



What is a 'Good Death'?

How faiths or beliefs help us to understand death and dying



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INTRODUCTION

Paul Southgate

This booklet is based on a conference held during National Inter-Faith Week 2011. There was a certain irony to this event since the theme of the Week was “Living well together”. In order to live well together it is important to know how to die well together, too; hence our topic “**What is a Good Death?**”

Following wide consultation, the “*Charter for a Good Death*” was published in 2010 by Public Health North East (PHNE). Despite its title, the Charter does not focus on dying but it is about *living with dying* and ensuring we live life to the fullest potential. It poses the question: How can we in the North East best care for and support those who are at the end of their lives, and their families and carers? Compassion is the kernel of the answer. Compared to the more coherent concept of “Compassionate Communities”, the idea of “The Big Society” seems somewhat shallow.

Information is available in the NE Faiths Survey carried out by the NE Regional Faiths Network and the Churches’ Regional Commission in the NE. This reveals what our churches, gurdwaras, temples, synagogues and mosques do in terms of projects, volunteers, partnerships, worshippers and so on. It is a useful, even inspiring resource which tells us how parishes, congregations and faith groups contribute to the wider community: www.nefaith.org

St Cuthbert’s Hospice in Durham was the selected venue where a full-capacity 100 participants were encouraged to reflect upon their surroundings. CEO Angela Dinsdale spoke about the proud history and work of the adult Hospice, which cares for the *whole*

person which obviously includes spiritual needs. Set in 5 pleasant acres, it is an independent charity founded by an inspirational group of volunteers 20 years ago and boasts 10 in-patient beds and 15 places in the day centre, but also now has a suite to deal with the special needs of bereaved children. The NHS provides 38% of funding and the Hospice raises 62% (£1.2m) by its own efforts.

Death is the ultimate lack of control, the victory of nature over society and culture. It changes the chemistry of the family, the office, the community and needs to be treated with care. Is there any connection, at all, between the world of the dead and the world of the living? How do we treat the “remains” (in every sense) of the departed? What happens to the person once their body has disappeared? How do we ‘shield’ ourselves against the terror of death? Do we need a faith to deal with death or make sense of it?

This publication records the contributions of the key speakers who were each invited to talk for 15 minutes about “What is a good death?” from their particular faith/belief perspectives?” We would like to acknowledge the incredibly generous gifts by the 9 voluntary contributors sharing **how their faith or belief has helped them to make some sense of the chaos imposed by death.**

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JEWISH



Rabbi Aaron Lipsey

It's somewhat ironic that we are sitting here in Saint Cuthbert's named after a saint who sadly, over the years, has not been left in peace - being interred and re-interred numerous times. And now apparently his final location is known only to a very select few. And of course I think all of us, in our own religions and our own ways, hope that death is less tumultuous than that. We are looking for peace and tranquillity and a better life: an afterlife of some sort although I suppose the term 'afterlife' doesn't really apply to the Jewish view of death because we don't see an afterlife as being distinct from this life. We see a continuum. It's a continuation. There is no 'afterlife'; there is only life in different forms.

In the finest Jewish tradition I think I will start with a couple of stories. My spiritual guide, who sadly passed away in 1994, from the Hasidic dynasty of Chabad Lubavitch and his predecessor known as the "Rebbe", Rabbi Schneerson of Lubavitch, was in Russia at the time when religion was frowned upon in all aspects. And certainly Judaism was not encouraged. It was stamped down upon. There was no education allowed. No Jewish practice was allowed. I am just going to give you an insight into the man: there were 700 clandestine schools running through Russia at the time that he was overseeing. Because of the dangers there was nothing written down. Everything was committed to memory. It was all in his memory. He maintained all the details of all seven hundred schools entirely in his mind. He was an incredible man! The Russians knew of him. He wasn't a quiet man; he was very vocal and he wasn't afraid. He was arrested in 1927 when he was in his late

fifties and he was tortured by the Russians or the Soviets - the NKVD especially. He was tortured and taunted and tormented and they were trying to break free all this information that he had within him and over many different interrogations and on many different occasions over the course of that imprisonment he was forced and they tried to break him but he wouldn't break.

At one point he was standing (and he had been standing for most of the day unaided in front of the table) in front of the two interrogators and one of them was toying with a pistol and he was pointing the pistol and he says: "You know, with one pull of the trigger I could end you and could finish you off." And Rabbi Schneerson looked the guy in the eye and he responded: "You have but one world and many religions, many things that you are chasing after, and therefore the gun to you is a threat and you see it as a problem. I have two worlds and one God and the gun doesn't scare me at all!" And this is a very profound lesson. We can learn from that. But as an approach to Judaism, one God and two worlds is a good place to start although of course there are many worlds.

The second story I would like to share with you is attributed to a number of different personalities, so we'll just talk about "the Rabbi" - but the Rabbi of a community who is living in abject poverty. He is approached by a wealthy businessman visiting the community. This man says: "It is not appropriate for the Rabbi to be living in such conditions; you should be in a decent and suitable home with everything you need." The Rabbi responds by asking the man "You're here on business so where do you call home?" to which the man says "Paris". And he goes on to ask the businessman "Tell me, where are your possessions?" And again the businessman replies "Rabbi, I'm not at my home. I'm travelling so I don't have them with me." To

this the Rabbi says: "That is my point - I too am travelling."

This also is a look at the Jewish view of things - that our journey through this world is temporary. It is that. It's a journey. The description of the Jews as "the wandering Jews" offends me. It implies aimlessness. I prefer "the journeying Jew" as we are all on a journey and, in fact, all of humanity is on a journey. Each of us individually and collectively are on a journey. What a fascinating journey it is! But nevertheless it's certainly not the final destination. We are heading somewhere and therefore in that process we don't always live in the way we necessarily would like to or would want to because this is not home. This is merely a staging point. And that really brings me to the crux of the Jewish view as I see it.



Are there any other Jews in the room? Possibly not - which is a rare privilege! Certainly, it's the exquisite balance between the sanctity of life and the journey of the soul and recognition of soul - the soul that inhabits and possesses every human being. Every being, every created being has a soul. There are different levels and different gradations of soul, but human beings certainly contain a

soul which has, as I say, a final destination which is not here. We are told in the writings of the Mishnah and reminded by the Fathers: "We are born unwillingly. We die unwillingly." We come into the world screaming. We leave the world screaming (sometimes, God forbid!). But certainly we don't go willingly and we don't come in willingly. Because the soul existed before the person is born and it will exist after the person passes away.

The soul is timeless and the soul from its lofty place in the heavens is given a mission. You know, one of the things that I struggle with and I'm sure everyone - well, I would hope everyone - would struggle with on some level, is belief in spirituality and spiritual beings. You know, we can't conceptualise them because the nature of what we are trying to describe and trying to grasp is beyond our ken because we are mortal and we are using physical objects, our brains and our thoughts to try and describe and capture something which is immortal and completely not physical. It is reassuring to know, though, that the souls and likewise other spiritual entities have as much trouble grasping the physical because the gulf is both ways: they have as much trouble trying to conceptualise us as we do trying to conceptualise them (so it's time for payback). But the soul is instructed, it's told: "There is a body, a child waiting to be born today. You're the soul. Go, live!" As I say, this idea is completely alien to the soul. It doesn't relate to it. It doesn't understand it. And therefore when the baby is born it (the baby) is crying because this is all really very strange and very unusual and very scary. But then over the years the soul begins to understand the confines of its body and begins to work together with its body to do good, hopefully, to do the right thing; and in that process the soul becomes rather wedded to the body and, finally, having lived a life we hope that the soul at the end of its life says:

“Well, there is so much more I can be doing here, why am I going back there? Why am I heading back upstairs?”

So there is a ‘mission’ in life. And that binding together of soul and body, of the two elements that create the person, is a lifelong process and one which is very special and very precious to both the body and the soul. The body doesn’t exist without the soul; the soul cannot express itself without the body. The one thing, when we talk about dying and the process of dying - and one of the reasons why I’m a little bit faltering today is because unfortunately yesterday I was called to a “not a good death”, so my preparation time was halved or less - but that aside, the process of dying itself, the divorce of the body and the soul and the way that we handle it, is a balance again of compassion, of consideration, and ultimately recognising that with a belief in God that we are recognising that the soul is “godly”. The soul has to go back whether willing or not. The body has to be left behind whether willingly or not. But to recognise that just as much as the soul is godly, the body is godly, too. God owns everything in creation, both body and soul. To God, God is not spiritual. God is beyond spiritual and therefore to God ‘spirituality’ is created as much as ‘physical’ is created, for to him they’re both elements of His and we have no right, we have no rights on our self to make pronouncements about someone else’s property; and the view, the Jewish view, of that marriage of body and soul of the person is that that person is God’s and therefore when God wishes to call back the soul element of that, that’s His mission, that’s His job, and that’s His right. We can argue with Him, we can dislike it, but we certainly don’t try and hasten it, and of course that leads to very many areas of (even) conflict. And there are many situations where we end up certainly in, as the rabbis as spiritual advisors

having to give advice that we know is painful to the families, but bearing in mind all the time that what we are dealing with here is something that if we get it wrong then we are guilty of murder.

My first introduction to ministry was about ten years ago when unfortunately one of the first jobs I had to do was deal with a person who had had a massive haemorrhage. I called the senior Rabbi for advice and he didn’t reassure me when he said this: “You know, get this wrong and you have killed someone!” And that’s an onerous responsibility which I am sure all of us bear in our own ministries and in our own ways and to bear in mind that we are not in control. We don’t have control. We don’t have the right to control. It’s not ours to give up. It’s not ours to give away. It’s something which is much more special and precious than that and we must do what we can to preserve it in all its ways. And that leads, as I say, to many other issues and many other conflicts which are probably beyond the scope of fifteen minutes. I think that in our journey through life our views don’t become set but they modify as we move along and as we gain more experience as well.

The final thing I would like to talk about is just to finish with the notion that maybe is more familiar to many of you about the Jewish religion and that is, following the death itself, the speed with which we wish to bury people and the manner we bury people - specifically the way, for example, many people who have been to a Jewish funeral will notice that the coffins tend to be unadorned and very plain. One of the simple reasons for this is as well as being mindful of the body we are also conscious of the needs of the soul. The soul has needs as well. The soul, although it is released at the time of death, still has a journey to get back to its place. And the soul and the body, because they are so connected and because they’re so in touch with each

other, that journey is mirrored so the soul will not continue its journey until the body is at rest and that's why we look to bury as soon as is decently possible, to allow the soul to be freed of its responsibilities here. It has not quite gone back despite the person having passed away. The reason why things are fairly simple, why many cemeteries will not allow any flowers in the Jewish section, is because we recognise that once the person has passed away the soul is the part that is living on and that soul is present in the memories and thoughts of the family and the people around him or her and it is also present in the good deeds and perpetuated in the memory of that person and ultimately the soul is the living part of the person. As I say, there is no afterlife; there is only a continuation of life, and that's with the soul and so therefore the body now has done its job, it's done its mission and all the bodies we bury are buried in a similar manner because death is a great 'equaliser', they say, but certainly in Judaism we recognise that having done its mission it's now time to be left alone in peace in the ground and that it's beneficial (again, this is coming from the Rabbinic tradition) for the family to be able to focus on the person's deeds and on their life, or their contribution, rather than on the physical presence of the body. There is no 'lying in state', there is no particular fuss made at the cemetery and, although a stone will be erected and mark a place there, it's a place that the family will visit maybe once or twice a year but the rest of the time when you think of the person it's with a view to action, a view to good deeds in that person's name.

Thank you for the opportunity. I am sorry it's so brief and if any of you would like to explore further my details are freely available to you all.

Rabbi Aaron Lipsey is Rabbi of
Newcastle's United Hebrew Congregation

BUDDHIST

Wendy Gray



I am a Nichiren Buddhist and a member of a lay Buddhist organisation called Soka Gakkai International (SGI), which has about 12 million members around the world. I have a faith support responsibility for our community in the North East of England, from the Scottish border in the north down to Teesside. I am really happy to have this opportunity to come to speak with you today on the subject of death, especially under this banner of “a good death” because it is such an important subject. Nichiren Daishonin, who was the founder of the particular form of Buddhism I practise, wrote many, many hundreds of years ago: “First learn about death and then about other things.” And that almost summarises the Buddhist view, that until we really appreciate the role of death in life we aren’t living fully, it actually gives context to everything that we do. So what I am going to do today is tell you a bit about the Buddhist view of death and dying, what happens when we die, what we believe. Then I will talk about what is a good death from the Buddhist perspective and, if there is time, I will talk a little bit about what that means we can do, collectively, all of us, whether we are Buddhist or not, to help ourselves and others experience “a good death”.

So first of all the Buddhist view of life and death. I think I ought to explain to begin with, as I don’t know how familiar you are with Buddhism, that the name Buddha is not another name for God. Buddha is quite different; the word is actually from ancient Sanskrit, meaning “awake”. So a Buddha is someone who is awakened to the true nature of their own life and of life the universe and everything - someone who is enlightened. As a Buddhist I believe that we all share this

capacity for enlightenment; that it is inherent in life. Every living being has the capacity for enlightenment, to understand and to know who we really are. So just as context, keep that at the back of your minds.

Now the Buddhist view of a living person can be described in terms of three integrated phases. The first of these phases is what you see: it’s the body, it’s the capacity to take action, to do things. To go and get a cup of coffee from the back of the room, I need a body to do that. The second is the mind or spirit, the thing that makes you not a robot, the thing that makes a living being, somebody who has thoughts and tensions and desires - your heart, if you like. Call it ‘mind’ but it’s much more than just mind. And the third element is the underlying reality of eternal and universal life. That is fundamentally who we are. So, if you think of these three things as being like an iceberg: there is the top of the iceberg that you can see - that’s the material. You’ve got the vast body of the iceberg under the ocean that you cannot see - that’s the mind and spirit, the being of the person. And then there is the ocean itself in which the iceberg floats. And you need all three things in order to be alive. So when we die it’s rather like the iceberg melting into the ocean. Death is the dissolving of the material and the spiritual and the mind elements into the ocean. So, often you will hear associated with Buddhism this idea of cyclical birth and death, and people will say it’s like a tree. You look at a tree in May and it’s in full blossom and very alive; you look at a tree in December and it looks dead but next May it’s going to be full of blossom again. I think that’s a good analogy but actually the iceberg is better because the reality is that the tree in December is still alive. The reality of death is that it is not life,

it's not manifest life. Death is a state of latency and we call it "ku". In this state of latency, when we are effectively the ocean, then we are unable to influence our lives. Now at some point, when the conditions are right, a new iceberg will form and the shape of that iceberg is determined by the shape of previous one, and I'll explain that. As a Buddhist I don't believe in an individual soul that continues after death. Instead I believe I form part of this universal life which is an ocean but that my individual identity, in the form of karma, continues. 'Karma' means cause and effect, so the sum total of all the causes that I have made through everything that I have thought, said and done throughout my eternal life, and all the effects that have been generated by those causes, that karma continues in the ocean. So the shape of the new iceberg is determined by the shape of the old. What that means, effectively, is that there is no get-out clause. If we live well, if we do our very best to live well - to live with integrity, to live joyfully, to live with compassion for other beings who ultimately are the same ocean as we are - then we will experience joy in life and that joy we can expect to continue in future lives. If we are struggling and we allow ourselves to continue to struggle, then the suffering and discomfort continues until eventually we start to make choices that result in freedom and happiness rather than in compression and distortion and dismay. Does that make sense? And it's absolutely not the case that there is anyone sitting in judgement above us; it's simply cause and effect. So that kind of also answers in a way what is the Buddhist view of "a good death". A good death is what happens at the end of a good life. A good death is when you can feel in yourself "actually, I have done what I came to do, I have fulfilled my mission, I have lived well, I have enjoyed life, I am ready now to have a rest".

To look at this concept of ku or latency in a different way: if you think of death as being like a period of sleep - if you go to sleep at the end of the day, and you have actually had a really good day, everything's gone right, you've done everything you set out to do, you feel very comfortable about what's going to happen tomorrow - then you're going to sleep really well and wake up feeling refreshed with a sense of no time having passed. If, on the other hand, you go to sleep and you're anxious then perhaps you won't sleep so well and the night will seem longer and you'll be less refreshed in the morning. So for a Buddhist the important thing is to live well. To live seeking to understand who we truly are, and having profound respect for our own life and for the lives of every other person who is also a part of this great ocean of life. So that's one answer: the Buddhist view of a good death is to have a good life.

The second answer is that because the cycle of birth and death is eternal and because we all have in our lives the inherent capacity for enlightenment, then inevitably there will come a time when we will realise this and at that point everything that has gone before will be seen through, if you like, the eyes of enlightenment, as being absolutely the cause for our enlightenment and for the support of others. So on one level there is no bad death. There is no aspect of life which is so bad or so awful, no aspect of death which is so bad or so awful that it does not inevitably lead at some stage to our enlightenment, our freedom, our happiness.

I hope you take this as a message of confidence - even though obviously very few of you, if any, are actually Buddhists - in terms of what we can do then to have a good death ourselves and to help other people to have a good death. And I want now to say four things about what we can practically do:

The first is that the very best way to support ourselves and others in death is to live well. Please live without regrets, really seize the day, and live to your fullest potential and spread that about, really spread a smile. Help other people as well to realise that they are incredible human beings and they have huge potential. And it's enormously helpful, if you are supporting somebody who is dying or you are with somebody whose family are fearing death or grieving after somebody's death, if you can be with them and actually yourself have no fear. So it is good for you, it is good for the people you are supporting, it really is. That's the first thing.

The second thing is to create a good environment for people whenever possible. Take a look at this lovely, wonderful booklet (A Good Death). We don't all have a choice about where we die, we don't have a choice about where, when, how. But insofar as is possible, let's create wonderful environments for people. Let's listen to people's choices and try to enable people to be free of pain, to have dignity, to feel comfortable, to be if they wish in their own homes. So create that environment.

The third thing is related to that: we need to bring death back into our society. Well done all of you for being here because in our modern society death is a no-go area, isn't it? We don't talk about it, we don't think about it. I remember as a child in the 1960s when my grandmother died just about five miles from here. She was laid out in my grandfather's home. All the neighbours came, all the family came, everyone came to say goodbye, to pay their respects before she was buried. But even in the 1960s I, as a child, was not allowed to go. Twenty years before that the children would have been there, too. Twenty years after that, as now, our deceased relatives and friends were in funeral parlours

not their homes. So I really feel that it is important for us to engage and talk about death and to make it again what it is - an absolutely inevitable part of life, something that if you like we are all in together, it happens to everyone.

The last thing I would say is: if you feel that somebody has had a bad death and you're concerned about it, worried about it, please be assured (and don't just take it from me, try it) that prayer helps these people who've passed away. In the state of latency an individual is not able to help themselves; they have no way of doing that but our prayer. And if you are uncomfortable with the word 'prayer' for whatever reason, then please think of it as sending your best wishes to that individual. Sending them hope and encouragement, even if you can't find it possible to believe that there is anyone to send it to, just try it because I have found in my experience, I have no doubt that those good wishes, that good intention towards people who have died, does enable people to move forward. And not just the living; I really believe that it helps as well the dead person.

And that's a whistle stop tour. Thank you.



Wendy Gray is Managing Editor at Buddha Productions, an independent publishing house, and a member of Soka Gakkai International, a worldwide lay Buddhist organisation

MUSLIM



Mohammed Bilal and Sultana Kimti

Sultana: Bilal and I feel very privileged to have been invited here to contribute our perspectives and share with you the Islamic perspective on what is “a good death”. So it is really to enhance some of the understanding that you might already have but to add to that understanding so that when you do come across a Muslim person who is either dying or there is a death, whether that’s in the home or in the organisational context such as the hospice here, or in a hospital, or in a care home, what your role is as professionals. So we hope to give you some information relating to that.



Bilal: At any gathering we Muslims have, we always recite our Qur’an. Because of that recitation then it becomes a good gathering. So I’m going to recite something and explain this to you, then continue the rest of the tour.

(Bilal recites the Qur’an here.) The translation of this is: “There is one God and we ask His help. We pray to Him. We only ask for His help. We ask for the straight path - the path of the Favoured One; not a path of the one who earned His anger or went astray. Amen.”

In our faith we believe in one God, all His angels, all His prophets He sent down to guide us to Him. We believe that the good and the bad comes to us according to our needs and

we shall rise again on the Day of Judgement to answer back.

God has created two paths: the right one, the wrong one - our choice. Free will, our heart’s desire, makes the choice. It’s as simple as that. This is the Muslim faith. ‘Muslim’ means to submit oneself to one God.

We are born - not our choice. We are born and the time is not our choice. We live in the world - our choice. We leave the world - not our choice. We die - and where we are buried is not our choice. We know nothing about it. Because of this we have to submit ourselves to the Supreme Being Allah (God) so that we are happy with the choice we have been given, now, in choosing the right or good death. Where we die we don’t know. So where we die we choose our life. How we die we don’t know: somebody dies in the house, somebody dies in the hospital, somebody dies on the journey, somebody dies amongst the people, somebody dies by himself. But the choices we have made according to our faith are the choice of the good or the bad death.

But as a Muslim, how do we comfort both the good and the bad? We pray five times a day every day plus optional prayers if you want to do more. But in every prayer we ask to be on the straight path. We ask forgiveness for ourselves because we make so many mistakes. We human beings are bound to make mistakes, we’re going to do wrong things, we’re going to make so many mistakes, but we ask forgiveness. We ask our parents - we are born from them - we ask for their forgiveness because if we do something wrong they will be questioned. If we do something wrong in school our parents are called. So our parents answer for us and we then ask for forgiveness on our own behalf to Almighty Allah for our parents.

Then we live in so much community: we have so much responsibility for ourselves, for our neighbours, our community members, our city, our country, the whole universe in which we live. We have so much responsibility to every single thing, we ask God for forgiveness for our mistakes - what we put into society, into our children, into our home, into our city, the country, the whole universe - so we ask for that every single day.

When a person dies, it doesn't end there. It turns merely from one state to the other state. As the living ones, we don't see what happens on the other side of the curtain. One person has a bad death, for example, but he left so much good work behind. My one word coming here might be the only purpose I will have lived for. I was given life to speak about something I have learned, to pass it on to you, and so my purpose may be complete like this. So at the end of the day I finish what I have come into this world for - I have passed it on. We don't know what our purpose here is. We have to recognise ourself and just please Almighty Allah so that he can guide us to choose the right path and that is what we do every day in our lives. Meanwhile, every night before we go to bed we remember that today this is what has happened to us, and tomorrow we'll make it better for ourselves again.

So we come to somebody's funeral. Somebody has passed away and now we need to decide how to accommodate the family who are in so much distress.

I am secretary of the Gateshead Muslim Society. We are presently in the process of launching a Death Committee because you know everybody is not very financially well off nowadays, so everybody, all of the community, maybe 100, 200 people, whoever lives in the area and wants to be part of that committee then contributes so much money

towards the cost of the funeral. When such a thing happens in the community and someone passes away, then that money is used immediately to cater for all the costs. Working with Gateshead Council we acquired a section in the cemetery for well over 200 grave plots.

In our religion we need to have a 24-hour burial situation. Now some people might ask why 24 hours? Because the people travel from other countries, from other parts of the city; they are full of busy, they have a got a lot of life, yet when they hear about the funeral they leave everything. And all those at the office have to take their leave immediately. Or if some people's children or a loved one is working, then some else would have to come. They have to attend the funeral. This funeral should take place as quickly as possible so that it is less stress for the rest of the living community. So you can bury them and accommodate all the people who come there, so we can have 24 hour burial situation - weekend burial as well. The imam in the worship informs them the funeral is going to take place and that a good death is someone who is working all his life in the community. If more than fifty people turn up at the funeral that means it was a good death, because everybody liked that person. If fewer people can get there then the other people pray for those people in their daily life.

When people die in hospital, then the first thing we have to do is the 'first wash' so that everyone coming for the burial is presentable. The family members deal with any questions from the hospital staff and give permission for the funeral directors to come and take the body. Then we have the second wash, which is just the family, so that they can pay their respects - the children especially are washed, clothed and tidied. Then we will go for the funeral. The funeral takes place and the coffin

taken to the graveyard where the grave is already prepared to receive the coffin.

We believe that after you bury the person the soul is given back to the body. The body asks three questions: What is your God? Who is your Prophet? What is your Faith? If you answer these three questions correctly, then God says to the body "Rest till I raise you again." Then the "Ruh", the soul, is taken back and he says "God is happy with your soul, so you go and rest to the place where you came from in the first place."

So that basically in a nutshell is the situation after death: you can have good death; you can have bad death. Good death is the one where everyone is praying for you every day all the time after you passed away. Then we have the period after three days in the community centre, or wherever the family chooses for all the people to come and pay their respects for three days, and then, once they are finished, the family can get on with their life.

After ten days, people come and see if the family is OK and then they come and pray again, recite a lot of the Qur'an and other things and after forty days the people and the family know that the family of this person have to get on with daily life. After one year, we believe that the soul comes back to the family as they are gathered in prayer and the loved one, the person who has passed away, then comes to see if the people who are left behind are working, are happy, are remembering their loved one - because this remembrance and prayer is like food which the person who has died takes back to their place.

And that, in a nutshell, is "a good death". So I hope I managed to explain in a very small time the importance of a good death and I

pass on to Sultana to finish off with a few more sentences about the topic.

Sultana: Just a couple of things to add to what Bilal has said which I think are useful for you to carry back to your organisations. I come from a clinical background (I have worked as a nurse, as a midwife and as a health visitor) so I have had the opportunity when people have died in a hospital. One of the things that hospital staff or care staff in any setting are always conscious of is not adding to the family's distress. What is the protocol? And the simple answer is: if you're not sure, ask. Ask the family, how is the process of death (almost) celebrated in your belief system, in your Islamic religion?

One of the things as a nurse that I remember is that when we had a Muslim patient dying, the family gathered together around the bedside and, in order for a good death I suppose, they recite the Qur'an and say the prayers. That is so important so death is as easy and quick as possible, not to prolong the suffering of that individual. That was always for staff thinking "How do we accommodate so many family members?" So it is important to understand that it is part of the Islamic belief system.

Referring again to what happens after death, and Bilal as secretary of the Gateshead Muslim Association is familiar with this situation at Queen Elizabeth Hospital: when he summons family members they will come from different areas because one of the things for a good death in the Muslim religion is you don't come and pay your respects seven months on or a year on or at your convenience. The whole point is that, if a family member or friend, you are there ideally for the burial, if not within that officially set mourning period. So you come to offer support to the family, so you are there when

they need you. You're not there at your convenience. Queen Elizabeth Hospital provides a place where they will bring the body from the mortuary so those members can pay their respects.

And we have other expressions of grief. We all have different ways of grieving but I think particularly in the Muslim faith although the Qur'an does say you do not try to pray for the soul of that person instead of the weeping and crying. For the women traditionally there is a lot of wailing and weeping which to other belief systems might be quite strange - but just so you are aware of that.

If you're running an organisation and you have a Muslim person who wants compassionate leave, please be aware that they need compassionate leave because they have to be there then. Obviously, it depends on the employment situation. When you do go and pay your respects the issue of dress is really important. You don't go to pay your respects as if you're dressed to go to a party. It's that sort of minimalistic attire to show sincere respects, etc, for the family. And, as Bilal has said, the community plays a great role, recognising some families will have financial hardship. There is a fund created so that it can pay for the funeral costs.

Finally, if there is one thing that you take away, as Bilal said: If you're not sure, ask. Do not assume; do not stereotype. There is only a limited amount of information that we have been able to share with you just to enhance your understanding. We hope that you have found that beneficial.

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BAHA'I

James Russell

The Baha'i faith is world religion whose purpose is to unite humankind into one universal cause and one common faith. Bahai's are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh whose name means 'the glory of God' whom they believe to be the Promised One of All Ages and a messenger of God for this age. He lived from 1817-1892.

One commonality of many traditions is the promise of a future time of peace and prosperity. Baha'is believe that time has been inaugurated and that it is the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh which will enable us to unite humankind and build a better world. So within this context we should look at the understanding of God. God is infinite, and as finite beings God is beyond our comprehension. We cannot make images of God. Even if I call God 'him', it is merely a figure of speech. But the way in which we can understand God is in his manifestations and this can be explained by analogy with the natural world: we couldn't approach the sun without being burned up or we couldn't look at the sun without being blinded, but if we have a perfectly polished mirror we can see the image of the sun in the mirror and all its radiance. God's manifestations of these special individuals who are like a perfect mirror of God, and to know them is to know God, and they reveal as much to us about God as humanity is ready for at that stage in its development. Some of these manifestations through history have been: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, Mohammed and Bahá'u'lláh. And each of these manifestations has been revealing one religion over time but adapted with the terms of reference for the particular place and culture in which it was revealed. Therefore all religious traditions are

fundamentally one, and all teachings about any topic including death are contributing to our collective understanding of this one, ineffable, spiritual reality.

Bahá'u'lláh's son, Abdul Baha, said that the purpose of our life is to acquire virtues, kindness, generosity; and with these virtues we can serve God both in this world and in the next. Everyday Baha'is face east towards Bahá'u'lláh's resting place in Haifa, Israel, and say the words "I bear witness, Oh my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee", and in the act of serving we draw out these gems of virtue within us. Bahá'u'lláh invites us to regard man as a mine, rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can alone cause it to reveal its treasures and enable mankind to benefit therefrom; therefore our gems are latent within us like jewels and the act of service draws out those gems.

Kindness is not only beneficial to those here but we understand that in the next world it would be of service as well. The next world is as incomprehensible to us as the outside world is to a child within the womb. The child within the womb can hear sounds coming from outside and may be able to discern something is out there but he won't fully know what it is until he is born. Likewise, the child in the womb doesn't know what his arms and legs are for; they don't have a purpose within the womb but when he is born he can use those arms and legs to serve others. Our understanding is that our virtues will be like, in a sense, our arms and legs in the next world, and as we cultivate our virtues in this life we will then use them to serve as we go on. I would like to share a quotation from Bahá'u'lláh's son, Abdul Baha, referring to this analogy and using the old-fashioned word 'matrix' for womb. In the beginning of this human life, man was embryonic in the world of the matrix. There he received

capacity and endowment for the reality of human existence. The forces and powers necessary for this world were bestowed upon him in that limited condition. In this world he needed eyes. He received them as potential in the other. Therefore in this world he must prepare himself for the life beyond that which he needs in the world of the kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the matrix by acquiring forces necessary for this sphere of existence, so likewise the indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially attained in this world.

So one can say that "a good death" is one in which one has lived a life of service and in which one has prepared for a continuity of service. And it truly is an unbroken continuity. Our reality is that we are spiritual beings who are given a body, as articulated by some of our other speakers, in this world. Abdul Baha uses the analogy of the soul and the body like a horse and his rider: the rider of a fine steed has utmost respect for his horse, he treats it with the greatest care, he loves his steed; but there will be a time to dismount and continue with his journey. Likewise the relation between the soul and the body: we ride the body like a horseman in this world, and for that reason we must respect it. In the Baha'i faith there is not a mannequin of duality where the soul is good and the body is bad; both of them are one organic whole. And for that reason Baha'is have great respect for the body. As in the Muslim tradition it must be buried within 24 hours. And Baha'is are refrained from cremating the body because that body was once the temple in which a soul was embodied in this world. So the next world, we are promised - even though it is beyond our comprehension - is one of infinite joy. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh says that the next world is concealed behind a veil from us because were we to know how wonderful it is

we would be too eager to obtain it and we wouldn't fulfil our duty in this world. One quotation from Bahá'u'lláh's writings on the soul says that "Death proffereth unto every confident believer the cup that is life; indeed, it bestoweth joy and is the bearer of gladness. It confereth the gift of everlasting life."

One way that those in the next world can help us is by interceding for us in the world here. As I said, Baha'is understand revelation to be progressive, therefore each teaching of the manifestations of God, the prophets who have gone before, has given us one facet for understanding this reality; for example, some religions teach that as we die we go to a heaven and a hell. Bahá'u'lláh teaches us that heaven and hell are metaphors for states of distance or proximity to God and that images such as the clouds, or harps, or fire, were ways of articulating this ineffable spiritual reality at an earlier stage of human comprehension. Some traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, teach reincarnation and that our life is cyclic. This indeed is also an aspect of this reality because while we will not be incarnated again in this world, Baha'is understand we will continue to cycle and move to God in many different worlds. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh uses the analogy of our relationship with God to that of a romance in which we will constantly be falling deeper and deeper in love with God. If God is infinite and we are finite then our journey towards him is infinite. This is actually something of a message of joy because we will be constantly falling more and more in love with Him. Confucianism and the indigenous spiritualities of Native Americans or Australian Aboriginal people, speak that those who have gone before us - the ancestors - are spirits who we can call upon to help us in this world. Indeed this is also another facet of the diamond of the afterlife because the souls of those who go beyond - which Bahá'u'lláh calls the

'concourse on high' - continue to assist us. And indeed we are told that all expressions of virtue and all expressions of creativity in this world come to us through the intercession of the 'concourse on high'.

So I hope I have provided a brief introduction to the Baha'i understanding. I would like to close with an appreciation of this life: Bahá'u'lláh says that we are all created noble. He said "Oh, son of man, I created thee rich: why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I created thee: wherewith dost thou abase thyself?"

Humans are such noble beings. We are the expressions of the image of God. That we have this material body - and it's a blessing to have it - but our essence is spiritual and transcendent and that gives a true message of hope for understanding this life and the next. That this world when we die, it's not as if we lose our existence or go beyond; it's as if we graduate; that this world is like a school in which we can cultivate and draw on our virtues. And just as when we graduate we can go into the working world, when we die we can continue to serve God in the world beyond.



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HINDU Vijaya Kotur



As I am growing older, I am beginning to think of life and life after death. The fear of death and dying is founded upon the love of life, which is the deepest instinct in human nature. I am talking about death as a natural phenomenon; death as it makes its presence felt through disease and through old age.

In reality let us first accept the fact that most of us fear death because of the uncertainty of its time and place. The innate fear of loneliness due to the loss of those we have been familiar with, increases our discomfort and taboo in openly discussing death.

Hinduism demonstrates that death is something that can be prepared for instead of being feared and not dread in our last days on this planet. Hindus embrace death as they embrace life.

As the Bhagavad Gita says, "For death is certain to one who is born...thou shall not grieve for what is unavoidable." A few wise words from the holy book for Hindus can bring peace to the grieving heart in our saddest moments.

One of the prayers most quoted is:

"Om Asato Maa Sadgamaya, Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamaya, Mrityor Maa Amritam Gamaya, Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih"

I desire neither earthly kingdom, nor even freedom from birth and death. I desire only the deliverance from grief of all those

afflicted by misery. Oh Lord, lead us from the unreal to the real; from darkness to light; from death to immortality. All souls at time of great departure see a vision of a tunnel of light at the end of which is divine nature.

Understanding death as a Hindu:

Hindus do not separate religion from other aspects of life and their spiritual paths are so greatly tied to the culture, history, tradition, art, life and death of their own community. Death, according to Hinduism, is not the contradiction of life. Death and Life are in fact two aspects of the continuous cycle of birth and rebirth – known as the Samsaric Cycle. Hindus believe life is full of spiritual suffering. The culmination of living through this cycle is liberation from suffering – known as Moksha.

The Hindu scriptures describe that the body is made up of three parts: the physical body; the mind and the intellect; and the soul. The soul feeds the intellect, and the mind and the physical body is controlled by the intellect and mind. The mind and the intellect are subtle beings and the “Atman or Soul” is the causal being. Physical death is the departure of the “causal and subtle beings” from the physical body. At the time of death, there is a propelling force within the body which propels the causal and subtle bodies to an unknown destination and leaves the physical body with no soul and no mind/intellect in it.

We believe that the subtle being and “Atman” are sent back to the earth to re-live another life. After so many births, the

individual realises the ‘Eternal Truth’ by being detached from all worldly possessions and desire, hence emancipating themselves from suffering. The soul “or Atman” re-unites with “Paramatma” by becoming one with the Supreme Being.

Death is therefore not a final destination but only a departure from one station to another station in a journey called re-incarnation. Although there are quite a few contradictory theories on this concept, science has not yet proved it to be otherwise!

Understanding Dying as a Hindu

Death can be peaceful or painful. It can be at home, hospital, hospice or a total new and strange place. It can be accidental or post-operative. As Death approaches, traditionally a Hindu dies at home. Nowadays the dying are increasingly kept in hospitals, even when recovery is clearly not possible. Knowing the merits of dying at home among loved ones, Hindus bring the ill home. When death is imminent, kindred are notified. A lamp is lit near his head and he is urged to concentrate on his mantra/prayers. Kindred keep vigil until the great departure, singing hymns, praying and reading scriptures. If he cannot come home, this should happen at the hospital or wherever the person may be.

Knowing that a conscious death (by this I mean being aware of dying) is the ideal one. Hindus avoid excessive drugs or mind-numbing medical measures. Many oppose assisted death.

At the Moment of Death, if the dying person is unconscious at departure, a family member chants the mantra/prayers softly in the right ear. Holy ash or sandal paste is applied to the forehead, Vedic verses are chanted, and a few drops of milk, Ganga or other holy water are trickled into the mouth. The lamp is kept lit near the head and incense burned. The family would prefer the death certificate signed immediately and transports the body home. Relatives are beckoned to bid farewell and sing sacred songs at the side of the body.

Hindu death rituals in all traditions follow a fairly uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas, with variations according to sect, region, caste and family tradition. Most rites are fulfilled by the family, all of whom participate, including the children, who need not be shielded from the death. Certain rites are traditionally performed by a priest but may also be performed by the family if no priest is available. The body is prepared according to various Hindu rites and taken to either the crematorium or the burial ground.

White is associated with spirituality, truth and above all Purity. Hindus believe that after a person is dead his soul is at peace and is free from all material and worldly desires. Hence all wear white to show respect for the departed at funerals. After the cremation or burial ceremony, everyone takes a bath and cleans the house. During the days of mourning, close relatives, friends and neighbours bring daily meals to help them cope during mourning and try to provide support.

So then what is a good death?

There is no such thing as a “good death”. We can make it as peaceful and painless as possible. What can we do to make it less painful and peaceful? The wish list could be endless but by understanding the faith and spiritual needs, a death can be made more acceptable for the person departing from this world and for the relatives left behind.

A Hindu would feel peaceful to keep a picture of his/her beloved form of Lord near them. Some would like to keep the book of faith with them. As anyone, we also need privacy to the family and freedom to visit at any time and not to be constrained by visiting hours regulations. The Hindu system has a large emphasis on friends and family and they visit during the last days. They would like to have the family 24/7 basis to be near them and to hold their hands at the time of departure. Hindus are scattered all over Britain and we are not as fortunate as some who could call upon a priest any time for advice or guidance. In the whole of the North East from Scottish borders to as far as Leeds, we only have two temples and two priests. We have many elders who live here and have the knowledge of the scriptures that we call upon when needed. Freedom of priest to officiate is important for the family. Some would like the services of a Hindu priest at the time of death and after death.

There may be a need for family members from different countries to come to attend the funeral and take over the supervision of the cremation/burial rituals. Authorities need to ensure papers

for visa, etc. for such a visit should be provided without any hassle.

Some do wish to be buried or cremated in their country of birth. In such cases, the family needs support in organising the passports, travel and the necessary certificates for the travel.

There will be cases where there is a need for financial support for the family/spouse, help with counselling, probate, wills, legalities, to deal with employers and their rules. There is still a lot unknown to many and during such times of coping with the loss of a near and dear one, these procedures should be made available in an accessible manner.

The health authority or health institutions should be involved in a continuous dialogue with the family/spouse. A partnership approach with other authorities to cope with such needs should be taken into account to ensure there is a peaceful death.

In conclusion, dear friends, I can say we are all in this journey together and the only certainty is that there is an end. Some of us believe in Death and some of us believe in re-birth. Whatever your beliefs, together we can harmoniously work to provide a peaceful end to our current journey.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel poet laureate of India wrote: "Death's stamp gives value to the coin of life, making it possible to buy with life what is truly precious".

Vijaya Kotur



SIKH

Sohan Singh



First of all let me say a few words about Sikhism so that you all understand the context in which death or 'Good Death' is viewed.

Sikhs believe in One Supreme God. He is Eternal. He pervades everywhere. He existed before time was started, He exists now and He will exist forever.

GURU (The Divine Preceptor): within Sikhism primary significance is accorded to the doctrine of the Guru and their role as the communicators of the Divine truth. For Sikhs a Guru is a spiritual guide and an inspiring exemplar or role model. The term Guru primarily refers to Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism) and his nine successors. All manifested one light, just as one lamp is lit from another. After the passing away of Guru Gobind Singh, the Guru-ship was vested in **Guru Granth Sahib**, the holy scripture of the Sikhs.

A word which you need to remember is *Bani* (speech) the common abbreviation for '*Gurbani*' - the writings contained in Guru Granth Sahib.

First of all, let us see what Bani has to say about the purpose of life on this earth:

Bhahi prapat manukh dehuria, Gobind Milan ki eh teri baria... You have been blessed with this beautiful body. This is your chance to meet the Lord of the Universe. (GGS p. 378).

Our main purpose in life is to be nearer to God or to merge in the Supreme Soul.

Parmatam hain sarab atam hain. (Jap (u) Sahib)

God is the Primal Soul. All souls originate from that Supreme Soul.

We have always placed Life and Death at two ends of the spectrum, favouring one, and dreading the other, and continually floundering between the two. We also assume that when a baby is born it will flower into a young person, grow old and then die. It doesn't happen like that always. The reality is that only a breath separates life and death.

Bani says: *Ham admi hain ek dami, muhlit muhat(u) na jana. ...* We are people of one breath only. We do not know the span of our life or the time of our death (GGS p. 660).

It is an illusion that we are going to be here on this earth for a long time. Again Bani says: *Jo shadna su asthar kar mane, jo hovan so duur pashane...* What one has to leave here he takes to be everlasting.

The death, which will come he considers to be far away. (GGS.p 267)

Quite often we say, "Why is it happening to me, or someone close to me? There are millions of others."

Again the Bani provides the answer: *Ghar ghar eh pahunchah sadde nit pvun(u), sadan hara simriea, Nanak se dih avan(i)*

This summons is served on every house, the Messenger calls everyday.

Meditate, therefore on the One who summons, for the day so arranged for you approaches ever nearer. (GGS.p.157).

We must not forget that we come to this world when God pleases, and not when we wish.

Again Bani elucidates it thus: *Ghale awe Nanaka, sade uthi jahe...* O Nanak, we come to this world when God pleases, and depart when he so commands. (GGS.p.1239)

In life, what do we do? We work very hard for wealth, power and status. We get attached to the wealth we have created and other worldly attractions.

Again Bani says: *Shod jae tis ka saram kare, Sang sahai tis pahare...* They work very hard for what we have to leave behind us; But turn away the Lord, their help and Support who is always with them. (GGS. p.267)

Guru Nanak, on one of his travels, went to the house of a very rich man called Duni Chand. There were several flags outside the door, so Guru ji asked what they were

for. It was explained that each flag denoted a lakh (100,000 rupees) which Duni Chand had accumulated. On this Guru ji gave him a needle and told him to keep it until he asked for it in the next world. Duni Chand took the needle to his wife, and told her to put it in a safe place for the purpose indicated by Guru Nanak. She asked him as to how a needle could go to the next world and advised him to think about the message Guru Nanak was conveying to him.

And again: *Birakh ki shaya jio rang lave, uh binse uh man pashtave....*Who ever attaches himself to the shade of a tree feels regret when the shade (which is temporary) passes. (GGs. p.268)

Kabir a devotee of God in Guru Granth Sahib asks: How should one die?

Kabir marta marta jag(u) muua, mar bhi na jania koi,
Ese marnai jo mare bahut na marna hoi ...
Kabir the world is dying, every one dies in turn but no one knows how to die. Whoever dies let him die such a death that he does not have to die again. (That you will not have to be born again and again). (GGs. P.555)

Bani also says: *Marna na mandhaa loka aakheeai jae mar janai aisaa koi...*Death would not be called bad, O people, if one knew how to truly die. (GGs. p. 579)

And Kabir for a change welcomes death: *Kabir jis marne te jag dare mere man anand,*
Marne hii te paiaya pooran parmanand.
Kabir, ...death of which the whole world is scared is pleasing to me.

It is in death alone that one is blessed with the Supreme Bliss. GGS.p.1365)

The above verses from Guru Granth Sahib show the inevitability of death and that we should prepare for it so that it does not scare us. Guru Nanak has emphasised that in life we should follow three principles, and thus prepare for the next world: *Naam, Dan and Ishnan*, i.e. recite or meditate on the Name of the Lord, Share your earnings and lead a life of good conduct, or cleanse your inner self.

Even if we are not thinking of our own departure from this planet, 'The birth and leaving of close ones sometimes compel us in some profound way to adjust our compass bearings—which way should we be facing?' (From *The Secret Power of Light*)

The death of a close relative or friend may be the most painful experience of all; but it's important to focus on learning when there is pain. To do this, we need to ask, 'What has the death taught me? How can I change my thinking, my behaviour, and not be a stick-in-the-mud? How can I use this knowledge to improve the quality and purpose of my life and of those around me? Seeing things in this light, it is possible that death can have a positive and life enhancing value. You can derive meanings from death. Thus we can use death which is inevitable to live our lives in a more meaningful way.

Now imagine you are in your final moments, you are tranquil, and your thoughts are clear. Think back about the course of your life. What brought you the

greatest satisfaction? What were your biggest disappointments and regrets? What were your strengths? Do you feel you did your best? Were you clear about the purpose and meaning of your life? Did you make a contribution to others? How would you evaluate your life as a whole?

Most likely you can get in touch with a number of regrets, bad decisions, and ways you wasted your precious time. But fortunately it's not the end of your life. You have the time to correct some of the regrets and make changes in your life. It gives you an opportunity to change your life for the better, to make important changes, and put your energy into the things that matter most. After the fear of death is reduced, we can move forward and learn from past experiences. If you have made mistakes, have regrets; make sure that it doesn't happen again. Use the reflection on past experiences positively to try to carry on and live your life as meaningfully as possible.

Some suggestions to make your life more meaningful:

You are what you think. You can decide what you want to do before your departure from this world. How would you like to be remembered? Now think about your eulogy.

Michelangelo said that inside every block of stone dwells a beautiful statue. We all have a beauty within us, but we ignore it, and concentrate on outer attractions, and our desires. Some of us set out to make sense of the world, but get distracted by external influences and lose sight of the purpose and meaning they were searching. 'Our life is gold, in an untidy

bag.' We do not have time to unravel the beauty within, or to tap our inner resources. Our goal normally is external enrichment, and inner happiness tends to elude us. The effort should be to achieve an amalgam of enough money to live, to meet your needs, and spiritual excellence. You are then guided by higher values and beliefs because you know that your life has a purpose and a meaning.

Our willingness to act on our moral values, combined with a deep desire to improve and grow opens us up to our spiritual enhancement if not greatness. There may be sacrifices involved, a major change in life style, but if there is a deep desire to build for ourselves a truly worthwhile life, to live peacefully and develop spiritually, the goal can be achieved. It will be a life in which you have no regrets when the journey of life comes to an end.

When death comes, you accept it, knowing fully that you have left this world a slightly better place. You are ready for the next life, or to meet the Supreme Being. We believe that in the next world, our deeds are scrutinized by the Lord of Dharma. Bani says:

Changiya buriaia vachai dharam hadoor, Karmi apo apni ke need ke duur... We will be allowed to dwell near Him or far away as a result of our adjudged actions. (GGS. p.8)

I have dwelt upon personal responsibility above or what religion tells us what to do. But we must acknowledge also that not every one can be religious or spiritual, and accept death philosophically. There are people who remain committed to leading

a worldly life, and have no deep desire to commit themselves to a spiritual life. They don't have much belief in a religion and hold the view that they are better off as they are. They want to remain in their comfort zones.

Now let us see how we can render help to those in need irrespective of their religion, background, gender, ethnicity, or even whether they have a religion or are the secular. We need a caring society. Sikhism says that one should earn his living by honest means and share the earnings with others who are in need.

Ghal khae kish hatho dei. Nanak rahu pashane sei... He who eats what he earns honestly, and from his earnings shares something (with others); He alone O, Nanak, knows the True way of life (GGS. p. 1245).

The sharing or selfless service we call it *seva* should be used to ease the lives of others who are experiencing difficulties. Society has a responsibility to ensure that their last days on this earth are as comfortable as possible, and their dignity is maintained when they are too weak or frail to look after themselves. Such people might have worked very hard in their lives and contributed to the welfare of the society. We can't ignore them when they need our assistance.

Sohan Singh, of the Newcastle Gurdwara, has just had his 4th book published: "Spiritual Sayings from the Sikh Faith"



HUMANIST

John Severs



John Severs is a member of the British Humanist Association (BHA), North East Humanists and the National Secular Society and the BHA Local Development Officer for County Durham.

I would start by pointing out that humanists don't define themselves as having a faith, but, as what we hold to be true is evidentially based, we see Humanism as a belief system.

Before I can say anything about humanist perspectives on death and dying, it is important to know, briefly at least, what our beliefs are founded on – then we can better understand the essence, and the

limits, of our thinking; one is seen as a projection from the other.

Vitality, as stated in an 11 point charter produced by the American Council for Secular Humanism, humanism is a philosophy of the **Here** and **Now**. Our values make sense only in the context of human life rather than any supposed life after death. Humanist ethics are based on meeting human needs and answering human problems and morals are seen as developing from human experience and shared values in regard to living better lives. Humanists, although valuing help and communal action, take full responsibility for their own lives, based on making the most of the one that we know we have and helping others to do the same.

Our views on dying and death are therefore strongly influenced by this creed.

The dying process is seen as being transformative, hopefully the summation of a 'life well authored'; the vast majority will see it as leading to what is total completion, an absolute ending, with no possibility of a transference of what is termed the soul. Most humanists are atheists, rejecting the supernatural, with the minority, agnostics, stating they can't totally deny the existence of a supreme being or an after-life because they have no evidence for this, but, nevertheless do not expect to have any form of existence once the brain ceases to function. Reversing the saying, the joke goes that 'a humanist can be said to be a person with no invisible means of support'.

Not only do Humanists take responsibility for ordering their lives, they can, in a sense, where appropriate, take responsibility for their own deaths. This can take both a mental and a physical form. In regard to the former, it hinges on coming to terms with its inevitability, an acceptance, even within the knowledge of suffering a serious or terminal illness; developing a different 'mind set'.

This comes with the view that life is lived to the full, that it is productive, that it allows for achievements of various kinds, say academic, writings, making things, achieving good relationships, making contributions in a variety of ways, from donations to working for voluntary organisations, to assisting individuals – it is vital that they are helped to achieve the positive view that the life they had lived had been worthwhile. This was the purpose, life was not a test for something else, but an end product in itself and death was a natural culmination of the process.

Accepting death as an end does not make it any more pleasant, but, in a strange sort of way, it can make it easier to come to terms with. We accept the one life and focus on what we achieved in it, or, even, areas where we didn't or have regrets over.

Perhaps in common with those of faith, non-believers may wish to right perceived wrongs, things they had done and regretted, that are troubling the conscience. They do not want absolution but help in resolving it in an appropriate way. I quote Pam Burn, an experienced

humanist hospital and hospice chaplain, *“The regret and learning come from ourselves, but sometimes it needs a discussion with an objective person to bring that clarity of thought”*. This may lead to admitting something to a relative or friend that they were not aware of and apologising for this and/or other acts that they were aware of for any hurt caused, intentionally or otherwise; sometimes even reconciliation.

Humanists, who act as hospital or Hospice chaplains, in common, I’m sure, with those of faith, show enormous sympathy, even empathy, with those who are dying; they attempt to offer solace through listening and drawing people out in areas that they wish to expound on; some will need little encouragement, others more. Only a few will want to discuss their illness and treatment, particularly in later stages, but families may gain a great deal in coming to terms with a death, particularly of a young person, perceived as dying ‘before their time’.

A ‘Good’ death can partly be defined in terms of where and when, at a person’s own choosing. This choice, particularly in respect of dying with dignity may involve opting for assistance. Many terminally ill people, who do not wish to continue suffering great pain, travel abroad in order to terminate their lives. Pam Burn, who is highly experienced (visiting three hospitals and 3 hospices), tells me that not only may the matter be broached by the dying, but, often, relatives who cannot bear to see their loved ones suffering, in real pain, and/or losing all quality of life, and, finally, the thought of them hooked

up permanently to machines. The British Humanist Association believes that people, providing they are sane, should have full control of decisions regarding their own deaths and, providing safeguards are in place, should make a choice themselves and, as such, is a strong supporter of the ‘Dignity in Dying’ campaign.

Decisions made by humanists would include, when possible, how their own and, after discussion, possibly the deaths of relatives and friends should occur, who should be there and, where, and the nature and form of any funeral or other type of ceremony.

Some consider classic funerals as being unsuitable for “celebrating” a person’s death, a number, for example, not wishing relatives and friends to have to observe the coffin moved to be burned. My youngest brother was one such. He arranged for his body to be cremated with no one there and organised a celebration of his life in the local village hall – it was a marvellous and uplifting experience with computerised pictures, musical items he had chosen, a humanist celebrant reading his account of his life, amusing and poignant, his daughters reciting selected readings, the head of the school, where my brother had been a head of department, giving an appreciation. My third brother and his two daughters created a beautiful ceremony for my sister –in - law, again with readings (such as Dylan Thomas, Pat was Welsh), songs by favourite singers, appreciations from one daughter and a lady from the INS (Integrated Neurological Services), a

locally based charity providing long-term support for people with neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's, the illness she died from.

In other cases, no funeral or celebration at the time, but, later, a humanist appreciation ceremony with, sometimes, a memorial being created, for example, planting trees, such as a spruce, as a reflection of regeneration.

A friend hired the village school and everyone joined in a celebration which embraced holding hands in a circle in the playground.

Most rationalists, in common with the religious, feel a need to participate in rites of passage. It appears that, in the words of Professor Paul Kurtz, sometime editor of the Free Enquiry magazine, *"sharing one's grief with others may enable one to better endure"*, that they may, too, *"need a support system to bolster their despair"* and, taking part in a humanity based secular ceremony *"encourages a form of emotional catharsis"*.

Kurtz says that although *"death may be the end of consciousness...something survives, however, that which a person has given to others. This remains indelibly etched in our memories"*. Something that Humanists are happy to accept therefore is that they will be remembered and, also, may live on for ever through their genes.

Of interest is that my mother's and father's ashes were not buried. My father was blind for the last 12 years of his life. Two of my brothers & I thought that a fitting memorial would be to pay for the

recording of a talking book that blind people could enjoy.

In common with those of faith, humanists would wish a dying person to be comforted as much as possible, receiving the best palliative care, as appropriate, visited by friends and associates as well as relatives, possibly chaplains, people who are good listeners and able to draw out from the person what she or he is interested in. Pam Burn has written *"I think (and hope) that what I bring to my conversations with those who are dying is the comfort of talking to someone about anything they wish, who will not judge them or tell them what to think, but who will listen with care and compassion and suggest ways of viewing situations which will bring a measure of peace and calm to their thoughts at the end of their lives."*

A key element, it is clear, is willingness to listen. Pam Burn says that humour, handled carefully, is important, bringing a smile or a laugh can be heartening, and music or readings from talking books may be of real value. On a personal plane, I well remember singing Gilbert & Sullivan, favourite music of his, with my father, just a week or so before his death. Much of this may parallel experiences with those of faith, with an important difference, no reference to a long term future.

Of interest is that seriously or terminally ill people have shown a strong desire to die at home or, possibly, a hospice, but not in hospital, wishes that we should try to accede to whenever possible.

An important element in regard to feeling at peace before dying has to be that

concerns for the future of loved ones, particularly spouses, are resolved, ranging through elements of immediacy, such as funeral arrangements, to the on-going management of lives, the wish to make things as easy as possible, expressing in practical terms the love that exists between people.

In summary, I would suggest that as 'good' a death as possible would embrace a person having come to terms with their lives, possibly being helped to do so; is happy with arrangements made for care of loved ones; when applicable has chosen the place and mode of dying; has been helped and comforted by relatives, friends and, possibly, others, such as chaplains, who have shown patience and a willingness to listen and focus on, even draw out, the real, as opposed to supposed, interests of that person; is provided with whatever would make him or her most comfortable and where she or he, if desired, and close relatives have been fully involved in funeral arrangements.

I will end with verses from a poem "Optimistic Epitaph" written by a humanist, Jonny Hathcock, who was a professional songwriter. In it he expresses the view that he would live on in people's memories:

I do not think my song will end
While flowers, grass and trees
Abound with birds and butterflies
For I am one with these

I shall remain in hearts and minds
Of loved ones that I knew
And in the rocks and hills and streams
Because I love these too

So long as love and hope and dreams
Abide in earth and sky
Weep not for me, though I be gone
I shall not really die

John Severs



CHRISTIAN

Fr Colin Carr

Christians read the story of the Garden of Eden, and the disobedience of Adam and Eve, with spectacles supplied by Saint Paul who said that death came through the fault of one man, Adam, so that everyone since then has been mortal and death is a kind of punishment for sin. I doubt whether many Christians would see this as a particularly helpful line to take when dealing with dying or bereaved people. But it might be reinterpreted in terms of **Death as Interruption**, the sense that death is a particularly stark example of a world which is deeply unsatisfactory, whatever positive things we might also want to say about it. The sense of protest which people feel in the face of most deaths is not something which Christians should be shocked at, or try to suppress by explanations. Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" expresses a cry of anguish which we are not aloof from. We are not to be complacent about the death of a child, of a victim of ethnic cleansing, of a young mother, or of anyone. Some of the Catholic funeral prayers speak of Jesus weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus.

But there is another view of death in the Scriptures, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and what Christians call the New Testament, and in some Christian prayers: the sense of **Death as Completion**. Some people are described as dying "old, and full of years". There is a prophetic picture of the time when God will restore Jerusalem, and it says: "Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age; and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls

playing...." Those approaching death are surrounded by lively children, and so their death is a completion of their life. We want death to be seen as a part of life, so various interruptions feel particularly inappropriate – murder, bombing, road accidents etc. But also it is a scandal that poverty is death-dealing; poor areas, poor groups of people, have a lower life-expectancy than others, and this is an affront to human dignity. However there are some curtailments of life which Christians see as a kind of completion, as do other religions: martyrdom, supremely – for Christians – seen in Jesus giving his life for others; in one of the Gospels he is recorded as saying, as he dies, "It is completed": this is understood by Christians to refer to his saving, healing work, but it is precisely in the moment of death that the words "It is completed" are fittingly spoken.

However, in the less dramatic dying of those with a terminal illness, whose life is curtailed but who nonetheless enter with a degree of consciousness and acceptance into the dark forest, there can be a sense of death as part of life, as a completion which is sometimes spoken of as an achievement. Such language will seem meaningless to many, and in bad taste to some, but the hospice movement has perhaps helped our culture to understand and appreciate it a little.

For Christians it makes sense to talk of that completion because there is the further perspective, in which we can see **death as a gateway to life**. Paradoxically we can feel that sense of completeness precisely because death is not the last word. A true belief in Resurrection does not trivialise death, or bypass it: the road to Resurrection led, for Jesus, through the agony of Calvary and the finality of the tomb. But the seeming impasse is in fact a

pass – like a mountain pass leading to another side which is beyond our ken but which is grasped by hope.

This hope is not just a bet, a flip of the coin by an optimist who calls heads: it is based on a belief in God derived from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as understood by his first followers. Jesus portrayed God as Abba, a term of endearment for a Father who is all that a father should be, a Father to whom all creatures, but especially humanity, are precious. (I won't get into the debate about whether putting humanity at the centre is distorting the cosmos; we are talking about human death in this particular meeting). Such a God is a lifegiver, not ultimately a destroyer although clearly God does not prevent destruction and mayhem, natural or initiated by humanity. The purposes of this God of life are seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; it is important to realize what Christians don't mean by resurrection: it is not the resuscitation of a corpse: in the Gospel narratives, the risen Christ was seen and touched by some people, but their encounters were not with someone who had just had an unfortunate interruption of his life and was continuing with more of the same. He was in a new dimension, in what I like to call explosive continuity with what had gone before, but completely transcending it by triumphing, in his death, over death-as interruption. That makes what went before all the more precious; the glory of what is to come doesn't make the present a worthless waste land, but what some early Christian writers called a "vale of soul-making."

St Paul writes in one of his letters about the cosmic dimension of resurrection, in which "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain

the freedom of the glory of the children of God". Our lives and our death are part of a vast cosmic process which doesn't dwarf us but elevates us to be utterly precious, here and now. So in case you were getting worried, my feet are firmly on the ground, and that ground is the ground on which Christ trod and which he healed with his act of total love.



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This means that we can talk about death in at least one other way, which again may seem mad to the hard-headed or tasteless to people who are in the throes of a painful bereavement. We can speak of **death as gift and crown**. Christians are used to talking of life as a gift from God, but if we see death as a part of life then that too can be seen as a gift – a crowning gift. What I'm saying may feel a bit like the notion of death as completion, but what I'm emphasizing here is the quality, the preciousness of that life which is moving

towards death. That death is part of the whole cosmic process in which we obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God, and therefore – feet firmly back on the ground – our care for the dying is a celebration of the immeasurable glory of this human person with whom we are dealing; so, paradoxically, we wash the feet which will never walk again, we cherish the unconscious person. And if the language of death as gift and crown doesn't work pastorally for this particular person who is dying or facing bereavement, obviously we don't use it; but if we believe it ourselves, it will do marvels for the quality of our caring.

Fr Colin Carr, O.P.

NORTH EAST CHARTER FOR A GOOD DEATH

COMPASSION AT END OF LIFE

All of us should have the right at the end of life to experience a good death and our family, partners or other carers deserve support and compassion at this time.

Sensitive and appropriate end of life support should begin at the time illness is identified and continue throughout ill health, during death and in bereavement. It should be available to people coming to the end of life at any age and from any condition.

This charter will guide health, social care, community, voluntary and other organisations, groups or individuals who plan, develop and provide end of life care or support. It will help to ensure the right services are available at the right time for individuals who are dying, their families and carers.

All care providers should be aware of the charter, and its impact on their work, not only those who work specifically in end of life services.

Principles of a good death

Respect:

- To see death acknowledged as a part of life.
- To be treated with dignity, respect and privacy, according to our wishes.
- To value each individual and the contribution we may still wish to make to our family, job or social network, in a caring and supportive way.

- To have clear, honest and tailored information and good communication throughout illness or frailty.

Time to plan:

- If appropriate, to be told clearly and compassionately the reality that death is coming.
- To be provided, where possible, with a sense of how long illness may last and information about what can be expected, to allow time to plan.
- To be given the opportunity to make a plan for our care in advance which takes account of our wishes, and to have that respected by health, social care and all other services.

Care:

- To have access to end of life care in the location we choose, with every effort made to support this.
- To have a named key worker who will organise and coordinate care, including where this cuts across organisational boundaries.
- To have clear information about whom to contact around the clock and seven days a week if advice or care is needed at home.
- To be given every opportunity to take part in decisions which affect care. If the person who is dying is unable to do this then the views of people close to them must be taken into account.
- To receive speedy, practical help for the end of life.
- To receive the best care and support with any social difficulties.
- To have help to control physical pain and to alleviate emotional distress, if they occur.

Support:

- To have support with the practicalities of dying, death and matters after death.
- To receive appropriate emotional or spiritual support, with our beliefs and values honoured.
- To have access to appropriate specialist support, including counselling if required, for families, partners, carers and staff. This may be before or after death occurs.

This draft charter was produced in partnership across health, social care and other organisations in the north east of England, and with the involvement of patients, carers and their representatives.

It has been updated and amended to take account of the views expressed by members of the public and professionals during the consultation exercise which ran between October and December 2009.

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