

## **Question #5, What Does My Death Mean?**

by Reverend Kit Ketcham, May 21, 2006

I want you to close your eyes for a few moments and think back to a particular time in your life. You were probably 7 or 8 years of age and, through events in your life, perhaps the death of a pet or a friend or a relative, you had suddenly realized that your parents and other loved ones would someday die and that you yourself would also die, that there would come a time when you would not exist.

We all come to this moment of awareness of our mortality. And from then on, the idea that we are mortal is never far from our minds. We wonder about it, we listen to the various theories of what happens when we die, we may experience morbid flights of fancy, even get fixated on the many horrible ways there are to die.

At the same time, we may harbor a secret belief that we are immortal, that the things that cause other people to die just can't happen to us. Teenagers with a new driver's license are particularly susceptible to this one, as are those who drink themselves into oblivion or get hooked on a variety of dangerous substances.

Yet the evidence is there. And so death becomes a reality for us to deal with, like it or not. In a week we will celebrate Memorial Day, a time when we commemorate the lives of those who have already died. We are conscious of our need to reflect upon their contributions and their sacrifices.

Our first experiences with death are usually within our own families. A precious animal is hit by a car or falls ill. A grandparent dies, an aunt or uncle has a sudden heart attack or other debilitating illness.

When we go to school and our circle of acquaintance expands, we may have a classmate or teacher who dies. As we mature, our list lengthens, and we are acutely aware of the effects of death on our own lives.

We learn to deal with it in many ways. As children, we are often bewildered by it--we simply can't imagine not existing. So children are likely to think that someone has just gone away. As we age, we become painfully aware that those someones have gone away forever, and we find ways of handling the loss.

During my years as a school counselor, I worked with many students who had lost parents and friends, sometimes in very cruel ways. I'll never forget the scene at my school the day after the sudden heart attack death of a 7th grade student. Scott had simply fallen down dead on the school bus.

The entire school was devastated, even those who barely knew him. Football players in a corner weeping, girls screaming at each other for their perceived cruelty to the boy at some time or another. Wars erupting between students over who really cared

about Scott and who really didn't. But underlying all this anger and pain was the deep fear which accompanies the uncontrollable events of our lives and the effort to make meaning out of something which seems completely random.

What do the deaths of other people mean? These deaths mean pain and anguish for us and a disruption in our daily lives because of the absence of someone important. They mean guilty feelings about maybe not having been a good enough friend or son or daughter or sibling or parent.

These deaths mean birthdays and holidays when we stop short in our planning and realize that we don't have to buy that particular gift or card or memento, because the person who would have appreciated it is no longer here.

Sometimes the onslaught is relentless. Death seems to come fast and furious. In our later years, we attend increasing numbers of memorials and funerals, mark anniversaries of holocausts and massacres. We learn to be with people who are very ill or dying, to offer comfort and support to them and to their loved ones.

We pray that death will not take our dearest ones too soon, knowing this would be the hardest loss of all. We weary of buying sympathy cards, of attending the services, of sending the flowers or the donations, and yet we will always perform these acts, knowing their importance, to us and to the recipient.

For Unitarian Universalists, one of the most difficult things is attending funeral services that seem to inadequately address the questions of mortality: "he's gone to be with Jesus", we hear. Or, under the breath at the smoking area outside the funeral parlor door, "the old jerk, probably in hell--I hope!" And, hardest of all, "God must have wanted Susie in heaven; that's why she died."

Others' deaths are a clear reminder that our deaths too are inevitable, that someday we ourselves may struggle and lose the battle with illness, that an accident may suddenly end our lives, that old age may put us in the same position as our elderly, frail parents. We shrink from the knowledge that we will eventually yield to our own humanity and become helpless and dependent. Our worst case scenarios come quickly and relentlessly to mind.

Woody Allen put it so well when he said, "It's not that I am afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Death clarifies the meaning of time. Death marks the end of the amount of time our lives include. It places limits on our time to live life. So, in a way, when we ask, "what does my death mean?" we are also asking "what is the meaning of time?"

Especially as we age we become aware of the swift passage of time. Remember when we were kids and our birthday seemed eons away? When we were in high school, senior year took ages. In college, things sped up a bit, but four years were still four

years. When I went to seminary, the years between 1995 and 1999, graduation, were gone in a flash. And the 7 intervening years have even more rapidly flown by.

Our children grow up and leave home overnight. We seem to have so little time to do the things we want and need to do. And always, in the dim distance, the final door reminds us that we are finite, that we are dying even as we live, and that all this will pass away.

In a race against time, we try to pack our lives with every experience and relationship that seems important. It's easy to go overboard in our race with the clock; we bemoan the overinvolvement that separates us from what we truly love. We don't even notice our surroundings at times, we're so busy being busy, accomplishing everything we want to do----before we die.

And yet, for most of us, there comes another moment of awareness, that this day, this hour, this minute is really all we have anyhow. There is no guaranteed future, there is only this moment.

Seven years ago, I discovered almost accidentally in a routine health exam that the heart murmur I'd had all my life was a congenital condition that needed surgical correction so that it would not damage my health later on. Boy, I was angry. Angry at my body for its betrayal, angry at the doctor who couldn't guarantee me continued good health unless I got it fixed, angry at myself for not investigating it sooner, angry at people who fussed over me and seemed to assume I should be wrapped in cottonwool.

My anger became fear, fear that I would die before I had a chance to be the minister I'd prepared to be. And every little twitch, every little pang, every little breathless moment convinced me that any time now it'd be "the big one"--though that was hardly even a possibility! I'd lie awake, listening to my heartbeat, sure that it was too fast, too slow, too loud, too bumpy. The cardiologist was reassuring, but my fears persisted.

My younger brother Buz has had a lot of heart trouble, some of it big stuff. And one day, when we were together before my open heart surgery, he called me on my fear. "How come you're so afraid of this?" he asked. "All we really have is today anyhow. You could get hit by a truck, and your heart problem would be meaningless. All we can do is live fully in the present."

Now Buz is a strict Republican and a former engineer at Longview Fibre; we argue about spotted owls and timber usage and the Bushes. He's a conservative, "one-way" Christian. He's also 9 years younger than I am--not exactly a candidate for Kit's Mentor of the Year! But his wisdom took me aback.

It doesn't do me much good to worry about my death. Where I need to be spending my energy is in living my life. It isn't how and when I die that is important; it's how and why I LIVE that matters.

The biggest mystery about death, of course, is what happens next. Is there an afterlife? What happens when breath leaves the body, when the brain ceases to function, when our blood no longer circulates? We know what we see when someone dies: the body cools, is unresponsive to stimuli, it is less flexible and the skin becomes waxy-looking and rigid. The physical signs of death are clear.

But what happens to the life that once animated the body? There are several points of view: one belief is that death is a complete end, and that we survive only in other humans' memory. A second is the naturalistic view that death is a rearranging of our bodies' elements and that we survive in our children and grandchildren.

The third view is reincarnation, that our souls return to the earth in other bodies. And the fourth is the traditional view of the afterlife--of heaven and hell.

As I've pondered each of these ideas and have spent time with people who are dying or whose loved ones have died, I've developed my own theories about what happens after we die. There is, of course, no way to know for sure till we get there--all our best thinking is only theoretical!

I have pretty much rejected the rationalistic idea that Nothing Happens. If brain and body function were the only measure of life, this would be true. But I believe that I am more than my brain and body. I believe that there is a spirit in me that is not dependent on my brain and body.

My spirit uses my brain and body as tools, but my spirit itself is non-material and therefore I believe that my spirit is not necessarily subject to the death of my body and brain. Of course, I could be wrong!

I am more in tune with the idea that our bodily elements return to the earth in regenerative cycles. After all, if we can recycle Coke cans, surely it's clear that our bodies are recyclable. But if I am more than recyclable elements, where does my spirit go? Is my nonmaterial spirit recyclable?

Reincarnation, based as it is on the idea of karma and ultimate justice wrought by rebirth into another body where one will pay for one's past misdeeds, doesn't work for me, on purely personal grounds.

I want to see justice in this life. I want the Bush bigwigs to get their comeuppance in this life, not by being turned into rats in another. I want the heroes of justice to be recognized now! And I want to see it happen!

And I don't like the traditional ideas of heaven and hell, purgatory and limbo, imaginative as they are. I don't believe that God calls people home to be with "Him", that God causes some people to live while others die, that God makes us sick to teach us lessons. I don't believe in a Higher Power that acts that way. But people often justify

tragedy and assign meaning to it in these ways. Meaning certainly is available in tragedy, but it's not so easily achieved.

So here's what I've come up with over the years of mulling over the question of what lies beyond death, and I know I might be wrong. I believe that I have an immortal spirit, which, at my death, finds a higher consciousness, that I will learn, after death, things I could not learn in life, for whatever reasons.

I believe that I will connect somehow with people who have gone before me, that I will be with my parents and other loved ones, in spirit, in some way which I can't even fathom. Even now I feel a connection with them, and I believe that this will not end at my death.

I can't get more specific than that. I doubt there are streets of gold or fiery infernos beyond death. I have toyed with the idea that maybe heaven and hell come to us at our memorial service, that heaven is when our spirit hovers over the gathering, where people are saying wonderful things about us, sharing their love for us, and we know that what they are saying is true, because we know we tried to live our lives with integrity.

Hell is when our spirit hovers over our memorial service, where people are saying wonderful things about us, saying they loved us, and we know that they are lying, because, in this moment of higher consciousness, we know we did not live with integrity.

Woody Allen also said, "I don't believe in an afterlife, though I am bringing a change of underwear." I don't believe in a traditional afterlife, either, but I doubt that underwear will be required in a higher consciousness.

I also believe that we have immortality in what we leave behind us--not possessions, but memories--of kindness, of forgiveness, of generosity with time and energy, a legacy of love for people and the groups which we have invested ourselves in. We will live on in the ideals we are committed to, we will live on in this congregation and in the positive effect this congregation has upon Whidbey Island.

Death, in all its permutations, marks time for us. We have only so much time--and we don't know what its margins may be. All we know is that we are alive right now, as are the others around us, and this moment today is ours to do with as we will.

Will we spend it in thoughtless ways? Or will we invest it in our own lives and others'? Will we cherish it? Or waste it? Will we use our priceless moments to hurt one another with careless words? Or will we spend them in listening and comforting?

Let me quote the UU minister Forrest Church in one of his recent books, *Lifecraft*: "One more thing you should keep in mind. We are all going to die. This is not a... tragedy. If you could love forever, work and play forever, neither love nor work nor play would be nearly as charged with meaning as they are by the fact that each will end.

“So what gives our lives meaning? Here is my short list. Kindness... Forgiveness. Generosity. Enthusiasm. Ecstasy. Empathy. Above all, love given and received.... Finish a good project. Start a new one. Ponder the cosmos. Shake your head in wonder. Tell someone you love them. Kindness never hurts.”

The choice belongs to each of us. The meaning of death is determined by the meaning we give our lives. What will that meaning be? Let me close with a poem by Mary Oliver, entitled “The Summer Day.”

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

Let's join in a moment of silent reflection and prayer  
Hymn “#295, Sing Out Praises

**Benediction:** Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our every act of kindness and care and generosity enhances not only our own lives but the lives of everyone around us. May we remember this and live out our time on this earth in ways that are healing and helpful, for ourselves, our fellow travelers, and the universe in which we live. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.