

The Simplicity of Death

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To understand death, we can observe nature as in the lifespan of insects or the hierarchy of the food chain. Death is an integral part of the cycle of life. Death is necessary, inevitable, and unavoidable. I doubt that insects or animals contemplate their mortality as humans do. Yet, what we have in common with all creation is our need to survive. The survival instinct is driven by an innate need for continuity, but for some humans it's confused with one's fear of death. We humans have turned death into a terrifying phantom that sneaks in the shadows and steals our precious lives as a thief.

In my book, *Four in the Garden*, Cherished came upon a dead mole that disturbed him because it didn't behave like all the other animals he had encountered thus far. He found the mole stiff, cold, and unresponsive. When he asked, "Where did the mole's life go?" the Teachers explained that its life left its body and rejoined the One Life in which all living things share, the One Life that is Creator. God is the source and embodiment of Life, and all living things manifest God's Life. When a living thing dies, its life returns to God.

The Balance of Life

In college, I used to pray atop a hill behind the dorms. Each time I ascended the hill, I passed a small pond full of many dozens of polliwogs. I would always stop and watch them wriggle along the edges of the pond as if eager to climb onto the land. Over time, they grew large and began to sprout limbs. One day, when I visited the pond, the water had dried up and all the polliwogs had died. This event devastated me because I had grown attached to those little guys. For years, it bothered me because I could never understand what lesson could be gained by observing this catastrophe.

Looking back at that event now, I take heart because of the laws of physics. Energy is being transformed all the time. Matter converts into energy according to Einstein's famous equation. We now know that energy and matter are interchangeable. Everything transforms. Nothing is wasted. The life energy of those polliwogs wasn't extinguished, but released to the universe. Death is

not a destructive end, but a transformation of energy from one state to another.

I see Life as a dynamic constant, where creatures come and go, but the totality of Life is a vast fabric that God infuses with His Life. All creatures are alive with the spark of God's Life, and the spark returns to God when they die. In this sense, death is but the shedding of the body. Life continues. Spirit continues. Even for us, death means that we shed our bodies and continue in a new form. Think of it as shedding a skin like a reptile or crustacean sheds its skin or shell as it grows.

Gods View of Death

I believe that God views death from a wider perspective that isn't tied to a material point of view, given that God Himself is Spirit and not tethered to a body. Most people are confounded when they read passages in the Bible about God slaughtering people. From God's point of view, He is simply terminating bodies, not souls. I don't mean to make light of murder (it is one of the ten commandments), but God takes a more casual and neutral view of death when taking lives, as they are His to take. We're comfortable telling children the story of Noah's ark, even though the tale includes the worldwide intentional slaughter of the entire human race save one family. Bodies serve as temporary housings for our souls, nothing more. We regard our human lives as only the short time we inhabit our bodies, when our existence actually extends far beyond that. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes," says James 4:14. Psalm 90:4 says, "In God's sight a thousand years is but a day." Whether we live a day or ninety years, our human lives are a momentary flash from God's point of view.

We consider it tragic when people die "before their time." Who decides what my time should be? It may be much shorter than yours. I think everyone's time is too short. God, on the other hand, doesn't hold a tragic view of death. Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of

His godly ones (saints).” Those mentioned are God’s favorites, I assume, but their death is deemed precious to God, not tragic. Contrast this with the feelings we have when those dear to us die. We consider it extra grievous if the deceased was a good or godly person, somehow less deserving of death, as if death is based on merit.

Why We Fear Death

Death is natural and not to be feared. The reason we fear it is because our ego is unwilling to suffer loss. Ego clings to security and substance. Ego refuses to let go. Death is the enemy of ego. The best way to address our fear of death is to stop clinging to life so tightly, to release our grip, to let go of control. In its place, we choose to trust in God, to trust in Life and Death. Death is not genuine loss, but only the shedding of our temporary bodies. I find comfort in this, seeing the shedding of my body as liberating and freeing me to experience God without the distraction of my body.

One thing that terrifies us about death is the loss of ego and identity. In this world, we are known by our outward personality and accomplishments. Those personal attributes cease to define our non-material being after death. The quality and nature of our souls is what remains. Ego and self are baggage meant to be discarded along the path toward fulfillment in God. The supremacy of self runs counter to the spiritual life and to the nature of God. Ego, as self-focused, opposes the open, outward essence of God who desires Oneness with all. After death, ego and identity have no place or function. They only thrive where separateness causes one to define a distinct self in relation to and in opposition to all others. For those who experience Oneness with God, separateness ceases to be a marked reality, and our need for ego and identity fades because God’s embrace supplies the security that ego tried to provide and our new identity of being one with God replaces our old fragile identity of “I alone.” On our journey toward death, our ego must “die” in order to find fulfillment in our relationship with God.

The Issue of Decay

Before death comes decay. Here in the United States, with our emphasis on youthfulness and newness, decay and deterioration repulse us. I admit I join the crowd on this issue. I don't look forward to the slow loss of physical and mental capacity or the frightful challenges that tend to strike older people. Yet, deterioration is a natural consequence as we transition toward death, and it ought to be accepted. Through all of life's circumstances, we learn to adjust and adapt so that by our latter years, we have gained resilience and calm acceptance of what is. If I have learned these things, I can then apply them to the upcoming challenges of aging. I will adjust and adapt to the deterioration happening to my body with humor and patience and compassion. If we haven't yet learned to release our stubborn egos, then these final humiliations will give us ample opportunity. When we accept our limitations instead of resisting them, we are best prepared for change as it comes. We trust in God, believing He will guide us through all the stages of life and will give us what we need along the way.

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Rick Hocker

Author of *Four in the Garden*

An Allegory about One's Relationship with God

Readers' Favorite International Book Award Winner

Available in print and e-book at all online stores

Email: rick@rickhocker.com

Website: www.rickhocker.com

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