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Addressing the fear of death

By David Sunderland

Death is “rumoured, suspected and feared” (Jenkinson). Yet we tend to fear most what happens short of death: old age and its “continuous series of losses”. Woody Allen said, “I’m not afraid of death, I just don’t want to be there when it happens”.

Gawand suggests “we rarely pay more than glancing attention to how we will live until we need health until it’s too late to do much about it”.

Death is the only certainty we have. “Fear can’t stop death, but it can stop you from living a full life” (Kübler-Ross). We usually refuse to face it until something forces us to; when this happens, instead of running away we have to get closer. And when we have the courage to act upon what we find, the response may be acceptance or even contentment. Ultimately, Ostaseski writes, “Love is the motivation that enables us to move toward fear—not in order to conquer it, but in order to include it so that we might learn from it”.

Osho suggested the idea of heaven and hell should be put aside “because they are only your greed and your fear” – and speculated that the richer the society, the more it fears death. “The fear of death is fear of time. And the fear of time is, deeply down, fear of unlived moments, of an unlived life”.

We can laugh in the face of death. Leget suggests humour, adapted to the situation and time, can open up unexpected new interpretations and dimensions of reality. We can always look on the bright side.

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