

EPILOGUE – WHAT IS DEATH

Now that you've arrived at the end of this book, it's time to take stock of what we have read and see if we can come to any conclusions. We've heard the opinions of almost 150 people, and there was a section on what some of the great religions think about death. Having done all of that, are we any closer to consensus? It seems not.

The majority opinion seems to be that death is some kind of transition from one stage to another. But there were plenty of other opinions, ranging from an agnostic "I just don't know," through deep religious beliefs, to describing death as a change in the vibration of strings. But let's examine the very idea of what it means to "know" something. Can we *know* anything, and how can we know that we are correct?

On at least two occasions I am familiar with (coincidentally separated by 100 years – 1900 and 2000), scientists believed, and announced to the world, "We are at the end of science. We know just about everything right now, and it is only a matter of taking our knowledge out to a few more decimal places."

An early example came primarily with Isaac Newton and the discipline of "classical physics." Isaac Newton was the first to be able to calculate the orbits of planets to a degree of accuracy unheard of before him. In fact he had

to invent a whole new branch of mathematics, called calculus, to do it.

Famed mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes, believed those same ideas could be extended to the rest of science. *If only* we had enough data, we could predict anything and everything, and therefore there could be no free will – everything that happens *must* happen according to the inexorable laws of science.

This philosophy Descartes helped lay the groundwork for was called determinism. It ruled philosophy for hundreds of years, and still exerts tremendous influence over all our lives, even though we may individually know nothing about the actual philosophy.

Classical physics came to its completion with Albert Einstein. Newton used the concept of gravity to master the orbits of planets, but he himself had no idea what gravity actually was and made no attempt whatsoever to define it.

That was left to Einstein, who explained it through two seminal papers on relativity (the special theory and the general theory). Einstein “completed” classical physics and that’s when scientists made the announcement that they now “knew everything.”

Science recognizes four forces in the universe: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force. Einstein spent the remainder of his life trying to unify the four forces – but went to his deathbed unable to do so.

Soon thereafter, however, other scientists took up the gauntlet and tried to come up with what they called the “Theory of Everything.” Nobody was able to quite do it, but they came very close with a new theory called string theory (or sometimes superstring theory). At that point, they announced once again that they were on the brink of “knowing all there is to know.”

I guess I don’t need to tell you that they were wrong! In fact, I find it amazing that they could ever have been so egotistical as to even dare to make such a statement.

We know that we are part of a vast universe of incomprehensible size. But up until the early 1920s we thought that the entire universe was comprised of our solar system. It was only after 1920 that we had powerful enough telescopes to see beyond our immediate neighborhood. Then we discovered that the earth and our entire solar system were but a tiny part of what we now call the Milky Way galaxy. Our sun is merely one medium-sized star in one of the arms of the pinwheel galaxy called the Milky Way, which contains more than a hundred billion stars.

And then in 1924, Edwin Hubble, working with the most powerful telescope on earth, discovered that there are an almost endless number of other galaxies. It is estimated that there are 100 billion galaxies with about a hundred billion stars in each of them.

In 1990, the Hubble Space Telescope was carried into orbit by a space shuttle. The Hubble has helped to resolve some of the long-standing problems in astronomy, as well as turning up results that required new theories to explain them.

So it's only been about 80 years that we have any idea how large the universe really is. And what do we know even about our own solar system? No human being has visited any of the other planets and we've only set foot on the moon. On our own earth, we know very little about what's in the ocean and we can't even *name* all the species on our very own planet.

We are making new discoveries almost daily. Now there's a theory called the multi-verse theory. Many scientists believe that our universe, as vast as it is, is only one of possibly billions of *other universes*. So does it really make sense to announce that "We are at the end of science, and know about all there is to know?"

So if we *know* almost nothing about the physical world, should we be surprised that we know even less about the spiritual world, a world we can't see or measure with our scientific instruments or our sense?

We have a very good clue from science in the form of a theory called quantum mechanics. An integral part of the theory is called the theory of indeterminism, and is also known as "Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle." The theory essentially says that *ultimately we can't* know everything there is to know, not even in theory. There is a basic mystery built into the fabric of the universe so that we can't predict much of anything with certainty.

I'm sure you've heard of the Serenity Prayer: "Grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed, the courage to change that which can be changed, and the wisdom to know the one from the other." We can modify the prayer for our purposes to: "Grant us the serenity of mind to accept that over which we have no control, the courage to make the right decision when we do have a choice and the wisdom to know the one from the other."

So in light of the above, let's visit three basic questions:

1. Why do people die?
2. Is there life after death?
3. How can we handle the pain of loss?

Before I begin, let me say that I would *never* attempt to tell you what you should believe, especially in any kind of religious context. Only you can decide what rings true for you, but let's at least look at some different ways of seeing things to determine if there is anything helpful or comforting by doing so.

And while I have nothing to say about what you should believe spiritually, I do think that in a physical sense, science is a powerful tool that is not to be ignored completely. Of course, this itself is only a *personal* belief. There are literally millions of people who believe that the world is only about four thousand years old, and that God created *everything* one time only and that there is no such thing as evolution. I believe in evolution and God.

My personal beliefs have convinced me that, while science does not hold a patent on truth, nor is it any authority on spiritual matters, I can't ignore the basic evidence that the world is billions of years old, and that evolution is real.

Evolution, like any other branch of science, is hardly complete, and the theories are not infallible, but I can't ignore all of it because I don't believe some of it. The whole point of science is to propose theories and then to examine those theories through evidence and experimentation and thus to try to get closer and closer to the truth.

So now let's examine our three basic questions.

One: Why Do people Die?

(Especially good people, or innocent young people)

Somehow, and I don't pretend to know exactly how, life appeared on our planet. Of course I don't only mean human life: there are more life forms on our planet than we can count or even name. There is good evidence that there might be some form of life (microbial or otherwise) on other planets or moons in our very own solar system.

The chances of life happening may seem extremely rare. We can't even make an estimate of the probabilities of life arising, but just for the sake of argument, let's say that they are one in a billion. But remember that we have 100 billion stars in our own galaxy and over a hundred billion other galaxies that we know of. So the chances that there is life *somewhere* else, seem pretty strong to me. I am not so egocentric to say that I think humans are the pride of the universe. They may well be, but I think the jury is out, to say the least.

I don't pretend to have all the answers, but some things seem clear to me, at least as it applies to life on Earth. Somehow life appeared, and there seem to be certain properties associated with it. It appears that all forms of life have a built-in mandate to stay alive and to pass that life on through some form of procreation. Any one individual might not live forever, but we try to live long

enough to at least pass on life so that our species or life as a whole does not perish entirely.

This mandate of self-preservation is an extremely powerful force. We constantly talk about “saving the planet,” but the truth is that our planet is amazingly capable of taking care of itself. We have been through an amazing number of “catastrophes.” We’ve been hit by many asteroids and other bodies, including at least one big planet, which have at times stamped out most of the life on Earth, and even tilted us on our axis. Yet, not only has our planet persevered, but it has become arguably better. Had dinosaurs not been exterminated, other forms of life, including ourselves, could never have come into existence.

Had our planet not been hit by another big planet, we would have no moon and could not exist. Had our Earth not been tilted on its axis, we would not have any seasons.

Our planet has been through climate changes that make the current idea of global warming like comparing a firecracker to a trillion-ton atomic bomb. At one point our climate was so cold that we had what science calls “Snowball Earth” because the Earth was so covered in ice that it looked like a giant snowball. Scientists estimated that no life could have lived on the surface of the Earth during this period. And yet, apparently microbial life continued to live on beneath the surface of the Earth and

made possible many of the things that were *necessary* to our very existence.

In short we don't really know what is actually a catastrophe and what isn't. Without a very large number of "catastrophes," none of us would be here.

And while evolution seems to favor life, I see no evidence that it favors any particular form of life. No matter how conscientious we may try to be, thousands of species go extinct every year.

What we very certainly know, and it is reflected in many of the opinions expressed throughout this book, is that death is an integral part of life. If any species becomes immortal =, they would soon overtake the Earth and cause the death of every other species. In short order they would kill off themselves, too, as the Earth cannot provide for an infinite number of any kind of being. So death is necessary for life in general to continue.

And we can die for all sorts of reasons. First, there are the physical laws of nature. Defy gravity and jump off the Empire State Building and you will die. Eat poorly or introduce toxic things into your system and you greatly increase the chances that you will die sooner than if you hadn't. Or simply live too long and you will eventually die. There are many things you have no control over, like simply living more than 150 years, for example, and there

are also many things you do have control over: what you eat, what your morals are, how loving and conscious you choose to become, as well as countless other things that make you a direct participant in your lifespan.

The very inevitability of death is the most important lesson we can learn. If you know anything about the theory of yin and yang, you know that all things come in pairs, and we only know things by comparing and contrasting them to their opposite. How could you know hot, if you have no experience of cold? I could say that for any pair:

You only know
Light
Happiness
Good

Because of
Darkness
Sadness
Bad

And so on. Most importantly, life and death are just such an inseparable pair. We can't know one without the other. Whatever else you may believe, to me the obvious lesson is that you must cherish life. You must cherish those you love, because the day will inevitably come when they will die.

And it doesn't matter what your religious beliefs are. The main point is to realize how important your life is and to make the best of your life *now*.

If you take nothing else away from this book, I hope it's the lesson about how very precious life is, and you should honor that, both for yourself and others.

Two: Is There Life After Death?

There are two levels at which we can approach this question: the first is religious and the second is scientific.

Before we tackle anything religious, let's talk about religion in general. I happen to be an interfaith minister. Among other things, it means that I have studied many other religions besides the one I was born into. There are at least two reasons why I embarked on the study of other religions. First, I wanted to know as much as I could about God, and secondly, since I am the kind of person who is all about including everybody rather than subscribing to an "us vs. them" mentality, I was pretty sure I would be able to find things that all religions have in common, and that would show me the common ground where we all could meet.

And I must admit that I naively thought that all religions believe in some form of God, whether they called him Jesus, Jehovah, Allah, Yahweh, Mazda or any other name, seemed unimportant to me.

Imagine how shocked I was to find that all religions do *not* believe in God. There are quite a number of them, Taoism

and Buddhism being the first two that spring to my mind, that have no belief in any kind of God – no heaven or hell, no commandments or other rules to follow. So now, where was my common ground?

I pondered that for some time, and I concluded that what they all had in common was *belief*. In part, you are cured.

So for me, the hallmark of religion is belief. And belief, by its very nature is somewhat antithetical to proof. If you could prove what you believe in, it wouldn't be religion any more, it would be science. Faith, the cornerstone of any religion, requires you to believe in something for which you have no proof, but must simply accept *on faith*.

Because of that, I can't make any convincing and irrefutable argument for any religions belief about life after death. I can't prove there is a heaven. I can't prove there is reincarnation. I can't prove *any* belief, or we would no longer call it a belief.

Moreover, your beliefs color what *you* will see. A Christian doesn't see Allah when he or she has a vision, any more than a Muslim sees Jesus. So a Christian may see Jesus and heaven after death, a Buddhist may see the *bardos*, and so on. Each religion has their own idea about what happens and I propose that by the very definition of religion and faith, we can *never* make an irrefutable argument for any religion's particular belief. If you are

blessed enough to be a person of faith, nothing I can say will convince you otherwise, anyway, so I won't even go there.

And diverse religions say that there is *only one thing* and that thing is God. If you make something, you make it *out* of something. If you are the only thing there is, then you make it out of yourself. So Christians would say that you are made "in the image of God." But Asian religions would actually argue that we *are* God. And since God never dies, there is no real death.

Humans (and all life forms) are made of things that we also find in inanimate objects. But *something* animates that pile of chemicals and makes it alive. For most religions, that something is their version of God – whatever you want to call it – and that which animates never dies.

Let's resort then to science. Surprisingly, we may find that science itself can give you more ammunition for what you already believe.

There aren't too many "laws of science" – they are usually classified as "theories." But one of the things that comes closest to a "law" is the "law of the conservation of matter and energy." It says that matter and energy can neither be created or destroyed, it can only change form. In more modern times, we believe essentially that there is only

energy, and that what we call matter is really frozen energy.

But however we phrase it, the “law” tells that nothing really dies or goes away – it merely changes form. This is not something to “have faith in.” It is one of the bedrock principles of science, and you have no doubt noticed that several of our contributors brought up this very point. So we know that nature isn’t exactly creating any new atoms or elements, and that what we have is all there is and it merely changes from one form to another.

We also know from the science of evolution that life in general continues. All the leaves on a tree might “die” in the fall, but new leaves will come back next spring.

But of course, what we really want to know is what exactly happens to mom and dad or Uncle Mel.

Well, think about it (and all you need here is common sense, not even science). My mom and dad are both deceased, but I carry half of my genes from mom and half from dad – so they live on in me *literally*. But it isn’t only their genes that live on in me; the very core of my being, the *ethics* that guide my life, were in great part instilled by my parents. Every person I have ever met has left something behind in me that lives with me right to this very day. No one I’ve ever known will ever die as long as I live and can think of them and continue to love them.

Better still, I don't even have to have met them. I can pick up a book with the words of Aristotle, who died almost three thousand years ago, and he lives on through me and all the thousands of people who have been touched by his words.

How many artists continue to influence our world even though they have been dead for a very long time? Through their work, they are alive still in our world. And how much more so is this true for Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and countless others who have changed the world and live on through their ideas?

Your faith may also make you believe that you will see them in heaven or whatever you see as the next life. Your beliefs may enable you to "talk" to them any time you like and have them help you with life's trials and tribulations on a daily basis. But whether you believe all of that or none of that, you cannot deny that people live on in countless ways and that death is *not* the end of them. I do not believe we should dwell on death nor should we deny the fact that we will die someday. Therefore, we need to live each day with *love* in our hearts.

Of course, what death usually does mean is that you will never see that person in the flesh again, so you can't hug them and kiss them, for example. And that part is in large measure responsible for the severe sense of loss and pain

that we feel when those we love die. That leads us to our final question:

Three: How Do We Handle the Pain of Loss?

Here, too, there are many possible answers to this question and most of them come, again, from religion. It may be comforting to believe that they don't really die and are waiting for us somewhere on "the other side."

I would never try to tell you what to believe nor to take away from you any belief that provides you will comfort. Like all things religious, they are, by definition, beyond proof.

And while we are on the subject of religion, it brings me to an interesting theory that Buddhists have. The Buddha was not himself a religious figure. He did not intend to start a religion, to think of himself as divine or to tell people about paradise. Although many people think that "Nirvana" is the Buddhist equivalent of paradise, nothing could be further from the truth. The word Nirvana means "extinguished" and the idea of Nirvana is that you will never again have to come back through reincarnation. You will simply be "extinguished" and cease to exist.

Buddha was shocked to find so much suffering in the world, and his only goal was to *stop the suffering*. Eventually he believed he solved the problem, and he encapsulated his goal in four simple ideas now known as

the Four Noble Truths. (In a way, there are only three truths, as you'll see in a moment).

The Four Noble Truths (simply) are:

1. Noble truth Number One: All of life holds the possibility of suffering.
2. Noble Truth Number Two: Things have the power to cause suffering because of our attachment to them.
3. Noble Truth Number Three: Therefore, do not get attached!

Easier said than done. To this, Buddha answered with the fourth Noble Truth, which is often called the holy Eightfold Path, a guide to self-improvement that will lead to the end of the cycle of rebirth.

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Aspiration
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

There are many people in my life whom I adore. I'm sure that is true for most of us. I've heard many times from people who tell me that their children and grandchildren are the biggest joy in their lives. I know a couple who have been together for almost 35 years, and they seem to love

each other and respect each other more with each passing day.

But I also know that if either of those two people dies, the other will be devastated. I know that if one of those grandchildren dies, the grandparents will be devastated.

So what are they to do? Well, they could try to be unattached – to not care all that much in the first place. Or they can avoid such relationships all together.

But at what cost? Because of how sad I was when each of my parents died, do I wish I never had a mother and father I loved so much? Because I will be sad if my husband dies or one of my children, do I wish I had never fallen in love, or had any children?

I believe that for most people they would have rather had all that joy in their life, even at the cost of the pain at the end. I don't think they would rather have never fallen in love, never had children and never had grandchildren.

In summary, I would say these four things:

1. Life and death go together. To be born is to start on the path towards death. The only way not to die is not to be born. Therefore, know well that life is precious and fleeting, even if it lasts 150 years. Make every moment count, and love people *especially*

while they are here. Don't wait for somebody's death to connect with them and treasure them.

2. Whatever else you may believe about life after death, in countless ways our loved ones never die. They live on in our hearts, they live on in our actions and they live on in the hearts of every person they have ever touched.
3. The death of someone you love *will* be painful. That is a true measure of how much joy they brought into your life. The theory of yin and yang is inescapable. Every coin has two sides; the bigger the front, the bigger the back. The more joy you have had, the more you will suffer loss. Only you can decide whether the joy is worth the pain.
4. Time and again, I keep returning to Love. Life is about how much we have loved. Love is the true religion of every soul.

And I leave you with my sincerest wishes that:

1. You realize how precious life is and treasure every moment of your life and those you love.
2. You learn that love never dies and that often we can be closer to someone after they die than while they were physically present.
3. You strengthen your heart by the repeated exercise of loving and that you grow strong enough that you are willing to love completely even though you know how much you may suffer later by loss. For me, it is

always better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all.

With Love,

Lexie