

ON DEATH AND DYING

Reflections on End of Life from Local Religious Leaders

Michael Pappas, SFIC Executive Director

"Celebrating our diverse faith and spiritual traditions, the San Francisco Interfaith Council (SFIC) brings people together to build understanding and serve our community."

In the spirit of this mission, we are grateful for the invitation to contribute spiritual reflections from a variety of faith perspectives on death and dying for this issue, which shines a light on end-of-life care.

Each of our contributors brings a long history of firsthand experience in spiritual care giving to the terminally ill and their families. Rev. Dr. Paul Fitzgerald, SJ, is the president of the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit university with a rich tradition of compassion, social justice, and outreach in our community; Dr. Robert Crane, a longtime supporter of the United Muslims of America, offers Islamic wisdom on the topic; Reagan Humber, currently a candidate for the traditional diaconate in the Episcopal Diocese of California, is a hospice chaplain and the bereavement coordinator at Gentiva Hospice; Rev. Ron Kobata is the resident minister of the Buddhist Church of San Francisco and a clergyman who brings the deep spirituality of his tradition to all to whom he ministers; Kaushik Roy, rooted in the Hindu faith, is the executive director of the Shanti Project, a community of volunteers and staff who provide emotional and practical support to San Francisco's most vulnerable individuals living with life-threatening illness; and Rabbi Eric Weiss is the president and CEO of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, whose mission is dedicated to providing Jewish spiritual care to those living with illness, to those caring for the ill, and to the bereaved through direct service, education and training, capacity building, and information and referral.

Rev Dr. Paul Fitzgerald, President, University of San Francisco

The Catholic tradition provides two principles to keep in mind when dealing with end-of-life care: We are to find meaning in suffering, and we are to alleviate suffering when it is appropriate to do so. Applying these to the context of palliative care should be made against the larger horizon of faith in a God who invites us into collaboration with grace, loving care for others in an imitation of Christ, and hope built on the promise that this life opens up into eternity through the reality of death.

Suffering and death are inevitable in every human life. We are not called to seek out or worship suffering per se, yet in the book of Job in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Passion narratives of the four Gospels, we find patterns, pathways, and frameworks for us to enter into the depths of human suffering as a unique place of encounter with the divine. Easy explanations of the meaning of suffering are typically inadequate or wrong; God does not seem to want us to suffer, yet God is especially present

to those in extremis in ways that either heal and give a temporary reprieve or lead the dying person through the doorway of death. A good death is one in which the dying person accepts all that has been, forgives all who have offended, and embraces forgiveness for all that went awry.

Care for the dying is provided in light of these beliefs. There is thus no necessity to artificially forestall death through extraordinary means, nor is there warrant to speed the end through active euthanasia. Palliative care is a balance of relieving pain and preserving as much quality of life as possible, chiefly so that the dying person can fully experience this last chapter of a lifelong spiritual journey.

Eric Weiss, Executive Director, Jewish Healing Center

We spend a lot of time in our beloved community talking about how to care for our young and for our aged, and we should. But we all know that not everyone lives to see old age, and certainly not everyone bears or raises children. No matter our life circumstance, everyone becomes ill, comes to their last breath, and comes to fold grief into their lives. Illness, death, and grief are the universal human experiences. These universal human experiences naturally stimulate spiritual reflection, and they reasonably yearn for a communal response. Judaism emphasizes the blessing of life itself, to be fully living and engaged in the world, and at the same time to recognize that we come to die. At our last breath it is assumed we will ascend to Heaven. Our tradition encompasses many rabbinic perspectives on the nature of Heaven, the after-life, reincarnation, and other natural human curiosities. This is because the emphasis is on life in this world. There is a famous rabbinic story that tells us that when the teacher Zusya was on his deathbed, his students said, "You will be welcomed into Heaven because you are as great as Moses." To which Zusya replied, "When I die and arrive to Heaven, God will not ask me why I was not more like Moses, rather God will ask me why was I not more like Zusya?" Even at the moment of death our tradition asks us to simply be our authentic selves.

Dr. Robert D. Crane, supporter of the United Muslims of America

The traditionalist or classical wisdom of all the Abrahamic religions about the end of human life is essentially the same, because they agree on its purpose, though with different emphases. In Islamic teachings, the purpose of everyone's life is to become the person that God created one to be by seeking to know one's deepest identity, instead of trying to create an artificial self. This is the key to salvation, which has only three requirements. These are to love God in return for God's love, to recognize the continuum of justice from this life to the next, and to do good works. One of the

Prophet Muhammad's favorite prayers was, "Oh God! I ask You for Your love, and for the love of those who love You, and for the love of everything that will bring me closer to Your love."

To know oneself in Islam is to recognize one's own human nature, and especially the basic teaching of Islam that one's own essence includes what is known as *infaq*, which is the inclination to give rather than to take in life. One's own nature is also to value one's own life and the life of others as a gift, which produces a reverence for the human transition from this life to the next, to the extent that one has no fear of death, so that those who have lived a life in awareness of God and repented their failures can regard their own death as the greatest moment in their life.

For untold millennia, traditionalist communities have provided support for those who can no longer be cured so they and their loved ones no longer fear the disappearing quantity of life and instead can enjoy the growing quality of life available to those who recognize their own purpose and its final fulfillment.

Rev. Ron Kobata, Resident Minister, Buddhist Church of San Francisco

In our Jodo Shinshu Buddhist tradition, we have a custom of reading an epistle during funerals/memorials. "On White Ashes" was composed in the fifteenth century by the eighth-generation head of our denomination. It clearly and simply sets out that facing the fact of our own death and shared inevitability of death can lead to deeper and fuller living. The reflective statement, "whether it be today or tomorrow, who is to know?" offers an awareness that end-of-life care might well occur throughout the course of this finite experience we call human life. After all, our dying began the moment we were born, and the paradox is that in dying to our finite self a new sense of living comes ALIVE: Aware, Loving, Inspired, Valued, Engaged.

Rennyō Shōnin's "On White Ashes"

In silently contemplating the transient nature of human existence, nothing in our world is more fragile and fleeting than our life. Thus, we hear of no one sustaining human form for a thousand years. Life swiftly passes and who among us can maintain our human form for even a hundred years?

Whether I go before others, or others go before me; whether it be today, or it be tomorrow; who is to know? Those who leave before us are as countless as the drops of dew. Though in the morning we may have radiant health, in the evening we may return to ashes. When the winds of impermanence blow, our eyes are closed forever; and when the last breath leaves us, our face loses its color.

Though loved ones gather and lament, everything is to no avail. The body is then sent into an open field and vanishes from this world with the smoke of creation, leaving only white ashes. There is nothing more real than this truth of life. The fragile nature of human existence underlies both the young and old, and therefore we must one and all, turn to the teachings of the Buddha and awaken to the ultimate source of life.

By so understanding the meaning of death, we shall come to fully appreciate the meaning of this life which is unrepeatable and thus to be treasured above all else . . .

—NamoAmidaButsu

(I take refuge in the Buddha Amida: Immeasurable Life/Light)

Reagan Humber, Hospice Chaplain and Bereavement Coordinator, Gentiva Hospice

"Rest in peace and rise in glory." These words have become something of a mantra among Anglicans as a public acclamation following death. This prayer reflects the Christian hope for the person who has just died but also expresses two of our chief concerns when caring for those at the end of life. Our first concern is that we attend to the embodied experience of the person. Is there suffering, physical or spiritual? Through Jesus Christ, we believe that God has fully entered into the human condition, and with this faith, we are called to constantly live out the good news that God is with us, even in the midst of immense suffering. God, who does not cause our suffering, shares in our suffering and therefore we share in the suffering of our fellow humans.

Yet our suffering is not what ultimately shapes the meaning of our lives. The labor of our bodies—our pain and pleasure—does not determine the value of our lives. Through Jesus the Christ, God has shared with us that the apparent shape of our life does not determine our fate for all eternity. Through one who appeared to suffer the ultimate shame, God cried out that we are all meant to be at God's right hand. And so, at death, we proclaim that, though our body may be destroyed, yet shall we see God. Therefore, we embrace the fullness of death's mystery as a human experience fraught with pain and suffering, and a divine passage into the life of God. "All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

Kaushik Roy, Executive Director, Shanti Project

In the ancient epic *The Mahabharata*, King Yudhisra is administered a test on morality by the God of Righteousness, which ends with the question, "What is the greatest wonder of human existence?" To which the King responds, "Every day, people look around and observe others entering the abode of death—yet in their heart of hearts, they think that perhaps they somehow will avoid having to enter as well—what could be a greater wonder than this?"

The blissful ignorance highlighted above is something to which every person can relate. Yet Hinduism encourages us to cultivate an attitude of fearlessness toward death, because beyond our physical bodies lie our true selves—the Atman, our individual soul, which is eternal and changeless. Human existence is the vehicle through which our soul strives to realize its true nature, "Brahman," or the cosmic soul. The amazing conclusion Hinduism posits, then, is that each living being, at our eternal core, is divine, and the purpose of our lives is to realize this divinity (or God-nature)! Many Westerners might have some familiarity with the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Our karma is both the cause and result of our actions—the karma from one of our lives dictates our next, and our individual soul continues this evolution from life to life. When the soul identifies more with its gross or physical body, it will suffer through this attachment. Hinduism offers four ways to liberate ourselves from this suffering and realize our true divine nature: selfless acts, rigorous analysis of the nature of reality, devotional love of God, and meditation. When we dedicate our life to the combination of these four methods that is most suitable to our individual temperament, then, and only then, do we hold the key to solving what my Guru would refer to as "the mystery of life and the riddle of death."