JEWISH REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

JACK RIEMER

Our topic today, the meaning of death, is now "in"; all over the country, in churches, synagogues, hospitals, colleges, high schools, it is being discussed—in the movies and in rock music. An entire issue of the Reform movement's magazine for high school students was devoted to death and dying as was an issue of the magazine of the Jewish college students in Boston. When I was in school, our attitude towards death was like that of the Victorians toward sex: we knew it was there but didn't talk about it, and maybe it would go away. But now, everybody is talking about it. When I spoke at Harvard, they put me in a room with forty chairs, and four hundred students showed up—not to hear me, but to hear the topic. Ohio State University has a class in Religious Views of Death and Dying—limited to the first four hundred students who register; and so it is all around the country.

Nobody knows the reason for this sudden interest, but let me offer a couple of guesses. It may be because of all the violence surrounding us. Ever since the invention of the atomic bomb, we and all future generations are destined and doomed to live under its shadow. We know that we are mortal; now we know that the universe itself may be mortal. Our generation has seen its heroes die and be buried on television. There is so much violence in our times, and young people want to know what the bottom line is—what it's all about, what's the meaning.

A second explanation for the increased concern with this issue may be recent medical achievements and the moral questions which they raise. Our generation has to deal with questions that have confronted no previous generation: Can death be hurried if an organ is needed for a transplant? Should somebody be kept alive indefinitely by machine? What is the legal definition of death?

A third possibility is that the current interest in this topic is the work of one woman, a very great lady named Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who wrote a book, a best seller translated into many languages, called *On Death and Dying.* She tells that early in her career she went to a Chicago hospital and asked to interview their dying patients. They replied, "We don't have any, and you can't see them," and then she realized that doctors are squeamish, that nurses are squeamish. When over the opposition of the doctors she finally got to the patients, she found that they were hungry for someone to talk to them and that they had great wisdom to share. So now she goes around the country, holding seminars at which the dying speak to those who are not yet dying, and help

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doctors, nurses, rabbis, and ministers understand what it means.

For whatever reason—whether because of violence or new medical achievements or the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross—the topic is "in", and so I feel that there ought to be a Jewish voice in the discussion, for Judaism claims to be a religion that speaks about all of life and this is part of life. We all stand before the same darkness, and we all hunger for whatever guidance, whatever wisdom, and whatever light we can find.

Let me begin by making one thing clear; I am no expert; nobody is. No one knows anything at all about death. People have been dying since the beginning of time, and yet everybody believes—not in his head, but in his heart—that it will happen to other people but not to him. In this quest, I am at least as scared and at least as ambivalent and at least as anxious as anybody else, and so these thoughts are intended not for professional thanatologists, but only for those people who either are themselves or know somebody who may be mortal.

What I have done very simply is to go to my teachers, both living and dead, to people like Eli Wiesel and Milton Steinberg and Abraham Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchek, and asked, "What do you know? What helped you get through grief? What helped you live with the fact of mortality?" They told me that just as the Jewish way of life is different, the Jewish way in death and dying is different; they told me that it goes directly against the grain of much of contemporary culture in at least five ways.

Before I describe those five ways, let me share a simple story which I think dramatizes and symbolizes the difference between the way it was and the way it is, between the traditional Jewish way and the modern American way.

I have a friend whose father died on the seventh day of Passover. He told me that on Passover his father did what he did on every holiday: he read the *Hallel*, the psalms of thanksgiving and rejoicing; and then a little bit later he did not feel well, so he turned to the back of the prayerbook and said the confessional, the prayer that you are supposed to say when you feel that your end is near. And that is the way he died. When I heard that story, I had two reactions. The first was, "What a way to go! Connected to David, to the psalms, to your children; what a beautiful memory to leave behind!" The second thing that occurred to me was a question. It is too late to ask him now, but I wonder: he must have said *Hallel*, he must have said those psalms a million times in his life. When he said them for the last time, what were the words of the *Hallel* that meant the most to him? Was it a line like, "I am your servant . . . undo my chains" or "Grievous in the sight of the Lord is the death of his beloved ones"? I wonder which line meant the most to him when he said it for the last time.

Most of us will probably not go that way. Most of us will probably go heavily sedated by tranquilizers which, God bless them, will lower the pain but blur the consciousness. Most of us will probably go in intensive care units where children are not allowed in at all—as if children were a contagious

disease—and where adults are only allowed in for a few minutes every hour. Most of us will probably go connected to those intravenous gadgets. And if you juxtapose these two images—of the man who died connected to David and to his children and the man who dies in sterile, antiseptic isolation connected to tubes and wires—you have the difference between the way it was and the way it is, between the traditional Jewish way of death and the modern way.

There are, as I said, five Jewish insights which I have learned from my teachers; and I will talk about them in ascending order of importance and of difficulty. The first Jewish insight is realism and honesty. It's bad enough to fool somebody else; it's worse to fool yourself. Jewish tradition from beginning to end is honest. According to the Bible, when Jacob gathered his children around his bedside, he said, "Behold, I am now about to die"; and he said the word—no euphemisms, no "passed away," no artificial grass carpets, none of all these devices that we use in the futile and eventually unsuccessful effort to deceive ourselves. In the prophetic reading for the same Sabbath we read that David, too, gathered his children and said, "I am now about to go in the way of all flesh," and he said the word. That is so different from much of contemporary culture with its coverups and denials. The poet, Charles Reznikoff writes in a wonderful satire of modern funerals that "a well-phrased eulogy, a low-pitched dirge, faces politely sad before the expensive, well-polished coffin, a thick green cloth around the deep grave to keep loose earth from the sod. A funeral, punctual, well-mannered, neat. I see that from the rude young man you were *you've gone far.*" In Jewish thought death is not only the inevitable end of life, it is a constant companion and possibility *within* life; that is why one is never supposed to say, "I'll see you tomorrow," because nobody owns tomorrow; instead one says, "I'll see you tomorrow, God willing." That is not a morbid way to live. The fact that life is fragile and that each day is a gift makes it more precious, more to be treasured, and less to be wasted. One of the rabbis in the Talmud says that a person should repent one day before he dies and know that every day might be his last. Jews would buy plots and make their own shrouds not out of morbidity, but simply in order to be ready.

The story is told of the Chafeytz Chayim, one of the great sages of Eastern Europe, that a visitor from America was shocked to find that this great teacher owned so little furniture and so few possessions. "Where are your possessions?" he asked, to which the Chafeytz Chayim replied, "Where are *your* possessions?" "What do you mean," said the visitor, "I am a visitor here." "So am I," said the Chafeytz Chayim. We are all visitors here; David said, "I am a sojourner on this earth."

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, has many meanings; one of its meanings is that it is an annual confrontation and rehearsal of mortality, so we fast, we get along without anything, we bless our children before it begins as if in farewell. The focus of the prayers is on the fragility and the preciousness of life. One of the ways in which the Day of Atonement expresses this idea is that

the Jew is expected to wear a simple, white linen gown called a kittel, which is really a shroud. That which one will wear at the end of his life is put on once a year. It is a profound educational experience to put on a kittel in the Jewish tradition. Not just the rabbi wears it; everybody wears one. "You see that man over there? I've been meaning to make up with him one of these days. It may be too late; he's wearing a kittel! And I'm wearing a kittel, too!" It's a profound, humbling, educational experience to wear a kittel.

In our synagogue we have an annual book-burial. One reason for this is to teach people respect for books. You don't just throw a book away; that which was holy *is* holy. That is why a broken human being, a senile human being is to be treated with reverence; a book is, too. The other reason for conducting a book-burial is to provide our children with a walking tour of the cemetery, to share some of the history which is on those tombstones, inscriptions like "She Brought Over Many." And every time I do it, I get calls from parents: "I don't want you to take my child; I don't want my child traumatized; my child is only eighteen." My response is to leave it up to the parent: "You don't have to send them if you don't want to, but I think it is better to know before you need rather than need before you know." If only we had a contract with the world that it would not expose our children to any experience until we decide they are ready! We don't have that kind of a contract, and therefore it is better for us to prepare them before the need arises.

The classic Jewish prayerbook was meant for all of life. There was a prayer for getting up in the morning, for going to sleep at night, for going on a journey, for having a baby, for when you were lonely and frightened. It covered all of life. Most modern prayerbooks are for synagogue services. There is a page in the old prayerbook which is missing from almost all modern prayerbooks. The *Viddui*, a prayer to be said when dying: "Dear God, I want to live, but if this is Your decree, I accept it from Your hand. Take care of my loved ones with whom my soul is bound up; into Your hand I commit my soul. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Why is that not found in most of our modern prayerbooks? We spent hours, weeks, months teaching our kids to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, but we never teach them that page as if they are never going to need it. There is something wrong with our curriculum; we rob our children of a dimension of life which ought to be a part of their education if we don't teach them that page.

If the first Jewish insight into death—as into life—is realism and honesty, the second Jewish insight is equality and simplicity. We spoil, we strain, we shorten so much of our lives getting ahead of each other. There is so much envy and so much competition and so much pressure to keep up with each other all through life. We are so busy being frustrated with what the other person has that we don't enjoy what we have got. The Jewish tradition says that has to stop somewhere; and if nowhere else, then at least at the end, at least before God all people should be equal and all people should be simple. And so everybody should be buried in a plain, white linen shroud with no pockets

because you can't take it with you. If you have seen the treasure of King Tutankhamen, you know that enough jewelry and gold and filigree was dumped into that grave to feed a generation of Egyptians; it was put into those graves to impress the gods. Jews don't think that God is impressed with gold or jewelry or mahogany and that putting good money into a grave is not really the way to honor the dead. The law is that everybody should be buried in a plain, white linen shroud with no pockets and that everybody should be buried in a plain wooden box. When people are bewildered, confused, and vulnerable, it's easy to persuade them to buy bronze caskets, mahogany caskets, coffins with pictures on the inside and so on, but that is not the Jewish way. The second Jewish insight then is equality and simplicity.

The third insight is community. Ours is not an I-Thou religion; ours is a We-Thou religion. To be a Jew is to be a cousin to the Jew in Cairo and in Calcutta, in Berlin or Baghdad, in New York or New Delhi. To be a Jew means to be connected horizontally and vertically to all other Jews. To be a Jew means to be a grandchild of Abraham and a grandparent to the Messiah. To be a Jew means to come before God in the name of the covenant and in the name of the Jewish people. What we come with is people. At the time of our greatest isolation, our greatest helplessness, our greatest bewilderment, the community reaches out and embraces us and says, "You are not alone; we care about you." The biblical term for dying is "to be gathered to your people"—to become an ancestor, to become part of history. When you stand at a grave, what do you say? Whatever you say feels so glib and dumb, so inadequate and superficial: "I know how you feel"—you don't know how I feel. "Time will heal"—time won't heal. "How old was he"—what difference does that make? And so our tradition teaches that we are supposed to say, "May God comfort you," since we don't know how, "together with all the other people in the world who are mourning for Zion and Jerusalem." At the time when one is most self-adsorbed to know that others are in exile, others are in mourning, and others are lonely, that not only do we have needs but that we are needed and that therefore in the midst of our sorrow we should transcend ourselves and care and get involved in helping others. After coming back from the funeral, the law says one must eat because if it weren't a law we wouldn't do it and to eat is to live. According to the law, other people have to make the meal, which means that other people come into the house. For the next seven days the service is held morning and evening, not in the synagogue, but in the home which means that ten people come in the morning and the evening, so one is not alone. You join a club, a fraternity of mourners that meets for a year, morning and evening, in the synagogue. At first you're clumsy, you don't know your way around; but after a while you learn the ropes, and then you help the next one who comes and a sense of camaraderie develops.

One expression of the sense of community is the ethical will. The great Jewish humorist Shalom Aleichem said, "Please don't give me a fancy funeral; if you do, I'll be embarrassed. . . . If you want to say Kaddish, that's

up to you; I don't want to dictate your religious convictions. What I would like is for the family to get together on the anniversary of my death and read from my stories—whichever they like, but preferably the funny ones." A dear friend of mine wrote an ethical will in his mid-forties when he was well, and died of a heart attack soon after:

> Dearest, weep not; dry your tears, at least in my behalf. The years that God has given me have been good ones; I have no complaint. Death is the final state of all human beings. A few years more or less don't matter. I've already drunk full the cup of life; a few drops left unsipped will cause me no regret. The only thing I ask is that I be permitted to see my children married; if not, I'll be watching from somewhere anyway. Marriage is the fulfillment of life, and I've been blessed with a jewel of a wife and four good children.
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> To my wife: your love for me has been beyond measure. Remember what's been and don't cry. Time is a great healer, even as you and I have not forgotten but have recovered from the loss of our parents. You're too much of a woman to live alone, and the children mature: they'll go their own way. Look for a man that you can respect and love, and know that I only want you to be happy.
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> To my children: in material things, I've seen to it that you won't want. Those are the least important things, although the lawyer has prepared a document to safeguard them. Remember to be Jews, and the rest will follow as day follows night. Jews don't lie or steal because it's *passt nicht*, it's just not fitting, as our parents used to say. Take care of your mother; in honoring her you honor yourself; I know how much love she's lavished on you. Marry within your faith, not to please me, but so that you'll be happy. Not because gentiles are inferior, they're not; but because marriage is complex enough without the additional complicating variables of different viewpoints. You are the bearers of a noble tradition; don't let it end with you. Never turn away from anybody who comes to you for help. We Jews have suffered more; therefore, we should help more. That which you give away is your only real possession.
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> To my son: I mention you first not because I love you more, but because you will now be the head of the family. The girls can call this sexism if they want to; I hope they will forgive me. Take care of your sisters and mothers; their tears are my tears. Know that money is only a tool and not an end unto itself. Your grandfather taught you that a man should earn money until forty, enjoy it until sixty, and then give it away, that a man who dies rich is a failure as a

human being. Don't forget Israel; you can be a rebuilder of our homeland and a better American as a result.

To my daughter: you're warm-blooded. Jewish girls keep themselves clean, not because sex is dirty—it's not—but because the love that you'll bring your husband shouldn't be sullied by experimentation and dalliance. It's always been the Jewish mother that's preserved our people. I'll be content if you follow the example of your mother.

To all of you: let your word be your bond. I know that it's hard to learn from the experience of others, especially of parents, but if there's one thing I ask of you it's this: let your word be your bond. Say Kaddish after me, but not for me. The grave doesn't hear the Kaddish, but the speaker does; and the words will echo in your hearts. Kaddish is the link that binds the generations in Israel. The only immortality I ask is that my children and my children's children be good Jews and thereby good people. God bless you and keep you; I love you. Your Father.

The fourth Jewish insight into death as into life is *halacha*, which, for want of a better name we translate as "the way in which to walk." Ours is a legal religion; it's much more than a legal religion, but it's based on it. When I was working on my book *Jewish Reflections on Death*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), I went to psychology books which described how to work out grief in a therapeutically healthy way. I went to Christian books which focus on how to be saved. I went to Jewish books where the focus was on duty, responsibilities, and obligations. The great code of Jewish law has page after page of techncial, pedantic, detailed laws: How do you die? How do you visit a dying person? What do you say? What do you do in your last moment? What do you do afterwards? You're supposed to sit a week—what's a week? You're supposed to cut a garment—what kind of garment? How should you cut it? Page after page of law. Why so much law? Because it gives form to our mourning. It prevents excess; it prevents anarchy. I grieve in the same way that my cousin in Calcutta, as my great great grandparents did, as my great great grandchildren will follow. It gives order to life, preventing under-grieving or over-grieving. Left to ourselves, God knows what we'd do. Two thousand years before Freud, the rabbis allowed only seven days, not eight. Whoever wants to sit more than the law requires must be mourning for something else, and they don't let you do it any more than they let you undo grief. Today people slough it off as if nothing happened. Something *did* happen. There are people who don't have time to sit for seven days, but end up sitting seven times seven days on a couch afterwards, working out what they didn't have time to work out. If death is nothing, if death is cheap, then life is cheap. So the tradi-

tion says, "Stop whatever you're doing and mourn and work it out and talk it out for seven days." No more, no less.

Because we're an old people, whatever can happen has happened; when you don't know what to do, you can look it up. There are all kinds of laws for every conceivable case. Can you hurry somebody? Can you prolong somebody indefinitely? What if there's conflict between a bridal procession and a funeral? Whatever can happen has happened and is discussed in the laws not in a frenzy, not in crisis, not when you can't think clearly, but discussed calmly by people using precedents, by people using reason.

The fifth Jewish insight into life is God. It's very hard to talk about God in our time. Words have been cheapened almost beyond use; we ought to quarantine them for a century until they become clean again. If every politician is a prophet, if every movie star is divine, if revelation can be a pipe tobacco, how can we talk about holy words any more? The real question is whether there is life after birth. If a human being is only a collection of chemicals worth so much on the market, there is little for which to hope. If life is a gift or love or a wonder, if life is a trust, then you can hope and yearn and pray for something more.

The keys to a culture are in its language. The classical Jewish word for dying is *niftar* which is related to the word *patur* which means to be released from service. What it means is that this world is better than the world to come because in this world you can serve God; you can do things for God; you can do things with God. Then there is the world of rest and reconciliation, the world of harvest and completion.

Milton Steinberg delivered his farewell sermon, "To Hold in Open Arms," between his first and second heart attacks. "After my (first) heart attack I went out, and I saw the sun. People walk by and take it for granted; how wonderful. I want to hold on to it, and I realized you can't hold on to it; it has to set. At least when I let it go, I can let it go to the One who gave it. He is entrusted to take care of it." We have to learn to hold on to life with open arms, appreciating it and yet ready to let it go. Shortly before his own death, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in an essay titled "Death Is Homecoming" that "Unless we cultivate sensitivity to the glory here, what can be in store for us afterwards? The life to come, the seed of eternal life is planted here and now; a seed is wasted if it is placed on stone, in souls that are dead while the body is still alive. The greatest problem is not how to continue, but how to sanctify our existence. The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous if there is no sense for the eternal life we have now. The world to come is not only a hereafter, it is a here-and-now. This is the meaning of existence—to give back to God for all He has given us, to somehow balance getting and giving back, owning and surrendering, believing and trusting. Death if so understood, the ultimate self-dedication to the divine, will not be destroyed by the craving for immortality. The act of giving back is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift of life. For the truly pious person, it is a privilege to pay."

Let us now look back at the world in which we live by the light of these insights. Honesty and realism: there is so little in our world where we try to disguise the coming of old age or the reality of death. Equality and simplicity: there is so much envy and so much competition in our society. Community: we live either in apartment complexes where nobody knows anybody or in suburban developments from which people move every couple of years so there is no sense of community. There is also very little sense of law in our lives; instead we make our decisions in terms of popularity or fashionability. As for God: in our time He has been replaced by us; by "us" I mean our bodies, and when they give out we're in deep trouble. When "God is dead" was the fad, I recall Abraham Joshua Heschel's saying that the God is dead movement was "like a patient crying out in his delirium that the doctor is dead." Realism and honesty, equality and simplicity, community, law, and God—these five insights have a great deal to say to us and to the world in which we live.

Let me finish with four words that mean a great deal to me. There is a play, a deeply Jewish play, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. It is the story of Willy Loman, *low man*, an unsuccessful salesman, a failure as a father, a failure as a salesman. His son despises him for having caught him in an immoral deed out of loneliness. He has a breakdown, but everybody's too busy; nobody pays attention—except his wife who loves him with all his faults. At one point she comes center-stage and says, "Willy Loman is having a breakdown. Attention must be paid!" It's not a lung being removed in room 304 or cancer in room 407; it's a human being up there. *Attention must be paid.* Should we hasten the process or not? I don't know how to answer that question. One can argue either side from Jewish sources. There are no easy answers. What matters is that up to, at, and after the end of life: *attention.*

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once told me she was about to publish a study about a certain hospital in Chicago; and I said to her, "Don't publish it; and if you do, don't name the hospital because I'm sure that the same would be true of any hospital. And it's no more true of nurses than of doctors, rabbis, or ministers." She had found that nurses visit the homes and rooms of terminal patients one-tenth as often as they visit those of other patients. You can't blame them; there's not much that can be done for them, so we feel helplessness, our mortality, reflected in their eyes. It's easier to avoid them. Ask me; I always have a reason to do something else, but it's really not right. If we treat them as dead when they're still alive or if we treat them as children and talk about everything under the sun except what they want to talk about, we dehumanize them; and we dehumanize ourselves. We cheat ourselves of what could be a sacred and precioius shared experience, an experience not between people of a different class from our own, but people who are us, a little bit further along the road that everyone has to go. Up to, at, and after the end of life—*attention must be paid.*

LIFE AFTER DEATH: RESURRECTION AND IMMORTALITY

JERRY A. IRISH

There is a Jules Pfeiffer cartoon which pictures a man and a woman seated in front of a television set. Perhaps they are husband and wife. For the first four frames of the cartoon they simply sit there. Then the woman turns to the man and asks: "Do you believe in life after death?" The man responds: "What do you think this is?"

As is often the case in a Pfeiffer cartoon, the comic insight comes at several levels. In this case we cannot miss the suggestion that this man and woman are already dead. They sit passively, bored with one another and their flickering entertainment, or worse yet, numb to everything. This is death in life. It is perhaps the most common fatality in a narcissistic age that has pursued individual autonomy all the way to extreme loneliness and alienation.

Whatever the precise situation of the man and the woman in the cartoon, Pfeiffer's second meaning is clear. Life and death constitute a reciprocal polarity; each has its meaning in relation to the other. It is no surprise then that a question about life after death elicits a response about life before death.

Following up on that insight, I would like to review with you the two images of life after death that have dominated Western thought: resurrection and immortality. Perhaps in exploring these two images of life *after* death we will learn something about the meaning of life *before* death.

The earliest and most fundamental image of life after death in the Christian tradition is resurrection. In order to understand the concept we need to look at its roots in the Hebrew Bible and some basic Israelite presuppositions about life. Psychologically speaking the human being is a center of vitality that includes every part and element. Death is the breakup of that vital center. In the words of II Samuel, "We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground that can never be gathered up again."

Human life is membership in a community, participation in social and political relationships. Death is the loss of full, functioning membership in that community; it is the inability to participate in social-political interaction. From the theological perspective communal life is understood in covenant with Yahweh. To live is to honor and enjoy that relation of trust and obedience; to die is to lose the capacity to do that. The Psalmist prays to Yahweh: ". . . for in death there is no remembrance of you: who can sing your praises in Sheol?"

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible Sheol, the realm of the dead, is described as murky. It is the land of no return in which all share the same fate regardless

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of their station in life. Sheol is the underside of creation; the dead are mere shadows of the living. There is no sustained discussion of the meaning of death. On the whole it is simply accepted as the natural and inevitable end of life. It is not to be feared, especially if one can die in the midst of one's family and community. Listen to the patriarch Jacob's instructions as recorded in the twenty-ninth chapter of Genesis:

> "Bury me near my fathers, in the cave that . . . Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial plot. There Abraham was buried and his wife Sarah. There Isaac was buried and his wife Rebekah. There I buried Leah." . . . When Jacob had finished giving his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, and breathing his last was gathered to his people.

The ancient Israelite attitude toward death can only be understood against the backdrop of life in a community convenanting with Yahweh. It is this community, not the individual Israelite, that sustains the continuity of life. Death is the dissolution of the person, not the clan.

The concept of resurrection first emerges in Hebrew culture when the covenant with Yahweh seems in jeopardy, when the community is in exile or oppressed. The eschatological hope borne of national disorder and personal stress comes to expression in apocalyptic images. These words were written in the fourth century before the Common Era:

> On this mountain,
> Yahweh Sabaoth will prepare for all peoples
> a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines,
> of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines.
> On this mountain he will remove
> the mourning veil covering all peoples,
> and the shroud enwrapping all nations,
> he will destroy Death for ever. Isaiah 25:6-7

> Your dead will come to life,
> their corpses will rise;
> awake, exult,
> all you who lie in the dust,
> for your dew is a radiant dew
> and the land of ghosts will give birth. Isaiah 26:19

Note the corporate, even cosmic imagery in these passages. There is no compromise of the holistic or unitary anthropology. In apocalyptic material written a century and a half later the notion of judgment is added to the eschatological scenery.

> There is going to be a time of great distress, unparalleled since nations first came into existence. When that time comes, your own people will be spared, all those whose names are found written in the Book. Of those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace. Daniel 12:1-2

The resurrection of the dead in this apocalyptic material simply reaffirms Yahweh's will for life over death. In the age to come the forces of chaos and oppression will be routed and Yahweh's covenantal reign will be permanently established. The final judgment depicted in the eschatological vision is a radicalized version of the same judgment already ingredient in the Israelite self-understanding. The obedient receive life, which is to say participation in the covenant. The disobedient recieve death, which is to say the loss of the covenantal relation.

It is this eschatological perspective with its understanding of resurrection that provides the context for the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity first emerges as an apocalyptic sect within ancient Judaism. If there is any clue in the New Testament as to what may have been Jesus' own view of resurrection, it is found in his response to the Sadducees' question about the widow who married successively seven brothers according to the law of Moses. "Now at the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be?"

According to the twelfth chapter of Mark, Jesus responds that when they rise from the dead, men and women do not marry; they are like the angels in heaven. Jesus views resurrection as a transformation of this life, not simply more of the same. Furthermore, Jesus admonishes the Sadducees for their denial of resurrection. If there is no resurrection, how can Yahweh be at once the God of the living and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The transformation of this earthly being is seen against the continuity of God's covenant.

In Paul's first letter to the community at Corinth we get the New Testament's single most sustained discussion of the resurrection. Paul adopts the eschatological framework we found in the Hebrew Bible. Christ is the first fruits of an age to come in which the dead will be raised. Once again transformation and continuity characterize the movement into the future.

> What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.
> I Corinthians 15:36-38

The life to come will be a radically altered life, but the stuff that is altered is the stuff of this life.

In Paul's understanding of the resurrection death takes on a new role. Jesus of Nazareth, the one who gave substance to the resurrection hope thereby put death in a new perspective. As Paul writes in Philippians, it was the same Jesus who emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, who became as men and women are even to accepting death, death on a cross, it was this same Jesus that God raised high and gave a name above all other names. This drama in which death is appropriated as the transition to new life is played out in a variety of contexts in this present life. Again Paul employs natural imagery.

> It is the same with the resurrection of the dead: the thing that is sown is perishable but what is raised is imperishable; the thing that is sown is contemptible but what is raised is glorious; the thing that is sown is weak but what is raised is powerful.
>
> I Corinthians 15:42-44

The same beings that will be altered in the age to come are altered now in anticipation.

The New Testament communities expected the new age imminently. As it became necessary to accommodate themselves to its delay, a second image of life after death developed. This second image that has dominated Western religious and philosophical thought regarding the meaning of death is the immortal soul. The classic statement of this view is found in Plato's *Phaedo.* Phaedo, apparently one of Socrates' companions at the time of his death, recounts to some colleagues not present the story of that final day in prison. In his characteristic dialogic fashion Socrates develops his arguments for the immortality of the soul. The soul is found to be the single, indivisible, and incorruptible ruler of the composite, changing body. By virtue of its pre-existence, the soul exhibits the capacity to recollect the eternal intelligible forms. Its essence is life itself; its destiny is not tied to the temporal body but to the ultimate state of eternal blessedness associated with divinity.

The arguments themselves are no longer convincing. Indeed, one suspects Plato never intended them as logical proofs. The appeal is to our intuition, and, as such, it is very successful. The repeated invocation of the body-soul, material-immaterial, duality plays on our ambiguous sense of our own identity, now mere members of a vast animal kingdom, then again participants in the councils of the gods themselves. Plato has us stand in awe of the noble Socrates, facing death with the same critical honesty that brought him to this fate. Perhaps even more, we identify with the mourners whose very enthusiasm for the discussion belies their keen awareness that this is the final colloquy with their teacher.

"But how shall we bury you?" asks Crito, one of Socrates' closest companions.

> "Any way you like," replied Socrates, "that is, if you can catch me and I don't slip through your fingers." He laughed gently as he spoke, and turning to us went on: "I can't persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now and marshalling all the arguments; he thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead; and he asks how he is to bury me! As for my long and elaborate explanation that when I have drunk the poison I shall remain with you no longer, but depart to a state of heavenly happiness, this attempt to console both you and myself seems to be wasted on him. You must give an assurance to Crito for me— . . . you must assure him that when I am dead I shall not stay, but depart and be gone. That will help Crito to bear it more easily, and keep him from being distressed on my account when he sees my body being burned or buried, as if something dreadful were happening to me; or from saying at the funeral that it is Socrates whom he is laying out or carrying to the grave or burying. . . . No, you must keep up your spirits and say that it is only my body that you are burying; and you can bury it as you please, in whatever way you think is most proper."[1]

Whether or not you and I have immortal souls that survive our mortal bodies, that understanding of human destiny has had a long and rich history in Western religion and philosophy. Indeed, it is very much alive and well today.

The word "immortality" seldom appears in the New Testament. In I Timothy it is used to distinguish God from all other beings. In I Corinthians 15 immortality refers to a quality of the existence of those who share the resurrection of Christ in the age to come. Here that desire for life everlasting that found expression in Plato's philosophy finds fulfillment in the hoped-for transformation to be wrought at the second coming of Christ. Such immortality will be a new thing, utterly dependent on the power of God. Paul does not share the view that the soul is by nature immortal. In fact it is well to ask whether Paul even shares the body-soul distinction so crucial to Plato's understanding of immortality. To couple that distinction with one between evil and good would be a double contradiction of the biblical anthropology. Be that as it may, the passage in I Corinthians focuses on the distinction between this age and the age to come; these ages are separated by an act of God in which all things, body and soul, material and immaterial, will be made new. If men and women are to have immortality, they will have it not by nature, but by the gift of God.

[1]Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (New York: Penguin, 1969), pp. 179 f.

In the centuries that followed Paul's authorship of I Corinthians the distinction between him and his Greek predecessors blurred. The "Church Fathers" gradually negotiated a marriage between immortality and resurrection. As the members of the early Christian communities came to accept the indefinite delay in the second coming of Christ the same human concerns that the *Phaedo* speaks to so directly came to the foreground. First the question was simply, "What is the fate of those believers who are martyred before the eschatological clock strikes again?" It wasn't too long before that question was generalized to apply to anyone who died in the faith. The idea that such persons were simply asleep became less and less satisfying. Commerce with the Hellenistic world-view and its understanding of the distinction between body and soul also had its influence. The classical Christian theological description of death as the separation of body and soul gradually emerged. Christian writers began to speak of an immortal soul, but it was immortality with a difference. Let me briefly illustrate this development.

In the second century Irenaeus wrote that the soul does not die with the body but awaits the resurrection in an "invisible place" which Irenaeus does not describe. The primary focus is still on the resurrection when soul and body will be reunited.

In the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa writes a dialogue in which his dying sister Macrina assumes the role of teacher. She describes the soul as the divine element in men and women. Its life-giving nature differs from that of the body to which it is inseparably bound in life. At death the immaterial soul goes to the unseen world of Hades. It is futile to speculate further as to existence. The soul has the unique power to recognize its own body, whether decayed or not, at the resurrection. When the perfect number of souls has been created and purged of all evil, men and women will dwell eternally in body and soul with God. It is interesting that this dialogue, so reminiscent of the *Phaedo*, maintains the eschatological framework of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Gregory of Nyssa rejects Socrates' mythology of judgment immediately after death and the ultimate separability of body and soul.

In the sixth and seventh centuries of the Common Era souls begin to show signs of activity during the period between death and the awaited resurrection of the body. Gregory the Great, Pope from 590 to 604, speculated that at death with its passage to an incorporeal state all souls endure some sort of purgation after which the souls of the wicked go to hell and the souls of the perfect go to heaven. Even the soul of a person who had, on the whole, established a meritorious record could still expect to make satisfaction for minor misdemeanors. Apparently Gregory had voted on the wrong side in a particular papal election. While Gregory maintains the eschatological time frame in that he claims salvation will only be perfected at the Last Judgment, the process of purgation gets under way at death and the separate routes to heaven and hell are already clearly mapped.

Succeeding Christian thinkers modify the postmortem scene in a variety of ways. By the time we reach the thirteenth century and the work of St. Thomas Aquinas the doctrine of the immortal soul is not only accepted, but argued on philosophical as well as religious grounds. The shift in focus from the eschatological judgment to the judgment that takes place with the death of each individual is now complete. The biblical framework in which the imagery of resurrection had its place has faded into the background. The focus on the corporate nature of judgment and transformation has been replaced by an emphasis on the individual's destiny, be that through purgatory to heaven on the one hand or hell on the other. In Aquinas' view the last judgment simply ratifies or confirms the judgment made and the purgation initiated at an individual's death. Aquinas matched the theological analysis of the body-soul relation with an Aristotelian metaphysical analysis in which the soul was understood as the form of the material body. So understood the soul has priority in fault or merit and is therefore punished or rewarded immediately upon its separation from the body. Though this deathbed judgment can initiate the soul's purgatorial period, it is finally incomplete because the soul is without its body. Since the soul is the form of the body ultimate happiness as well as ultimate punishment must await the general judgment at the time of resurrection. The growing emphasis on immediate judgment and the period of purgation following death was at once a product of and a support for the doctrine of penance whereby the living, through the merit of the saints controlled by the priesthood, could have some influence on the situation of the dead.

The Reformation theologians attacked the penitential system and thereby called into question the possibility of intercession on behalf of the souls in purgatory. However, they left the overall framework propounded by their thirteenth century predecessors intact. By this time the shift in focus from resurrection imagery with its emphasis on the consummation of history to the image of immortality with its emphasis on individual destiny was complete.

The mythology of an immortal soul has had its viability over the past several hundred years insofar as it has been able to give expression to the belief in the intrinsic value of the human individual as an end in itself. Advocates of this mythology have equated the soul with a plethora of entities and ideas: mind, ego, spirit, consciousness, psyche, transcendental unity of apperception, and so on. John Hick, a contemporary philosopher of religion and Christian theologian argues that the soul refers to the self as personal. If one distinguishes between the solitary, protective dimension of selfhood and the interactive, transcendent dimension, between what Hick refers to as egoistic and personal, then immortality is associated with the latter. Hick has a developmental or evolutionary theory of human existence in which there is movement from pre-individualized unity through separate egos to a supra-individual unity. We currently find ourselves in the phase of individual freedom and responsibility characterized by a plurality of fully differentiated

selves. Hick writes: "The task of moving from the multiplicity of ego-selves to the higher unity of interpersonal life is however far too great to be accomplished within this present earthly existence."[2]

On the assumption that human beings cannot fulfill the destiny for which they were created, that individual men and women cannot realize their human potential, unless their lives are prolonged far beyond the limits of their bodily existence, Hick reviews the philosophical evidence in the debate over the relation between mind and body or mind and brain. He concludes that mind's capacity to survive the decay of the body can be neither established nor excluded by philosophical argument or empirical evidence. Hick argues: "Inspection of the notions of mind and body and evidence of mind/brain correlation, . . . leave the door open, or at least unlocked, to a belief in the survival of the conscious self."[3] Combining fragments from responsible research in parapsychology with insights from Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, Hick develops a view of postmortem existence as a succession of rebecomings in ascending spheres beyond this world. The number and nature of the individual's successive embodiments depends, presumably, on what is needed for him or her to transcend egohood and attain the ultimate unitive state. ". . . since we know nothing of the specific conditions of these postulated other existences we cannot develop our picture beyond the thought of a plurality of lives in a plurality of worlds."[4]

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published a book entitled *On Death and Dying.* Based on her interviews with, at that time, over two hundred dying patients, this book set forth five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kubler-Ross did not put these five stages forward as an absolute pattern followed sequentially by all dying patients, but as a paradigm or guide to further study and understanding. Kubler-Ross' contribution to the theoretical discussion of death and the practical care of dying persons has been invaluable. She not only broke the stifling silence that surrounded terminal illness, she offered a framework in which to deal with dying, death, and grief. The impact of her work will be felt for years ahead.

Kubler-Ross' work with dying patients has also led her to consider what happens after death. Her observations reflect the notion of an immortal soul. According to Kubler-Ross the opportunities for growth do not end with death. She has collected hundreds of cases from around the world in which persons

[2]Hick, John, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 53.
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 112.
[4]*Ibid.*, p. 419.

declared dead have left their physical bodies, have been conscious of the attempts made to save their lives, and have then, after being revived, reported their out-of-body experiences. Kubler-Ross concludes:

> . . . death, as we understood it in scientific language, does not really exist. Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly coming out of a cocoon. It is a transition into a higher state of consciousness, where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh, to be able to grow, and the only thing that you lose is something that you don't need anymore, and that is your physical body. It's like putting away your winter coat when spring comes and you know that the coat is too shabby and you don't want to wear it any more. That's virtually what death is all about.[5]

Kubler-Ross' account of life after death is reminiscent of our reading from the *Phaedo.* Regardless of your own assessment of her assertions, there is no doubt about the popularity of her position.

Having looked at the two primary images of life after death in the tradition of Western Christianity, how might we assess them with respect to our conference topic of meaning and death? What can we learn from these interpretations of the mystery of eternal life? Let us begin with immortality.

First, the notion of an immortal soul gives expression to the human duality of embodied consciousness. It acknowledges our capacity for self-reflectiveness.

Second, it distinguishes the locus of selfhood, the center of consciousness, in each individual human being and makes it the basis of continuity in this life.

Third, it attributes an ultimacy to this individual soul, a participation in the divine if you will, whereby it survives the death of the body and maintains the continuity of this life in yet another stage of existence.

Finally, the elusive character of the soul, its constant escape from precise definition, keeps always open the possibility of supporting evidence from outside the narrow confines of theology.

Unfortunately each of these positive characteristics has a negative counterpart. The imagery of an immortal soul turns the duality of embodied consciousness into a dualism, negating the body and, by implication, all of physical nature. In making the locus of individual selfhood the bearer of con-

[5]Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, "Death Does Not Exist," *The CoEvolution Quarterly* (Summer 1977), p. 103.

tinuity, it tends to downplay if not ignore the relational social character of selfhood. This tendency to atomistic individualism is exacerbated when the soul is deified. Since each person carries his or her own unit of survival in the face of death, the quest for individual immortality is exaggerated as is the sense of responsibility to satisfy the desire to live by one's own independent efforts.

From a strictly psychological perspective, the concept of an immortal soul severs the dialectic between life and death. The latter is no longer understood as a real limit to life. In trivializing the significance of death, life is trivialized as well. Immortality so defined becomes an exercise in delayed gratification.

From a religious perspective, or at least the Christian viewpoint as rooted in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the dualistic anthropology, body-soul, nature-spirit, is inaccurate. This misleading terminology coupled with the elevated status given to the soul is contrary to the priority of God and the understanding of death as the inevitable and universal fate of all human beings. Perhaps most problematic is the sense in which the immortal soul distracts us from the importance of our present existence.

Does the imagery of resurrection offer a more viable way of dealing with meaning and death in the Christian tradition? It does counter the body-soul dualism with its notion of a unitary living creature. It offers a corporate vision of human destiny. No longer carrying the entire burden of his or her own destiny, the individual is able to acknowledge the real limit of death and therewith the priority of God.

There is, however, some ambiguity with regard to these points. The corporate vision of the eschaton may neglect legitimate individual concerns. Furthermore, the logistics involved in a universe of resurrection bodies tends to boggle the mind. Jesus' response to the Sadducees that we will be as angels is not altogether satisfactory. Resurrection imagery has its own version of the broken life-death dialectic. The major problem, however, is that the resurrection imagery, interpreted as it has been in conjunction with the notion of an immortal soul, suffers from the same malady as its partner. It points away from this life. Pushed to the extremity of time and separated from our present existence by the long purgatorial journey of the immortal soul, the resurrection may mean very little to us.

At this point we may find ourselves with the woman in Pfeiffer's cartoon. "Do you believe in life after death?" We raise the question because we have the desire to live, but we find that resurrection and immortality do not satisfy that desire. They direct our attention away from the life we are living now and promise a life in the future that we find difficult to imagine. I think these images leave us knowing, deep inside, that we will die. Worse yet, without viable images of the continuity of life, our death appears to be meaningless. Perhaps we live in an age that has no genuine mythology of life after death, no satisfying interpretation of the mystery of eternal life. If so, let us phrase our question more boldly: "Given that I must someday die, what can I do now to satisfy my desire to live?" Perhaps probed from such a perspective resurrec-

tion and immortality will yield insights into the meaning of life.

Certainly in its late Hebrew Bible and New Testament form resurrection acknowledges death. Apart from death resurrection imagery makes no sense. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and burial and Paul's own theological interpretation leave no doubt. When you're dead you're dead. How, then, is the resurrection imagery relevant to this life?

It affirms the relational character of all being and human being in particular. Social solidarity, not atomistic individualism, is its currency. The transformation it promises transforms this life, all of it. The material substance of this universe and our own bodies are no more to be denied than the minds or spirits with which we identify our consciousness. Resurrection only makes sense in the context of the Creator's saving will for the enitre created order. Resurrection acknowledges that death's limit on our lives is real. We cannot satisfy our desire to live by ourselves. But to give up that attempt is not to renounce the desire to live. It simply means we must seek some other way to satisfy our passion for life. The New Testament calls us to do so by laying down our life for another.

"A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The dimension that the New Testament added to the Hebrew Bible concept of death was that death itself could become the movement to new life. It could be the intentional vehicle of creative transformation. Recall our earlier reference to Paul: "The thing that is sown is contemptible but what is raised is glorious; the thing that is sown is weak but what is raised is powerful." To believe that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, and that he was raised from the dead is to believe that our present existence is a dialectic of life and death. "Always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body" (II Corinthians 4:10). Through death as well as life, in death and life, we can be participants in the transformation of this world.

It is here that the imagery of an immortal soul can be integrated with the biblical understanding of resurrection. Our individual human being is the point at which social solidarity is experienced. If we look within ourselves we will discover the relatedness of which the resurrection imagery speaks. The immortal soul is a way of speaking of that being that dies and is raised, again and again, that being that experiences the struggle to transform this world. It is the dialectic between death and the continuity of life that defines the individual. To deny either pole of the dialectic is to deny the vitality of human existence. The individual that is saved out of this world is not an individual at all. The resurrection focuses on the transformation, not the extension of this life. The immortal soul makes sense in that context. Immortality consists in being personally alive to that God who is making all things new now.

Human beings tend to look to the future for orientation in the face of what is. The integrated imagery of resurrection and immortality may turn out to be instructive if it sends us back into life. It is the dialectic of life and death

In conclusion, let us look again at Pfeiffer's cartoon. The woman asks: "Do you believe in life after death?" The man replies: "What do you think this is?" Perhaps he is saying life is always lived in the presence of death. Only if death is acknowledged as a real limit can we set about living urgently and creatively. In that sense, all life is after death.

that makes us aware, that turns us to one another, opens us to one another.

Death forces Leo Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych to acknowledge the hypocrisy and superficiality of the existence he has led. This terrible truth comes at the end of Ivan's life and only after months of alienation and days of suffering. "At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified."[6] There was still something he could do. In the final moments of life he could appropriate his own death for some purpose. He could free his family from the wretchedness his own agony was causing.

> He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. "How good and how simple!" he thought. . . . "And death . . . where is it?" . . . In place of death there was light.[7]

The death-life dialectic operative in resurrection and immortality imagery is operative here in the setting of a middle class family.

The same dynamic can be illustrated when we move to more comprehensive social issues such as the military draft and nuclear arms. Here the sense of death and the continuity of life poses critical questions. To what transforming purpose are individual lives, young lives, given over to the economic aims and political ambitions of corporations and nations? What manner of social solidarity is exhibited in arms policies that can only achieve their ends by sacrificing the lives of millions at home and abroad?

The eschatological imagery of Matthew 25 puts these questions directly. The nations are called to judgment before the Son of Man. And what are the criteria by which their behavior is assessed?

> I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.

Here resurrection and immortality have their viability as images of death and the meaning of life.

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[6]Tolstoy, Leo, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories* (New York: Signet, 1960), p. 155.

[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 155 f.