Can Understanding Death Change How We Live Our Lives?

The idea of healing the fears that we have around death led me to collect stories and interviews with scientists, with people from different cultural and religious traditions, as well as atheists and skeptics. How do we begin to awaken to the inevitability of our own mortality? BY MARYLIND SCHLITZ, PH.D.

The Death Makes Life Possible Project

This project originated before I can even remember, when I was a precocious, inquisitive, pink-jammed eighteen-month-old. At that time, exploring my environment, I did what toddlers do: I put things in my mouth. It happened to be a bottle of lighter fluid that my father had left on the table, and it sent me into three months in and out of intensive care. I think during that time there were some seeds planted: wanting to understand healing, consciousness, the impervious nature of living and dying. As a little child, holding on at some level to her physicality, at the same time I was dipping in and out of that state. This and other circumstances in my life catalyzed my curiosity and led me on an odyssey around consciousness, exploring the furthest reaches of our human capacities.

I gave my first lecture on the topic of possible survival of consciousness after bodily death back in 1979 at the Rhine Center in Durham, North Carolina. My talk included scientific inquiries into what happens after we die, what is the nature of the soul, and is consciousness something more than the brain? People at the Rhine Center were interested in how to bring an evidence-based perspective to these perennial questions that are part of every religious and spiritual community. These questions had only marginally been addressed by science in a formal way, so that captivated my interest. Over the years I started collecting interviews for diverse projects—some on healing, some on transformation—and in the process I learned a lot more about our views toward and relationships with death worldwide. It is ultimately the biggest transformation that we are all aware of and we all participate in.

The idea of healing the fears that we have around death led me to collect stories and interviews with scientists, with people from different cultural and religious traditions, as well as atheists and skeptics. In the newly released film, Death Makes Life Possible, we have perspectives from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all represented. We also hear from a man who was given a terminal diagnosis and tells about his experiences, which is very inspiring and also very heart wrenching.

About three years ago I was helping a friend, Deepak Chopra, at a time when his colleague, David Simons, had been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Deepak was teaching some workshops and I did some teaching with him, kind of on the fly, so that he didn’t have to carry it all.

During that time I showed a video of interviews about death, about twenty minutes long, to the group that had come to his seminar in Sedona. Afterwards he told me, “You know what? We should make a movie.” And who wouldn’t want to make a movie with Deepak Chopra? That night when I went to bed I was overwhelmed with the thought that I could not possibly take on the production of a feature documentary. The fundraising alone was daunting. I woke up in the morning and thought, “you’ve just got to tell him no.” We met for lunch and he said, “Marilyn, you must not worry about the money.” Through a Kickstarter campaign and other donations, we raised a significant amount of funds, enough to make it happen up to this point, and it has manifested something that I think is really beautiful.

Exploring Consciousness

There are so many different ways to think about the topic of consciousness, the nature of our direct experiences, glimpses of insights that aren’t part of the standard physical-materialistic worldview. From a scientific point of view there have been attempts to document case histories of things like out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, reincarnation. There is a very rich body of research, done at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where they have collected many cases evidential of reincarnation, including children born with birthmarks that seem to correlate with the cause of death of the person they are remembering. That provides another level of objective evidence to support the hypothesis that consciousness can survive bodily death. Researchers at the lab at the Institute of Noetic Sciences have been looking at what happens in the brains of mediums who believe they are communicating with the departed.

In Death Makes Life Possible, both the film and the upcoming book, we are trying to dispel some of the fears people in our culture have around death, to understand our own views, especially the fears, beliefs, opinions and emotions that lie below the threshold of conscious awareness. How do we begin to awaken to the inevitability of our own mortality? I think one of the critical factors for many—and why they are so fearful—comes from uncertainty. We are all co-existing, using the same supermarkets, going to the same schools and hospitals, yet each of us carries a different little bubble of beliefs and worldviews around with us. And I find that really fascinating.

One of the things that we are discovering through science, the wisdom traditions and spiritual/religious traditions, is this idea of interconnectedness. Western science has been very objectively oriented: the only
valid form of truth is that which can be manipulated, measured, somehow touched or physically represented. What we are starting to see through quantum physics and information biology is that non-local consciousness provides data points for an emerging new paradigm. I think all of this research offers us a new kind of map or model as we encounter mortality. It begins to empower all of us every day. So I think of it as a practical application of consciousness science.

In traditions where they don’t have the sense of separation, where death is not considered so finite, people have a much more permeable relationship with the departed. On the Day of the Dead, Día de Muertos, in the Mexican community, they believe that the membrane between the living and the dead is thinner, so spirits come in and there is a lot of celebration, communication and appeasement. In the film I also interview Lauren Artress at the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, who introduced the labyrinth to America. She talked about the stages of grief and how one can process them in the labyrinth where there is a natural cycle of beginning, middle and end. We can walk a labyrinth in a meditative way, asking a particular question, describing a certain experience, connecting, praying in whatever form, and it can be very therapeutic. I think that the world’s traditions offer us a lot of tools that we forget when we are in the middle of our own crisis. Dreams are also a very potent way for people to stay connected with their loved ones.

**Visioning Global Transformation**

The boomers are coming of age and returning to their middle and end. We can walk a labyrinth in a meditative way, asking a particular question, describing a certain experience, connecting, praying in whatever form, and it can be very therapeutic. I think that the world’s traditions offer us a lot of tools that we forget when we are in the middle of our own crisis. Dreams are also a very potent way for people to stay connected with their loved ones.

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**ur culture is not too keen about death and dying. Truth is, neither am I. Perhaps I’d be more open if we could end our days by just fading into the night—at after a great dinner with folks we love. I also find death much more acceptable on days when I’m feeling immortal than on days when I’m wondering, with anxiety, why I still have that peculiar pain. This lapse of faith leads me to read many books about the cycles of life and death. Then I study other cultures that seem to have a deeper awareness of this sacred circle, like the Native Americans. When Chief Crazy Horse went into battle, he proclaimed, “It’s a good day to die!” Some American Indians still say it, every day, to be ready for death and to live their best life. So I started saying it myself in my morning walk, after the flowers were blooming in the day and the world. And when I open my arms wide and look out at the sky and mountains, I often feel it: It is a good day. A good day to die. To merge with the universe and see what comes next. I especially feel it on blue-sky days when the crows are squawking and the trees are in bloom. Yes, I think, if I have to die, this would be a good day for it. (Notice I’m still using the “it”?)

Then, one morning, while my eighty-something mother was visiting from Philadelphia, she came out on the patio and sat down nearby, just as I was doing my morning “hellos” to the sun, birds, et al. She regards my diverse spiritual practices with some bemusement, but tries not to intrude when I’m at it. Still, she’s also curious, which spurred her to move closer to hear.

“I’m here to the birds and the deer,” I said, arms open wide. “Don’t forget the squirrels.” Mom interrupted.

“Hello to the flowers, bushes, and trees.”

“You have some beautiful trees,” Mom said “Really.”

“Finally, I spread my arms even wider and announced, “It’s a good day to die!”

“Well,” Mom chirped in, “it’s not a bad day to live either.”

“Don’t have a point. So now I end my blessings like this:”

“It’s a good day to die!” I say.

And then, with gusto, “It’s a good day to live!”