

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Fear of Death and Dying

Some Light Hearted thoughts on a very heavy subject

Some years ago, a friend of mine was facing the birth of her first child. While happy that she was soon to be a mother, she openly confessed her fears about the actual birth-process, the pain, the dangers, and the unknown. But she consoled herself with this thought: Hundreds of millions of women have done this and have somehow managed it. Surely, if so many women have done, and are doing, this – I too can manage it somehow.

I sometimes take those words and apply them to the prospect of dying. Death is the most daunting, unsettling, and heavy topic there is, for all of us, our occasional false bravado notwithstanding. When we say that we are not afraid of dying, mostly we're whistling in dark and, even there, the tune comes out easier when our own death remains still an abstract thing, something in the indefinite and infinite future. My thoughts here, no doubt, fit that description, whistling in the dark. But why not? Surely even whistling in the dark is better than denial.

So I like my friend's methodology for stealing her courage in the face of having to face pain and the unknown: Hundreds of millions of women have managed this, so I should be able to manage it too! And in the case of dying, the numbers are even more consoling, billions and billions of people have managed it, and everyone, including myself, is going to have to manage it. A hundred years from now, every one of us reading these words will have had to manage his or her death.

And so I sometimes look at death this way: Billions and billions of people have managed this, men, women, children, even babies. Some were old, some were young; some were prepared, some were not; some welcomed it, some met it with bitter resistance; some died from natural causes, some died through violence; some died surrounded by love and loved ones, some died alone without any human love whatsoever surrounding them; some died peacefully, some died crying out in fear; some died at a ripe old age, some died in the prime of their youth or even before that; some suffered for years from seemingly meaningless dementia with those around them wondering why God and nature seemed to cruelly keep them alive; others in robust physical health with seemingly everything died of suicide; some died full of faith and hope, and some died feeling only darkness and despair; some died breathing out gratitude, and some died breathing out resentment; some died in the embrace of religion and their churches, some died completely outside of that embrace. But every one of them somehow managed it, the great unknown, and the greatest of all unknowns. It seems it can be managed. And nobody has come back from the other world with horror stories about dying (given that all our horror movies about ghosts and haunted houses are pure fiction, through and through).

Most people, I suspect, have the same experience that I do when I think about the dead, particularly about persons I have known who died. The initial grief and sadness of their loss eventually wears off and is replaced by an inchoate sense that it's alright, that they are alright, and that death has in some strange way washed things clean. In the end, we have a pretty good feeling about our dead loved ones and about the dead in general, even if their departure from this earth was far from ideal, as for instance if they died angry, or through immaturity, or because they committed a crime, or by suicide. Somehow it eventually all washes clean and what remains is the inchoate sense, a solid intuition, that wherever they are they are now in better and safer hands than our own.

When I was a young seminarian we once had to translate Cicero's treatise on aging and dying from Latin into English. I was eighteen years old at the time, but was very taken by Cicero's thoughts on why we shouldn't fear death. He was stoic, but, in the end, his lack of fear of dying was a little like my friend's approach to giving birth: Given how universal it is, we should be able to manage it!

<http://ronrolheiser.com/some-light-hearted-thoughts-on-a-very-heavy-subject/#.VHUwUstxIMs>

*Life is
changed not
ended*



*"Just when the
Caterpillar thought life
was over it became a
butterfly"*

~ Anon ~

*"When the heart weeps
for what it has lost,
the soul laughs for what
it has found"*

~ Sufi aphorism ~

*"Some people are so
afraid to die
that they never begin
to live"*

~ Henry Van Dyke ~

*Death does not
end our
story...
Death does not
end our
relationships*