

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a person who has researched death and the events around death, claims that the dying almost always know that they are dying and this awareness often prompts them to lay aside “the conspiracy of silence” that our culture has constructed about death and reach out to others and attempt to share their feelings and finish the business at hand before it is too late. However, those who are not in such desperate straits often have so much fear and insecurity of their own that they cannot handle such honesty, so they busily try to divert attention and cheer up the dying, so to speak, which means in effect they add the burden of loneliness to everything else the dying person is having to experience. They force them needlessly to walk that “valley of the shadow” all by themselves.

Therefore, I make no apologies for what I am doing in raising directly the issue of death and dying and suggesting we look at it honestly and openly. After all, it seems in our culture of instant media we are confronted with death every day in one way or another. But more importantly, we will be better equipped, not only for dying but also for living and sharing with others, if we will face now the questions and fears and uncertainties that rise up in us at the prospect of our ceasing to be alive in history. The more we put this off the less able we will be to handle the challenge creatively. The more work we are willing to do now, the better it will be for us in the future.

Maybe we can approach this with steady eyes and look straight at the basic issue involved in this phenomenon. What happens to a person when that one experiences physical death and passes from this realm of earthly existence? Obviously, we can describe the physical and material dimensions of the experience. The body remains here as well as all of one’s material possessions. “There are no pockets in a shroud,” as the Arab proverb puts it. We do not take anything physical or material with us on this journey. It represents a stripping away of these aspects of personality. Only the animating spirit of a person leaves — that willing, thinking, reflecting inner self. This seems to be the only vessel left in which to embark on whatever sea lies beyond this experience. We have no more physical or material power with which to work at such a moment.

If there is anything more, it is up to another, and the question arises: “Does another power exist at all, and if so, is it the sort of power that cherishes individuals and would want or would be able to sustain such spirits and enable them to live on in other realms?” The moment of death is just like the moment of birth in terms of who is there to receive and nurture and develop these “bare selves” who cannot sustain themselves. This really is the issue: “After death, what? Is there or is there not a receiving, sustaining, nurturing presence who will give us life-after-death on the same terms we were given life-after-birth?”

I trust you realise that the New Testament eloquently declares that such a power does exist and can be counted on in the moment of the great relinquishment. The love that called us out of nothing into being is at once larger than life and stronger than death. We are told that it is not the will of the Father that any should perish, but that all should come to the fullness of his purpose. The book claims that nothing, not even the experience of death, can separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In fact, the New Testament depicts Christ as that courageous figure who did not just walk into the valley of the shadow of death but through that valley to the light on the other side, and having done that he came back to say to us: “Be not afraid of death. There is only God and he can be trusted.” What is more, Christ has now positioned himself like a ferryman at the great divide, and promises “having gone to prepare a place for us, that he will come again and receive us unto himself”; that is, he will traverse that “space between the worlds” with us and beside us. “Lo, I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth” were his words, which means that when you have nothing and can do nothing — exactly as you were when you were born — there will be one to receive you and sustain you and nurture you as there was when you came out of your mother’s womb. And realise — it is all of grace.

We do not earn the gift of life after death anymore than we earned our way into this world at birth. It is all of grace, not of works, lest any person should boast. Here, then, is the New Testament witness to the question “After death, what then?” It points to a love that is larger than life and stronger than death, the same love that created us in the beginning, and this leads us to question “What is the basis for accepting or rejecting such a claim?” Here is what the New Testament says about the mystery of death. What am I to say as response to this?

I believe there are two alternatives at this point. A person can simply accept this vision of reality on the authority of Holy Scripture. The written word does have the power to come alive for us to convince us of its reality. After all, we would never know the incredible story of God’s love and suffering on our behalf if it were not for the book. Therefore, simply on the basis that we have found it trustworthy in the past, one can accept what it teaches about the future with perfect confidence. John Baillie, the Scottish theologian, tells of a doctor who was called one day to the home of a dying friend. As he sat quietly by this one, suddenly the dying man sat up in horror and cried, “Tell me, friend, what is it going to be like to die? What is the next world like? Is there friend or foe to be encountered there?” The doctor recognised that the man was in mortal terror, and he prayed for some means to convey to him a sense of hope. At that

very moment there as a scratching at the door, and the doctor's prayer was answered. He said softly to his friend, "Did you hear that noise just then? That was my old dog Shep who walked over here with me from home. He has no idea what lies in this room or the other side of the door. He has never been here and has no information about what it is like. All he knows is that I am here. He can hear my voice, and he has learned to trust in me. I really do not know exactly what it is like to die or what 'the world beyond the world' is like. But I do know that Jesus has given us his word that he will be there, and because that is true there is nothing to fear. How could you describe to a foetus in the mother's womb what time and space are like? They are not ready for that yet. So Jesus did not give us information about the next life, just the promise to meet us at the border and take us to the place he has already prepared." It proved to be a word of hope. On the authority of Holy Scripture, this man was given to believe that what he was about to experience was not walking out on a cliff and dropping into nothingness, but rather venturing onto a bridge, where there already was another and in whose company the transition would be made from realm to realm. You can then let the authority of the book be the basis of your hope.

However, there is another way, not altogether separate from the first, but different nonetheless — the way of risking obedience long before the trauma of dying, and learning in your own experience that there is another who can be depended on and who is able to sustain. Jesus said again and again, "Whosoever would save his life will lose it, but whosoever would lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, will save it." I think he is talking about those occasions in life where we dare to risk beyond the security that our own strength and our own material possessions can provide, to step out in faith, not knowing the end from the beginning, not having everything in our knapsack that we feel we are going to need, but like Abraham, moved from beyond, we venture to the limit of our own powers, only to discover that we are not alone, that there is another, and we are received in those moments as surely as we were received when we came from our mothers' wombs. What I am suggesting is that all "the little deaths" we undergo as we dare to risk and venture may teach more about the sufficiency of God in the act of dying than a thousand abstract ideas.

I have known several people in my life who were no longer afraid of either death or life. They were really courageous and alive and spontaneous people, and in every case they had come to this robust confidence through the experience of risk and venture. They had, on occasion, begun something when they did not know the end from the beginning, did not have all the resources in hand before setting out, and it was this very daring to go to the limits that enabled them to discover that one who is in fact there and can do something when we get to the place we cannot. This is a discovery you can never make if you forever hug the shore and keep one foot on the bottom, obsessed with creating your own security.

This is the way of trying to save life that ends up losing it. You never discover for yourself that the waters of God's grace will hold you up because you have never lifted your foot from the bottom and dared to float. If this has been your style of life from day one, no wonder death seems such a terror, for remember, it is a stripping away of the material and physical aspects of personality — it is "going through the eye of a needle" where there is nothing left but you and God, and if you never have been without your security before, what a terror!

The more we avoid risk and venture in the days of our living, the less prepared we are to face death with confidence. It is in the attempts to save our lives that we lose the opportunity to learn of this power, and it is in the experience of losing our lives for Christ's sake and the gospel's that we discover the amazing grace that can do things for us when we cannot do anymore for ourselves.

This thought brings me back to where it all started — our ambivalent feelings about life's greatest inevitability — the experience of death. Run from it as we try, we cannot help but wonder: "What is it going to be like? Is there nothing or something when we become totally helpless again? Is death a cliff edge or a bridge?"

Jesus always points to hope. God, who made all things, loves all that God has made. It is not God's will that any should perish. But how are we to believe that? You can take the Bible's word for it, and that is significant indeed. In addition, you can test in your own experience a venture of obedience — launching out where you do not know the end from the beginning, and in such risk, finding it is true: There is no fleeing from God's loving presence. "If I ascend up into heaven, lo, he is there. If I make my bed in Sheol, he is there. Lo, if I take the wings of the morning and flee to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there his right hand holds me, his right hand sustains me." (Psalm 139) It is "perfect love that casteth out fear," (I John 4:18) and you do not have to wait until you die to begin to experience it. On the other side of risk is discovery and help. If you try to save your own life, you will lose it. But those who dare to lose their lives for Christ's sake — ah — they are the ones that find that he can save.

You do not have to wait. Learn the secret of dying now. It is also the secret of living.

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