

INTRODUCTION – WHAT IS DEATH

After I finished writing *What is Love?* a tiny voice said to me, “Write *What is Death?*” Love and death are so intertwined and each teaches us about life.

A dear friend once said, “The three most important days of our lives are the day we are born, the day we figure out why we were born and the day we die.” Our divine purposes are as varied as human beings are unique.

Perhaps one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is: If I die tomorrow, how will I be remembered? Your answer will teach you how to live. Through this book I hope you can find more meaning in your life by better understanding and accepting our inevitable transition into the next realm.

Death has long been a taboo topic for people. We avoid it. We dance around it. We don’t really know what to say when someone dies. We are taught to believe funerals are depressing and loss of life is a tragedy.

Death in our society is generally seen as a negative thing, rather than a continuation of a natural cycle that begins when we are born – intensifying as we become more emotionally and spiritually evolved – and comes to fruition when we die.

Death will always remain the great mystery. It is our personal faith that defines our feelings and thoughts about death. I believe that faith can grow as we open our hearts to gentleness, love and compassion. This openness prepares us for death and teaches us how to live today.

What is Death, Anyway?

What is death? That is a question that I began grappling with as a child – starting when I lost my first dear pet, and then when my beloved father died. He was so young. He lived with such compassion, forgiveness, love and grace. I wondered how God could take him, how someone so kind would be allowed to die and if I would ever see him again.

Since then, beloved pets, relatives, friends and, and more recently, my wonderful mom, have passed on. Just as I was there to see my first grandchild born into the world, I have been there to see people I love leave this place. Over time I have come to know, through my personal experiences, that death, like birth, is a natural, remarkable process.

Like so many people who shared their thoughts in this book, I learn more each day to peacefully accept death with the sense that it is not the end, the last stop or the “demise” of loved ones. To me it feels as if those I love have moved into another room, and that they are never truly far away. I miss them, but I am not without them.

The question "What is Death?" can be pondered on so many levels: emotional, physical, spiritual, medical, metaphysical. Where do we go when we "cross over?" How does the soul move on? What happens in the last breath of life that takes us into death? Do our loved ones greet us on the other side?

In preparing this book, I interviewed hospice workers around the country who have pondered death's significance and value. Many have reported their patients' recounting of near death experiences. Perhaps you've heard a similar description: "It felt like my soul crossed over to a most profound, loving place, but this was not my time, so I had to stay on Earth."

Although accounts of these kinds of experiences are becoming more and more common, medicine and science have yet to validate them. But there are many small miracles that occur every day that defy logical, linear explanation.

One day a few months ago, I walked into my office and saw a vivid rainbow lighting up the room. I asked my assistant if he saw the same thing, and he said yes. He had worked in that space for several years, but had never seen such light. Consider that a rainbow is the result of sun shining through water drops in the air between you and the sun. The raindrops act as small prisms, separating the light into colors.

There was no direct sunlight in my office, and there could not have been water drops in the air. What was the explanation? I don't believe such a force to be nuclear, gravitational or electromagnetic – something described by science alone.

Every day science makes new discoveries regarding forces, fields and particles. But I believe I was witness to another dimension. Perhaps scientific principles formed some basis for the rainbow's appearance; but I felt its presence as something extraordinary, something mystical. It's possible that all three – mystical forces along with science and religion – might have had something to do with my rainbow, but I can't explain it, and neither can anyone else.

I like to believe that my mother appeared to me as this rainbow; a reminder that she is still with me. When I take a moment to slow down and think of mom, I love the idea that our dear, departed loved ones continue to make themselves known to us earthly beings.

As Others See It

Every religion has its own beliefs and teachings: Christians believe in a heaven where they will be greeted by Jesus; Hindus believe the soul continues to reincarnate; Native Americans believe the soul becomes part of nature; and atheists believe, basically that "when you're dead, you're

dead.” There are thousands of spiritual schools of thought that give us even more ways to view dying, death and the fate of the soul.

Each person possesses his or her own view – sometimes shaped by religious beliefs, yet often enhanced by personal experience. Even the most devout of us may see beyond the veil of current religious understanding or logic when faced with illness, death or the trials of going through a death experience with a loved one. The death of someone close changes us forever, and often motivates us to search even deeper for answers.

In this book you’ll find theories, beliefs, personal wisdom, experience-based knowledge and intuitive insights from almost 150 people of various religious backgrounds, customs and beliefs. From doctors and clergy to people who rarely talk about death and dying, their diverse views point to so many possibilities. It is my hope that just by reading through their responses, new doors of understanding will open for you.

Loss Leads to Learning

As time goes on we begin to lose those close to us, but we learn much from those losses. I learned from my uncle. He was 97 years old, and lived with my family the last six months of his life. In his final weeks, he told me fascinating stories about his time on Earth – he was a bachelor until age 60, and divorced his wife at age 90. He

told me his divorce was stressful, and he didn't want to re-marry. Each day, even when he was in a coma, I rolled him out into the sun. (He was a sun worshipper, and his leathered skin showed it.)

The day he died, I placed my hands on his shoulders and said, "Nat, I believe there are angels all around you. You are completely loved." He opened his eyes, smiled and gently let go. At that moment, I felt a deep, peaceful, calming kind of love that to this day I can hardly explain. It was more than anything a gift – an awakening to a better understanding of the calmness that can be found in death.

My first really big loss was my father when I was 19. My dad made such a huge impact on my life because of his honorable character. He lived the Ten Commandments and then some. When I think of dying with a full life behind me, I think of my dad's as an example. He died young, but lived with compassion, forgiveness, love and grace and that very fact gave me comfort when he passed; it made his loss less abrupt and gut-wrenching than I anticipated.

When my dear mother died not too long ago, my close friend Alvin remarked, "Death is so final." Death feels final to me most of the time. However, I experience moments of continuance. By that I mean I can still feel my mom's love and presence, especially in times of prayer and

meditation. Somehow our relationship continues on a very subtle level.

My mom always told us that we are not supposed to look back, only forward. I believe that is true in life and death. In life, we must look beyond the obvious, not have regrets and learn to let go. Upon death, we must look beyond, not back, and let go.

An hour before my mom crossed over, I whispered in her ear, "I love you, Mom. You are the best mom in the world. I feel completely loved by you, and your love for me will live in my heart forever. I'm so blessed and grateful that you are my mom. I love you, I love you, I love you. Thank you for being my wisdom teacher, my best friend and the best mom ever."

I rubbed frankincense, myrrh and lavender oils on her feet, hands and head. In my heart, I let her go, I did not cling to my roiling emotions – but felt love and gratitude. I asked friends, Tibetan monks of the Drepung Loseling Monastery, to pray and chant for my mom. After she passed, they visited her apartment, brought roses and performed some of the sacred funerary rites spelled out in the *Bardo Thodol, The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I decided on my last birthday that I would celebrate my mom's life and my birth together. My children were with me. In Gestalt therapy, this kind of celebratory memorial

is called “completion.” I felt it was important for my children to see and hear what a loving, full life my mom had.

How do we do that exactly? How can we come to peacefully accept death as a natural, remarkable process? For me, a key step was the realization that a piece of our dearly departed stays with us.

I believe that when my mother died, some of her spirit, her energy, her life force – stayed with me. My friend Sally told me that she, too, felt a subtle energy enter through her solar plexus when her grandmother died. In the realm of the unseen, love is stronger than death. And I know that a big piece of my father lives inside of me and forms my character and my moral code to this very day.

Conversely the dying worry about leaving their loved ones behind. Many people are ready to leave but hang on because their families are not ready to let go. My father was concerned about departing so early. He didn’t want to leave his wife and three children.

And their concerns are well-founded. I was only 19 years old, and, of course, I didn’t want to let him go. His death meant that a cherished part of me was dying. Despite all the work I have done to understand and embrace death in a more spiritually mature and evolved way, I experienced

that pain again when my mother died, more than 30 years later.

Over time, however, I have learned to “stay in touch” with them both regularly. In my personal meditations and spiritual practices, I move deeply into my heart and send love to my dad and mom. I let them know that my life is good, and that I remain grateful for their profound teachings. I find this process spiritually healing, and it serves as an opportunity for growth.

I also feel my meditations give comfort to those who have crossed over. Knowing I am well allows them to continue their soul work without worrying about me. My parents are now the subjects of my truth. Their death taught me that our relationship can continue and their wise teachings continue for me. My heart tells me when they are speaking through others. I may sit next to someone on an airplane and receive pertinent information about a personal matter. I may think: “Mom, Dad, help me on this matter,” and their wise thoughts and guidance show up for me – the person next to me will say something that will make me realize it’s coming from my parents, speaking to me in a deep, profound way. If you pay attention to these signs, you will hear them.

By the same token, a mistake we make is that we believe we have forever and we postpone being with those we love the most. It is always later than we think. Every day,

let's make a toast to those we love, wherever they may be!

And live fully in the moment. A life lived with faith, hope, charity and happiness is a quality life. The quality of the journey is what really matters.

Science and the Soul

Science and religion present two complex systems of thought regarding death. They both offer explanations, but each one is incomplete. Although science is ever evolving and expanding its scope, it still cannot definitively explain the soul, afterlife or even the beginning of life.

The most widely accepted theory of the origin of the universe is called the Big Bang Theory, which postulates that a "singularity" exploded (or more precisely, "expanded") and brought the universe into being. The theory doesn't explain what it is exactly that "banged," where it came from or why it happened.

Science is still full of areas of interest that we have no understanding of whatsoever. Researchers often use the code word "dark" to talk about such phenomena. When you see the word "dark" in the field of science you may know that they are talking about something they can't understand – like dark matter or dark energy.

Is it possible that the dark matter in our universe – which has never been directly measured – could in part be made up of consciousness and the so-called spirit world?

Sir Isaac Newton, considered by many to be the greatest scientist who ever lived, described the mechanics of gravity and invented calculus in order to calculate the orbits of planets more accurately than anyone before him. He solved the mathematics of gravity, but didn't attempt to say what gravity actually was. That was left to Albert Einstein, whose brilliant theory of relativity completed the picture of the world.

Interestingly enough, it was Albert Einstein who proved that atoms really exist, and *that* is what he received the Nobel Prize for, not for $E=MC_2$ as most people assume.

It was left for the architects of quantum physics to examine the world of the atom and its subatomic particles. Quantum physics has shown us that we have a very long way to go indeed before we can say that we have a complete understanding of the physical nature of the universe.

Science is a continuous march from discovery to discovery, with each new discovery changing what we believe to be the truth about reality. I wonder if science may progress to a point where it can measure and quantify the afterlife? Will quantum mechanics be the

answer, or at least part of it? Perhaps the quantum particles of consciousness will always stay connected and influence one another. If we have a soul, and it exists in the form of energy not yet known to physics, does that mean it does not exist? If you shared deep love and a soulful connection with another human being and that person dies, could it be that the love and soul connection also dies, or does it somehow stay alive – either in our hearts and minds or in a place, unknown to science, in our own cosmos?

The cells in our bodies are continually replaced. Do thoughts, feelings and memories, as non-cellular matter, outlast the body? Does love and consciousness then transcend our physical being?

Consider the Alternatives

Faith and tradition do offer moral guidance while we're here on Earth, and they address the question of existence, as well as where our souls go when we die. Learning how science and religion can mesh in world traditions brings us toward additional answers about the afterlife. This is fundamental because we will always ask questions.

Science asks: "What is the origin of mankind; how did the world begin; how will it end? When we carefully examine the two camps, science and religion – and there are examples of both in the quotes of this book – something fascinating begins to emerge. Science and religion, in all

parts of the world, in aspects of work and avocation, seem to be pulling closer and closer.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama supports a cutting-edge exchange program at Emory University for scientists and contemplative monastics. I am certain that a major breakthrough in science and spirituality will arise from this meaningful exchange. The historically stiff line of differences will softly begin to blend. Perhaps the most interesting example of melding science and religion is the documentation of near-death experiences. Is death as divine as life, or is it better? What does "better" mean? Raymond Moody wrote a book called *Life After Life*. He interviewed hundreds of people who had near-death experiences and came back with new perspectives on life.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that after death, consciousness remains alive and we travel through various intermediate states, called *bardos*, in the interval between death and the next rebirth, *reincarnation*. Tibetans further believe that a dead person can still hear earthly voices for some time after death, and so it is their ritual to read the *Bardo Thodol* to the deceased to guide the dead person through the *bardos* to insure that they will be reincarnated as a human.

Reincarnation is a fundamental belief in Hinduism and Taoism, too. Plato endorsed versions of reincarnation. A friend who is an orthodox rabbi, once told me that he

believes in reincarnation. Many leading Kabbalists feel the same way. In Christianity, Jesus' resurrection is, to me, a form of reincarnation. He rose again and appeared in the spirit form, first to Mary Magdalene and then to his disciples. Mary was the first to "see" him. *Perhaps Mary could access both realms simultaneously?*

Many other spiritual teachers believe the work of the soul continues on the other side. Even people who have hurt us, who were unkind or were parents we did not have a good relationship with can work with us to heal issues after they die. That's why it is so important to that we find it within ourselves to forgive as well as be forgiven, even after death. If we harbor feelings of resentment toward one who has died, we should take the opportunity to heal and improve that relationship.

The late parapsychologist and researcher, Hans Holzer, once said: "Everything we have here – they have over there. That is a duplicate of this world, except over there the purpose is to develop the personality from the negative to the positive, or to give them assignments, or to send them down for some more education."

William James, the founder of modern psychology, maintained that our consciousness is fed by a cosmic immaterial realm into our brains. When our brains die, the consciousness carries on.

Lockhart McGuire, a professor of medicine in Virginia, took the concept a step further. McGuire was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. He was asked to address medical students about his condition and his impending death. "by whatever method the leap of faith occurs," he said, "it can be orienting during life and, in the face of death, possibly transcendent and even redemptive."

The pain and suffering that often go hand in hand with dying are understood by many as an enlightening part of the journey we make toward a developed concept of God, or however you wish to refer to a Supreme Being.

Alan C. Mermann, MD, a Christian, has served many people on their deathbeds. He believes we must recognize several fundamental segments of self-understanding in relationships with patients and their families as one is about to cross over. He writes:

1. Does life have meaning? The shadow of death sweeps away easy answers and supports the alternative of considering anew the ...human journey.
2. The major religions in Western culture stand firm in their faith in a life after death.
3. What will it mean to 'not be?' Our dying patients can raise those spiritual questions that have called to us for so many centuries...the roles of religious faith and the life of the spirit...provide meaning where chaos may seem to reign. Our hearts and minds can open to different realities.

4. ...our dying patients are ourselves father along on a common journey.
5. Life comes to a close, persons require honesty from those who care for them, and pen communication about what the future holds. Love, in its many forms, is a gift we can offer those who face death. The intimate relations between love and forgiveness suggest a role for the physician as advocate in resolution of conflicts...An examined life may invoke a deep desire for forgiveness by God so that true peace may come at last."

At some point in our earthly existence, many individuals awaken to the concept that the most important part about life is that it is a stepping stone to death. The work of end-of-life experts Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, as well as Ondrea and Stephen Levine, has shown that we have so much to learn from the dying. As Kessler has says, "The dying have always been teachers of great lessons, for it's when we are pushed to the edge of life that we see most clearly."

If you think of spirit, peace, love and death as four elements in a circle, you may envision a map of life. Death is equally as significant as the other three. Each year on November 2, Mexican tradition celebrates *el Dia del Muerto*, or the Day of the Dead. This is a time to remember family members who have died. Families bring food and flowers to honor their relatives. At night, they light candles and set up picnic near their departed ones'

graves. The Day of the Dead isn't sad. It's a celebration, a way to reconnect to those who have entered a new dimension.

Perhaps death is moving into a silent realm of love and intimacy. As Robert Sardello states in his book *Silence*: "As we enter into Silence, we enter into Wisdom. We do not become wise but enter into the objective Wisdom of world processes. As we enter into the Wisdom of Silence, we allow ourselves to be taught by the things of the world. We allow the revelations that flow from the Silence to give rise to their thinking through us."

Silence helps us get in touch with our inner calm. It is a place where we can find emotional freedom, a place where we can deeply connect to our intuition. I believe we may find many personal answers in silence and meditation.

As quoted by Thomas Merton and Johannes Tauler, adapted:

"O God, may I find deep solitude and gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers and sisters. For I know, O Lord, that the more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. May solitude and silence teach me to love others for what they are, not for what they say. Give me your spirit to learn wisdom through humility, knowledge

by letting go, how to speak by silence and how to live by dying.”

What I Believe

We can't discount our own personal experience of truth. If you were to ask me, "How do you feel right now?" I am the only one who can answer that question accurately. There is no experiment that science can conduct or piece of equipment that can be used that will give a 100 percent reliable answer to that simple question. Yet inside me, I *know* beyond any doubt the exact answer to that question and to countless others like it.

And this personal understanding is not limited to internal consciousness. The experience of seeing the rainbow in my office is just one example of things I see in nature that speak to me.

I have even felt that way about clouds. I love staring at clouds. I could look at them every day and never be bored. When I was a child, I would lie on the ground and look up at the clouds and imagine animal shapes, flowers and buildings. When the sunlight shines through them, they look like mystical kingdoms, islands or magical spheres. When I stare at clouds, my mind wanders. I think heavenly thoughts filled with dreams, wonder and awe.

They stimulate my curiosity, my personal search for truth: Do they just float up in the sky and give the earth shade

and rain, or do their shapes have meaning? Do clouds communicate a hidden message to us? Do they tell their own story or that of someone from beyond?

I have no definite answers, only beliefs that stem from personal faith and what I deem mystical evidence. In my personal search for truth, for God, the Divine, the Creator, it seems obvious that life is only one stage in the hierarchy of eternity. Life is a stepping stone to death. And after death we ask: Do we transcend body, go to a timeless existence and find life everlasting?

The intransigent dualism of life and death is an earthly trapping. Our lives are made up of body, mind and soul. Body and soul are not dualistic, but they are different. Is it possible that they have distinct functions after death – one disintegrates while the other goes on? I deem our immaterial minds and hearts far removed, literally, from our material bodies; that the mortal fate of our physical body does not imply the death of our love, hearts and souls.

Like the Tibetans, I believe there is a time period in which there is a sacred, precious “hanging out” after physical death. There is change going on. I have felt the “presence” of close friends and family after their death. I had conversations in my heart and mind with them. I felt their souls were growing and changing before they agreed to their final departure from the Earth plane. For the pre-

deceased, it is a time to be quiet. In contemplation, there can be felt a sense of the mystical meaning of the universe.

A Prescription for Death

As beings who possess a body, mind and soul, we tend to think of these three parts of ourselves as intertwined – until death. We see life and death as being an “either/or” concept – you are either dead or alive. But perhaps the body disintegrates yet the mind and soul go on and do not require a material home to survive?

I’m in that camp. I don’t believe that the mortal end of the physical body brings death to the mind and soul. In fact, I believe the death of the body is a kind of freedom for the mind and soul to live on, and therefore, the love experienced by any soul survives infinitely. Although science and some religious traditions may refute it, to my mind, neither can absolutely “prove” it isn’t that way. The evidence is, at best, incomplete.

Thus, the distinction between life and death is, at worst, relative. In deep meditation, it is possible to voluntarily visit the space that lives beyond time and live in the eternal now. That can be interpreted as dying before you die. Even as our childhoods die and we move through adolescence into adulthood, each stage of letting go will move us forward in wisdom so that we can love more fully and live our lives with empathy and compassion.

Another example of this relativity of the life cycle is when a loved one passes. A part of me died when my father and mother crossed over. Divorce, changing jobs or losing a pet bring pain to our hearts; they are mini-deaths. Yet, new lessons come forth and experiences unfold. We give birth to original thoughts and fresh ways of living as we work through pain and heartache, learning to adapt and expand.

Now and then you'll see denial in a family that is about to lose a loved one. Denial can temporarily shut down the love and heart connection, and one will miss the beauty of death. The greatest gift you can give someone is dying is to impart loving permission to go. It takes courage and wisdom to know when to give permission to those we love to release and expand into the new realm. My mom used to say, "Life is for the living." When someone dies, we must live on and continue to love them.

I have written and performed several memorial services and they were each a celebration of life. People told touching stories about the deceased. We prayed, celebrated and looked at photographs that told a thousand words about the person who had died. In some cases, videos were shown as we laughed and reminisced. This type of dynamic remembrance is sacred and vital to the letting-go process. Loving memories keep our loved ones alive in our hearts.

Staying present opens up the vessels of remembrance, the great river of feeling and deep inner-knowledge. The Divine presence is always there and since we can connect with the infinite now, upon death we can let go and gently move into this divine presence. Centering prayer and the welcoming practice have helped me to learn this letting-go, non-clinging process. Our ultimate letting go will be that sweet surrender back to Divinity itself.

The Universe is for us. When we take the first step, we are met with gratitude and trust. Something in us knows we are Divine. There is no place where God stops and we begin. There is a natural flow of life. Nothing stands still.

Love and Death

Most of us will be asking two questions on our deathbeds: How much have I loved? How much have I been loved? It will not matter how much money we've made or how many things we've acquired. It may not even matter how often and to what degree we've experienced love in our lives, because love and death are interconnected; spiritual love lasts forever.

When I think about what I value most in life, I consider human beings, animals and my natural surroundings to be most precious. Things don't make me happy; love does. I love my family and friends, my cats and dogs and I love the tree that provides shade for me to sit beneath in the

warm summer months. I love to give love, and receive it. Spiritual happiness is made by sharing our love. We can start with a child we love unconditionally, and then extend that love to family, friends and strangers.

Recognizing the preciousness of human life opens our hearts to connect deeply. None of us will live forever but the love we have extended and shared will continue – like perfume that lingers in the air after we have left the room. My parents' love still lingers in my heart.

In my studies with the writer Cynthia Bourgeault, I have learned that our egos must diminish here on earth in order that we may know more about love. The moment our egos are pushed aside, our hearts will open and our world will be transformed. Through the surrender of ego, in making ourselves less important, dying will become a rebirth. We are flowing out of the eternal state of things and upon death I suspect we will flow back to this eternal state.

As we drop deeper into our divine self, by letting go and finding who we really are, we discover our sacred strengths. The most important gift we can give one another is the pure transparency of our present. Our beauty lives in the quality of our aliveness.

If we can live out of the place where there is no time, we connect to infinity. Our beautiful human self is the vessel

in which the infinite manifests. When it is our time to cross over, we can go courageously or kicking and screaming – it's our choice. We can choose to live – and die – consciously.

Our heart is the ultimate space traveler. The electromagnetic field of love and relatedness connects us to all, back to the source, and we do not fall out of it when we die. We are all beloved creatures flowing from Divinity and someday we will gently flow back to Divinity. Love never dies.

Ask yourself, "What is Death?" Your answer might just teach you how to live.