

Reconciled to Death

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Last Monday morning, in the dark hours before dawn, while most of California lay sleeping, the earth stirred slightly and abruptly the artifacts of a complex human civilization were scattered about across the hills and valleys like toys left on a nursery floor when a sleepy child is bundled off to bed. Apartment buildings cracked and crumbled, trapping sleeping occupants within. Shopping malls collapsed. Parking garages became tumbled layers of concrete. Roads buckled and bridges collapsed; gas lines ruptured and water mains broke; power lines went down and the telephone system; houses began to burn. Dazed and confused, people struggled to escape their ruined homes, in the darkness they rushed to rescue their loved ones and when the morning sun revealed the extent of the devastation they could not believe their eyes. And then began the grueling efforts to find victims trapped in the rubble, to treat the injured and to account for the missing and the dead.

Watching in dumb fascination as the television cameras poured the images of disaster into my living-room, I found myself thinking once more about the profound contingency, the incredible fragility of our daily existence. We stride up and down this planet as if our very lives from moment to moment were inevitable and unexceptional, as if this earth under our feet, the skies over our heads, the water we drink and the air we breathe were unremarkable and quite to be expected. And then there comes an occasion, like this one, when we are driven to see that every moment of our existence is a minor miracle of improbability, that a slight change, a minor adjustment of the context in which we exist, and life is no longer possible. There comes a circumstance, like this one, when we are confronted by the enormity of the powers and forces within which our moment of conscious existence is nestled, and we are driven to awe and to wonder, to fear and to fascination, to contemplation and reflection. Watching the scenes of devastation from California, I heard a voice in my inner ear intoning an ancient question: "Where were you when the foundations of the earth were laid? Do you not know that my ways are not your ways?" And I found myself reminded that it is the need to confront the fragility of our existence, the reality of our inescapable vulnerability which evokes the religious response in human beings.

As we have often said, one of the major distinctions between human beings and the other living creatures with which we share this planet may be that we are that species capable of understanding that there was a world before we came into it and there will be a world after we have gone from it; we are the species which recognizes not just death, but *our* death as inevitable and inescapable. That knowledge drives us to seek the meaning of our sojourn on this planet, to define the good life, and to explain the fact of catastrophe and suffering and death. In many ways, the distinctive works of human civilization--from the

cave paintings deep in the labyrinths at Lascaux, to Michaelangelo's Pieta, to the Four Serious Songs by Brahms, to the passages of the Tao Te Ching--all are attempts to voice the ancient questions prompted by the knowledge that we were born and that we shall die and that in the interval between those two events, though we shall know ecstasy and delight and joy, not one of us shall escape pain and suffering and despair, and loss. Every religion represents an attempt to respond to this common human knowledge which, no matter how hard we struggle to banish it from our minds, remains with us all the time, an understanding resident in the very marrow of our bones.

Every religion must deal with the reality of death. How religions deal with that reality shapes the values, the practices, the ideals of the civilizations centered upon those religions. For thousands of years, the western world has built a civilization around religions which have responded to the reality of death by insisting that death is not normal, is not natural, but rather is the consequence of human disobedience. The story of creation told by all three of the religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, begins with a world in which there is neither death nor pain nor sorrow. Then pride, or curiosity or an unnatural appetite for novelty intruded upon paradise and human beings seized the fruit of the tree of knowledge and they were punished with death--not immediate extinction, but with the inescapable knowledge that every lingering life will have a limit and that everyone is doomed to watch the approach of the time when they must return to the dust from which they emerged.

For millennia, we have built a culture around the assumption that death is a punishment, the consequence of some calamitous ancestral failing, the evidence of human sinfulness and inadequacy. What is more, as we have struggled with that concept we have elaborated it. We have invented another realm of existence--beyond the physical, beyond the visible, beyond the tangible, in which the eternal sentence may be repealed. We have insisted that the reward for a good life, for a moral existence, for loving mercy and doing justice and walking humbly is not a good death--consider how many martyrs died in agony--but rather an awakening to an existence beyond death, where death is overcome and one exists forever. Indeed, in our dominant culture, the ideal human being is a mythical man who, though innocent, died in agony and then rose from the dead to live forevermore.

The values which derive from this response to the fact of death have helped to define the shape of western culture. By and large, we find ourselves unable to create within the structures of our lives an honorable place for death. In our culture, death is not a part of life; rather, it is evidence of failure and defeat. And so, in a curious way, we do not know what to do with that knowledge which makes us most human--the knowledge that we and all we love and cherish shall die. We talk in euphemisms and we deny reality, and in a strange way, this fact of death comes to dominate our culture. Our lives become twisted and distorted because we do not know how to reconcile ourselves to the fact that sooner or later, all of us shall die. We spend our resources trying to buy immortality. We define love of life to mean refusal of death. Vast sums of money and enormous energy is invested in fanning the flickering flame of life in every neonatal infant, without regard to questions about the quality of that life now or in the future. We quarrel with each other

over the putative rights of fetuses. We spend more than four-fifths of our health care dollars to fend off death at the very end of life. We attempt to deny people the right to decide that their own lives are no longer worth the living. And when death comes, as it always does, we try to pretend that it is something else.

This fundamental drive to deny death has other consequences. It generates in us a desire to achieve some kind of immortality. Many of us who no longer quite believe in a life after death in some non-earthly paradise, find ourselves growing chill at the thought of annihilation. We are driven to leave behind a mark on the world, some ineradicable graffiti which serve to tell succeeding generations, "I was here; I will not be forgotten." This drive to triumph over death has given us many gifts--the great accomplishments of civilization--and much suffering, as petty little men have sought to conquer death by conquering the world and leaving a legacy so horrible no one will ever forget--Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, and hundreds of others who sought to overcome their own mortality by enlisting in the service of death.

I find myself wondering what our culture would be like if we were able to formulate a different religious response, if we could come to regard death not as a punishment but as a part of the process of living, as natural as birth and as richly significant. I find myself wondering what kind of culture would result if we were able to regard death not as a failure, but as a culmination of a journey uniquely ours, the very element which makes our lives unique and gives our choices significance. I find myself wondering what kind of culture might emerge if religion were able to embrace death not as unnatural, but as part of the essential process in which life is embedded, as part of a deep, implicate order in which meaning and purpose are richly layered. I find myself wondering if there be not a way, at this moment in the history of the human venture, that we might define death not as the enemy of life, but rather as the servant of life.

Science, of course, has begun to suggest that as the old religious paradigms weaken, a new understanding might be possible. To begin with, biology affirms that death--from the explosive death of worn-out stars to the silent death of unseen cells--is the engine which makes evolution possible, which allows for change and novelty and the emergence of new forms and structures at every level. It is death which culls and shapes, spreading throughout the universe the elements cooked in the heart of ancient stars, allowing single celled organisms to evolve into beings able to create and appreciate a Bach prelude, beings driven to reach for the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Death is not our enemy; death is life's great benefactor.

James Lovelock, with his Gaia hypothesis, opens up a vision of reality in which our lives can be seen as part of the life-process of the planet as a whole, a vision in which our existence plays an important and necessary role and in which our deaths are essential for the continuation of the larger whole. In an intriguing manner, the Gaia hypothesis offers us layered structures of meaning and purpose which interact and yet are independently valid. Thus, our existence on the planet can be seen symbiotically. Our lives as individuals, are real and valid and capable of meaning and purpose on the level of our daily existence. We do not need any other justification for our existence. Our existence as

a species is meaningful and valid in terms of our history. It requires no other justification. At the same time, the meaning and purpose of our individual and corporate existence are amplified because our lives as part of the life-process of the earth are real and valid and capable of meaning and purpose on the meta-level of the planet's existence. Our births and our deaths have meaning within the human community. Our births and deaths have meaning within the history of our species. Our births and deaths have meaning within the life-processes of the planet. Just as the mitochondria in our cells have an independent existence, and yet are an essential part of our bodily processes, so we have independent existence and yet are part of the processes of the body which is Gaia, the earth.

Every day of our lives we slough off millions of cells, without thought or concern, without gratitude or grief despite the fact that our very existence was sustained by those cells. By the same token, Gaia shrugs, or her frigid winds pour down the valleys, or her tides wash away a shore and Gaia takes no notice of the deaths of thousands who were part of her life processes. The impersonality of the process does not negate the value or the meaning of the life that was lived; nor does it make the death any less meaningful. Both are essential to the larger process in which we find ourselves. Ecology, the science of the age, calls us to understand death not as enemy, not as punishment, not as evidence of failure, but as the final gift we give to the larger life process in which we are embedded.

The challenge to western religion here, at the ragged end of the twentieth century, is to reformulate our understanding of death and its role in our existence. That reformulation must consist of two elements. The first of these is defined as the affirmation of life. It is the existence of life which makes this planet unique. On this ball, third out from the sun, in an obscure corner of the galaxy, life emerged as part of the evolutionary process of the universe itself. Here, in ways we do not fully understand, a planet came to life and achieved a degree of self-regulation, accomplishing and maintaining the conditions which would allow self-consciousness and self-awareness to emerge. The sun waxed and waned, the ages came and went, and Gaia, the living planet regulated the atmosphere and the temperatures and the oceans and the waters so that life could flourish and continue. And we are part of that unique process--indeed, perhaps, together, we constitute Gaia's organ of self-consciousness. We do not give meaning to life. Life is the meaning. Life is the source of all value and meaning as we know them, and the service of life gives purpose and direction to our existence. We are called into being in order to further life.

Part of the meaning of life is that we do not live forever. There comes a time when life has used us up. And then it is that death comes to release us from the relentless tides of breath and time. And that is the second element in a new religious formulation--that we be reconciled to death, that we be able to affirm death as servant of life. This affirmation does not require that we rush to embrace death. We have function and meaning and purpose within life. We are called to live out our lives to the fullest. But when, because of age or accident or circumstance, that function and meaning and purpose have ended, the coming of death is neither failure, nor punishment. It is an appropriate moment for sadness and sorrow, for, indeed, a unique and never to be repeated journey is ended. And the loss of those we have loved leaves us wounded and lessened and we grieve for what

once was and is no more, for what might have been and will never be. And that is right and that is proper for inescapably we are touched and changed by all we have loved and could not save. But in another sense, death means a return to the larger processes of a living evolving planet which called us into being, which lived through our lives, and which receives us back to herself in the end. Death is completion; a part of the life process without which life could not exist. Therefore, in affirming life, in celebrating life, in serving life we accept death and seek ways to live richly with its dark realities.

Last Monday the earth thoughtlessly shifted, and some life journey's ended abruptly. Others found themselves confronted with profound and unexpected challenges and will now have to decide how to respond to a reality for which they were not prepared. For them, the world will never be the same again. It is right that we should mourn the dead, that we should seek to aid the living, and guard them as well as we can from the vicissitudes of existence. It is appropriate that we should reflect upon the fragility and uncertainty of our existence. But it is important that we remember that they and we, living and dead and not yet come to birth, are all part of a larger implicate order of richly layered meaning, the processes by which the planet lives and evolves. The meaning of our lives is found in our relationships--to our history, to each other, to our destiny, to the larger reality in which we live and move and have our being. Death does not destroy the meaning or the relationship. Rather, death returns us to the source.

--Rev. David E. Bumbaugh