

## Reflections on Death & Dying - Birth & Birthing.

Paul Barber

**DEATH** = *The boundary marker of physical existence and the twin-brother of birth - a drama we all buy into when we over-identify with the 'self' or the body.*

"Death" represents the threat – or joy – of being confronted with an ego-less state and the loss cum surrender of our self-identity. We may enter into an aware dialogue with it through meditation, or experience it in less aware ways via altered states induced by drugs or drunkenness, illness and toxaemia, sleep and coma.

But what of the passage of death - wasn't birth the death of the foetus yet didn't life continue? So we lost the womb, peaked from out its oceanic peace and entered that unknown zone of death we now term – life. Eventually, we made an art form of our alienation and built ourselves an ego, and in this way fashioned a brand new psychic womb all to ourselves. From the ego, our more recent socially crafted container, death now threatens to wrench us - or yet again to re-birth us? As we burst from the womb so we must burst from the ego. Life is what we know - now; death is our midwife and promises yet another birth into the unknown. Death is also the opposite of "time". Some spiritual traditions encourage us to act-into death in order to wake us up!

*"At death the flesh of the material body is abandoned by all the force which possessed it; and left to disintegrate. In a symbolic death, all contact with the outside world is cut off, as are all incoming thoughts, in an attempt to stimulate the experience of death, and so acquire spiritual insight" (Chetwynd 1982).*

At its most mundane, "death" is perceived as nothingness; a state where the whole cosmos is extinguished, as if in deepest sleep, a state wherein we lose consciousness and selfhood. The death of the individual, in this way is seen to symbolically correspond to a death of the universe:

*"Since ordinary consciousness with which we are concerned in ordinary life is before all things rooted on the little local self (...) it follows that to pass out of that is to die to the ordinary self and the ordinary world. It is to die is the ordinary sense, but in another sense it is to wake up and find that the 'I', one's real, most intimate self, pervades the universe and all things - that the mountains and the sea and the stars are part of one's own body and that the soul is in touch with the souls of all creatures" (Carpenter 1912).*

At the mid-point of life, about the age of forty-five when the ego is fully developed, a turning point is reached. In this second phase of life we leave our youth behind. All we have physically become and psychologically acquired now begins to wane. Fail to integrate this second part of life, attempt to hold-on to your fleeting youth and refuse to

meet your destiny and you will end-up fighting the universe. Shun this deathful return to the cosmos and the second half of life becomes an anti-climax and a living death. Better to let go gracefully and to travel light upon your journey:

*“A warrior considers himself already dead, so there is nothing for him to lose. The worst has already happened to him, therefore he’s clear and calm; judging him by his acts or by his words, one would never suspect he has witnessed everything” (Castaneda 1998 p 121).*

In Tibetan Buddhism three planes of existence beyond death are described:

- *The instinctual, animal and sexual plane which thirsts after re-birth;*
- *The form without matter where images, symbols and archetypes which are the residue of existence survive;*
- *Pure existence, essence and energy.*

But these are not just features of death they are also orientations to life, and to those who hold tightly on to intellectually control – their very Hell!

*“Why mourn for the cocoon  
After the butterfly has flown” (Ancient Chinese saying).*

Death defines our finite nature. Death is irrevocable, we *have to* accommodate it. It is highly relevant to us right now for its very absence defines us as – “the living”. We hear its message continually, it whispers continually we can’t go on forever. This gives us a certainty like nothing else can give us; and fear in the face of death, well, this helps us claim back our individuality and authentic being. Alone and humbled by mortality, I gain new life. Death is an intimate part of me, and to accept living towards this end? Well this ferments a renewed awakening to life.

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***A Reflection:***

To make friends with your death, *imagine* a future time when death is drawing near:

- *How do you imagine you will feel?*
- *What manner of illness or event is it that draws you intimately towards your death?*
- *Who would you like to attend you in your dying?*

Imagine yourself as one of your friends or as a loved one at your own funeral:

- *What would you like to have done with the deceased before they died?*
- *How would you like to remember them?*
- *How would you most like to honour and to celebrate their passing?*

To ferment a friendship with death, set about today planning your funeral today.

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**BIRTH** = *The imagined start of a journey - death's twin-sister.*

Birth indicates a commitment and a desire to enter into what is new, to journey and, to learn. Throughout our lives we experience many re-births. As the child dies the man is born. Turning from one way to another, adopting this and forsaking that, we self-create and re-birth ourselves time and time again; in short, you are your own midwife, mother and father, and will eventually be the executioner of all you have become.

From a Buddhist perspective *we are all born to die - and die to be reborn.* Zen reminds us that life is four times down - and five times up!

As was suggested above, in the midst of being born, our expulsion from the womb mirrors "death". As the water-borne creature in the universe of its mother – dies, vomits out fluid, gulps the unfriendly air and cries, it is reborn in a waterless and spacious world and is endowed with the label of "baby". If as new-born babies we knew of death we would think we were dying, for having been at one in the womb we are suddenly thrown out and expelled from our personal Eden, little knowing that this is a natural and planned for process and that others are already awaiting us. And death, what is this in such a light - but a re-birth to an unknown place; and those moments when we catch something beyond the conventional world we inhabit, things spiritual, what are these but sensations similar to those we received while cushioned in the womb. And who's to say there are not others on the other side of death, waiting and ready to parent us anew? So how does 'birth' differ from 'death'? Merely through the associations we attach.

The science of death and re-birth is pursued to considerable depth by Tibetan Buddhists, who see of vital importance a person's state of mind in their final moments. In terms of the death experience itself, they describe this, initially, as being drawn to a luminous light - which is none other than the enlightened state; if the disembodied soul can stay with this light they suggest all will be well and liberation will be achieved. Conversely, if an individual's karmic force is too strong and gives rise to confusion and fear- largely due to the terror of losing the delusional "I" - they say their soul will reach out for a new body. It is said other lights also appear at this time to offer further opportunities for liberation, but if these too are lost, soul-consciousness may be drawn to an intermittent state of limbo for up to 49 days, where it will meet bewildering phantasms and apparitions. Staying cool and not caught by such disembodied thought-forms as this - is seen as the primary goal of spiritual practice. If liberation is not achieved, terror and/or desire draws-in a new birth, which if this is to be a human birth, the future mother and father will be seen lying together. In the case of a male birth it is suggested that attraction will be felt for the mother, and vice versa for a female birth. Heated by desire the deluded soul then approaches with a view to intercourse - but being frustrated experiences anger, which seals the connection between the disembodied soul, the father's sperm and the mother's blood.

So what are we to make of all this? Are we to take this as a factual account or a metaphorical one? How do you feel when the unknown is given a voice and a shape? Just let whatever arises inform you - for there is no right or wrong answers here.

If there is consciousness prior to conception, and if we chose to incarnate, the contract we originally forged prior to our birth might well have been akin to the one below:

*"1) I desire birth.*

*2) I am ready to be burned and consumed; for that is what birth is.*

*3) I am ready to be naked and unprotected, and to suffer from my nakedness; for that is what life is.*

*4) I am ready to make the pilgrimage through matter in darkness and in fire, so that the circle of the uncreate shall become the create. The ordeal of fire which comes upon the soul immediately that the desire for birth is expressed, and continues while man remains man only, is the burning out and consuming of all alloy. When this is accomplished, the ego can effect the miracle of resurrection and rebirth into a higher state, and can begin to form a regenerated shape which shall be worthy of immortality" (Collins 1912).*

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### **A Reflection:**

Find a paper and pencil. Draw a line to represent the whole of your life, from birth through to your death. Bring to mind times of great transition in your life, perhaps these will include falling in love, career moves, bereavements, periods of planned and unplanned change, plus other turning points in your life. Mark these events down at strategic points along the symbolic life-line you have drawn.

- *At what time intervals do you usually experience re-births in your life?*
- *Are there any other patterns, perhaps relating to the type of re-birth you are usually personally prone to that are discernible to you?*
- *What symptoms seem to accompany these moments of re-birth – what are your more usual birth pangs?*
- *What sort of personal support do you need to help you through these transitions?*
- *What is dying or becoming less in your life, and what is growing or becoming more?*
- *What major transitions do you imagine await you?*
- *I wonder how best might you prepare for the changes yet to come.*

*So again, remind me, who are you?*

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This is not a mere theoretical paper; it was experientially informed by my son's death. I close with a letter I wrote some weeks after his passing

*Dear Friends and Colleagues,*

*Marc throughout his journey was supported by healers of the spirit, dietary supplements, massage, visualization and counselling. All contributed to his clarity and comfort, enabling him to face totally and completely all that happened, learn from it, and let it go. I remember sitting with Marc when he*

*was first informed that the options were running out. His first thoughts were of me. "It must be really hard for you dad, to watch your son die". This says masses about the quality of his being. Later, when we heard that there was nothing more to be done, we discussed the options, shed our tears together and moved to a place where the present moment was far more important than the past or future.*

*We did much work to prepare ourselves. I remember watching Marc play with the young son of a patient next to him. Soon after we worked together upon letting-go of the future and mourning the family he would never have. Marc's growth accelerated during his last two weeks. He told one nurse he had "learnt to love the executioner", he was no longer angry with his tumour.*

*He told another he was "moving to a new level". This change was undeniable, his eyes shone and a light and lightness permeated and radiated from his being.*

*The contract he had earlier made with me, that I would not show grief around him, was now no longer necessary, for there was no grief, only awe for the quality of our meeting.*

*Spiritually, Marc... really began to fly. He was alert to the end. By fully staying in contact with what unfolded the worst never happened. He made one request of me: to not wake up alone.*

*A few days before the end he held sway with a group of friends, reviewing past excitements, joking and teasing them to new levels of joyful encounter. He acknowledged that he was the happiest he had ever been. I am indebted to the nurses who enabled Marc to spend his last days in a private room - usually reserved for fee-paying patients - so that I might sleep alongside him. During our final days together we meditated upon "what was", "what had been" and "what we meant to each other". Marc shared his love and thanked me for all I'd done. He also acknowledged that he would have without hesitation done the same for me. Marc could never understand why he was so loved by all who met him.*

*I remember asking him if he felt worthy of being loved yet? He said "he was getting there.*

*Shortly before he died I guided him through several meditations from which He returned with powerful and symbolic images of what we took to be earlier lives.*

*There was one where he was in Celtic tunic, a warrior in metal helmet resting on one knee with his short sword drawn. Having repulsed one wave he was preparing himself for the final battle as the light faded. From another journey he returned having been taught breathing exercises by a man in white. Earlier Marc's mother had been visited in a dream by his great grandfather who told her "not to worry - everything would be all*

*right". Marc's great grandfather felt very present for me as I held Marc's hand, encouraged him to relax, to go with love and to gently depart in his own time.*

*Though he was as much a friend as a son, in the final days he became my teacher.*

*Four qualities especially summarize Marc at this time: courage, humour, compassion and joy - the qualities of a free soul.*

Paul