



**A Good Death**  
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From Galway Kinnell:

1

*There are things I tell no one.  
 Those close to me might think  
 I was sad and try to comfort me, or become sad themselves.  
 At such times I go off alone, in silence, as if listening for God.*

2

*I say "God;" I believe,  
 rather, in a music of grace  
 that we hear, sometimes, playing to us  
 from the other side of happiness.  
 When we hear it, when it flows  
 through our bodies, it lets us live  
 these days lighted by their vanity  
 worshiping — as the other animals do,  
 who live and die in the spirit  
 of the end — that backward-spreading  
 brightness. And it speaks in notes struck  
 or caressed or blown or plucked  
 off our own bodies: remember,  
 existence already remembers  
 the flush upon it you will have been,  
 you who have reached out ahead  
 and taken up some of the black dust  
 we become; souvenir  
 which glitters already in the bones of your hand.*

...

4

*Brothers and sisters;  
 lovers and children;  
 great mothers and grand fathers  
 whose love-times have been cut  
 already into stone; great  
 grand fetuses spelling  
 the past again into the flesh's waters:  
 can you bless — or not curse —  
 whatever struggles to stay alive  
 on this planet of struggles?*

...

*I want to live forever.  
 I am like everyone. But when I hear  
 coming through the walls  
 those grace-notes blown  
 out of the wormed-out bones,  
 music that their memory of blood  
 plucks from the straitened arteries,*

...

*in the holy days of their vanity,  
 that the two hearts drummed  
 out of their ribs together,  
 the hearts that know everything (and even  
 the little knowledge they can leave  
 stays, to be the light of this house),*

*then it is not so difficult  
 to go out, to turn and face  
 the spaces which gather into one sound the singing  
 of mortal lives, waves of spent existence  
 which flow toward, and toward, and on which we flow  
 and grow drowsy and become fearless again.*

I want to live forever too! Most of the time, I intend to.  
 Most of the time I live as though I had all the time in the world.  
 Even though I know that this is a dreadful mistake.

As I was growing up, our family didn't talk about death. When I was five years old, a boy I knew was drowned in the reservoir behind our house. I was told that God had wanted him and now he was happily playing in heaven.

Some attitudes about death, like the assertion that we're going to a better place, are as old as what we know of humanity itself. The earliest evidence of burial practices, in France revealed a well-preserved Neanderthal skeleton in a pit, wedged into position by several stones. The legs were folded, and near the hand was a fine oval axe. A scraper and other flint implements were placed not far away. Twenty years ago the Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego

left their bodies behind  
 to take on new ones on a far shore —  
 yet they made sure they had change in their pockets  
 and new running shoes.

The centrality of death in religion points out the truth of the late Forrest Church's observation that religion is our response to the dual reality of being born and knowing that we have to die.

In some religious traditions the dead remain active members of the culture. Traditional religions of West Africa made wooden masks to represent the ancestors. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe tells of the special ceremonies when the masked figures would appear, representing the living dead — speaking in guttural tones, giving messages and warnings to the living.

In Mexico one of the most popular holidays is *El Día de los Muertos*: the Day of the Dead, when the dead return to life for a few days to enjoy the pleasures they once knew in life. Graves are decorated with candles and colorful flowers, and special food and drink are set out for everyone — living and dead.

Other religions emphasize the return of the soul to the divine.

In Vodoun, practiced in the Caribbean, the human soul consists of two parts: the ti-bon-ange and the gros-bon-ange. The ti-bon-ange, meaning "*little good angel*," is the source of personality. The ti-bon-ange represents the accumulation of a person's knowledge and experience and is responsible for determining individual characteristics, personality and will. It can leave the body when dreaming, for instance, or when the body is being possessed by a loa.

The gros-bon-ange means, literally, "*great good angel*." At conception, part of the cosmic life force passes into the human being. This is the force that all living things share, connecting us to each other in a great web of energy. The gros-bon-ange keeps the body alive and sentient, and after death, *passes back into the reservoir of energy in the cosmos*.

The Sikhs consider death as the return of the ego, or "little I", to that which is the eternal essence of all things. In this way, we are immortal. The Hindus believe that we return, eventually, to the eternal.

Central to Buddhism is the belief in reincarnation. I've heard one Tibetan version of how it occurs. After you die, you awake at what seems to be heaven. It's a banquet — a wonderful party with interesting, amusing guests. The ambiance is exquisite, there are flowers and soft music, and all your favorite food and drink — but much more delicious than you remembered. You stay for several days, laughing and enjoying yourself. But then one day, unexpectedly, the beautiful dream turns into a nightmare. Food begins rotting on the tables, the faces of the people around you start melting, the flowers die, and the world begins falling apart. You are terrified — you panic, running mindlessly looking for anyplace to escape.

Then you see a way out — not knowing that it is the small area of space between a woman and a man during sex. You jump in into that space right at the moment of their orgasm and you are reborn as their child.

In this system, you can avoid rebirth by dying with full awareness and clarity, which enable you to recognize the banquet drama for what it is, and not reacting to it when it goes bad.

One's attitude at the moment of death is important in many religions. Not only Buddhists, but Sikhs, and Muslims as well stay with a dying person, singing songs and hymns, chanting, and reading from scripture to prepare the individual to face death in an atmosphere of love and support.

Unfortunately, that is not the case in our own culture, where we have a pronounced gap between practice and stated belief.

For example, a *Time* magazine poll stated that 87% of Americans believe in a heaven after death, 67% of them believe it is “up there,” 93% expect angels, but only 43% expect harps and 36% expect halos. As for their personal fate, 61% expect to go directly to heaven, 15% purgatory, and only 1% think they're going to hell.

But if that's true, why is it that  
*everybody wants to go to heaven*  
*but nobody wants to die?*

We relieve our anxiety around death with comedy and irony. For example,

- ☺ Today is the last day of your life so far.
- ☺ Health is merely the slowest possible rate at which one can die.
- ☺ The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.
- ☺ Always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours.
- ☺ Old soldiers never die. Young ones do.
- ☺ Never knock on Death's door.  
 Ring the bell and run!  
 Death *hates* that.

And an issue of *Adweek* commented recently that, “For some arcane reason, if you're in the business of creating TV commercials, funerals are funny. It then describes one: a man in his car being lowered into a grave; his wife crying inconsolably. A bystander explains to another, “she *really* loved that car.” For what it's worth, the car goes by the brand name *Infinity*.

We joke about death, but we don't talk about it. We're uncomfortable with the very word: people "pass, pass on, or pass away," but they don't die. I remember the Tamagotchi, or "Cute Little Egg" in Japanese. It's a small, hand-held toy, shaped like an egg, with a lively little character on its liquid crystal display screen. If you take care of it, feeding it, playing with it at regular intervals, it grows and develops. If not, it dies. In Japan, that is. In introducing it to the American market, the company was concerned about the American attitudes toward death, so for export it is explained that doesn't die, it just "returns to its home planet" if left unattended.

For most of us, I don't believe that this attitude is due to a fear of death. I think it's a fear of dying.

Eighty percent of all deaths in this country occur to individuals over 65 years of age. We're afraid that we will die, over a long period of time, in pain, and alone. And the opposition to Obamacare still invokes the dreaded "death panels," ignoring its intent which is to encourage end of life planning.

"We have done so little to serve the dying — and thus, when we face death, we see so few supportive options," said Joanne Lynn, director of the Center to Improve Care of the Dying at George Washington University.

They are working with other groups to advocate "controlling pain, giving patients and families more autonomy and control over the care they receive, planning end-of-life care in advance, limiting the overuse of high-tech machinery at the end of life, and helping patients feel that their last months and days are meaningful and satisfying."

"We have long ignored the end of life," explained Lynn. "Perhaps our priorities in the last few decades — tackling diseases and making life-sustaining machinery — somehow sought to spare us from dealing with the fact that mortality always closes the story. But now we have the opportunity — the burden — of having a long time to live with the disease that will kill us. We need health care that helps us live well at the end of life. That time should not be thrown away, and can be some of the most valuable, meaningful time we have on this earth."

So if the medical establishment does its part in striving to help us end our lives in dignity, what is our part? How can we make it "some of the most valuable, meaningful time we have on this earth?"

We can prepare for death. There are three basics: first, prepare a will. The next two, a Durable Power of Attorney, which documents the medical procedures you authorize and designates an individual to make decisions if you are unable to do so. And you can document your preference regarding burial or cremation and the type of service you wish. You can leave copies of these in my office which I would leave for my successor, if you wish.

Beyond those issues, there is an obvious but overlooked thing we can do to overcome our fear of dying. That is to recognize a much more pervasive and dangerous fear — fear of living. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in death and dying issues, says simply that, in her experience, we die as we have lived. Those who lived lives of meaning, purpose, and

connection with others accept the end when it comes, and welcome it as the appropriate conclusion to a life well lived. Others, haunted with regrets and enmities, die in despair.

Rather than surrender to death, it is our challenge today to surrender to life, with its beauty, its opportunities to serve love and justice! We can improve the odds on a good death by living a good life.

Stephen Levine tells the story of a well-known meditation master who is asked by a student, "In this world where everything changes, where nothing remains the same, where loss and grief are inherent in our very coming into existence, how can there be any happiness?" The teacher, looking compassionately at this fellow, held up a drinking glass which had been given to him earlier in the morning and said, "You see this goblet? For me, the glass is already broken. I enjoy it, I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on a shelf, and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, "Of course."

"But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious. Every moment is just as it is and nothing need be otherwise.' When we recognize that, just as that glass, our body is already broken, that indeed we are already dead, then life becomes precious and we open to it just as it is, in the moment it is occurring. When we understand that all our loved ones are already dead — our children, our mates, our friends — how precious they become. How little fear can interpose, how little doubt can estrange us. When you live your life as though you're already dead, life takes on a new meaning. Each moment becomes a whole lifetime, a universe unto itself."

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of mortal lives, waves of spent existence  
which flow toward, and toward, and on which we flow  
and grow drowsy and become fearless again.*

May it be so. AMEN