

Living, Dying, and the Fear of Death

Do you have a fear of death? Let me rephrase.

Do you fear being dead? Most people, I gather, tend to shudder at the thought of their own non-existence. However, if you regard death as your final end, if death is nothingness, what's to fear? Alternatively, if you believe death is the passage to a blissful hereafter, being dead is all good. Of course, if you worry that you will inhabit some un-blissful place hereafter, then there is nothing more fearsome than the prospect of death. Fortunately (I think), relatively few people seem to have this worry.

Do you fear dying? Many people do, with good reason. Dying can be a painful, protracted, expensive, lonely, debilitating process. Modern medicine can usually relieve most of the physical pain that would otherwise accompany dying, but modern medicine can also lengthen the dying process, occasion much suffering from rigorous treatments, cost huge sums, and contribute to the isolation, loneliness, and prolonged debility of the dying person.

Legal instruments such as advance directives, living wills, and Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST) can be very helpful in mitigating any fears one might have regarding the sometimes unavoidable challenges of the dying process.

However, I believe that the greatest challenge we face when we contemplate our final days is to live as we have wished, in our best moments, to live. Who wants to die with regrets? Who wants to die with important unfinished business? Who wants to die with broken trust, guilty conscience, estranged relationships, unkept promises? Who wants to die with a legacy of shame or injury, carelessness or destruction?

It is fitting to fear dying in a state that one could have, and should have, avoided -- a state of neglect respecting those matters of greatest importance to our lives. But honestly, we all die in some state of un-fulfillment. We are, after all, "only human." We mustn't be too hard on ourselves for our shortcomings. In the end, love and forgiveness must have the last word, for ourselves and all humanity.

Nonetheless, as long as we're alive and kicking, there are all kinds of ways to make the prospect of dying more a welcomed rest in peace than a feared indictment for wasting the opportunities that lie before us. What better way to banish the fear of death than to do our best at living by loving life and the world!

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One of the most distinctive features of being human is the capacity to contemplate one's own death. Most people are curious about what happens to them after death. Of course, unless there is some form of life after death, this curiosity makes no sense.

If death is an absolute end, then nothing can happen to you after death if death, because there is no "you" for it to happen to. Death in this case is nothingness, sheer absence of existence. Yes, something can happen to the dead body that remains, but whatever happens to it cannot happen to you because you no longer exist. People who believe death is the end have nothing to fear, because nothing can possibly happen to them after death.

Most people, however, seem to believe in some form of life after death. And most of them seem to regard it as a blissful existence. In American culture, most people claim to believe in heaven and hell, but it's rare to find the person who expects to go to hell. It's also rare to find the person who is eager to die in order to get to heaven. Which makes me wonder, just how serious is this belief in a life after death?

It appears that very few people are afraid of being dead. Either being dead means nothing, or it means paradise, neither of which is to be feared.

So the fear of death, if it exists, is most likely the fear of dying. And there are good reasons why one might fear dying. It can be