

Thoughts About Death

Perhaps the harshest reality of human existence is death. Intellectually, we all know that some day we will die, but we in the West tend to ignore this reality as long as possible. Our culture is devoted to materialism, youth, and power. We put our old people into homes where they often die abandoned and alone. Many build their lives on models that do not take into account “*the fact of death.*”

Sogyal Rinpoche, the Buddhist monk wrote *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, said that when he first came to the West, he was shocked by Western culture’s denial and lack of understanding of death. Because death can come at any moment, Rinpoche believes it is important to meditate on the *impermanence of things* and arrange our lives accordingly. Instead of trying desperately to grasp and hold on to things, we must learn detachment, or letting go. Detachment is not indifference; rather, it is coming to terms with the fact that all of those things will pass away.

But for many people, it is not only their own mortality that troubles them, but it is the realization that at any moment their loved ones could be taken away. In fact, this possibility can be more frightening than thinking about our own death. And for many, this nightmare becomes reality.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, lost his son to a rare disease called progeria, or “rapid aging.” The child was diagnosed at an early age, and Kushner and his wife had to watch as their happy little boy slowly turned into an old man before their eyes and then died in his early teens. Going through this excruciating experience, Kushner grew into a man of depth. His book, so human and wise, has helped thousands to face their own tragedies. Near the end of the book, Kushner expresses with disarming honesty how his son Aaron’s life and death changed him:

I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron’s life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose.

Kushner’s touching statement captures the truth of those whose souls have grown wise from painful loss: *he would give it all up in a second if he could have his son back.* This is how it is with dark nights of the soul.

It is true that souls grow strong and people develop an authentic capacity to console others through excruciating experiences. But no one can celebrate that kind of growth like an egoistic victory -- *because the price they paid was far too high.*

SOURCE: *Beyond Religion: A Personal Program For Building a Spiritual Life Outside the Walls of Traditional Religion* by David N. Elkins, Ph.D.; pp. 253-255.