

THE MEANING OF DEATH AND DYING

Unbelievers are often attacked with the charge that without deities, without supernaturalism and especially without life-after-death, life can have no meaning or purpose. Unbelievers know that this is not only false but ridiculous. Not only can there be much meaning and purpose in life without supernaturalism, but a good deal more is discoverable, and has a more profound meaning, without the childish presuppositions of life-after-death. On the other hand, even some unbelievers feel challenged by the question of what, if any, meaning there is or can be in death.

For as meaningful as life is, how can there be meaning in not-life? To be alive is to be capable of apprehending and appreciating the meaning of existence. To not be alive is not to be so capable. Indeed, to not be alive is not to be at all and therefore as meaningless as our non-existence before we came into existence.

Of course, the death of others has great meaning for us. If we knew and loved them in life it means that we can never again share ideas, experiences and enjoyment with them. Important and rewarding relationships are ended forever. If our loved ones that die were in pain and suffering, there may also be a sense of relief as well as loss. Most people who die, of course, are people we never knew and were unlikely to ever know. But even here there is a sense of loss, if not of the personal opportunity of ever knowing such people, then of the loss of a bit of humanity, of experience, of wisdom that can never be shared and stories that can never be told. As the 17th Century poet (and cleric!) John Donne famously wrote:

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

There are as well those who die that people are very glad to see die. A few may be people that are executed deliberately. They may be mass murderers or other criminals known on a local, national, or even an international scale. Or they may be personal enemies, ex-spouses, ex-bosses, estranged relatives or just other people, and often public figures, whose ideas and opinions were considered wrong-headed or offensive. People tell themselves that there was never any hope of such people becoming decent human beings. But as Cicero [106-43 BCE] pointed out decades before Jesus is said to have lived: “where there's life there's hope.” When a bad person dies there is a finality in their mistakes and misdeeds. And that too is a loss.

Great meaning may also be attached to suffering and the process of dying. A major world religion is based on such meaning and sees it as the expiation of offenses against its deity. But life itself, at least for organisms such as we, may be considered a process of dying. “We” live on, biologically, to the degree that the genetic material coding for our bodies lives on, our “selfish genes” even playing a role in our own senescence and death. Humanity has had some success in prolonging life and health

but still has a long ways to go.

Read the obituaries. It is often said that someone “battled” the disease to which they finally succumbed. This is another strand of meaning that attaches to death and dying. As Charles Darwin showed, our very existence as *Homo sapiens* is owed to the struggle for existence against numerous forces hostile to survival. Whole species and genera have been wiped out over the course of the history of life on earth when those forces were sudden and overwhelming as with, for example, the asteroidal impact at the end of the Cretaceous.

The late Christopher Hitchens, who said and wrote many interesting and important things during his career, wrote, as esophageal cancer killed him [in his posthumously-published 2012 book *Mortality*]:

“I love the imagery of struggle. I sometimes wish I were suffering in a good cause, or risking my life for the good of others, instead of just being a gravely endangered patient. Allow me to inform you, though, that when you sit in a room with a set of other finalists, and kindly people bring a huge transparent bag of poison and plug it into your arm, and you either read or don't read a book while the venom sack gradually empties itself into your system, the image of the ardent soldier is the very last one that will occur to you. You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water.”

In the same work, Hitchens expressed something he learned while dying:

“I have slightly stopped issuing the announcement that 'whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger.' In fact, I now sometimes wonder why I ever thought it profound ... In the brute physical world, and the one encompassed by medicine, there are all too many things that could kill you, don't kill you, and then leave you considerably weaker.”

Of course, as an atheist, he was pestered to the end by some who called on him to embrace supernaturalist religion. About this he remarked (in the same work):

“I sympathize afresh with the mighty Voltaire, who, when badgered on his deathbed and urged to renounce the devil, murmured that this was no time to be making enemies.”

But perhaps the best thought about death and dying is to realize and consciously act on the realization that we can only embrace meaning and purpose and all that life has to offer while we live. And that all whom we know and love, and others as well, are headed towards the same oblivion that we are. In this connection also Hitchens offered good advice:

“I can't hope to convey the full effect of the embraces and avowals [received during his final illness], but I can perhaps offer a crumb of counsel. If there is anybody known to you who might benefit from a letter or a visit, do not on any account postpone the writing or the making of it. The difference made will almost certainly be more than you have calculated.”

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PLANNED FOR OCTOBER: OVERCOMING FEAR with guest speaker Fritha Robinson
(and Freethought Day!!) here at the Comfort Inn DFW Airport North

THANK YOU VOLUNTEERS !!!!