious material that we have repressed over the years. Psychologists believe that much of what we do today that we do not understand or do not like about ourselves can be directly traced to repressed material residing in our subconscious – unresolved

issues with parents, unmet needs, troubling issues that have had no closure. Richard Rohr calls this *shadow material* because it can be considered our dark side in the sense that it is mostly hidden from our conscious awareness. It is largely invisible to us (not so much to others) because it does not fit well with the image we try to project and want to believe about ourselves. The work of cleaning up is not as easy as jumping in the shower, however. All of us have a significant amount of subconscious cleaning to do and we usually need professional help with the process. For most of us, that work takes years or lifetimes, during and beyond this earthly life.

Cleaning up is one step on the journey of *dying before we die* and seeking to enter the kingdom of heaven *before* our physical death, to use Jesus' verbiage. It is a way available to us here and now – here on earth and now, as in today. When Jesus encourages us to *repent*, he encourages us to clean up our lives in order to become more capable of faithfully following him and manifesting the image of God from which we were created.

Growing Up

Just as our physical bodies grow, so our spiritual natures grow too. Our spiritual growth is more subtle and typically in reverse order to our physical growth, but it is no less impactful. While most of us typically reach physical maturity in early adulthood, we often do not begin the spiritual maturation process until middle age or later, if at all. Richard Rohr and others refer to this as a *second-half-of-life* process. In the first half of life we are typically focused on finding our purpose, building an image and a career, and figuring out how to make our way in the world as we know it. It is not usually until we are at or beyond middle age that the goals we have been pursuing seem increasingly shallow and troublingly transitory. If we have children, they are now likely adults or approaching adulthood, so our parental responsibilities shrink to a fraction of what they once were. We resign ourselves to the fact that we are not going to become a professional athlete or a famous musician, and those types of aspirations no longer hold the appeal they once did anyway. Rather, our attention refocuses onto relationships and what of our lives will linger after our physical departure. Those of us who were faithful church-goers may begin questioning the religion that brought us this far. Others may turn to religion for the first time or after a lengthy hiatus. We may ask questions like "Who am I?" or "Who is God?" or "What is the nature of God?" or "What is the meaning of my life on earth?" These are questions without earthly answers, but they often haunt us anyway, particularly as we age and begin facing our mortality. This is a natural part of spiritual growth and development.

The apostle Paul described the *growing up* stage well in his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 13:11). He reminded his followers that while they once spoke, thought, and reasoned like children, now as adults they must put away their childish ways. I suspect Paul's *childish* references were more about the first half of adulthood than about the first years of life. We seek uses for the hard-earned wisdom and experience we have accumulated as our perspective expands to a broader and more eternal view than the limited and individualistic view of our earlier adulthood. Our accumulated wisdom and experience imprints on our spiritual nature and fuels our spiritual growth even as our physical nature begins its decline. Growing up requires relinquishing less-mature goals and desires.

Showing Up

Another of the *gates* we may pass through on our spiritual journey is *showing up*. This requires taking what we have been given, physically and spiritually, and finding a place for it outside of

ourselves and for purposes greater than our individual benefit. Life is no longer about us as individuals, but about us as a collective, as a community, and as a single, inclusive life. For Christians, this collective is the body of Christ. Collaboration with others as opposed to individual efforts may come more naturally and be increasingly fruitful with less focus on who will receive credit for whatever good is done. We may find ourselves joining social actions and protests instead of simply sitting back and complaining. Showing up requires that we be actively present to what is happening in the world around us. A part of spiritual growth is the realization that we are intimately connected with everyone and everything. Nothing we say or do, or refuse to say or do, occurs in a vacuum or is without consequence. We show up because we must, not because we wish to show off.

Spiritual growth forces change in our physical lives. In the New Testament of the Christian Bible there is much discussion of the importance of faith and works – believing and doing. Our level of faith is a measure of our spiritual growth. To the extent we are growing spiritually, we will increasingly seek out opportunities to serve others through works inspired by our faith. Our works are one way of showing up. If our older adulthood is simply an aged reflection of our younger adulthood, we likely are not growing spiritually, nor are we showing up.

Waking Up

The childhood prayer that began this chapter poses the possibility: *If I should die before I wake*… Waking up, in the spiritual sense, refers to the realization that there is a vast, unfathomable, and eternal life occurring just beneath the surface of the life we know on earth. Of course it is not literally "beneath the surface" of this life, as in being physically below us. Rather, it is all around and within us. We often catch glimpses of that life, although we seldom recognize what we are seeing or experiencing as such. We write off these manifestations as *coincidences* or other random chance events. Most often, perhaps, we do not see the emanations of the greater life simply because we are not looking for them. We tend to limit our attention to familiar, predictable aspects of our lives, and we treat the rest as if it does not exist. Just because we do not perceive something, however, does not mean it does not exist. Think of cell phone signals, radio waves, x-rays, and dog whistles.

Once we develop a belief in the expansive life that supports this earthly life, we begin to realize that there is a greater, truer *self* that is the foundation of the more limited self we identify with in this earthly life. Many authors call this foundational essence our *true self,* while naming our more familiar self as our *false self, small self, fragmented self,* or *ego self*. Author and teacher Tilden Edwards names the ego self as our *confused friend.* That label honors the fact that having an earthly identity (false self) is necessary, but without the knowledge of our deeper being and of our deeper life, that self is insecure, narcissistic, bossy, and often petty. Our ego self tells us we are what we do and what others think of us. Our true self knows we are manifestations of God, created in the image and likeness of God. That knowledge transcends everything we do and overrides anything others say about us. I believe that in Jesus' reference to our treasures that *moth and rust consume* (Matthew 6:19), he is pointing to our false self and our tendency to look to it as our true essence and treasure. Particularly as we age, we realize that much of what we have come to treasure is transitory in nature. His encouragement is to find our true essence and treasure in something larger and eternal – like the love of God – which is only fully experienced through our true self.

Waking up occurs as we begin recognizing the eternal love and abundance from which we have manifested and which is still available to us. Not unlike waking from an unpleasant dream, we remember that life is good, we are good, and that we are loved and cared for in spite of our oft-displayed shortcomings. To understand that we each have a deeper, eternal nature is the underlying reality of *faith,* which is not just something that we force ourselves to proclaim because we feel we

should. True faith, rather, is based on knowledge from experience, even though that knowledge is not from measurable data nor is it anything we can easily put into words. Once we have awakened to it, however, we *know,* and nothing can separate us from that knowledge.

So, what happens if we die before we *wake up,* or before we have been reacquainted with our eternal and true self? What happens is we live life on earth out of our false self, characterized by all manner of insecurities, fears, self-doubts, and suspicions. And we have a lot of company because most other people on the planet seem to be there, too. Because we feel small, threatened, and disconnected from the life around us we react violently, in verbal or physical ways, to whatever does not fit or that threatens our limited picture of life. Are there eternal consequences to not waking up before we die? Probably not, because I think our false self dies with our body at our physical death. Waking up may make little difference in terms of eternity, but it makes a big difference to our experience in this life, as well as in the lives of those around us.

Chapter 14: Suicide

Suicide is the final willful gesture, proclaiming in anger that if one cannot control circumstances, one can at least control whether one will continue to participate in the game or not. Gerald G. May, MD[31]

If I die with much anger and bitterness, I will leave my family and friends behind in confusion, guilt, shame, or weakness … I realize on a very deep level that dying is the most important act of living. It involves a choice to bind others with guilt or to set them free with gratitude…All the events of life, even such dark events as war, famine and flood, violence and murder, are not irreversible fatalities. Each moment is like a seed that carries within itself the possibility of becoming the moment of change... Henri Nouwen[32]

Suicide is a particularly challenging and tragic death wish that warrants special and separate treatment in any discussion of death and dying. It is a discussion of a different nature because most of the ways we die feel more as if death is imposed upon us as opposed to us imposing it on ourselves. In the context of dying before we die, suicidal and other self-harming behaviors can be seen as attempts to force a new life – a change in the status quo – by inserting a hard stop on our current situation.

Suicide occurs when a person ends their earthly life with a fatal act of their own conscious volition. Attempting suicide may or may not always be a sincere attempt to end one's life, but it is certainly a cry of desperation. Whether it is our own attempt or that of a friend or a loved one, suicide is almost always accompanied by tremendous pain and suffering. For the person attempting suicide, the suffering leading up the event is unquestionably overwhelming. For the friends and family left behind, a tragic trail of disbelief, guilt, and heartbreak is almost certain to remain. I know at least two people who successfully ended their lives by suicide. One was a former co-worker and the other was a casual friend. Although I did not consider myself particularly close to either, my oblivion to their intense suffering came as a guilt-inducing shock to me. I certainly would have tried to intervene had I known.

Suicide is doubly tragic because about half of all suicide attempts are believed to be impulsive in nature. One study indicated that 48% of suicidal people only seriously thought of attempting suicide in the 10 minutes preceding the attempt. In other words, if a friend or family member were aware that someone was considering suicide, a well-timed phone call or visit could provide a successful intervention due to the brief nature of many suicidal impulses. To the extent that suicide occurs impulsively, if someone helps the suffering person through their acute crisis, a tragic situation can often be avoided. Indeed, this is the philosophy behind suicide lifelines – not that they can fix what is wrong in the person's life, but that they can help the person step back and think through whether suicide is the best way to respond to what is wrong in their life right now. Research indicates that 90% of persons who attempt suicide and survive never attempt it again.[33]

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[31] Gerald G. May, MD, *Will and Spirit.* HarperCollins, 1987, p. 232.
[32] Henri Nouwen, *You are the Beloved,* The Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, Convergent Books, 2017.
[33] The statistical information referenced in this paragraph comes from work done by the Zero Suicide Institute, www.zerosuicideinstitute.come, Accessed November 19, 2020.

Overall, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. for all ages, resulting in about 48,000 deaths each year. It is the 2nd leading cause of death for those 15 to 24 years of age and the 4th leading cause of death for those 18 to 65 years old. Suicide rates in the U.S. are highest among whites, American Indians, and Alaska natives. Males are four times more likely to die by suicide, although females are three times more likely to attempt it.[34]

In his book *Will and Spirit,*[35] psychiatrist Gerald May refers to suicide as an angry and *willful* act. It is an act of defiance or an exercise of what little power or control one feels they still retain over the state of their life. Dr. May notes that there seems to be an attitude that if my life circumstances or the perceived influence of others upon it will not conform to my expectations then I will end my participation by killing myself. In my experience as a volunteer counselor on a suicide lifeline, I have heard this expressed in various ways: "I will show them," or "They will be sorry when I'm dead," or "Attempting to kill myself is the only way to get their attention." On the other hand, I have heard people say in response to suicide's impact on others, "I could never kill myself because I know the suffering it would cause my family." In some instances of suicide a person *desires* to inflict pain on others. That is the angry and willful act Dr. May describes. In other instances, however, one chooses not to follow through on a suicidal impulse because of the pain they know it will cause.

Brokenness

It seems to me there is a motivator of suicide that precedes willfulness and that is *brokenness.* In his book, *Life of the Beloved,*[36] author and priest Henri Nouwen identifies brokenness as a necessary and natural aspect of life and growth. As such, brokenness does not always lead to suicide. Brokenness, in this context, refers to life circumstances that break something in our life in a way that prevents a restoration to that life's former state. It may range from the end of an intimate relationship, an injury that causes the loss or inhibition of one or more body functions, the death of a loved one, or any of the endless tragedies that sometimes mark our lives. Some people fear that, once broken, their lives can never be put back together in an acceptable manner again. Being broken forces us to change in ways we normally would not choose, at least not voluntarily. It is a necessary aspect to life, however, in the same way that a snake must shed its skin in order to grow. We cannot grow without changing, and we cannot change without altering some aspect of our former life, whether by choice or circumstance. What makes change so uncomfortable for so many is the not knowing how or when their lives will become more stable and predictable again. In the words of the late songwriter, Leonard Cohen, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."[37] The crack that lets the light of new life in is our brokenness. Some persons, however, adapt better to the cracking of their lives than others.

Brokenness can occur in at least two different contexts. In the first, our brokenness occurs with the firm knowledge that we are loved and accepted, brokenness and all. We have an inherent confidence that neither our human frailties, our sometimes-poor decisions, nor our life circumstances will drive a lasting wedge between us and those who are important to us – friends, family, or the Divine. With that knowledge, our brokenness occurs under *the blessing,* as Nouwen refers to it. We

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[34] The statistical information referenced in this paragraph comes from SAVE (Suicide Awareness Voices of Education), www.save.org, accessed December 30, 2020.

[35] Gerald G. May, MD, *Will and Spirit.* HarperCollins, 1987.

[36] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved.* The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.

[37] Leonard Cohen, *Anthem. https://genius.com/Leonard-cohen-anthem-lyrics#:~:text=I%20heard%20them%20say.%20Don%27t%20dwell%20on%20what.,The%20holy%20dove.%20She%20will%20be%20caught%20again.* Accessed January 6, 2021.

know ourselves to be blessed and loved, and that knowledge provides assurance that we are neither suffering alone nor in vain. Those who suffer under the blessing have a more durable self-image, being built upon the foundation of the love and acceptance of others, and are less likely to consider suicide as a reasonable or necessary option to their difficulties.

In the other context, our brokenness occurs under what Nouwen refers to as *the curse*. The curse is the voice inside of us that says we are no good; that no one loves, understands, or accepts us; that we are a failure, a terrible disappointment, a burden to others, and that is how we will always be. In Nouwen's words, "Living our brokenness under the curse means that we experience our pain as a confirmation of our negative feelings about ourselves."[38] I hear this on the suicide lifeline too. "I am such a loser – always have been, always will be," or "I can never do anything right," or "No matter what I do, I am a burden my parents do not deserve." Under the curse, our brokenness becomes an affirmation of our inherent lack of value, that we deserve neither love nor respect. Clearly, a person who suffers under the cloud of the curse is more likely to seriously consider suicide as a reasonable response to their pain. Most suicidal people do not necessarily want to die – they just want their pain to end, and those suffering under the curse are much less optimistic about their future prospects for a less painful existence. That they could ever be *happy* is simply beyond their ability to imagine. Teenagers, in particular, have difficulty understanding that mental and emotional anguish, terrible as they may be at any given time, seldom last long. They simply do not have enough experience with seeing hard times pass and opening onto better times, like the waxing and waning of the moon, to know that *this too shall pass*. Younger persons are especially, though not exclusively, prone to confuse the *intensity* of a feeling with its likely duration.

Indirect suicide

While not always identified as a type of suicidal ideation, there are many people who consciously and regularly engage in risky behaviors that are potentially fatal. These not only include reckless driving, abuse of alcohol or drugs, and other immediately dangerous activities, but also include behaviors that are known to be hazardous over the long-term like unhealthy eating, smoking, lack of exercise, and other activities and conditions known to be contrary to good health. *Tempting fate* is a good descriptor for these types of behaviors. Playing *Russian Roulette* is another apt analogy. Genetic factors, mental imbalances, and other considerations mostly beyond one's control can contribute to some of these issues for certain people, but that does not change the fact that they are self-inflicted maladies for many of us.

Of course, just because someone is obese or regularly abuses alcohol does not necessarily mean they have a suicidal death wish. In many cases overeating, excessive drinking, and drug abuse are known to be *self-medicating* behaviors, meaning behaviors aimed at lessening the impact of or triggered by an underlying, often treatable condition. These behaviors may be triggered by repressed or unresolved experiences from one's past. One of my brothers, prior to being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, self-medicated with alcohol. While I was often surprised about the amount of alcohol he consumed, in retrospect in was clear that he was trying to maintain a more even mental keel, mostly unsuccessfully, by dulling his overactive senses with booze. Dulling one's senses with drugs or alcohol is a common strategy for the increasing numbers of particularly sensitive, anxious, and fearful people today. In addition, when someone is self-medicating, it becomes difficult for loved ones to reach out to help them. Too often, our sincere attempts to assist either enable the self-destructive behaviors or drive the one we are trying to help further away, or both.

[38] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992, p. 96.

A saying that was popularized during the drug-culture of the 1960's was that drugs were for people who could not face reality. Singer and poet Tom Waits turned the tables by saying that reality was for people who could not face drugs. Many people in the 1960's used drugs to open their minds to new experiences. Ram Dass famously claimed that God came to the US via the psychedelic drug LSD. Unfortunately, many people were sucked into destructive cycles of addiction and death in a search for enlightenment or altered states of conscious experience. Unfortunately, that destructive cycle did not end with the 60's and is arguably worse today. A common entry into drug abuse today occurs with attempts to control acute or chronic physical pain with addictive pain-killers. Others use the same addictive drugs to seek escape from the mental or emotional pain of their everyday existence. The risk of a fatal overdose increases with sustained drug use, and the loved ones left behind may never know if an overdose was accidental or intentional.

Eating disorders are known to cover deeper psychological issues often related to or stemming from a distorted self-image, unreasonable expectations, or tendencies toward perfectionism. While eating disorders, like other self-harming behaviors, are not always fatal, they are a cry for help and a manifestation that something in one's life is overwhelming one's ability to cope and adapt. As such, those burdened by eating disorders are sometimes more likely to consider suicide as a solution.

Cutting is an increasingly common method of self-harm, particularly among teenagers and young adults. It involves breaking the skin with a sharp object, usually to the point of having blood ooze from the wound. Cutters are generally ashamed of their behavior and most often cut in places where their scars can be easily hidden from the view of others. They are also common callers to suicide hotlines. I have been told by cutters that cutting makes them feel better for a short time, although a deep sense of shame typically follows. Perhaps the pain of the self-inflicted wound temporarily dulls the pain of their otherwise intolerable situation. The cutters I have talked to feel deeply hurt, disrespected, unappreciated, and misunderstood, usually by parents or love interests.

A common feeling experienced by people who turn to self-harm for relief is a strong sense of shame, as if they are punishing themselves for the wretched person they believe themselves to be. While we may feel guilt or regret about something we have said or done, shame strikes at the essence of who we think we are. Buddhist blogger Robert Brumet writes, "Guilt says, 'You *did* something bad.' Shame says, 'You *are* something bad.'"[39] We can often fix or reverse something we have done, but life turns tragically hopeless when we believe we are a bad person. That some feel they are bad people is a reminder that we should only criticize or correct *behaviors*, particularly in our children, and never imply that we are criticizing or correcting the person. Telling another they are bad for something they have done, particularly when that message is repeated over time, too often becomes internalized literally. Everyone I know has done bad things in their lives, myself included, but that does not make any of us bad or unsalvageable people.

Finally, a special case of indirect suicide can occur under one's conscious intent but at the hands of another, as in physician-assisted suicide. At the time of this writing, physician-assisted suicide is only legal in a handful of states and under specific conditions like a terminal medical condition that gives the patient no reasonable chance for recovery. Physician-assisted suicide allows the patient some degree of control over their passing, giving them an opportunity to pass away peacefully, with minimal pain or suffering, and in the presence of whatever loved ones they chose to have present at their exit.

Hate Turned Inward

[39] Robert Brumet, *Shame (Part 1),* Reflections from Robert, February 3, 2021.

Suicide is often referred to as *hate turned inward*. Just as people tend to look either outside or inside of themselves for affirmation, so people tend to extend blame for their unhappiness either outside or inside of themselves. If one's natural tendency is to accuse others for one's suffering, an act of suicide might be considered a willful act against those others, as in, "I'll make them suffer by killing myself." In such a case, suicide is an outward retaliation toward the others identified as the cause of the suffering, but the harmful action emanating from the hatred is directed inward. For these types of people acting on a suicidal impulse, as is sometimes said about resentment, they take poison and hope the other person dies.

For those who point the finger of blame inward, an act of suicide is likely motivated more by feelings of shame about who they perceive themselves to be. As in the earlier discussion on brokenness, they reject the notion that they are worthy of a good, happy life. Self-rejection is something Henri Nouwen labels as our greatest deception: "…the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection."[40] One could argue that even those who appear wildly driven and successful work so hard in order to stay ahead of a strong inner sense of unworthiness. They may put in long hours at work and climb the corporate ladder only to realize they are loved, appreciated, and respected only for what they can produce for their employer and not for who they are apart from their work. Indeed, many such people have no identity outside of their work, at least not one they value. That situation is not a healthy or stable foundation for one's self-image and can lead to the consideration of suicide as a reasonable option when their work life deteriorates.

Hate turned inward is influenced by our sense of purpose. When we look around and see others who appear to know where they belong and who live with purpose and seeming ease we naturally wonder what is wrong with us. We feel deficient in significant ways that seem to stem from the deepest parts of ourselves. Our life, what we do, and who we are lack any sense of meaning that we can identify or accept as meaningful, important, or significant. What we overlook is that very few people live with an unwavering sense of purpose and resolve all of the time. Everyone has doubts about themselves and why they are here, but some people have a stronger foundation from which to rebuild what gets torn down as a result of the wear and tear of our daily lives. In Nouwen's terms, we either know ourselves to live under the blessing or we believe ourselves to live under the curse. When we allow our self-doubt to descend into self-loathing and shame we become more susceptible to suicidal impulses than those whose sense of purpose is built on a foundation of loving acceptance.

Afterlife Considerations from Suicide

As mentioned earlier, suicidal actions arise from and result in tremendous pain and suffering, both for the person contemplating suicide and for the loved ones of that person. I have speculated in other chapters that the way we cross over into the next life has some impact on at least our early experiences in the afterlife. Most suicidal deaths are going to result in a chaotic, desperate end to this life and a likely chaotic and desperate entry into the next, not to mention the chaotic sorrow shrouding the family and friends left behind.

Some religious beliefs say that anyone committing suicide goes straight to hell, by which they mean into eternal punishment. While I do not believe that is a biblical or a logical conclusion, I mention it here because the belief is out there. Rather, I think it is likely that we enter the next phase of life after a suicidal ending in such a state of disorder and despair that some period of purgation or readjustment is likely necessary, not as a punishment for what we have done but in order to learn how to accept the loving environment into which we have fallen. I do not believe suicide is a more sinful

[40] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved,* Crossroad Publishing, 1992, p. 31.

act than other acts we humans are known to carry out, but because the violent desperation present before, during, and after the act is inconsistent with the larger life into which we enter. We do not immediately heal from traumatic mental, emotional, or physical experiences in this life, so it seems reasonable to assume that such healing is a process in the life after this one, too. Of course, since time in the next phase of life is almost certainly unlike what we experience as time on earth, there is no intelligible way to speculate about how the process might unfold outside of earthly time.

Be that as it may, suicide is arguably one of the more challenging types of death, both emotionally and physically. It leaves friends and loved ones pondering how they may have contributed to the tragic end of their lost loved ones, and that painful ambiguity may haunt them for the remainder of their earthly lives. Regular communication, affirmation, and personal contact with those known to have suicidal ideations is one of the best, if not always successful responses.

Chapter 15: Saying Goodbye

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." John 20:17a

Preparing ourselves for our deaths is the most important task of life, at least when we believe that death is not the total dissolution of our identity but the way to its fullest revelation…Jesus speaks about his death as being "lifted up."
Henri Nouwen[41]

It was August of 2017 and I was in a large convention hall in Albuquerque, NM, with about 500 other people. I had nearly finished my first, in-person week of study in the two-year *Living School* of the Center for Action and Contemplation. The school is an immersion into contemplative spirituality and mysticism, drawing from Christian and other traditions. I was watching the *Sending Ceremony* for the class that was finishing their course of study. It was not considered a *graduation* ceremony, which implies that something has been accomplished or completed. Rather, it was a *sending* ceremony, signifying that while one stage of the teaching was ending – a type of dying – a different setting for the learning was emerging – a rebirth. It was not *the* end; it was *an* end. As with all endings, it was also a beginning. These persons were being sent out to continue their education and work, both through study and through living a life that would draw others to the reality of the presence of God permeating everything.

The school's founder, Father Richard Rohr, was at the podium. I assumed he would share some of the common platitudes one typically hears at graduation ceremonies – congratulating the students for their accomplishments, telling them to be proud and to know they were now well-prepared to make a difference in the world. Rather, the tone he adopted was that of a funeral. He shared the five things we should say to those we love before they (or we) die. It was clear that this man, revered by so many of us, was modeling how to say goodbye to the in-person phase of the *Living School.*

Several months earlier, I, like many of my *Living School* colleagues, felt I had entered spiritual paradise when I received notification of my acceptance into the school. I was being given the opportunity to study under some of the most admired, living contemplative teachers, as well as studying insightful spiritual writers from the past several thousand years. Fr. Richard's blunt (but gently presented) words of closure felt harsh. Had I been a member of the class being sent, I would have been sobbing (some were). In his wise way, Fr. Richard was making clear that it was time to say *goodbye.* The purpose of the past two years had not been to create a destination where the students could rest for eternity, as many of us would have desired. Rather, the school was a temporary stopping point along a never-ending journey. It was time to say goodbye and move on, to die and be reborn, taking the teachings and experiences given in the school out into the world to make life better, more just, and more abundant for everyone.

The funeral-like tone of the ceremony made me wonder, "Who died?" Of course, no one died, at least not physically. A third of my colleagues, however, were being sent away from the school – expelled from this Garden of Eden – and back to their homes for the next phase of their lives. Clearly,

[41] *Nouwen Meditation: Preparing for Death.* Daily Meditation, Henri Nouwen Society, posted on September 16, 2020.

we cannot fully enter into a new phase of life without letting go of and moving on from the previous phase. It was death – not a physical death, but a death nonetheless. The parallels to our physical death were profoundly present in the imagery. Our physical death, and the deaths of those we love, are not endings as much as *sendings* to a new phase in the greater life. Our life on earth seduces us into believing it is a complete unit, is all that matters, and there is nothing worthwhile beyond it. I was *sent* from the *Living School* in 2019 and, I confess, my school experience felt like a complete unit, like it was all that mattered, and like there was no other study so worthwhile. While my cohort's *Sending Ceremony* did not feel like a funeral, it was clear that we could not return there anymore than we can return to our physical lives after our death, any more than we can return to anything in our past.

The sending ceremony reminded me of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene at his tomb on the morning of his resurrection (John 20:17). He told her not to cling to him. The earthly phase of their relationship was over, and it was time to let it go.

Forgiveness

The five things Fr. Richard shared that we should say to those we love before they (or we) die are: *Please forgive me; I forgive you; Thank you; I love you;* and *Goodbye.* In a perfect world these things would not need to be said. We would maintain our relationships in ways leaving nothing unresolved to forgive, nothing we had not already expressed thanks for, and no question about our love for the other. In the real world, however, whenever we are in close quarters with another, annoyances that are otherwise inconsequential become kindling for raging fires of indignation. Further, it is typically those we love the most with whom we share close quarters. Thus, the closure conversation necessarily begins with forgiveness.

Please forgive me. The need for forgiveness before we say goodbye, whenever possible, cannot be overstated, both for the dying person and for those left behind. The statement might begin something like this: "If there is anything I have done or said that remains as a barrier between us, please forgive me." Forgiveness is freeing to both to the one asking forgiveness and the one granting it. When physical death is near, being able to pass unincumbered by earthly woundings allows for a peaceful passage. It also reduces the likelihood of regrets being added to sorrows for those beginning a life without their loved one.

In cases of physical death, there is a hard deadline beyond which we can no longer give or seek face-to-face forgiveness. Especially when there is much to be forgiven, it is best not left until the last minute. Some of the ways we hurt others, even unintentionally, may require significant time to work through to the point where the strong feelings can be released. Asking forgiveness without a willingness to do the work to heal the wounds created, however, is a shallow ask unworthy of this solemn opportunity. While the ideal is to never leave anything unforgiven; the reality is usually something less. When we find we have wounded another, the quicker we seek forgiveness the more likely it is to be granted. Wounds that are treated early heal faster and more completely. *And* it leaves less to be forgiven when one of us is on our deathbed. *Please forgive me* is an admission of our imperfection and a (hopefully) sincere request to release another into their new phase of life without having to carry emotional baggage from us across the threshold.

I forgive you. If we are seeking forgiveness, we need to grant it, too. This expression of closure might go something like this: "If you fear there is anything you have said or done that offended me or continues to stand between us, please know that I forgive you." Obviously, telling someone we forgive them without doing the work necessary to heal our wounds is just shallow, mostly meaningless chatter. Forgiveness does not mean we forget the past; it means we let go of the inhibiting impact the past has on our present. Forgiveness does not mean that we leave ourselves or our children

unaccompanied with a parent who abused us as children. Forgiveness is not blind, nor does it mean we take unnecessary risks. Rather, forgiveness allows us to move on unincumbered by the remnants of past hurts. Clearly, certain sins are easier to forgive than others, and true forgiveness cannot be rushed. In that sense, there are cases where forgiveness on this side of the grave may not be possible. That, however, should not stop us from forgiving that which can be forgiven here and now.

The saying, "Wounded people wound people," is truer than many of us acknowledge. And we are all wounded in many ways. The goal is not to go through life unwounded, but to stop perpetuating the pain by wounding others. Forgiveness also helps us to stop being wounded by our wounds, sometimes called the *second wounding*. The *first wounding* occurs when another hurts us. The *second wounding* occurs when we perpetuate the first wounding by holding onto and reliving what was done to us in the past. Fr. Richard writes, "If we do not transform our pain, we will always transmit it."[42] Doing the work of forgiveness is one way to transform our pain and stop the vicious cycle of wounding ourselves and others.

Thanksgiving, Love, and Goodbye

Thank you. We tend to assume we express our thanks to others more frequently than we actually do. We may assume that because we feel gratitude in our hearts for anther's actions toward us that they naturally know how thankful we are. This is not a reasonable assumption, particularly as our earthly relationship nears its end. There is a sense in which saying "Thank you" makes us vulnerable. If we acknowledge something nice someone has done for us we may feel obligated to do something equally nice for them in return. If we feel incapable or unwilling to match their generosity it may be easier to simply skip giving overt thanks and assume the other knows how thankful we are. In truth, however, no one ever really knows how they are received by another unless and until they are told. Particularly as one of us nears death, expressing our thanks for *who* they were to us as well as *what* they did for us is an important piece in bringing closure to this phase of a loving relationship.

I love you. In many budding romantic relationships, it is difficult to know when and under what circumstances to tell the other "I love you." Certainly not on a first date and probably not on the second or third. Blurting out the *L* word too soon makes one sound shallow and impulsive. Confusing love with fondness or with lust is always a danger in relationships. Of course, not using the *L* word soon or frequently enough can leave the other wondering about the depth or sincerity of one's feelings about them. Jesus used love in a much broader, more inclusive sense than the exclusive way we tend to reserve it for. He told us to love *everyone.* For him, love was not a feeling. Love was positive action for the benefit of another.

These two different senses of love – what we say and what we do – are two different ways to express our love to those we are in close relationship with when they or we are near physical death. Certainly, we do not want the depth of our fondness or feelings for the other to go unexpressed, either in word or in action. As with forgiveness, there is a hard stop on our ability to verbally express our love for another face-to-face when one of us is near death.

Expressing our love for the other needs to be both verbal and action-oriented, however. We should leave no doubt in the mind of our beloved of our affection for them, *and* we should do what we are able to make their final days with us as comfortable as possible. In the wise words of Henri Nouwen that began this chapter, we can either "…bind (them) with guilt or set them free with gratitude."

[42] Fr. Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations,* September 19, 2020. www.cac.org.

Goodbye. We cannot know with certainty what will become of us after our time on earth. I have provided much speculation in the chapters of this book, but it is just that -- speculation. I *believe* that the energy field that has embodied itself into what I call *me* will continue to exist, as will the energy field that has embodied as *you,* although it will be in a different way and in a different form of embodiment. Regardless, saying *goodbye* to those we love on earth is an important piece in bringing closure to the loss of a loved one. Seldom is it appropriate to simply say "Good night" or "So long" when a loved one is about to embark on a lengthy journey. Rather, we say "Goodbye." We do not know when or under what circumstances we will meet again, and *goodbye* honors and brings closure to what has been, even as it looks forward to what is to come.

An Illustration

My Uncle Jim was larger than life to me. He married my father's sister, Maxine, about the time I was born, so I knew him my entire life. He was a Texan through and through, with all the bravado and bluster one would expect from a native Texan who descended from native Texans. He commanded a room with his presence, and his slow, Texas drawl was easily identifiable from across seemingly any distance. And I loved him dearly.

Although he and Aunt Maxine lived 7 hours south of us, we saw them frequently. Uncle Jim's work brought him into northeast Kansas every month or two, and he and Aunt Maxine would stay with us for a few days while he worked his territory. They were like another set of parents to Carrie and me, as well as serving as another set of grandparents to our children. Whenever they were with us, they joined us in whatever we were doing – children's concerts or sporting events, church, and gatherings with friends. When Uncle Jim came to visit he firmly inserted himself into our family life and none of us would have it any other way.

Uncle Jim was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, and it took his life in September of 2018 following a steady decline in his vitality. My wife, son, and I went to see him a few weeks before he passed, knowing it would our last visit on this side of the grave. A year or so before our trip, I heard Richard Rohr share the five things we should say to those we love before they or we die. I knew that would be my template for saying goodbye to my beloved Uncle Jim. I also knew it would be difficult.

He was in his pajamas, sitting in a wheelchair in his family room when the three of us entered for our visit. He tired easily and could not speak above a whisper, so the visit was much shorter than it would otherwise have been. As I sensed it was time to leave, I knelt before his wheelchair and began. "Uncle Jim, I know I haven't always been the best nephew to you, but if there is anything I have done that needs forgiveness, please forgive me." I was crying before I could get the words out, as was he. He waved me off as if it were ridiculous to think there was anything between us needing forgiveness. I skipped the second statement, "I forgive you," for the same reason. In my heart there was nothing from him needing my forgiveness. Next, I thanked him for being such an awesome uncle, for stepping in as a surrogate father to me after my dad's death, for being such fun company, for being another grandfather to our children, and for the blessing of his presence for as long as I could remember. I told him I loved him and that I would miss him. I said "Goodbye," wiped the tears from my eyes, kissed him on the forehead, and rejoined my cousins in the dining room while Carrie and Reid said their goodbyes.

I think about and miss Uncle Jim often. Having that final conversation with him did not miraculously heal him, at least not physically, nor did it erase my sadness over losing him. I believe that conversation was of immense help in my grieving process, however, because it allowed me to let him go without regrets and with no loose ends. He was not a perfect man, but at least to me, his imperfections paled compared to the goodness of his heart and his positive impact on my life. In our

goodbye there was mutual forgiveness, there was thanksgiving, there was love and appreciation expressed, and there was closure. I am convinced that is the best we can hope for whenever we lose someone we love. God knows, losing one we love is hard enough as it is.

Today, there is nothing but joy and gratitude in my memories of Uncle Jim because there was nothing standing between us as he passed – no unresolved hurts and no unexpressed affection or appreciation. And I believe he entered the next phase of his life unincumbered by any emotional baggage from me. While I wish this could be true for all of us whenever we lose a loved one, I know that is not the case – not for me and not for you. Many circumstances do not allow for the type of goodbye I had with Uncle Jim, but that should never stop us from seizing the opportunities we do have for saying goodbye in ways that release both parties.

Difficult Circumstances

The nature of the relationship I had with my uncle made having the conversation a whole lot easier than it would be with many others. For one thing, we did not live together. There is something about sharing the same space with someone over an extended period that breeds resentment and other, often repressed annoyances. The intimacy of living together is a wonderful gift; it can also be a hotbed of irritations and make finding a serene closure more difficult.

Another factor that can make this type of closure process difficult is when it cannot be safely done face-to-face. If our loved one was abusive – physically or emotionally – we may not be able to bring ourselves through the forgiveness phases of closure in person, let alone to sincerely express thankfulness or love. Whenever the closure conversation cannot be done safely, even in the absence of the loved one, professional assistance may be worthy of consideration. Obviously, if our loved one has already passed, we are no longer able to bring closure in person.

None of these situations prevents us from bringing closure, however, if only for ourselves. The energies of our loved ones remain with and around us through our memories, in the numerous environmental reminders of times shared with them, in our dreams, and often in the sense that they remain very near to us. It is important to remember that our deceased loved one now has a much different perspective, being freed from their earthly body and the hurts and burdens of their mortal lives. They will almost certainly be more open to giving and receiving forgiveness, understanding, love, and gratitude than they ever were prior to their passing. We may even experience a profound sense of peace in the presence of our departed loved one, even if our earthly relationship was turbulent.

Whenever *we* need to bring closure to a relationship with a loved one who is physically unavailable, we can always do so in a virtual manner. Here is an outline for having a virtual closure conversation:

1. Find a private, quiet place where you can have a reasonable span of uninterrupted time.
2. Sit in a comfortable, relaxed position. Having one's feet on the floor will provide a sense of stability and grounding if the conversation is likely to feel threatening or painful.
3. Relax. Take time to breathe. Close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply from your lower abdomen. Visualize the breath as it enters, penetrates, and exits your body.
4. Once you are relaxed, grounded, and centered, imagine your loved one into your presence. It may help to have a picture of them in front of you or an empty chair where you imagine them to be sitting.
5. *Please forgive me.* What aspects of the relationship weigh on you in the form of guilt or regret that you seek forgiveness for? What do you feel you need to apologize for? Verbalize it in the virtual presence of your loved one. Go into detail. Sit in silence for a time and listen. While we may not hear an audible response, very often we can feel a sense of peace that helps us to know we are forgiven.

6. *I forgive you.* Name the hurts that remain on your heart that were the result of actions or words of your loved one. Tell them what they did and how it made you feel. Go into detail. When you are finished and ready, grant forgiveness to your loved one. Sit in silence for a time, relaxing, breathing, and listening.
7. *Thank you.* Name that for which you are thankful with regard to your loved one. Be detailed and sincere. Go slowly and try to feel a sense of deep gratitude for everything mentioned. If you cannot be thankful for anything they actually said or did, perhaps you can be thankful for the example they provided of how *not* to behave in the presence of loved ones.
8. *I love you.* We cannot say it often enough. An even more helpful expression is to say, "I love you because …" and list that for which you love and loved the other.
9. *Goodbye.* Know you can return to this virtual space with your loved one whenever you feel the need or desire to do so. When you are ready, stand up and say *goodbye.* If it feels appropriate, bow to their presence.

The process can be repeated as and when needed or desired. Difficult relationships may require many such conversations. Finally, it can be helpful to reflect on this closure experience by journaling about it.

Chapter 16: Dying Well

I lived for thousands and thousands of years as a mineral,
And then died and became a plant.
And I lived for thousands and thousands of years as a plant,
And then died and became an animal.
And I lived for thousands and thousands of years as an animal,
And then died and became a human being.
Tell me, what have I ever lost by dying?
-Rumi[43]

In an article published in 2020, United Methodist pastor Michael Beck wrote, "When people die well, it's a sacred moment of beauty, goodness and truth."[44] He speaks from his experience of being at the bedsides of people who died well. He also experienced being at the bedsides of those who did not die so well. He writes, "When people die struggling, disillusioned and unprepared, accompanying them is hard."[45] He continues, "Often people who die well right all the wrongs in the final season of their life. They make amends for real or even perceived harms. *People who die well give themselves away …Dying well is a generative form of self-donation*"[46](emphasis added). Beck's article is technically directed at the dying of the United Methodist (and other) churches, but the observations are drawn from individuals. How we live and how we prepare to die greatly influences the manner in which we die. I would add my belief that the manner in which we die greatly influences the manner in which we experience at least our initial encounter with the afterlife.

Most of us spend the first half of our lives accumulating the *stuff* we feel we need to build the sort of adult life we desire – a home, car, profession, furniture, relationships, guitar(s), as well as a sense of identity and who we are in the world. As we enter the latter part of our lives, many of our possessions become less useful and can become burdensome. Many people begin giving stuff away as they age, not just as an act of generosity, but as a way of freeing themselves. This is implied in Beck's statement, "People who die well give themselves away," but the statement clearly goes beyond giving our unnecessary stuff away. His use of the term *self-donation* goes beyond our material stuff to include everything we have become attached to over the course of our lives, physically and emotionally. This may not include the relationships and causes we hold dear, but it certainly includes loosening the self-identification and tight grasp with which we tend to hold them. Dying well involves releasing everything and everyone that will not accompany us in our physical death, which is nearly everything we identify with during our time on earth. It does not mean *loving* less, only *clutching* less. To the extent that we are able to give ourselves away, to that same extent will we be able to release our hold on our

[43] Rumi, "Tell Me, What Have I Lost?" from *The Winged Energy of Delight: Selected Translations,* trans. Robert Bly (Harper Perennial: 2005), 339.
[44] Michael Adam Beck, *Dying Well: A Good Death and the Self-Donation of the People Called United Methodists.* www.ministrymatters.com/all/author/michael_beck. Published March 4, 2020. Accessed October 19, 2020.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

earthly existence and pass peacefully and with equanimity, anticipation, and readiness into whatever is next. *That* is what it means to die well.

There is an image I have seen on greeting cards and in humorous anecdotes about living life in such a way that there is nothing of our earthly self remaining when we take our last breath. I once accompanied my daughter to buy a car. Because we intended to trade her old car in, she asked if she should fill the gas tank before our trip to the dealership. I told her that no, the (*tongue-in-cheek*) ideal would be to roll onto the car lot on fumes. This is the spirit of dying well, that we organize our ultimate decline in such a way that there is nothing remaining at the end. Everything we had been given throughout our lives has either been used up or given away. This applies to emotional and relational as well as our physical and financial possessions. There is a story of the funeral of a rich businessman where one person asked another, "I wonder how much he left behind." The other person replied, "He left *all* of it!"

The 13th Century Sufi mystic, Rumi, posed the question, "What have I ever lost by dying?" In death, despite appearances, we lose nothing of true value, including whatever we desperately try to hold onto in life. Everything important and everything eternal goes with us. Everything else stays behind for recycling. To the extent that we give it away prior to our passing, we receive the joy of knowing something that was once important to us can now be important to someone else. In that sense our stuff attains its own immortality as we journey into ours.

Almost like being in love…

My first heartbreak came in junior high school when my girlfriend broke up with me. She was a cheerleader and one of the "popular" people at school, so being her boyfriend was a significant ego boost for me. After feeling terminally ordinary for most of my life to that point, I finally felt like *somebody* because someone who was considered somebody singled me out as a worthwhile person to be with. When she told me she did not want to be my girlfriend anymore I was devastated. It felt like I had died, and indeed, a part of me *had* died. In hindsight I know the part of me that died was an illusion. It was an illusion because it only existed in the context of how I thought others thought of me. Our value as children of God cannot be discerned using such low standards.

When my wife and I began dating, time stood still. We were so enamored with each other that everything else in our lives faded into the background. We lost ourselves in the moment and the hours passing by on the clock faded to irrelevance. We would talk until late into the night, oblivious to the fact that our alarm clocks would yank us back into *time-and-space reality* for work the next day. We had no idea what the future held and, at the time, it did not matter. The present moment was enough and our past did not encumber it. Of course, long before we reached our current 30+ years of married life, our lives together became more firmly grounded in our *time-and-space reality* and the late-night, starry-eyed conversations ceased. Getting to bed on time so we could face the next day ready and rested took precedence. The expression of our love for each other shifted to other modes while attaining new and more life-accommodating dimensions.

The *me* and *her* that were so obliviously in love gave way to the married couple that took on obligations beyond just being together. As in my junior high heartbreak, there was a death involved there, too – the death of two people who exclusively narrowed their focus onto each other. One can argue, correctly I think, that that sort of love experience is not sustainable for long. The reason it is not sustainable is because of the many other forces pulling at us in our earthly lives -- children, jobs, homes, cooking, paying bills, and spending time with family and friends. When we fall deeply in love it is easy to ignore the call of other parts of our lives, at least for a time, as we narrow our experience onto this one person as much as is humanly possible. That narrow focus, however, makes everything

else vying for our attention scream all the more loudly. It is not a matter of loving less but of accommodating a broader and more inclusive, if less intense experience of love and life.

I share these experiences because I believe there are lessons from loving well that can be instructive for dying well. Certainly we are going to face a big death – the end of our earthly life as we know it. We will leave everything and everyone we have grown attached to and move on to points unknown. While there is heartbreak in losing anything important to us, just like my adolescent experience, what we think we are so afraid of losing is mostly illusory. The *love* we so wish to hold onto and that undergirds everything important to us will *not* be lost in spite of the physical separation from those we love. This is because the love we cherish exists in a context greater than our day-to-day experience on earth with other individuals. When one we love goes away on a journey, we do not love them less for their absence. The old adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" is applicable here.

Preparing to die well has many of the markings of falling in love. Just as our previous self must die in order to enter a new expression of love, so our earthly life must die to allow us entry into the next phase of life. When our preparations for death have included the seeking and offering of forgiveness, along with generous expressions of love and appreciation, we are free to enter the next stage of our life adventure unencumbered. And once again we fall into the all-consuming, timeless dance with the Beloved, knowing we are loved and cherished for who we are, as we are.

Dying Contented

At its essence, and in my opinion, dying well is dying *contented*. We cannot die well if we feel we have been cheated in life, if we believe others treated us poorly, or if we think we were prevented from blossoming into our full potential by circumstances beyond our control or by the actions or inactions of others. Many people believe attaining contentment is not within their span of control. They believe the few contented people they know were *lucky* in some or many ways. And the contented people they know would probably agree: *Yes, they have been fortunate in their lives.* What is missing in the minds of our discontented sisters and brothers is the *gratitude* contented folks feel for what they have been given, *whatever they may have been given.* In other words, given the identical circumstances that discontented folks loathe, contented folks would still find their way to contentment. Unfortunately, those who are discontented today are not likely to die well unless and until they learn that contentment is not about what does or does not happen to us but is about *how we respond* to what does or does not happen to us. Do we react with gratitude, finding the blessings always present in every occurrence, or do we react with resentment, believing that life has used us as its punching bag once again?

The character *Eeyore* from the *Winnie the Pooh* book series is a classic personification of discontent. Whatever happens to him is seen as another slap in the face from the cosmic forces aligned against his happiness. He expects things to turn out poorly and the universe seems always to oblige. He is blind to the unconditional love, acceptance, and companionship bestowed upon him by his friends because his attention is always focused out of the present moment onto his sad past and dismal future. I suspect the sad truth is that if we expect our tomorrows on earth to be as bad or worse than our todays or yesterdays, then we will experience our afterlife as being as bad or worse than our life on earth – at least, that is, until we learn that the source of our discontent is internal and not external.

Fortunately for us, gratitude and contentment are perspectives anyone can develop at any time in their life. They must simply decide to do so. It is firmly within our power to develop and maintain a blessings-oriented attitude and identifying the blessings of *this* moment is the only place to begin. In the context of preparing to die well, finding contentment may be our number one assignment in life. It is the key to achieving a sense of completion or closure, not only as we end each day, but as we prepare to end our lives on earth. It is also the key to being fully present to the now. One of my

teachers and mentors, James Finley, says that death should not bring annihilation but consummation -- not obliteration but *completion.* We cannot attain completeness in this phase of life as long as we retain scores to be settled or believe anything about our lives was not good enough.

Contentment is a prerequisite for completion. Neither equates to nor requires perfection, at least not as we tend to define and (mis)understand perfection. As he was dying on the cross, Jesus' final words were "It is finished" (John 19:30). The earthly phase of his life was complete. We know from his post-death appearances that he was not annihilated. Rather, his earthly existence was consummated. He did not retain grudges against those who tortured and murdered him. He was able to pass into the afterlife freely and unencumbered. In doing so, he modeled dying well for us. None of us are likely to suffer the degrees of injustice, humiliation, or pain he endured, but through it all he demonstrated the importance of being grateful, contented, present, and complete in whatever life circumstances we have been given.

Before we end our days on earth we can develop an attitude of contentment; we can seek and acknowledge the better natures of everyone we meet, including and especially ourselves; we can freely and generously exchange love and forgiveness. We can give ourselves over completely to the *now*, which in the words of Brother David Steindl-Rast, does not pass away. He writes, "The finality of death is meant to challenge us to decision, the decision to be fully present now, and so begin eternal life. For eternality rightly understood is not the perpetuation of time, on and on, but rather the overcoming of time by the now which does not pass away." [47]

As such, a life and death of contentment requires relentless optimism, a bit of faith, presence to *this* moment, and a short memory. May it be so.

[47] Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Parabola*, Vol. 2, No.1: "Death," Winter 1977.

Epilogue

In various ways throughout this book I have downplayed the traditional notions of the afterlife as I learned it from the church, parents, and relatives. With each downplaying I have attempted to explain why I do not find those versions biblical, logical, or consistent with the rest of God's creation, at least to the limited extent we can ever know the underlying design of God's creation from our earthly vantage point. It is not that I feel a need to convince others that the traditional narratives are wrong, but I do think they are misleading and incomplete. For example, I do not worry about ending up in the traditional version of hell because if the traditional narratives are accurate, essentially everyone I care about and love will almost certainly be there, too, so I will be in good company. Which is to confess that I may be wrong. I do not present these musings with certainty but rather as fodder for the reader's own reflections and wrestlings with these issues.

A fundamental disagreement I have with the traditional view of the afterlife as an eternal placement into one of two diametrically opposed locations is that there is nothing traditional about it. As I have noted elsewhere, that traditional view is a relatively recent issue, at least in terms of its significance, in the history of the Christian church that, in my opinion, followed the development of the concept of *individual salvation,* which as far as I can tell emerged from the era of the (so-called) Enlightenment, 400 to 500 years ago. Until that time, salvation was understood to apply to collectives, like nations.

It was also during the Post-Enlightenment period that the concept of individual sin became such a big focus of and problem for us. In his book *What Do We Do With Evil,*. Richard Rohr writes, "In Jesus' and Paul's thinking, *sin and evil were first about the people as a whole, the cultural consensus, and not just personal behavior*. Jesus regularly damns the collective and hardly ever the individual."[48] Certainly, individual people sin and fall short of the mark we believe to be God's will for us, but it is the sins of the collective that result in widespread evil and need to be brought to some sort of societal reconciliation. Systemic evil occurs at the collective level in the building and maintaining of social systems that unequally benefit certain portions of the collective at the expense of others. Over the course of a few centuries, the responsibility for salvation shifted its focus from the collective to the individual, although this shift clearly was not inherent to the teachings of either Jesus or Paul. Salvation is no longer considered something we work toward together, which would be a truer statement of the traditional view, but something we must accomplish alone, which places a tremendous and probably impossible burden on each of us as individuals. In my opinion, this pressure, even when it occurs beneath our conscious awareness, has resulted in the wide-spread self-hatred and mental inhibitions that are increasingly common today, resulting in ever-increasing levels of anxiety, digestive issues, mental illness, suicide, and other individual and societal tragedies. Not to mention enflaming the already worrisome nature of death and dying.

The Eternal Me

A topic I have vaguely referenced but have yet to address in depth has to do with how much of what we identify as *us* actually survives our earthly death. Yes, I do believe our life continues

[48] Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With Evil.* CAC Publishing, Albuquerque, NM, 2019, p, 17.

unabated after we die. I do not, however, believe that the *I* that is identified as the individual *me* survives, at least not as I define *me* today. The being that I identify as *me* is largely an illusory projection of my ego and is based on my evolving image of the type of person I imagine others think I need to be in order to earn their love and acceptance. Of course these others, whose opinions I so highly value, are illusory projections of their egos, too. Once the layers of deception we have woven about ourselves are stripped away we are left with our *true and eternal self*. We will recognize that self as the purest essence of what we have always tried to become and always known we could become. I believe that *true self* is revealed again at our death to this life. Indeed, that self is the nexus from which everything we are arises. Our true self is our best and most holy self. It is where we are inseparably connected with God and with each other. *That* is the *me* that existed prior to my birth and will survive my earthly death.

Finally, when we become reacquainted with our true self we will recognize that same self in others, too. All of creation is a unique projection and individual manifestation of the same Spirit, and at our most essential core we are One, literally and figuratively. And this is why salvation is communal and not individual in nature. We cannot attain salvation alone any more than my right arm can go to California while my left arm remains in Kansas. Where one goes, all go.

The apostle Paul says as much in Romans 12:4: "*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."* Likewise, Jesus speaks of our oneness in John 17:21: "…*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us."* Through our deaths and rebirths we are united – not uniform, but unified in the same search for and struggle to become who we truly are – again – which in the end is One. And *that* is my non-answer to the unanswerable question of what happens to us when we die.

If I should die before I wake…it will be one more step in my journey to oneness with you.