

normal. I am not surprised to find that it is a lonely life: After all, the person who brought me into the world is gone. But it is more than that. I feel not just that I am but that the world around me is deeply unprepared to deal with grief. Nearly every day I get e-mails from people who write: "I hope you're doing well." It's a kind sentiment & yet it angers me. I am not OK. Nor do I find much relief in the well-meant refrain that at least my mother is "no longer suffering." Mainly, I feel one thing: My mother is dead & I want her back – sometimes so intensely that I don't even want to heal."

Grief is common. We know it exists in our midst. We become suddenly aware of how difficult it is for us to confront it. And to the degree that we do want to confront it, we do so in the form of self-help: We want to heal our grief. We want to achieve an emotional recovery. We want our grief to be teleological, and we've assigned it five tidy stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Yet as we've come to frame grief as a psychological process, we've also made it more private. But we don't have the rituals of public mourning around which the individual experience of grief were once constellated. We are not prepared for how hard we would find it to re-enter the slipstream of contemporary life, our world of constant connectivity & immediacy, so ill-suited to reflection. **We find it hard to reflect about the paradox of loss, with its monumental sublimity & microscopic intimacy.**

Muslims believe that all suffering, life, death & happiness are derived from Allah. He is the one who gives us strength to survive. These beliefs are usually sources of comfort & strength that aid the healing process. In accepting grief & loss, the relatives of the deceased person are urged to be patient (sabr) & accept Allah's decree. "Be sure we shall test you with fear & hunger, **some loss** in goods, **lives** & the fruits of your toil, but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere. When afflicted with calamity they say: **To Allah we belong & to Him is our return.**"

Muslims should grieve when they lose someone close to them. Bereavement is an upsetting & traumatic experience. It might comfort the mourner to know that such reactions & feelings are universal responses to loss & that they are not sinful. Shock, disbelief, denial, anger, guilt, bargaining, depression & acceptance are common human reactions to the loss of a loved

one. Express these feelings. It is damaging to suppress them since the loss has to be acknowledged, the different emotions of grief have to be freed, new skills may need to be developed & emotional energy channeled into new life. It is permissible to cry & express grief over the death of a loved one. Extreme lamentation is discouraged. It is permitted to weep softly, before someone dies, at the time of death, and after. The Prophet (p) cried when one of his loved ones died. When he (p) visited the grave of his mother he cried.

After the Uhud battle, when burying one of his companions, Uthman ibn Madhum, the Prophet (p) also shed tears. When giving the news of the death of Jafar and his companions in the battle against the Romans, he spoke with tears streaming down his face. Wailing, eulogizing & tearing one's clothes is discouraged. A few words are allowed to be said when crying over a deceased person. Words should be true & not expressions of dissatisfaction with the decree of God. When the Prophet's (p) son, Ibrahim, died, he said: "We are very sad for your death, O Ibrahim." This is not an indication of discontent with the decree of God or complaining against Him. It is just a genuine human outpouring. Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation. Individuals are encouraged to talk about & remember their loved one & recall the good deeds of their life. Muhammad (p) himself never forgot his love for his wife, Khadijah, years after her death.

Death of a Baby: A mother recorded the following: It is so hard to grasp that this child, whom we longed for so greatly, and who was born in such pain, left us before we got to know what kind of person she would be. Sometimes it all seems like a fleeting dream. But the more I think about it, the more grateful I am Maryam was born alive. In this way, despite the brevity of her life, I feel that she fulfilled a task on earth. For death begins with life's first breath. And life begins at the touch of death.

Death of the Prophet (p): When the Prophet (p) died Umar could not accept. His soul had just left his body temporarily, he argued. He would certainly return to his people. There must have been an hysterical note in Umar's compulsive harangue, because Abu Bakr murmured "Gently, Umar, gently," but Umar could not stop talking. Then Abu Bakr took over. This amazing speech was a reminder that Muhammad (p) had dedicated his life to preaching the unity of God. It ended with these eloquent words: "O people, if anyone worships Muhammad, Muhammad is dead, but if anyone worships God, God is Alive, Immortal." Then he quoted this verse: "Muhammad is nothing but a Messenger. Messengers have passed away before him. Why, if he should **die** or is slain, will you turn back?"

Gibran's poetic words probes deeper into the mystery: You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life? The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light. If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. **For life & death are one**, even as the river & the sea are one. In the depth of your hopes & desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond; And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring. Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity. Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour. Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king? Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling? For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind & to melt into the sun? What is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise & expand & seek God unencumbered? Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

Allah is al-Mumit; The Creator of Death. "We have predetermined death for you. Nothing can stop Us." (56:60) The believer who is cognizant of this almighty control grieves but is not thrown into despair. For the one who does not believe in the Prophets' message view death from a forlorn & desolate vantage point. Let your tears flow...for tears speak the language of the heart. Don't let your misted eyes & crying soul prevent you from insight. "It is He Who gives Life & Death; when He decides upon an affair, He says 'Be,' & it is." (40:68)

Live well with each other: The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid & deeds left undone. Arise in the morning & give thanks for the new day & for the joy of living. Abuse no one for abuse robs the spirit of its vision. Death is **not** the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.

Say: "Truly, my prayer & my service of sacrifice, **my life & my death**, are all for Allah, the Cherisher of the worlds." (6:162) Read that all-encompassing supplication again & focus your life. You will then feel the warm & living touch of sweet immortality. The day which we fear as our last is but the birthday of eternity. The decision is yours as to whether your eternal gift is smoking or non-smoking. The Divine Surgeon-General has warned that smoking is extremely dangerous. May we all R.I.P.

Prepared by: Zamals Software Co.
6 Dowding St. Kitty; 225-9031; zsc@networksgy.com
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Living & Dying

When we die we truly WAKE up

We bury the dead but do **not** take lessons from it. Muhammad (peace)

The Major Lesson: We should first fully accept that **OUR** death is certain. The only uncertainties are when, where, how.

And the more we can fully accept the certainty of our own death, the less our worries about when & how will have the **power to control us**. What flows from this thought is a wider & longer perspective on life — greater openness to change and a greater desire to contribute to events and people outside ourselves. Investing purely in our own **narrow identities** loses

its attraction when we realize that we really do have **built-in obsolescence**.

Without God, death is an unequivocal tragedy. We focus only on loss and are devastated. The Quran reminds us that once the journey of our life terminates we will find ourselves before the blinding reality of God's Presence. Death is the only birthright which can be denied to none. If you are a person who does **NOT** believe in Hell or Heaven...there would still be that gnawing question: **What lies beyond?** In everyone this nagging query lies at the edge of their consciousness, beyond the ken of perception: "Is there any life after death?" Because death is

REAL it pays to explore this in depth before you are interned. **The True Reality:** **We are spiritual beings having a physical experience...**

Let's awake, when we die, with an eternal smile of fulfilment upon our lips.

To God we belong (2:156)
& to God is our return

Death means the rejuvenation of the taste for life. Under the cover of sleep it is a message of wakefulness. We must have an acceptance of death as part of life, instead of our dread of death which ironically turns life itself into a living death.

The senior doctor directed the chest compressions and the Ambu bagging until the resident who would intubate the patient was ready. Someone else slipped a central line into place, and fluids were administered. The EKG leads were placed, and the senior doctor quietly said, “V Fib — **shock.**” Zap went the defibrillator pads. The body reflexively jerked. “Still in VF, keep pumping. Give an amp of bicarb & start lidocaine.” Meanwhile, the endotracheal tube had been inserted & each side of the chest was auscultated to be sure the tube was in position. During the next 20 minutes, multiple vials of bicarb, epinephrine, procainamide, lidocaine & finally bretylium were given, stat blood gases sent, and the results analyzed while everyone worked together to bring back a viable rhythm, pulse & blood pressure.

The code was unsuccessful. Deciding that everything was tried, the senior doctor said, “The code is called.” “Let’s have a moment of silence to honour this departed soul.” **You’re DEAD.** You have now felt the cold touch of mortality. Death, the one appointment we all must keep, and the time set of which we are unaware. At that point all the doctors walk out of the room to take a cup of coffee. But You? Are you crying these terrifying words of regret: **“Ah! Would that death had made an end of me!”** (69:27) An end of me...an end of me....

Normally we do **not** like to think/ponder about death. We would rather reflect on life. When you start preparing for death you soon realize that you must look into your life **now**...and come to face the truth of your self. Death is like a mirror in which the true meaning of life is reflected. Let’s reflect on life’s final chapter & demythologize the process of dying & death. A little reflection should help us to see that **the question of life after death is not merely a philosophical question; it is deeply and intimately related to our everyday life. In fact our moral attitude depends entirely upon this**

question. Pondering about Death, and our ultimate physical finiteness must be made compulsory, a part of some educational syllabus. Remembering Death is the sure antidote for Arrogance, Haughtiness, Greed, Deceit, Lies, Betrayal, Envy, Spite. It is the best antidote against taking things/people for granted. It is an ego minimizer, it is a slap from Reality, from Truth into Wakefulness. These last 24 hours, this day, this hour, this minute, this second, may be your last...You have no control over it.

A little reflection would let us remove this silly question that torments most of humanity: “If we’re all going to be dead in the end anyway, what difference does it make what we do with our lives?” Does the finality of death make life meaningless? Although many people feel that it does, a moment’s reflection will show that death is irrelevant to the question of the meaning of life: If human beings were naturally immortal – if there were no such thing as death – there would still be a question about whether or not our lives had meaning. We will not think thoughts such as: “Most of our accomplishments will be totally forgotten, the memories of our lives reduced to a mere name etched on a tombstone/written on a genealogy chart. In a few centuries even our tombstones will be unreadable due to weathering; our skeletal remains will be all that is left of us. Barring fossilization, these too will be disintegrated into the earth and no trace of us will remain.”

Actually there is more than a “trace.” Atheists don’t have the answer. Neither scientists. Or doctors. The question is beyond their jurisdiction. Only the Prophets definitively did. If we listen to their discourse then this answer will positively shape our lives. The question of whether there is life after death does not fall under the jurisdiction of science, as science is concerned only with classification & analysis of sense data. Moreover, man has been busy with scientific inquiries/research, in the modern sense of the term, only for the last few centuries, while he has been familiar with the concept of life after death since time immemorial.

All the Prophets of God called their people to worship God & to believe in life after death. They laid so much emphasis on the belief in life after death that even a slight doubt in it meant denying God & made all other beliefs meaningless. In these materialistic times when people are disillusioned with their future & think their lives are “sound & fury signifying nothing” the belief in Resurrection should be disseminated. In Macbeth such is the disillusioning cry of the disbelieving soul: **Tomorrow,**

and tomorrow, and tomorrow; Creeps in this petty pace from day to day; To the last syllable of recorded time, And all our yesterdays have lighted fools; The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player; That struts and frets his hour upon the stage; And then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying Nothing.

With belief in God, most of the feeling of life’s absurdity & futility will be eradicated. **Signifying everything.** People, then, will be reanimated with a fresh zeal of life. The celebrated poet, Mirza Ghalib, beautifully expresses the imminence of death this way: **“Without death, life would have been a dull affair. It is death that makes desires work efficiently.”** Death is not to be feared by one who lives wisely. It is only death that compels people to bow before God, otherwise they are far too self-conceited to do so.

The philosopher Goethe wrote, “If Islam means submission to the will of God, then in Islam we all live and die.” This succinctly summarizes the goal of Muslims: To live & die in accordance with God’s will. Muslims attempt to adjust their view of the world with the lens of the Quran. When it comes your time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so they weep & pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. “When death comes to one of them, they say, ‘My Lord, send me back. **I will then work righteousness.**” (23:99) Don’t arrive at the doorsteps of death with this awful regret.

Death is a question of ultimate concern for every human being, and Islam has a very vivid portrayal of the stages of death and the afterlife. Death is likened to sleep in Islam; interestingly, sleep in Arabic is called “the little brother of death.” The Prophet (p) spoke often of death. The Quran is filled with warnings of the dangers of ignoring one’s mortality & of not preparing for death before it is too late. In one poignant passage, the Quran reads, **“And spend something in charity out of the substance which We have bestowed on you before death should come to any of you and he should say, ‘O my Lord! Why did You not give me respite for a little while? I should then have given in charity, and I should have been one of the doers of good.’ But to no soul will Allah grant respite when the time appointed for it has come; and Allah is well-acquainted with what you do.”** (63:10)

Hence, the world is seen as an opportunity to cultivate for the hereafter, and time is seen as capital that

human beings either invest wisely or squander, only to find themselves bankrupt in the next life. Muhammad (p) said, “One of you says, ‘My wealth! My wealth!’ Indeed, have any of you anything other than your food that you eat & consume, your clothes that you wear & your wealth that you give in charity which thus increases in return in the next world?”

The idea of mentioning & reflecting on death is very important in a Muslim’s daily life. Attending any Muslim’s funeral, whether known or not, is highly encouraged; for such attendance, one is rewarded greatly by God. Muhammad (p) advised, “Make much mention of the destroyer of delights,” which is death. He also said, **“Introduce into your gatherings some mention of death to keep things in perspective.”** This is not seen as a morbid exercise & Muslims surprisingly accept death, resigned to what is called “one’s appointed time (*ajal*).” An individual’s appointed term, according to Islam, is inescapable & fated. When a Muslim survives a near-death experience, such as a serious car accident, an operation, or an illness, he or she will often remark, “My appointed time has not come.”

Death is being played out in many places as you read this. As time seems to pass ever so slowly in every room where someone is dying, Muslims recall the verse from the Quran about the moment of death: **“God is nearer to him/her than you, but you cannot see.”** (56:85)

The feelings of grief are like the waves of the ocean...high tide...low tide....high. Sometimes the feelings are stormy & sometimes calm. Sometimes there is a sense of utter despair, emptiness & a numbing of the senses. It can become so intense that one actually questions the whole purpose & meaning of life. There is no right way to deal with grief. What is important is **not** to bury your grief or avoid it. Muslims see death as a transition to the other side. Islam is seen as the vehicle that will take one safely there.

Difficulty in accepting a catastrophic loss: Here is someone’s anguish. “Since my mother’s death, I have been in grief. I walk down the street; I answer my phone; I manage, at times, to look like a normal person, but I don’t feel

Every soul shall have the taste of death. In the end to Us shall you be brought back. (Quran: 29:57)

Prepare for your death as if you will die tomorrow; live your life as if you have eternity. Prophet Muhammad (p)