

## Session 2

# Probing the American Sensibility on Dying and Death

What we Fear, What We Yearn for

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# Death as Unexpected



# To Pursue in Future Sessions

- Permission to die
- Caregivers and partners, experiences and needs
- What do we mean by a “natural” death?
- ?

# Works Recommended by Participants

- *Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying*, Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush, 2018
- *My Father's Wake: How the Irish Teach Us to Live, Love and Die*, Kevin Toolis, 2014

# The Ethical Will, Historical Versions

- The ethical will is an ancient document from the [Jewish tradition](#). The original template for its use came from [Genesis 49:1–33](#). A dying [Jacob](#) gathered his sons to offer them his blessing and to request that they bury him not in Egypt, but instead in [Canaan](#) in the cave at [Machpelah](#) with his ancestors.
- Other biblical examples of ethical wills include [Deuteronomy 32:46–47](#) where Moses instructs the Israelites to be a holy people and teach their children, and [Matthew 5](#), where Jesus blesses his disciples. The early rabbis urged men to "transmit the tradition's ethical teachings" and they communicated orally to their sons.

# The Ethical Will, Modern Versions

A "gift of spiritual health" to leave to family, to clarify one's ethical and spiritual values, and communicate a legacy to **future generations**. . . .

It clarifies identity and focuses on life purposes. . . . addressing a person's needs to belong, be known, be remembered, have one's life make a difference, bless and be blessed.

--Andrew Weil

# What We Fear

- Call no man happy until his death,  
Always we must await his final day,  
Reserving judgment until he's laid away."

--Ovid, 1<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E.

as quoted in Montaigne's *Essays*

# What We Fear, cont.

- A painful dying (or one marked by significant suffering?)
- “Social death”: when one dies alone or abandoned
- A dying process or death that burdens our survivors
- When biographical death precedes biological death
- An “undignified” death: when dying diminishes our status or self-esteem, a dignitary harm
- An ugly death



# Is a Quick Death a Good Death?

- *“Here’s to a long life and a merry one  
A quick death and an easy one  
A cold beer, and another one”*
- Contrast the Rogation Day Prayer:  
“Deliver us, O Lord, from a sudden and  
unprepared for death”
- Hamlet & King Claudius

# A Death of One's Own

O Lord, grant each his own, his death indeed,  
The dying which out of that same life evolves  
In which he once had meaning, love and need.

---Rainer Maria Rilke

What is the positive content of this desire?

# What We Yearn for: An Autonomous Death?

- 'autonomy'—from auto (self) and nomos (law, governance), means literally, self-rule, or being self-determining. First used to refer to self-rule of the Hellenic city-states, Athens and Sparta.
- No person is wise enough to govern another without his/her consent. --Abraham Lincoln
- In contemporary usage it is the right to think, decide and act in accord with one's own values, independently, without being coerced by others.

# Autonomy as Freedom from Interference

- “the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. . . . In the part which merely concerns himself, and over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

--J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859

# Natanson v. Kline, 1960

“Anglo-American law starts with the premise of thorough-going self-determination. It follows that each man . . . may expressly prohibit the performance of life-sustaining surgery or other medical treatment”

Respect for patient autonomy is often expressed through a process of *informed consent*, which is not just information giving, but actively helping patients to come to their own decisions.

# A “Good Death” is marked by the Principle of Respect for Autonomy

- As embodied in advance directives, living wills, durable power of attorney documents, organ donation policies, etc.
- The aim is to ensure that our wishes are fulfilled when we are no longer able to express them. *Carrying autonomy beyond decisional capability.*

# The Precariousness of an Autonomous Death

- The element of luck/fate in our lives. . .
- Our diminished ability to exercise our will in life-threatening situations, e.g., hospital policies, legal restraints, medical traditions, the family isn't ready, or think they know better...
- Our limited ability to predict what we will want when we are *in extremis*. . .

# Hospitals Shape the End of Life

- “the switch from curative to palliative care is often fraught with conflict because the core purpose of hospital care is to maintain life.”  
--Sharon Kaufman, *And a Time to Die*, 2006





# Is Autonomy More a Means than an End?

- Dying free? Is that our goal?
- More a *precondition* for embracing our values
- Free from what? The controlling agendas of others...
- Free for what? To make our deaths our own, in the sense of reflecting/embodying our values, rather than those of others...
- But, what are the values we fight so hard to enact in dying?
- What makes for a good death?

# What is a “Good Death”?

## An answer from Psychology

E. Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 1969

1. Denial “Not me!”
2. Anger “Why me?”
3. Bargaining “Yes me, but...”
4. Depression When bargaining has failed
5. **Acceptance** Peace, calm...

Movements, as much as stages...

Cycle, and recycle. . .

# Lessons from Kubler-Ross, 1

- Opposite of denial is not rational acknowledgment of truth, but panic.
- The need for continuing denial is proportional to the doctors' and families' needs for denial.  
"Mutual pretense"  
-- *Awareness of Dying*, B. Glaser & A. Strauss, 1965
- Denial of death persists in many forms; "fear of death is a persist and universal fear, even after we have mastered it on many levels"

# Lessons from Kubler-Ross, 2

- Some form of Hope pervades all the stages, although what one hopes for may change. Sometimes it is what Jonathan Lear calls “radical hope,” meaning not hope for a specific outcome, but a conviction that even in the greatest loss some good will emerge.

--Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*

# The Persistence of Hope

“Hope” is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops - at all

--Emily Dickinson

Does a good death have dimensions of hope?

# What is a Good Death?

## Some Practical Candidates

1. Dying in a way that reflects, completes (or improves upon) one's sense of self?
2. Death that does not burden survivors, emotionally or financially?
3. Dying marked by caring: expressions of gratitude, love, reconciliations, hope, goodbyes?
4. Dying that includes an experience of the sacred?

# A Stoic's Image of a Good Death

- “Spend this brief moment walking with nature and greet your short journey’s end with a good grace, like the olive that falls to the ground when it is ripe, blessing the earth that receives it and grateful to the tree that bore it.”

--Marcus Aurelius, *The Emperor's Handbook*,  
180 C.E.

# In Praise of “Death Panels”

- Doctors who will tell us when treatment options are “futile” or likely to cause more pointless suffering, and provide good palliative care
- Families and friends that will keep the vigil and embrace our deaths with us
- Clergy that espouse and affirm the spiritual significance of our deaths



# Dying—the final process in a life

## Death—what becomes of us?

Ideas about What Happens After Death?  
can shape our ideas of a “good death.”

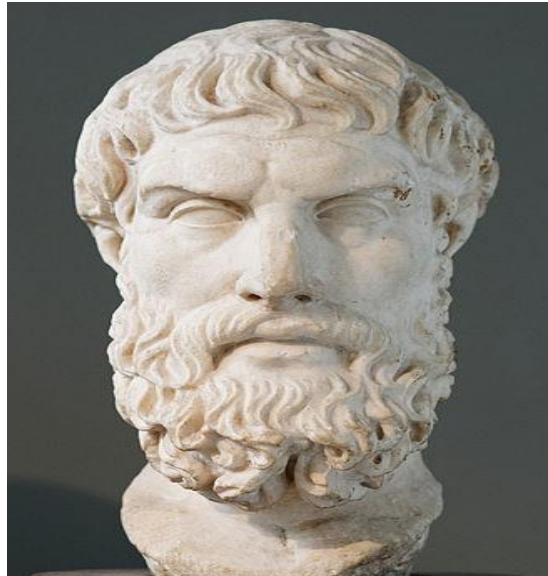
5 possible answers to “What’s next?”:

1. Nothing
2. Resurrection
3. Continuation
4. Recycling
5. Agnosticism

# 1. Nothing

*"Death is nothing to us, since when we are, death has not come, and when death has come, we are not."*

- Epicurus, 341-270 B. C. E.



# Nothing cont.

- We pass into nothingness, at least as self-conscious beings... perhaps I will continue in terms of my genetics, but this may not be the “me” that I am attached to. . .

## 2. Resurrection

“Spiritual body” (pneumatikos)



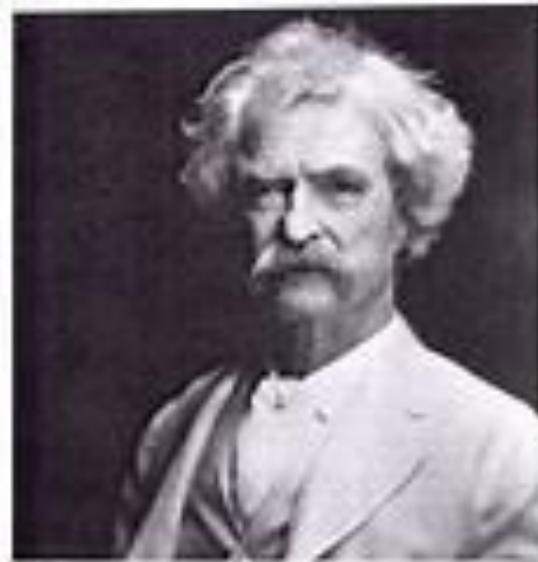
# Resurrection, cont.

- Reward for right belief and fidelity—current life as a qualifying exam for the next one
- Existence in heaven, beyond evil & suffering  
“trade my troubles for a crown”  
“where rainbows never die”  
-- Chris Stapleton
- Incarnation of the true self, in presence of God

# Skepticism about Resurrection

- People go to heaven for the climate, but they go to Hell for the company...

Mark Twain



# 3. Continuation

- The soul as a separate, eternal entity



# Continuation, cont.

- Ancient Greek thought; Plato
- Gnosticism—Christian heresy: people are divine souls trapped in a materialistic world; body as a shell, impediment, or evil
- Manichaeism—Christian heresy; battle of dark forces (this life) vs. light forces (the next life).



# 4. Recycling

- Perpetual destruction & recreation (samsara)



# Recycling, cont.

- Actions in this life determine future incarnations (karma –law of cause & effect)
- Ultimate goal is merging with the Universal Spirit (moksha)

# Reincarnation

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**“In a past life, you were a bowl of flour,  
butter, eggs, sugar, ginger and molasses.”**

# Contemporary Religious Hybrids

- For example, Episcopalians who meditate, attend Dharma talks, and whose favorite religious text is the *Baghavat Gita*.
- These can lead to hybrid answers to “What’s next?”
  - what we should expect if we humans are spiritual polymorphs

# 5. Agnosticism

- “What follows death is nothing imagined or hoped for”  
Heraclitus, 540-480 B. C. E.

# 5. Agnostic

- It's impossible to have a well-grounded, rational answer to "What's Next?"
- One may be OK with this. It's no more worrisome that where I was before I was born.

Or

- Worried by this lack of a solid conviction, especially if one thinks certain beliefs/practices are necessary to get you into an afterlife, or a better next version.

# A Hopeful Agnosticism? (Or Denial? Or Faith?)

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

What do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;

The smallest sprouts show there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not  
wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward. . . .and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed,  
and luckier.

--Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

# Connecting Afterlife & Good Dying?

- Is your notion of a “good dying” grounded in a certain view of what happens after death?  
Or
- Is the better (ethically) attitude one that separates these?  
Or
- Is it better (ethically) to have no view at all about “What’s Next?”



# Near-Death Experiences?

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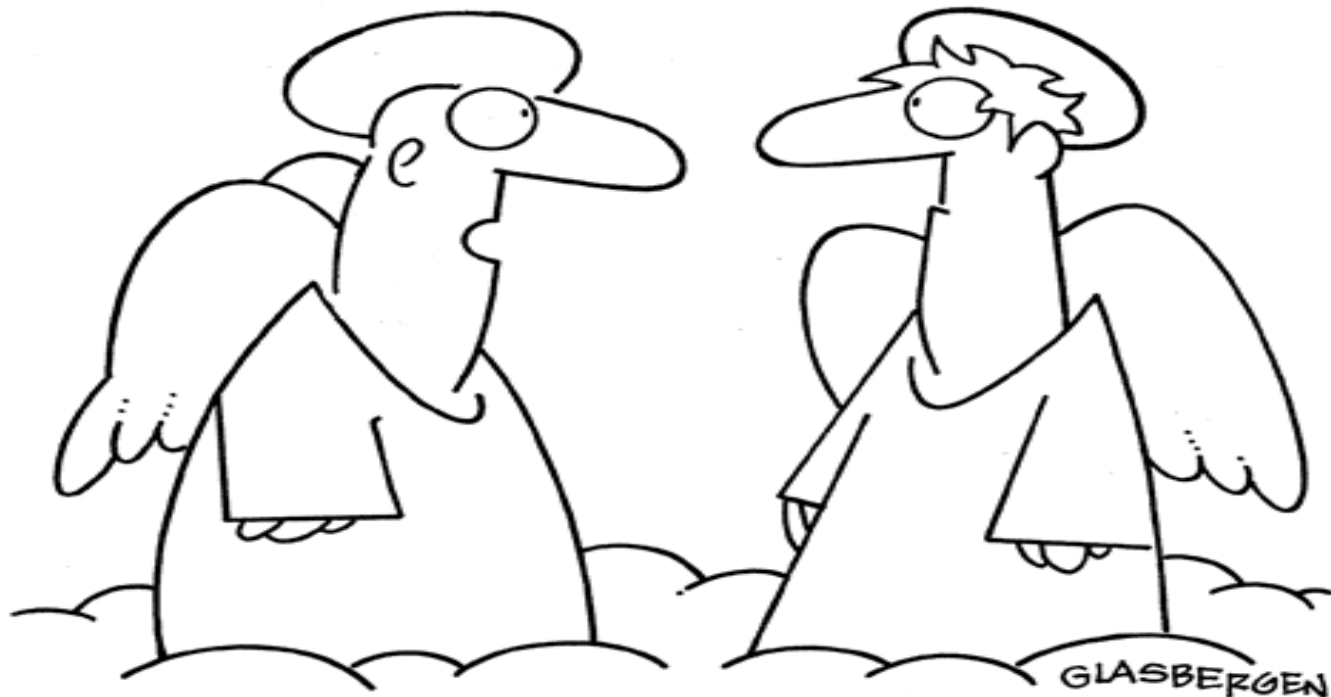


**“There was a tunnel and a bright light. My grandparents, Uncle Lenny, my dog Shep, my tonsils, appendix and all of my missing socks were there to greet me.”**



# Human Egocentrism

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**“The day after I died, the sun came up as usual  
and the world went on without me.  
I wasn’t expecting that!”**

# Is Idea of Life after Death based on Hubris, or Human Egocentrism?

We see ourselves as the endpoint of evolution, not only the center of the universe, but as the only love object of its creator.

*--Mary Beth Saffo*

The life of an individual is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.

*--David Hume*

True religion involves renunciation, getting beyond all expectation of reward/punishment, or personal survival

*--Paul Ricoeur*

**What is your particular notion  
of a Good Death?**

**[take 5 minutes to sketch this]**