

DEATH REMEMBERED IN DREAM AND REALITY
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Memorial Day reminds us not only of the death and sacrifice of men and women in the armed services in our nation's wars, but also of the death of loved ones and friends over the years, and of the possibility of our own death. All of us want to be remembered and honored in some fashion by those we leave behind, and however young or old we be we have all been touched by the reality of death.

The earliest recollection of the imminent possibility of my own death dates back to when I was a boy in the third grade. I woke up one morning with a sharp pain in my right side. It was an appendicitis attack. The doctor said I had to go to the hospital for an operation. I went. They operated. There were no complications. I was up and walking the next day. My relatives brought me presents which helped sweeten the ordeal.

The sense of my own possible death came during the application of the anesthesia, old fashioned ether, rarely used these days. I remember fighting against the powerful affects of the ether. I did not want to lose my self-awareness. As the ether took hold I felt as if I were falling into an endless dark abyss--it seemed like I was falling for an eternity, that it would never end. I literally thought I was dying and that I might never regain consciousness again. I wonder how many children fear their own possible deaths from minor operations. All I know is that I did. I was glad to be alive when I woke up the next day.

Children often encounter the reality of death first in the death of a pet. I remember an experience when I was minister in Middleboro. I was visiting with some friends. Their little girl had recently been given two small goldfish for her birthday. She them in a small bowl and enjoyed watching them swim about and nibble at their food on the surface of the water. Unfortunately, neither of them lived very long.

At the time of my visit the second fish had just died and she had buried it in the garden. She asked if I wanted to see where she had buried her pet gold fish. So I went with here over to a little garden by the side of the house. "Oh, isn't that nice," I said. She had put a little grave marker where the fish were buried. "But look on the other side," she said. "I've written something there. It says, 'Lisa, with love.'" How very touching. How very human. She needed to give ritual expression to her feelings about her once alive goldfish, feelings evoked by the mystery of death.

I remember when our blonde Beagle dog Penny died on my birthday in December 1976. She was 13 years old and got struck by a car. I had some private moments of grief as did my wife. Our daughter, Jenny, who was nearly 6 years old at the time, took it quite well, almost philosophical about it. She was ready to replace her with a cat or another dog which we did years later. Jenny had gotten the idea from one her playmates that after death people can come back as animals, any animal they wish. She thought it might be nice to come back as a horse. If we lived in India it would be advantageous to come back as a holy cow.

Remember the ditty, "Be kind to your web footed friends, for the duck may be somebody's mother..." Our daughter did not know, of course, at age 6, that this was a very ancient oriental notion called transmigration of souls. The term reincarnation is usually reserved for returning to life as another human being. I think we can be reasonably sure there is no horsing around after death, but you never know.

I nearly died once as a child. The summer after I presumably had learned to swim, dogpaddle style, I jumped off a small dock into water over my head, panicked, and forgot how to swim. As I was going under for the third time I managed to give out a weak cry for help. My father who was standing on the shore heard me, dove in, and rescued me from a near drowning. I have a deep respect for lake water born out of hard experience.

When I was in the 6th grade of elementary school a classmate, a girl, Carolyn Hussey, died from sleeping sickness following a case of the measles. I remember our teacher, Mrs. Hope, with tears in her eyes, informing us of the tragic event. I came to realize that death companioned, even children, yea, even myself. No town on the South Shore has escaped that hard lesson. Children too are mortal and subject to accident and disease which can take their lives no less than our own.

The first death on my mother's side of the family occurred during my early high school years. My uncle was killed in a private plane accident, a piper cub, at age 38. Uncle Bert was a heavy set, hearty and robust man, with a deep resonant laugh that was infectious. He was the life of family gatherings and parties. I remember having numerous dreams about him after he died. The dead do indeed continue to live in the depths of our being. Who of us knows where dream ends and reality begins?

Perhaps life is a dream of death, reality a dream in the mind of God, and we are all actors in the mind of the universal dreamer. Who knows? Who can say? I remember after my grandfather died, during my last year in theological school, a striking dream in which he seemed to be trying to communicate with me, but was unable to speak. Then I saw him climb into his coffin, rise up and get out, climb into his coffin again, rise up and get out. The message seemed to be clear--death was a resurrection of consciousness that transcended the demise of the body. At least that was what my unconscious seemed to be saying to me. And who knows where dream ends and reality begins.

Death sometimes has a macabre sense of humor in our dreams, at least in mine. What other kind of humor could death have, you ask? I remember a dream I had early in my ministry. I dreamed that a local funeral service was offering its customers death on the installment plan--die now pay later--at a reduced rate. What a way to beat inflation. A friend of mine (still in the dream) was taking advantage of this money saving offer and was preparing to die. He wanted me to come along for company. I was going to do it, but at the last minute I got cold feet--what else would a corpse have--and decided it wasn't such a good idea after all. I still had a lot of living I wanted to do. Death on the installment plan was a bad deal.

Don Juan, the Indian sorcerer, tells Carlos Castaneda that death is our eternal companion in life and the only wise adviser we have. It will keep us, if we listen to our death, from the cursed pettiness of human egotism and greed, and liberate a new energy for joy in living without attachments, with no economical layaway plans. Don Juan tells Castaneda that death is always to our left at arms length, watching. Castaneda looks, thinks he sees a flickering movement, and a chill runs down his spine. I remember a dream from years ago, long before I ever read JOURNEY TO IXTLAN, of looking into my bedroom mirror and seeing over my shoulder the pale rounded image of a ghost like face. It scared me not a little and I woke with a start and a shout. Reading Castaneda years later reminded me of my dream. Perhaps I had caught a fleeting glimpse of my eternal companion, death remembered in dream and reality.

I remember a friend of my former parish in Norwell who died in his mid 40's of a brain tumor. We were all caught up in the tragic drama of his leaving behind a family of seven children. A Memorial

Service was held in the church with close to 400 in attendance. A few months after he died I had a dream in which I saw him coming through an airport terminal from the other side into the lobby. His wife is there and greets him warmly. I realize immediately that he is dead and that this must be a dream. We see each other and shake hands and exchange greetings. I ask him how he is and what he is doing here. He answers, "I guess I came back to say goodbye." I put my arm on his shoulder and we ascend up some stairs. He disappears, the dream fades, and I awake.

I've wondered ever since, was the dream an expression of my need or his, or both? Who knows where dream ends and reality begins?

Shortly before my father died I had a dream in which I received a letter from him from the dead. In the letter he says now that he is dead he can express himself once again, which he was not able to do very well towards the end. He says how much he loved us and needed to say goodbye. I am puzzled how it is possible to receive a letter from the dead. Since his death dreams about him have continued from time to time. He continues to live in my thoughts and memories, in my dreams and imagination. And he is changing as I am changing. We are indeed part and parcel of one another.

I share these personal dreams about death and dying with you because I believe that what I have experienced is not atypical. The dead continue to live in us long after they have left the physical plane. They are part of who we are and we honor them on Memorial Day and other days by remembering them in our conscious thoughts and memories and in our dreams.

Dr. Carl Meier, a Jungian analyst, tells of the case of an older man who came to see him because of a series of strange dreams which he had been having. The culminating dream made a powerful impression upon him. He reported his dream as follows: "At the base of a high rocky wall a huge fire of wood was burning. The flames rose high up into the air and there was much smoke. The place was lonely and romantic. High in the air a number of big black birds were revolving directly above the fire. Now and then one of the birds dove deliberately into the fire and as it died its color was changed into white." Meier says that he felt impelled "to tell the man...that he was being reminded of the fact that he was going to die before long." Though he was shocked by this interpretation he faced it with equanimity. "Exactly nine months later," reports Dr. Meier, "he died quietly of a stroke after having attended to all of his worldly affairs."

We are all of us familiar with the myth of the rising of the Phoenix out of the ashes of death. A white bird in ancient mythology is a symbol of the soul. This man's unconscious was preparing him for the approaching reality of death by producing symbolic images which gave to the dreamer assurances of a rebirth of consciousness out of the fire and smoke of death and dying.

Dr. Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychiatrist, once said that an old man who cannot bid farewell to life appears as feeble and sickly as a young man who is unable to embrace it....As a physician," he noted, "I am convinced that it is hygienic...to discover in death a goal towards which one can strive; and that shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose." Jung concluded that the ancient religious teaching of a life beyond, though sometimes couched in mythological garb, was more consonant with a state of mental and spiritual health than the modern materialist view that physical death marks the end of consciousness for the individual.

The plain truth is we do not know that death is the ending anymore than we know that birth is the beginning of life and consciousness. We do know that death is mystery, companion and partner with the mystery of life. We cannot have life without death. Death would not be if life were not. Death is

the eternal companion of life, life the perennial partner of death. It may be that consciousness, human and divine, is the immortal child of the pairing of these twin mysteries.

Memorial Days come and go, reminding us of the death of soldiers and sailors in the carnage of war, and of our own death and dying, and the grief we all bear for irretreivable losess, theirs and ours. May we each find the courage to embrace in our own way the reality of life in death, and death in life, and the power of a dream to transform our living and our dying into a prayer of greater meaning for all.

Prayer: Death remembered in dream and reality--who knows were the dream ends and reality begins? We meet thee, eternal companion, in recollections of times past, in dreams remembered or forgotten, in future anticipation of ending and transformation. May we be lifted above the pettiness of small lives and selfish aims. Liberate us for larger purposes of living beyond the circle of self, sharing with others the joys and the sorrows of the eternal mystery of being. So may it be. Amen.