

Facing our Mortality: Transforming our Suffering

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Death borders upon our birth and our cradle stands at the grave.

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Are love and life stronger than death? Is the inevitability of our mortality the ultimate source of existential suffering? Or, as the proverb goes, how do we live knowing that we shall die? Love may be the most powerful force in the universe but it cannot stop death. In the course of living, we all will experience the pain of losing our most beloved relationships. Furthermore, the degree to which our own mortality affects our living is incontestable. While every cell in our being desperately wants to live, the only inevitable reality is that one day we shall all die. In moments of profound loss or when our own mortality is threatened, it would seem that death is the greatest source of suffering in life.

For half of my life I have written and taught extensively about this subject as a professor of philosophy and world religions, a medical ethicist, a hospice chaplain and end-of-life educator. Over a period of twenty years, I personally attended to the deaths of five hundred hospice patients. On the whole I observed many more peaceful transitions than agonizing deaths. But it was the latter cases that motivated me to attempt to articulate a contemporary language that describes the unique suffering that I call “soul pain” particularly at the end of life. As a result, a tool was created that is becoming a best practice for many

hospices and health care institutions in collecting and analyzing data regarding existential suffering at the end of life. The goal was to create a means of opening healing conversations with hospice patients and to attempt to measure and understand their 'soul pain.' [1]

GREAT SUFFERING, GREAT LOVE

Since 1997 the **Spiritual Health Assessment Tool** [2] has been employed by thousands of patients and their caregivers and has been translated into a dozen languages. The foundation of the tool is the question originally posed by the modern hospice founder, Dr. Cicely Saunders, "How are you within yourself?" [3] Participants are presented with four scales that reflect on these universal psycho-spiritual issues: meaning, forgiveness, relatedness and hope. The initial hunch behind this project was the observation of professional caregivers, especially palliative care nurses, that the most painful deaths seemed to be exacerbated when these core human issues were left unresolved. The data from these same hospice patients encouraged me to write and teach about how the dying may be our best teachers in learning how to deal with existential suffering. With the help their profound and courageous feedback, a series of training workshops was created called the *Sacred Art of Living and Dying*; to date more than sixteen thousand health care professionals in North America, Europe and Asia have participated in this two year training program. In turn, these students are creating a growing network of pilot sites for the on-going study of spiritual suffering [4].

However, a year ago, my beloved wife and best friend of nearly thirty years died following nearly a decade of living with cancer. Mary's death was remarkably peaceful, but suddenly, the questions I posed at the beginning of this article became intensely personal as I encountered my own experiences of grief. And because these issues are not optional in the human journey, I believe that how we deal or do not deal with death will have much to do with our experiences of spiritual pain and suffering—not just for persons with a terminal diagnosis—but across the entire spectrum of our human existence.

NO DEATH, NO FEAR

Of course, if death were not the end— if after dying, there was re-birth, continuity of existence or the survival of consciousness, it could go a long way towards curing “life's greatest disease which is fear.” [5] The respected Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says our greatest fear is that after we die there is nothing. But what if there really is no such thing as death? [6] Beliefs about what happens after death are typically the purview of spirituality and religion; science does not lay claim to explaining the ultimate nature of consciousness or the mystery of death. On the other hand, the fact that books regarding the art of living and dying are written in nearly every culture and period of human history indicates a perennial search to struggle with and to explain the inseparable relationship between death and life.

Some of the ancient books of the dead include the Egyptian *Pert En Hru*, The Aztec and Mayan *Codecis*, the European *Ars Moriendi* and the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* [7]. Regardless of culture or century, there is one conclusion that these diverse traditions hold in common, namely that, reflecting on the inevitability of death is the best starting point for finding meaning in life. Far from exacerbating fear and suffering, our ancestors believed that, when death is not the enemy, personal healing and transformation are possible even in the midst of grief and loss [8]. The question here is whether modern research confirms or disputes the instincts of antiquity.

This article will explore some of the perspectives that were named in the book of dying and which may be of benefit to the modern person as well. By nature, such a wide ranging conversation should draw on the insights of philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, theologians and humanists.

DEATH IS NOT AN OPTION

For the past five hundred years Western culture has been notoriously poor in facing issues related to mortality and death [9]. Today many persons in North America claim that either they really are not afraid of death or that they just don't give the subject any thought. Regardless of whether this posture is a coping mechanism or our narcissism that creates the illusion about our inevitable demise, the more important issue is whether our contemporary stance alleviates or produces more suffering. In his Thoughts for the Times of War and Death,

Freud wondered if our "...so-called civilized attitude about death is not a step backwards in our evolution... causing us to live psychologically beyond our means." [10] Likewise, following one of his visits to the United States Carl Jung observed that, "Few societies in history have managed to create the illusion that death is an option... such is America's naïveté about mortality which is fed by an unqualified confidence in science." [11]

By contrast, in other parts of the world we still find remnants of a very different perspective that had dominated human civilization for millennia. For example, the Nobel poet Octavio Paz observed that in his country, "The Mexican frequents death, caresses it, sleeps with it, plays with it, it is one of his favorite toys and most enduring love." [12] By contrast, for the inhabitants of New York, Paris or London the word death is rarely spoken. So why does the subject of mortality "burn our lips" today and what are its consequences? According to Paz, the price of denying death is a low grade fear and anxiety that ultimately produces more suffering both for the individual as well as for our culture.

While the denial of death may be a source of immense suffering, a remedy is not necessarily achieved by simply 'leaning into the pain' of one's mortality.

Thanaphobia is an exaggerated fear of dying that has been observed among some patients suffering from chronic or incurable disease, especially ones that are incurable. Researchers at Harvard Medical School have developed an instrument to measure the perceived fear of death or thanaphobia and its

deleterious consequences. [13]. Noted death researcher Stanislav Grof has also concluded that some patients who may be very present to their mortality can also experience fearful fantasies of how their pain will continue or increase in the future [14].

OUR IMMORTALITY PROJECTS

In a Pulitzer prize-winning book, The Denial of Death, [15] cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker asked whether the hope of surviving death may be humanity's elaborate defense mechanism against the knowledge of our mortality. Becker argues that human beings live in the tension created by our dualistic nature that involves a physical, or animal self and a symbolic self—as expressed through the world of meaning. Becker concludes that, when people create or become part of something which they believe will last forever, they find consolation in contributing to something eternal. Becker calls this inclination, humankind's Immortality Project (or *causa sui*). This would seem to be at least a partial solution for alleviating our mortality dilemma.

However, The Denial of Death goes on to say that the same beliefs which fuel a person's hope for immortality may also result in negative and fear-producing consequences. In an effort to become 'gods' and achieve immortality, there can be a dangerous consequence that fuels our mania to be right. Such a 'vital lie,' as he names it, can even lead to acts of violence towards those who disagree with our belief system. Becker believed that religious extremism is one example

of man's immortality project gone awry. In the end, because we are neither animal nor god, we must succumb with humility to the fact that we are ultimately conditional beings.

So what of the equation believed by many that the more religious or spiritual a person is the less they will suffer? Becker does not deny that there may be a relationship between personal belief systems and existential suffering but his research arrives at more nuanced conclusions. Today, students of the Ernest Becker Foundation remain committed to exploring the possibility that, the unconscious denial of mortality profoundly influences human behavior but may give rise either to acts of hate and violence as well as noble and altruistic striving [16].

FEAR IS THE DISEASE OF HUMANKIND

All conversations about death and dying inevitably return us to the core issue of fear which, as I said at the start, is the disease of humankind and the ultimate source of our suffering. Our response to the inevitability of death can lead to different conclusions but the same problem. Position A rationalizes the reality of death. Because everything dies, why struggle with the inevitable? Live for the moment, *carpe diem*, and leave the rest to chance. But such a position could be a mental attempt to escape from or deny death and hardly lessens the grip of fear. Position B might be expressed in a belief like reincarnation or an afterlife. The belief may satisfy and comfort the mind but the fear of death may still be very present.

I propose that there is a third position in approaching this fundamental human dilemma which is echoed in the ancient books of dying and supported by modern clinical perspectives. Rather than taking refuge in the denial of death or in speculations *about* precisely what happens after death, there is another kind of wisdom in the ancient dictum, “Die before you die... so that when you die, you will not die.”

DIE BEFORE YOU DIE...

“If you truly want to live, die before you die...” This fifteen hundred year old teaching, attributed to Mohammed, [17] places emphasis not so much on the final moment of physical death but on the many ‘deaths’ that are a normal part of living. The ancient books of dying are, in fact, also books of living because their lessons are intended for persons throughout the many stages of life. In this perspective, experiences like aging, divorce, job loss and bereavement become ‘opportunities’ which life presents to us in order to practice the art of dying. Put in psychological language, the essential work of being human is a continual process of dying to the ego or small self. How we tend to the dying ego, for example, may require us to experience the same five stages of physical dying articulated by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

I believe that a truly integral dialogue about the intersection of suffering and death must also include perspectives from the world’s classical mystical traditions as they often embody the “depth psychology” of their culture and day.

Mystics universally wrote about the paradox of suffering in terms how the psyche [soul] is not destroyed by life's "little deaths" but potentially enhanced by them. In this perspective, each loss potentially opens a door to something that would not have been possible had we refused to walk through the threshold of death.

People often reflect back on their experiences of great suffering and conclude that life was paradoxically enriched as a result. While this is rarely possible to see prospectively or when we are in the moment of suffering, there are times when suffering can lead to a threshold to healing.

The scholar William Mac Namara describes the threshold of human suffering this way: "There is only one gateway to freedom and openness to the Ultimate, to infinite possibilities or finite impossibilities; that gateway is death" [18]. This path is neither easy nor automatic; it requires a constant choice to "die before you die..." Krishnamurti would say that the only solution to suffering is to become one with the fear itself. Such a position has the potential to transform the very thing we would most like to avoid [19].

CONCLUSION

Socrates wrote that all philosophy is nothing more than the art of dying. I do not think this is an exaggeration. While it may never be possible to quantitatively prove the exact relationship between our physical, animal self and our *self* that makes meaning, few deny there are mutual influences between our "two selves." Nurses frequently report about patients who live far longer than was thought to be physically possible—without food, water or even an appropriate level of

oxygen intake. Family caregivers all over the world tell stories about persons who seem to have control over when they die if critical unfinished life business is at stake. Perhaps the time has come for our traditional medical establishment to consider not just how long a human person can live without hydration and nutrition but also— without the soulful qualities of meaning and hope. Maybe our science would do well to be curious about the impact of unresolved forgiveness issues at the end of life on physical pain management and symptom control. Western medicine is very much in need of a model for helping us live through our suffering. As Dr. Cicely Saunders said of the nascent palliative medicine movement, “Spirituality remains the most overlooked factor in relieving pain.”

In Western Europe during the Middle Ages the *Ars Moriendi* taught that the best way to support dying persons was not by obsessing about what happens to them after death [20]. Instead, by focusing on the gift of the present moment, both patient and caregiver could find solace in this instruction about paradise: “What you will find later is what you find now.” Similarly, when the 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, was asked where the soul goes after a person dies, he said, “Nowhere... everything is eternally present.” The sages from this and other world wisdom traditions believed that life is lived more fully when death becomes a wise mentor for our living rather than a grim reaper. The dying have taught me that the best remedy for spiritual pain is to live as fully as possible in the only place where I do have any control... is in the Eternal Now. No wonder techniques related to breath control, meditation and calming the mind are

universal prescriptions in the ancient books of dying. It is remarkable that a thousand years ago my ancestors articulated that, “Unless you can find paradise at your own center, there is not a chance that you may enter” [21]. Reclaiming this kind of consciousness may be the best source of genuine consolation in times of loss and death. If Becker is right, it might also be humanity's best chance for survival.

FOOTNOTES

[1] A recent study on existential suffering and mortality has been published in, The American Book of Living and Dying, Lessons in Healing Spiritual Pain, authored by Richard Groves with Henriette Anne Klauser, Random House, Ten Speed Press, 2006.

[2] The Spiritual Health Assessment Form is available on-line through the Sacred Art of Living Center, go to: sacredartofliving.org [the form is also attached at the end of this article if you would like to include it; it is also available in pdf form]

[3] Cicely Saunders, MD is the founder of the modern Hospice movement began at St. Christopher's Hospice in London, 1967. Her question, “How are you within yourself?” is now common practice during the admission process of a hospice patient in the UK. The question was thoughtfully composed so that anyone, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation, would be able to relate to it.

[4] For a listing of all North American and International program training sites who have participated in the Sacred Art of Living and Dying series, contact Sacred Art of Living Center in Bend, Oregon at www.sacredartofliving.org

[5] This insight from Huston Smith is quoted in the forward to: The Ultimate Journey, Consciousness and the Mystery of Death, Stanislav Grof, MAPS Press, Berkeley, CA, 2006, p.11.

[6] No Death No Fear, Thich Nhat Hanh, Riverhead Books, New York, 2002.

[7] For a description and comparison of the various ancient books of the dead, consult The American Book of Living and Dying, Lessons in Healing Spiritual Pain, Groves and Klauser, and The Ultimate Journey, Consciousness and the Mystery of Death, Stanislav Grof, MD. Both works deal extensively with this subject.

[8] Rites of Passage, Arnold Van Gennep, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

The Belgium anthropologist Van Gennep [1873-1957] was one of the first scientists to note patterns from antiquity that seem to be 'hard wired' in human nature. He noted that birth, puberty, marriage, and death are, in all cultures, marked by beliefs and ceremonies which may differ but are universal in function. Van Gennep noted the regularity and significance of the rituals attached to the transitional stages in human life, and his phrase for these, "the rites of passage," has now become a part of the language of anthropology and sociology. In terms of death and dying, van Gennep concludes that antiquity generally approached death as a great teacher rather than as a monster to be conquered.

[9] The Hour of Our Death: Philippe Aries, translated from the French, Random House, New York, 1985.

This comprehensive work describes Western attitudes toward death and dying over the last thousand years. Aries work demonstrates the shift in Europe's attitudes about death from the time of the *Ars Moriendi* defined as "the good, tame death," to our modern era which prefers "a quick, unexamined death."

[10] Sigmund Freud, from "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," 1915, prologue.

[11] Carl G. Jung, "Memoirs in Visiting America," 1942, as quoted in The Freud-Jung Letters, Princeton University Press, 1979, pp. 223-334.

[12] Labyrinth of Solitude, [bilingual edition], Octavio Paz, Grove Press Inc. , New York, 1959, p. 104.

Among Mexicans themselves there is much debate on the subject of culture and death. While Octavio Paz describes the so-called special relationship with death, others say that in the process of modernization, some of these attitudes are becoming less distinct.

[13] The Collet-Lester Fear of Death Scale questionnaire was developed on the basis of the Harvard Medical School Instrument.

[14] The Ultimate Journey, Consciousness and the Mystery of Death, Stanislav Grof, MAPS Press, Berkeley, CA, 2006.

The topic of thanaphbia is extensively discussed in psychiatrist Stanislav Grof's most recently published book which is concerned with the psychological, anthropological and eschatological aspects of death and dying. He begins the study by observing that ever since society became industrialized, interest in our final passage has become taboo. Heretofore, death had been a more open and accepted part of our daily existence. However, it was not until the later decades of the last century that a scientific study of the implications of subjects even tangential to death and dying were deemed worthy of scientific study.

[15] The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1973.

The Denial of Death is a seminal work of twentieth century psychology and philosophy. It was awarded the Pulitzer prize for general non-fiction in 1974, two months after the author's death. Becker's work builds largely on the works of Soren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank. Becker argues that the conflict between "immortality projects" which contradict each other, particularly in religion, is the wellspring for the destruction and misery in our world caused by wars, bigotry, genocide, racism and nationalism. His thesis is that the 'immortality 'project' of one person which contradicts others indirectly suggests that others must be wrong and are a threat. On the other

hand since the Age of Reason, science has attempted to resolve these issues without success. Becker's hope is that a gradual realization of humanity's innate motives, namely death, will help to bring about a better world.

[16] For more information on the Ernest Becker Foundation:<http://www.ernestbecker.org>

[17] The hadith is attributed to Mohammed, "If you truly want to live, die before you die..." [in original Arabic: *Mutu kubla anta mutu*].

[18] William Mac Namara, Christian Mysticism, The Art of the Inner Way, quoted in Living Well, Dying Well, Edward Bastion, Sounds True, Boulder, CO, 1008, p. 11.

[19] On Living and Dying, Krishnamurti, Morning Light Press, Sandpoint ID, 1992.

[20] While the cultural context of the Ars Moriendi included a strong belief in the afterlife, the tools of tradition placed for more emphasis on bringing comfort to the suffering in their immediate circumstances.

[21] Quote attributed to Angelus Sileius, the Polish-German mystic, 1624 – 1677.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT

Healing through Self Awareness



Based on "Healing the Four Dimensions of Spiritual Pain" in the classical Sacred Art of Living and Dying tradition

NAME/CARE RECEIVER _____ CARE GIVER [optional] _____
DATE _____ TIME _____ LOCATION _____

INSTRUCTIONS

- Quiet yourself and take a moment for reflection or prayer.
- Circle the deepest truth that describes "How you are within yourself" today.
- Use the optional questions as a guide for insight.
- Record and compare your answers at regular intervals in order to discover patterns of spiritual health or distress.
- Trust that awareness is the first step towards healing. Instead of trying to fix spiritual pain, it only needs to be listened to and received.

MEANING

1	2	3	4	5
Life is filled with purpose and meaning		I feel generally motivated		Life has become meaningless

What is giving me life and energy right now? _____
Who or what keeps me from being fully alive? _____

FORGIVENESS

1	2	3	4	5
I feel a deep sense of reconciliation towards myself and others		There are no outstanding issues that are calling for forgiveness in my life		I feel a strong sense of un-forgiveness towards myself and/or another

Who or what do I need to forgive? _____
From whom do I need seek forgiveness? _____

RELATEDNESS

1	2	3	4	5
I feel a strong sense of connection with the persons and things that matter most to me		Most important areas of my life seem balanced		I feel seriously alienated from someone/thing that is important to me

Who are you and 'whose' are you? _____
Who or what do I fear losing? _____

HOPE

1	2	3	4	5
I feel hope-filled and optimistic		I generally trust what the future holds for me		I am experiencing deep depression and hopelessness

What dreams keep me alive? _____
Why might I feel depressed or hopeless? _____

Background for the Spiritual Health Assessment Tool

- The **Spiritual Health Assessment [SHA]** was developed originally as part of a palliative care initiative in North America to help care givers and care receivers better understand the nature of existential suffering and pain.
- **SHA** was designed by Spiritual Care educators, Richard and Mary Groves, co-founders of the Sacred Art of Living Centre in Bend, Oregon USA. Following twenty years of clinical caregiving experience they developed the *Sacred Art of Living & Dying* series, an international training program for caregivers.
- The **SHA** tool was designed in consultation with physicians, nurse practitioners, mental health therapists and spiritual caregivers from a wide range of faith and cultural traditions. Underlying the SHA is the concern that, “Western Medicine has no model to help someone live *through* their suffering,” [cf. *Mortally Wounded: Stories of Soul Pain & Healing*, Michael Kearney, MD, Medical Director for **Sacred Art of Living Center**].
- Since 1997 the **SHA** has been utilized as a ‘best practice’ in numerous care facilities in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia [including hospices, hospitals, long term care facilities and in a variety of faith community venues].
- The purpose of the **SHA** is to assist persons living with chronic or terminal illness through enhanced awareness of emotional and spiritual concerns. The presumption of the tool is that awareness is the first step towards inner healing.
- The goal of the **SHA** is to invite a person to reflect on “How you are *within* yourself” a question designed by Dr. Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement. Her Total Pain Management approach to suffering attempted to measure not just physical pain but emotional, social and spiritual dimensions as well.
- The **SHA** utilizes four dimensions* of existential suffering [Meaning, Forgiveness, Relatedness and Hope] that are universal qualities, regardless of a person’s age, gender, culture of belief system.
 - *For more background on related theory and practice of the four dimensions of spiritual suffering, consult *The American Book of Living & Dying: Lessons in Healing Spiritual Pain*, by **SHA** author Richard Groves.
- The benefit of the **SHA** is the support it provides to persons living with chronic or terminal illness through enhanced awareness of their related emotional and spiritual needs. Caregivers and care receivers consistently indicate that awareness provides the first step towards inner healing. The **SHA** is always optional. Utilization rates of the **SHA** among care receivers range from 86-93%.
- Responses to the four dimensions of spiritual suffering should be offered only after caregivers have studied and received mentorship appropriate to their profession and experience. It is highly recommended that, before instituting the **SHA**, profession organizations and their personnel receive training and education through the *Sacred Art of Living & Dying* programs. To learn more about this series and related Anamcara Project, which are offered worldwide, contact the **Sacred Art of Living Center**: www.sacredartofliving.org To date, more than 16,000 caregivers have graduated from the *Sacred Art of Living & Dying* series.

“The Sacred Art of Living & Dying is necessary because spiritual suffering is the least diagnosed cause of pain.” Dame Cicely Saunders