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DEATH HAS A BAD REPUTATION

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IJHC Editor

There are many moving personal and reasoned discussions of death and dying. (See reading list, below.) While few knock eagerly or even willingly at death's door, all of us will eventually enter there.

I invite you on a brief exploration beyond death because in western society a lot of our fears about death come from our belief that we are just material beings. We are stuck in a Newtonian paradigm of classical physics where we view the body only as matter. Medicine does this regularly. To many doctors we are just a bag of chemicals, and these doctors see their job in terms of helping us find the right biochemical rebalancing in order to get better.

When I was in medical school, I was taught all the wonders of medical diagnosis and treatment. I was not taught how to help people deal with death. In effect, I was taught that if someone had the affront to die under my care, it was probably my fault. I had to look for ways in which I might have contributed to this death by missing the correct diagnosis, as well as by my actions or inactions. On the one hand, that is how we practice responsible medicine – seeking always to learn from mistakes. On the other hand, in putting the responsibility for a patient's dying on the physician, that is an unnecessary and unwarranted casting of blame. If I hadn't had any fears of death previously, this certainly inculcated a very healthy avoidance of death at all costs, because death would have been my failure.

This is pretty crazy, because the one condition that every person who comes under my care is eventually going to face personally is death. In most medical schools they don't teach us as doctors to deal with that very well, nor do they teach us how to deal with bereavement.

I went along believing what I had been taught. I believed that the body was the basis for life, shaped by Darwinian evolution – from primordial chemicals many eons ago, through selection to the fittest survivors of today. I was taught that the mind and all consciousness were products of the brain because damage to the brain produces disorders of perception, thought processing and action. I was sure that belief in an afterlife and other spiritual beliefs were just wishful thinking or denial of the seriousness of what's going to happen to everybody when their body dies.

If we fear death and believe that there is nothing more after our physical life, we often do our best to avoid thinking about death or dealing with it. Every soldier going away to war knows that death is a clear possibility – an absolutely certain probability for *some* soldiers... but hopefully not for himself (and in today's army, also *herself*).

Men do not care how nobly they live, but only how long, although it is within the reach of every man to live nobly, but within no man's power to live long.

– Seneca

In western society, death is often seen as the grim reaper.



Credits [1]

In clinical practice I have often seen fears and denials of death that were paralyzing to the people who were dying, as well as to their friends and families. By not talking about their feelings, barriers were set up which kept the dying from dealing with their fears and the family members from dealing with their grief. Relationships were strained and tensions were often palpable – with everyone tip-toeing around in fear of upsetting others, and a pall of frozen feelings chilling the atmosphere. If the mutual protection pact is not dissolved, the dying may carry positive as well as negative feelings with them to their grave, and the living may end up with barrels of feelings sealed away in the caves of their unconscious minds – never to be opened but still fermenting a bitter brew of unresolved hurts, resentments, guilts, and gobs of positive feelings that got sealed away along with the negative ones and never reached the ears of those who departed with the pact of silence intact. (Ways to deal with these pacts of silence are discussed below.)

Even though we bury our thoughts and fears of death somewhere deep within our unconscious mind, it is impossible to avoid being reminded of some of the fear because there are frequent reminders of death in our everyday lives.

A day is more than a passage of time--it is a passage of life.

Before you were formed in the womb your days were numbered and set in place.

They are the chapters of the lessons you came here to learn, faces of the wisdom this world imparts, gateways to the treasures that belong to this lifetime alone.

Each day enters, opens its doors, tells its story, and then returns above, never to visit again.

Never – for no two days in the history of the cosmos will ever be the same."

-- The Lubavitcher Rebbe

Flowers fade...
and die...


Much of their
beauty
residing in
their
transiency.

Reminding us
of our own
impermanence.

Credits [2]



Forgetmenots

<p>Winter comes...</p> <p>and trees</p> <p>are barren.</p> <p>Credits [3]</p>	
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Poetry and metaphor can help us experience and deal with grief, bereavement and resolution of our feelings,

THE THUNDERBIRD
ANNUAL SUMMER SOLSTICE
POETRY READING
Ric Masten

in the plant world
 an annual lives but for a single season
 the fate of the first
 Summer Solstice Poetry Reading
 one would reason
 it being but another non-assiduous event
 good for an evening
 then falling away to decompose
 on the rising heap of spent affairs
 but surprise! surprise!
 we were deciduous

for eighteen years
 reappearing
 on or near the longest day of the year
 like clock work the date being
 a public appearance connection
 dependable as Good Friday is to Easter
 events lining up
 till once again the bolder is rolled aside
 assuring resurrection

just so
 Summer Solstice



brings us out again
 May, the Czarina of the Thunderbird
 rolling the stone aside
 enabling the poets to appear....

of course
 before a poet speaks
 if he looks down and sees his shadow
 he goes back in
 for six more weeks

(See also the series of poems that helped Martina Steiger process and transform her grief over the death of her husband, in this issue of IJHC.)

Rather than face our fears, we tend to bury them and run away from them.

Humor helps us tone down our anxieties and distracts us from the feared finality of death.

<p>An entry in Portland adult soap box derby.</p> <p>Credits [4]</p>		<p>Car in Portland Rose Festival 2007</p>	
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<p>Waiting... forever... for technical support...</p> <p>Credits [5]</p>	
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Looking back on all of this from my present perspective, it is actually puzzling how these fears of death have developed and become so firmly entrenched in our society. The evidence for a spiritual reality that transcends our ordinary, physical reality is abundant.

I came into an awareness of spiritual healing, as in Therapeutic Touch, Healing Touch, Reiki, Qigong, Shamanism and other traditional methods that are known around the world. And the healers brought me a healing for many of my fears about death and dying – not just as a treatment of my own fears but through teaching me new ways of understanding and working with people.

I learned that the body is more the product of the mind and spirit than the other way around. The mind can influence the body profoundly, manifesting mental, emotional and spiritual dis-ease from the inner worlds into symptoms and diseases in the world of biochemistry, flesh and bones. The mind can even predispose the body to death or sometimes even cause death (Benor 2003).

This has led to major changes in my understanding about life and death and theories to explain them. I learned how anxieties, fears, angers, emotional traumas and hatreds can damage the body to the point of death. I also discovered that love, hope, forgiveness and healing can heal the body, even near or at the point of death. (Much more about these understandings is elaborated in my new book, *Consciousness, Bioenergy and Healing*.)

These were relatively easy steps in my expanded understanding of bodymind and mind-body connections and interactions. I could readily see, with my medical and psychiatric training, that the mind could influence levels of physical tension in the body and could alter hormonal balances. Tensions and hormones could weaken the immune system and leave it open to diseases of many sorts.

Healers insisted that biological energies were the templates for health and illness and that spiritual healing could influence the body through these energies. At first, this was too much to swallow. I assumed that healers were probably good placebos, influencing people to make them better through suggestion. It was only through receiving healing myself, and eventually through learning to activate my own intuitive awareness and bioenergy healing abilities that I came to understand what healers were saying.

Being trained in western science, I was bothered by the lack of a theory to explain these healing effects. Then I realized that from a quantum physics view of the body, our physical existence can be perceived as energy, not just as matter. This is what healers say they are addressing.

I spent 25 years exploring what healing is and share a lot of that in Volume I of *Healing Research* (Benor 2001a; b). This book examines research, which shows that healing really works – as a bioenergy intervention and as a projection of mental wish/intent/prayer. I found 191 controlled studies exploring whether prayer and bioenergy healing can have an effect – and 64 percent of these studies confirm that healing is a potent intervention.

Healing and spiritual awareness

If prayer at a distance can have an effect, it means that you can reach out through your wishes, through your prayers, through your healing meditations, and can touch someone else from a distance. Think of that. You are an energetic being, as are other people. Your energies can interact with the energies of people from a distance, just as a radio transmitter and radio receiver transmit messages. Except that radios have a limited range and mental and intuitive awarenesses don't seem to be limited by distance. People have connected through intuition and healing from opposite sides of the planet.

I asked healers how they understand this and they started telling me, "Oh, I'm not doing it, it's Christ or God or Buddha or Allah." I said, "Thank you very much. You're pushing my boggle threshold just with the energetic healing. I don't know that I can handle this other business." But over the years, with my own growing intuitive awareness and healing gifts, I found that inner knowing of something beyond sensory awareness feels very real, and sometimes more real than anything that I know through my senses.

Being trained in psychology, medicine, psychiatry and research, the skeptic in me demanded that I look carefully at the research to see if this isn't still just wishful thinking or delusion to explain all of it. I was amazed to find an enormous, impressive body of research on telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis ("PK" – mind over matter) that shows it is possible to be aware of and influence other people across vast distances.

While we can't yet explain extrasensory perception and PK, there is no reasonable doubt that they exist. If it is possible to interact with the world outside ourselves without physical interventions and without inputs from our ordinary five senses, then the claims of healers are more credible.

But what about the spiritual explanations of healers?

I was astonished to find an article in the American Journal of Psychiatry (which is not your New Age journal) a survey published in 1988, asking people who had been bereaved of someone close to them whether they had the experience of sensing their presence after they had passed on.

What would you expect in this conservative journal survey? Two out of three people said, "Yes!" They had either seen or heard or just sensed the presence of the person who had passed on.

Have you had an experience like that? If you haven't, there is a two out of three chance that anyone else you ask will be able to tell you of one.

So the "S" word (*spirituality*) is becoming more and more acceptable, as we find more and more evidence to support healers' and other people's reports of these awarenesses. And we can raise our hands in public and people won't put us away. But, I'll tell you, when I've asked people who have been bereaved about their experiences with bereavement, most of them had never spoken of this to anyone else because they were sure that they were losing their mind, or they were sure the other person was going to think they were losing it.

I then went on and explored the literature on the afterlife and what people believe of the afterlife. There is wonderful research on channeled information where sensitive people can speak with a spirit who has passed on. Now, you might say, as I did, "Well, that's a pretty good imagination or good people-awareness. The fortune tellers probably wait for you to say 'yes' when they make a guess about your life, and then they make another guess following that one, and if you are shaking your head or looking skeptical, they go in another direction," But it goes way beyond that. Intuitives can hone in on specifics of your life and your relationship with that other person who is no longer alive, in ways that are absolutely convincing that they are in communication with that person. They will describe the spirit person's mannerisms, mimic their speech patterns uncannily, and disclose intimate details that only you and that person shared, and which you had never discussed with anyone. Faced with evidence of this sort, it is difficult to explain away their channeling.

What's more fascinating to me, since being involved in healing, is that some intuitives and healers offer psychotherapy with the people who are on the other side. Many times people leave this earth, this physical plane, with unfinished business. So we who are still in physical existence carry guilts and hurts and angers because of what we didn't say or what we did say. And we wish that we could have done things differently. Similarly, there are people in spirit worlds who carry unfinished business, and wish they could have had the

opportunities to clarify unfinished business and make amends for errors of commission and omission. Well, the good news is that people in the flesh and people who are in spirit worlds really can clear the closets of old emotional and relational garbage with the help of a good channeler.

And the skeptic in me said, "Well, what's this all about? Is this all an elaborate ritual for clearing emotional dross? If there is a spirit, where does it actually go? What happens to it?"

In partial answer to these questions, I found further research. Wonderful studies on reincarnation show that people in third world countries, many of whom are below the age of five, report detailed memories of previous lives, which have been verified objectively. They will name relatives' names; they will name and describe places; they will identify people in person by name and by relationship and relate intimate details and circumstances of the experiences that they had with those people in a previous life (Stevenson 1974; 1987).

So here is wonderful evidence to help my left brain accept what my right brain is telling me is real. And I encourage you to develop that right brain part of you – but not to the detriment of the left brain, because you need to keep a balance between the thinking and the intuitive.

Though I've satisfied my own questions through a thorough study of the research on spiritual dimensions (Benor, in press), I know many people who still maintain that the mind and emotions are simply products of brain activity. (Bergland 1985; Dennett 1991). Their reasoning is simple: If parts of the brain are damaged, then certain mental and emotional functions go awry or stop working. Therefore, they believe the brain is the source of these experiences. Similarly, they hold that spirit communications are pure fantasies, channeled readings are lucky guesses, and reincarnation is a cultural myth that helps people have less fear of death.

An alternate hypothesis, which I believe more accurately explains the reports of spirit communications, is that the spirit is an independent entity, which connects with the body *through* the brain. In other words, the brain is like a radio receiver. If the brain is not working properly, then these communications are impaired or blocked.

This is a long way around to suggesting that death of the body is not the end of a person's awareness or existence. My skeptical scientific training leads me to persist in asking, "Is there any other evidence to support this belief?" Surprisingly (to me, but not to intuitives who have direct perceptions of spirits), there is.

People have Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) when they are resuscitated from drowning or brought back from death's doorway after a cardiac arrest or other close brush with death. . They sense that they are going through a tunnel towards a light which gets brighter and brighter. A Being of Light greets them and conducts a life review. In an instant, they perceive each and every moment of their life, seeing their pleasant and painful interactions with others during the entire course of their recent sojourn on earth. The being of light beams total and unconditioned love and acceptance. The only judgment involved in this life review is that of people towards themselves, perhaps regretting acts of commission here and of omission there; seeing ways in which they could have been more accepting or compassionate; less critical and rejecting; or more understanding and giving. Then, after a discussion with the Being of Light, they are either told they can choose whether to stay in the world of spirits or choose to return, or that their time is not up and they must return. They then wake up, back in their bodies. The hallmark of the NDE is that people are transformed. They know with a certainty that transcends linear reason that life persists after physical death. They no longer fear dying.

They have been declared dead. They were flat-lined. There have been children who had 20 minutes without breathing, were resuscitated and came back fully conscious, reporting what happened on the other side. So, we have first-hand reports from children who had no prior information about NDEs, relating consistent stories of what it is like to cross the boundaries between life and death, and they, too, say that they are often greeted by relatives on the other side who welcomed them. And this is an experience that is reported not just in America, not just in England, but all around the world.

Skeptics still debate whether this is a part of a phenomenon that some of you may remember in the old-time tube TV sets, where when you shut them off the picture went down to a little white spot and then it

went out. Some people say the NDE is just a manifestation of a dying brain that is bringing up images as the bioelectricity is fading and consciousness is waning. Contradicting this theory are the studies comparing people who have been in coma and who have not had an NDE when they come out of the coma, and comparing people who have had an NDE while being in a coma. People who have had the near-death experience are universally transformed. They know there is something more to physical life. They then come back and they know that they have a reason for being here. They may abandon relationships and careers, which they find are no longer satisfying, seeking partnerships with people who share similar visions and finding careers of service and healing that are truly fulfilling.

Other evidence for an afterlife comes from people who are bereaved. They often report that they either see, hear, or simply sense the presence of people who were close to them and have died. These encounters are often very healing on many levels. They offer opportunities for resolution and closure around unfinished business between the bereaved and their spirit family members and companions; comfort to know that the departed are not gone forever and are in a place they feel good to be in; and a strong reassurance that death need not be feared because it will not be the end of the bereaved person's life.

Further evidence yet comes from deathbed experiences. I haven't had the direct observation of this myself, but I've spoken with many people who have. When people are near death, they often have a wonderful smile and a peacefulness comes over them as they name the names of relatives who have preceded them. They will sometimes talk with them and appear to be hearing responses to what they are saying. If you happen to be present when a dying person experiences this, then please don't let the doctor give them an antipsychotic medication at that point. This is a very real experience for them. They are probably partly in their spirit body at that time. The spirit body appears to detach from the physical body and then can communicate with the spirits on the other side. It is not uncommon for other family members who are sensitive to perceive in some way the presence of these departed relatives. Whether this is hallucination is still debated by the skeptics, but we also have evidence of people who have had reincarnation memories, near death experiences, or have seen bereavement apparitions.

An interesting confirmation of the validity of these reports of reincarnation memories, bereavement apparitions and near death experiences is that they are repeated in virtually identical detail by people in the US, UK, India and other countries.

So we have a variety of evidence from many different people in many different parts of the world and many different experiences to help us accept that if someone is smiling at someone at their deathbed, they are perceiving a real experience.

So what's it all about? To help answer this question, the last piece that I would add to this discussion is from the observations of many intuitives and healers that we come into this life not just as ourselves but as members of a family. In some cases, we end up leaving our family of birth and we end up with a family of choice. Either way, we are not just representing ourselves in the dramas that are our lives; in what we do with our lives we are working out a series of relationships with other people. And it appears from the best we can gather from those who speak from first-hand awareness of the other side, that our family relationships are as important as our other choices in life. And how we live our lives is intimately related to our families.

Within the perspective of reincarnation as a family experience, illness and death may be opportunities for other members in a person's family to learn caring in a way that they may not have learned had their family member not had the illness.

So everything that happens in life is an opportunity and an invitation to learn lessons – both personally as well as through our relationships with other people around these challenges.

Practical lessons from accepting death as a natural part of life

The pact of silence forged from fears of death can be resolved through healing interventions. When a caregiver provides a safe environment and encouragement to broach the topics of death and the feelings surrounding it, there is an immediate warming in the room in which death is awaited – that is otherwise chilled by feelings frozen through the pact of fearful silence. Though this process might be accompanied by storms of tears and floods of pent-up feelings, the relief after the storm brings an enormous, healing warmth and openness into the relationships. Those facing the transition to spirit are freed to speak from their hearts – not only about their fears of hurting others by raising the issues of death, but also about all of their positive, loving feelings. Those who have a longer time before crossing the river into the worlds beyond are freed to speak of their grief, to ask forgiveness for deeds done and promises unfulfilled, and to express their thanks and love for the person who is leaving them.

As a physician, I learned this care for the dying and bereaved through practical experience, mentored by healers who worked in hospices. I am delighted to see medical students today seeking electives in hospice care – and finding it a deeply satisfying experience (Batcha 2004).

*Portions of this editorial are taken from a panel presentation under this title at the Conference on World Affairs, Boulder, CO, 2004

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IN THIS ISSUE OF IJHC

Autumns of our lives is our feature section in this, the September, 2004 issue.

Rondi Lightmark details her journey to widowhood, as she nursed her husband at home through his terminal cancer and into a healing death. While this was obviously a difficult and challenging experience, Lightmark found many healing lessons for herself in this journey.

Martina Steiger, ThD found relief and nurturance in journaling her way in poems through her widowhood. She generously shares a sampling of these here.

The subject of wholistic deathing (thanatology) is a growing area of interest – heretofore largely neglected in conventional medicine and nursing practice. The WholisticHealingResearch.com site has a new list of references on grief, bereavement, and spiritual awareness around the time of death.

<http://www.wholistichealingresearch.com/References/death.asp>

Adina Goldman Shore, PhD, studied the effects of Reiki healing on depression and stress over the period of a full year. She found lasting effects with only six 1 to 1 1/2 hour treatments. Shore shares the qualitative aspects of her study in this article. (Shore published a quantitative analysis of her results in *Alternative Therapies*). Though this is unstated in her article, Goldman illustrates how a researcher who is herself a healer can add dimensions to the design and execution of a study.

Sherry Osadchey, MA, LMFT, brings us an excellent discussion on many ways in which the body participates in the stresses of our lives, and how we can deal with our stresses through the body.

David Gersten, MD, in his third (final) part on the treatment of borderline personality disorder, shares ways in which he helps people master this challenge with the help of spiritual perspectives.

Joanne Callahan, PhD, details how Thought Field Therapy was enormously helpful to a person who was undergoing treatments for cancer. The TFT reduced side effects of medications and helped to deal with both the current stresses and underlying psychological issues related to the cancer.

Martin Brofman, PhD, is an American healer living and working in Switzerland, offering workshops internationally on spiritual awareness, healing and self-healing. His path to becoming a healer led through his own challenges with cancer.

Our poetry section is graced with offerings from two physicians, David Watts, MD and Barry Sultanoff, MD. Martina Steiger's journaling in poems about her bereavement is detailed above.

Larry Lachman, PsyD, in his monthly column on wholistic news items, reports on coping strategies for women with breast cancer, the use of hypnosis and existential psychotherapy with terminal illness, and more.

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