Reflections on Death and Reconciliation

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...the child has no knowledge of death until about the age of three to five. How could he? It is too abstract an idea, too removed from his experience. . . . He doesn't know what it means for life to disappear forever, nor theorize where it would go. Only gradually does he recognize that there is a thing called death that takes some people away forever. .. (Becker, 1973, p. 13).

Death was introduced to me suddenly, without forewarning and without any preparation, at the age of ten. I was riding home on my bike on a warm summer evening. A crowd had gathered, and I stopped to see what had happened. There, laying in the street, was a little girl's tennis shoe, next to a tiny pool of blood. I don't know how I knew it was blood, but I did. She had been hit by a car and killed. Vague thoughts and feelings stirred within me as if I were in a dream, and I wondered how she might have looked: the color of her hair, her dress, her face, the expression in her eyes. I tried to imagine her voice, but all I heard was silence. The image stayed with me for years.

This was the first time that I had really thought about death—not in words, but in pictures and feelings. Had this been an isolated event I am sure I would have buried the memory. But within a few years I was to witness two other accidents, one fatal, also involving children. I saw a young boy hit by a car and watch him sail through the air. It is difficult to describe how I felt inside. It all seemed to happen in slow motion and, except for that awful thumping sound, in silence. This time I was terrified. The little boy was alive but he was in shock, and so was I. I tried to imagine what he was experiencing, but I
couldn't. I was facing something incomprehensible, and I could not tolerate the experience. I became immersed in a dreamlike reverie: distant and withdrawn, yet inexplicably pulled and attracted. My fear of death became something incommunicable, and I was taken over by a deep silence.

Psychologically, when a situation overwhelms a child and he cannot find a resolution, he becomes "imprinted," and portions of the experience are forced deep into the unconscious. These imprints can emerge years later, still unrecognized, when similar events trigger the memory.

Even while writing this paper I noticed that I was avoiding certain memories and feelings that had been particularly disturbing. As I began to explore these feelings in this area, I realized that I had unconsciously omitted a significant event: my father had nearly died in front of me when I was 16 years old. He had taken some medication and warned me that I was to call his doctor if he had a reaction. He did. I made the call but as I tried to help him to the bedroom he went into anaphylactic shock and collapsed. As he lay there on the floor, I felt myself go numb. I stood and watched helplessly as the doctor saved his life. My father was an angry man, and his anger could scare me, but his helplessness in the face of death was even more terrifying, and as a result I repressed most of my feelings toward my father for the next five years.

By the time I was 21, I still had not discussed these events with anyone. So it was with great interest and excitement that I first read a book that talked about death in a way that was new to me. It introduced the idea that death could be seen as an enhancement to life. It was Castaneda's story in which the sorcerer, don Juan, tells his young apprentice, "Death is the only wise adviser that we have.... Focus your attention on the link between you and your death, without remorse or sadness or worrying. Focus your attention on the fact you don't have time and let your acts flow accordingly. Let each of your acts be your last battle on earth" (Castaneda, 1972, p. 55, 112).

I had found a way to think about my experiences with death, albeit from the unfamiliar perspective of sorcery, but it made sense. My anxiety shifted, and I started to talk with others about the subject of death.

At this time, I began to encounter a series of highway accidents. Over the next five years I witnessed the aftermath of fifteen fatal crashes. I did not seek them out and only came across them while driving. These encounters seemed bizarre to me, and I began to wonder if this was coincidence or if there was some
kind of connection between myself and these external events. Perhaps, if I had known about lung's views concerning synchronicity, these events would not have been particularly upsetting. With each accident encountered, however, I became more and more troubled, and increasingly wondered why this was happening to me.

Finally, one afternoon while driving, I heard a report that a helicopter and a small plane had collided in the vicinity. I felt drawn to the site and as I wandered around I noticed there were little pieces of flesh—there was no blood-scattered over much of the neighborhood. I saw others picking them up and taking them away, as if for souvenirs. This bothered me deeply, yet I was desperately searching for something—an answer to some unspoken question. In an empty field, where no one was wandering, I sat down in front of one of the little pieces and deliberately meditated upon it. I thought, "Was this a person?" I wasn't sure. I recall voicing the question, "Where is the soul of man?" I had never before consciously formulated this kind of question. I stared at that little piece of a person until I concluded that his or her spirit no longer resided in the flesh. That was the extent of my philosophical investigation, but I felt that something in me had been satisfied. I remember saying to myself that I no longer wanted to come across these experiences. For the next ten years they ceased, and during that decade I felt no need to engage in further contemplation on the nature of life and death.

RECONCILIATION WITH MY FATHER

Only death is absolute, irreversible, final; first and foremost our own, but equally that of others. This is why death anxiety, when not relieved by a firm belief in an afterlife, surpasses all other anxieties in depth (Bettelheim, 1980, p. 4).

A month after my wedding ceremony at age 35, my father called to tell me he had cancer. He seemed calm when he told me of his diagnosis. He did not seem anxious, nor was he considering any immediate treatment. What he did not know—his doctor refused to tell him—was that the cancer was spreading so rapidly he could be dead in a matter of weeks.

This situation thrust me into a new confrontation with my fears and anxieties, and those of my family. I was also under pressure from other events in my life. I urgently needed a solution and I had no idea where to begin. Conscious of my tendency to withdraw from such a situation, and unwilling to do so, I experienced what I can only describe as a complete intellectual...
intimacy within the crisis. All my thoughts were suspended, for what seemed to be hours, perhaps days. All solutions seemed inadequate.

In this condition a distinct thought came to me, heard as something like an "inner voice."! In a clear and gentle tone it said, "You can make of this situation anything you so choose." I immediately felt a sense of calm that gave me the strength to begin with my father the difficult exploration of our relationship.

When he came to California to visit, we began to talk about our difficulties in expressing our love to each other. During our first conversation, he was abruptly stricken with a crippling pain that would not subside. He usually had a very high tolerance for pain, and I watched in agony. I asked him if he would try a guided imagery exercise, and he surprised me by saying yes. He was desperate. I asked him to visualize the pain in any way he wanted. He saw it as a grayish cloud. I asked him to start at the top of his head and gather the cloud into a ball and slowly move it down his body, adding to it all the other cloudlike areas. When he had collected it all in his abdomen, I told him to expel it from his body. The exercise worked and he was (temporarily) free of the pain. I, however, was extremely nauseous, and had to excuse myself for a few minutes. In that emotionally wrenching experience many years of internal resentment began to break down as I extended myself to him as a loving son.

Just before Christmas my father went into the hospital. I knew he was going to die. I thought about our history of fighting and frustration, and the communication that I had so desperately wished for as a child. Only within this crisis were we able to share these brief moments of intimacy.

For the next two weeks my father, partly due to pain and partly due to medication, drifted in and out of consciousness. I visited him often, mostly in silence or in brief exchanges of dialogue. When he was conscious he was nearly delirious. At one point his face relaxed and decades of wrinkles literally disappeared. I said, half to myself, "You've just let go of your anger." I thought he was unconscious, but he opened his eyes, looked clearly and directly at me and nodded yes. It was our last communication, for he never regained consciousness. I watched as his vital signs began to slow, and I felt a desire to be with him at the time of his passing.

When the hospital did call I hesitated briefly and arrived a few minutes after he had died. I closed his eyes and hugged him for a very long time. He was still warm. It reminded me of when I
was a little child curled up in his arms on his chest, only now I was holding him. There, in the privacy of death, I was able to finally feel safe enough to love my father. Eventually I opened the window and felt a cool breeze filled with the smells from a morning rain. I lit some incense that I had brought and sat down to meditate.

My father seemed as alive the moment after his death as he was the day before. I even felt a vibration, or energy, of sorts in his hands. I knew it might have been my imagination, but that did not concern me. This was my final time with my father and I decided to sit with him for an hour. During that hour I came to realize that my father's anger was a defense for his own fears, and with this simple realization my own childhood angers and fears towards him began to dissolve.

I kept returning to the question of my father's soul or spirit. How could I know if he was still here or not? Ten years earlier I had concluded that the tiny piece of flesh had no soul. Now, with my father, I was not so sure. An hour had passed. Without really thinking about it, I started to imagine, as a deliberate fantasy, my father's "spirit" coming out of his body. I watched him first sit up, look around the room, and then, with a little difficulty step out of bed onto the floor. In my imagination, there he stood translucently. At that moment a doctor I had never seen before stepped into the room, apologized for the interruption, and officially pronounced him dead. It was remarkable timing. I began to feel elated and left the room to walk down the hall, continuing with the fantasy that my father was by my side. I even imagined him telling me a joke, and I walked away feeling exhilarated.

My family had decided upon cremation, but the thought of it bothered me for it had a sense of destruction that seemed unimaginable. A human being turned into dust was a difficult notion for me to grasp, until I was handed my father's ashes in a little cardboard box. Why they are caned ashes I do not know. They are actually pieces and chips of bone, quite heavy to hold. This was very much the remains of my father, and when we scattered them into the Pacific I had the sense that he was finally gone.

Several months later I began to have vague feelings of anxiety connected to dreams about him. I came to the unexpected and disturbing realization that I did not believe that anything continued after death.

... I have never written expressly about a life after death; for then I would have had to document my ideas, and I have no way of
doing that. . . . Even now I can do no more than tell stories—"mythologize." Perhaps one has to be close to death to acquire the necessary freedom to talk about it. It is not that I wish we had a life after death. In fact, I would prefer not to foster such ideas. Still, I must state, to give reality its due, that, without my wishing and without my doing anything about it, thoughts of this nature move about within me. I can't say whether these thoughts are true or false, but I do know they are there. . . . Unfortunately, the mythic side of man is given short shrift nowadays. He can no longer create fables. As a result, a great deal escapes him; for it is important and salutary to speak also of incomprehensible things. . . . A man should be able to say he has done his best to form a conception of life after death, or to create some image of it—e ven if he must confess his failure. Not to have done so is a vital loss (lung, 1963, p. 299, 300, 302).

Jung was the son of a pastor, exposed to a religious philosophy steeped in mythology and images beyond the grave. My own religious influences, or lack of them, tended more towards an atheistic ambivalence. I had long since rejected any belief in an anthropomorphic god with his heavens and hells and afterlives. But I had ignored the fact that parts of my mind were still bound to those thoughts.

I discussed my condition with an analyst friend of mine, whom I respected, and he suggested that I use my imagination, as I had done in the hospital, to create a sense that my father's presence was still available. I objected to this suggestion, arguing that there was no basis for me to accept such a blatant fantasy. He replied, "And how do you know? Try it and see what happens." I struggled with my doubt and skepticism, but was quite surprised to find that the exercise alleviated my uneasiness. Furthermore, the anxiety-producing dreams ceased.

A new phase of reconciliation had begun. This period of "mourning" involved occasional sadness, but was filled primarily with a desire to explore all the meanings that death had held for me throughout my life. Thus, the mourning process involved the building of a new theoretical perspective, one which helped me to organize and integrate the many feelings and impressions that had preoccupied me for so many years.

ONE YEAR LATER: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

In the year that has passed since writing this paper, I find, to my surprise, that I have become profoundly atheistic, and have a sense that death is absolute and final, that nothing whatsoever exists of one's consciousness or "self-ness" after death. Furthermore, this point of view brings with it a pervasive sense
of well-being. This is particularly unexpected for I have made no attempt to build this point of view. I was, in fact, following Jung's advice and struggling to build the opposite perspective. It is even more surprising since many people who have had various mystical, near-death, and other transpersonal experiences have emerged from them with the conviction that life does, indeed, continue in some form or another. Since these reports are often popular-they do relieve many people's anxieties, at least temporarily-I think it is important to demonstrate that the opposite conclusion can also bring deep satisfaction, particularly if it emerges as a natural process. In my own case, it has heightened my appreciation of the present, for within this framework the present is all there is. Its brevity makes living all the more precious, and I feel a beauty and an intensity in my interactions with people and nature that I had not previously felt.

I have also come to know that my personal story is similar to that of others in father-and-son relationships. As all too many men know, it is very painful for a child to grow into manhood and not have a satisfactory exchange with his father. Whether the reasons for this are to be found in the dynamics of the particular family or reflect larger social and cultural problems, the relationship may still be amenable to change, even if one's own father is no longer living. My father's dying provided the opportunity to begin that process, and I no longer dwell upon the difficulties of our past relationship. In fact, much to my surprise and delight, my love for him has grown.

NOTE

In my experience-this voice, insight or sense-shares certain elements with Assagioli's process of Self experience and integration (1986, p. 25), and his technique of dialogue with the teacher within (1965, p. 204-5), as well as with Maslow's description of peak experiences (1964, p. 60, 62, 66, 67). I was introduced to this technique in my own analysis and training. This kind of experience is not the same as intuition, which can be traced to previous unrecognized clues. It is a tool that can be consciously developed and has been found in a number of conventional and spiritual teachings. Other examples of inner voice experiences can be found in James' book, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). A recent study and comparison was done by Heery (1989).

REFERENCES


