

Confronting Death to live more fully

Talking seriously about death threatens deeply entrenched biases in our cultural beliefs. In the modern western world we tend to have an anxious aversion to thinking about death. It makes most people uncomfortable. Just try bringing it up in serious conversation and you can often watch as the other person gets fidgety, attempts to change the topic, or looks at you as if there is something wrong with you for insisting on a prolonged discussion of such a 'morbid' subject. Such discussion is not fit for polite company.



The fact of the matter is that every single one of us will someday die – *that* is our uncomfortable reality. Yet our culture works to shield us from that reality. It gives us ways to repress our awareness of death and the related thoughts and feelings. For example, we talk about “life insurance” instead of what might be more accurately defined as “death insurance.” When we talk about suicide, we use vague words such as a person having a desire to “hurt themselves,” instead of “killing themselves” or “wanting to die.” When children ask about death, instead of engaging in an age-appropriate discussion, most adults will nervously provide some simple explanation that effectively communicates to their child that people do not die at all. This is expected to ease the mind of their child, though it likely does just as much to ease their own.

And while we have no control over death, and often very little control over *when* it takes us, we nonetheless shield ourselves with as much structure and certainty as possible, which provides the illusion that the ‘d-word’ is somehow not going to get *us*. When we are physically ill, for example, we may catch an uncomfortable glimpse of our own fragility. We then go visit our family doctor, who we expect will tell us *exactly* what is wrong with us. I suspect the medical profession is aware of this psychological need for certainty, which is why so many doctors are afraid to say “*I do not know what these symptoms mean.*” Most of them instead portray an air of omnipotent all-knowingness – an attitude that puts our minds at ease. They provide a diagnosis – a label that allows us to achieve some psychological distance from the fact that something negative is happening to *us*. In addition, the physician is usually all but certain that they have the *correct* diagnosis – that is, until we return to them ‘unhealed’ and they provide us with yet another diagnosis and another prescription or near certain ‘cure.’ But who can fault them for their attitude – we have come to expect it and are not good at tolerating ambiguity. For knowing is control, and control provides psychological comfort and peace of mind.

So it would seem that in our culture, thoughts and feelings about death, and the fragility of life, are avoided at all costs. But one can easily argue that there are extreme benefits to confronting your own mortality while

you are still alive to do so. Just ask anyone who has had a near death experience. Most will tell you that it changed them in profound ways – that it opened their eyes and allowed them to experience life more fully. It allows a person to question their use of time and changes their relationship to it. Instead of mindlessly living on the hopes and dreams of some future always ‘just out of reach,’ they learn to find happiness in the ‘here and now,’ accepting the future for what it will be, putting greater emphasis on relationships and what exists in the present moment. Death is therefore paradoxical. The more we allow ourselves to think about it (without being overwhelmed by it), the greater our capacity for living our lives with meaning, purpose, and vitality; in short, we feel more *alive*.



The ancient Buddhist monks were in this way ahead of their time. On their writing desks would sit a human skull – staring at them and reminding them of their ultimate fate. This was consistent with their mantra: “*Keep death as a friend, always on your shoulder.*” Repressing death and its associated feelings were thus seen as potentially harmful to the human being – repression settles our day-to-day anxieties, but it deadens the mind and our capacity to relate to the world in general and other human beings more specifically. So rather than seeing death as a morbid fascination, we might recognize that more frequent reminders of our mortality can help us to live more fully – to question the values that we live by, to see the importance of time, and to not take things (or people) for granted.