

Does Reflection on Death Enhance Life?

By Guy Newland, a dialogue developed in collaboration with Carolina Gutiérrez-Rivas

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Reading
from Rainer Maria Rilke

Why to be human, always running from our fate?
Not for happiness, a fleeting moment before the losses start.
But because simply to be here is so much.
This vanishing world concerns us strangely,
We who are most vanishing of all.
Once,
For each, only once. Once and no more.
Never again.
But to have been *one with this earth*
Even if only this once,
That can never be taken.

Guy: Does reflection on death enhance life? Well, *Yes*, It does.

Softly: Short sermon today. [pretends to take mike off]

Carolina: Uh, **No** it doesn't!

Guy: Hunh?

Carolina: Well why would it? It is definitely NOT pleasant to think about death. And everyone knows there is nothing you can do about it. Brooding about death is unpleasant and pointless; it seems adolescent. There is no way that it “enhances life.” At best, it is an utter waste of time. It suggests self-centered brooding or even masochism.

Or maybe it means you have been manipulated by organized religion via fear of what will happen *after* death.

Guy: The last part of what you say is definitely true. People are afraid of dying and this fear can be intentionally amplified and then used to control behavior.

But *Maybe* . . . well maybe that that is not the worst thing in the world—maybe some people really can only be controlled and semi-civilized ONLY via such fear, and that is exactly why these manipulative techniques have independently evolved to such prominence in diverse cultures.

Maybe UUs would actually tithe if they were even a bit worried about hell!

Hey! maybe Donald Trump would be a better person if he lived in fear of damnation.

Carolina: Yeah, maybe. Maybe he would be more like Ted Cruz.

Guy: Point taken.

Carolina: Universalism is for those of us who have outgrown fear of hell. We are guided not by fear of hell or death, but by positive values of love and care. Telling people to think about death is the manipulative fear-mongering of traditional religions—including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. We don't need it. We are liberated from it. We prefer to talk about the SPIRIT OF LIFE.

Guy: You are on target in this sense: There does seem to be less talk about death in liberal Protestant denominations than in many other religions. And that relative silence seems to extend to UU. But it does not seem so healthy or liberated to me. Death is real and it is not just some random fact about reality. We say that the spirit of life is inseparable from loss and pain, but we always seem to want to look the other way.

Everywhere and every-when, human beings cannot avoid struggling to make sense of life in the face of death. It is not something imposed by organized

religion. Because religions—as we well know—are the creations of human beings, created to deal with human needs.

Facing death means facing the fact that we, and our kids, and everyone we love will definitely die. All animals die, but *to know* that we definitely WILL die and to know that we do not know when—that seems to be the uniquely human situation.

Carolina: I've heard all of this before. I guess it is a pretty widespread human problem among the deeper thinking types. But it surely doesn't define us. Wouldn't human life be better if we could live fully, right here and right now, without fretting over unpleasant things we can never change or control?

Wendell Berry put it so well:

“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
*who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief.* For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Guy: OK. So, it is true that one can escape, for a short while, into a romanticized, imagined 'peace' of nature—But in fact, natural things are killing and eating each other every instant. They fear one another and struggle. Even here, in his escapism, the poet can't fully suppress his human knowledge of this; when he says

that the “great heron feeds,” death is right there. He calls that *peace*, but the fish don’t.

Reflecting on death is actually good, and life enhancing, because it helps us see what really matters and what is not so important in our lives. We don’t waste time when we keep in mind that each breath we are one breath closer to our last. It really allows one to put things in perspective and to face death with fewer regrets. Atul Gawande’s book *Being Mortal* cites studies showing that people who face near-death experiences, or terminal diagnoses, tend to reassess values and priorities. They spend more time on what matters most. Facing reality, which means reflecting on death, prevents us from taking this moment of love and breath for granted.

And if we don’t reflect on death, we definitely WILL take things for granted and waste our time on trivialities rather than love. Many poets have written of this connection between love and death. It is at the heart of all Rainer Maria Rilke’s work. He wrote in a letter that all of his best poetry is about “the transformations of love that become possible when death is no longer kept out of mind.” James Baldwin put it this way, “Perhaps the whole root of our trouble is that we will sacrifice the beauty of our lives in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.”

Carolina: Life is hard and full of pain; we can agree about that. But it does NOT make life more beautiful to intentionally brood on the unfixable horror of losing those we love most. This is a perverse luxury you can afford only when your life is basically going pretty well.

Yet, you are trying to claim that we can become kinder, more loving people, with more beautiful lives, by intentionally reflecting on death. If *were* true, then maybe the unpleasantness would be worth it. But is there really any evidence of this?

Are you aware of the research undertaken since 9/11 on terror management? It shows that when fears of death are implicitly triggered in people—such as by asking non-Muslims questions about Muslims *on the street in front of a cemetery*—they consistently give more xenophobic answers than they do in other settings. Study after study has confirmed that evoking fear of death leads to more hostility, selfishness, and xenophobia.

Guy: I have read that stuff, but you're missing the point. Whether triggered or not, terror of death is always there and continues to shape our behavior in powerful and unnoticed ways until we bring it out of the closet, into consciousness, and face it. Like the book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Only when we face our fears directly can we let the wild rumpus begin, and only then can we sail peacefully home.

Carolina: So, according to you, if we really understood and accepted our own impermanence, if we humans had a culture within which we acknowledged our lives as passing phenomena, then we would be kinder than people who imagine themselves to be essentially real or eternal souls?

Guy: Um, yes it would seem so. The more we face death, and internalize its certainty, the less we will be impelled by our terror of death to harm others. Because we know we will die in any case, that we are all in the family of mortals together. We will grow to recognize that what makes life worthwhile is what we can do to help others.

Carolina: That's your theory?

Guy: Yes . . . well that is my belief, my philosophy. I guess you could say it is my hypothesis.

Carolina: Ok, so I agree that helping others—or believing that you are helping others-- does give most people a sense of happiness; there is plenty of scientific evidence. But I doubt that there is evidence that understanding your own impermanence makes you kinder. This might *sound true* to you, but I that is probably just some sort of personal preference born of your own gloominess and masochism.

Guy: [Taken aback]. Hey, do you have to get so personal? And what the heck are you talking about?

Carolina: I am going to describe for you the results of new, large-scale research testing the very hypothesis you propose. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes death, mortality, impermanence, and the illusory nature of the “self” or “soul” that we take ourselves to be. So those who are raised fully immersed in a very traditional Buddhist culture, in a Tibetan or Bhutanese community, are imbued from an early age with a distinct sense of what “a person” is. They are taught that a person is merely what we call an ever-changing collection of mental and physical components. Within that flux of mental and physical events, there is no pith or core or essence that endures. This sense of what it means to be a person is very different from what one finds among Hindus and Christians. For example, Hindus and Christians, when asked about who they were ten years ago and who they expect to be ten years in the future, realistically describe change from the past to the present, but radically underestimate forthcoming change. They tend to see their present self as the end of history, a completed and stable agent who will go

forth and do what needs to be done in the future. Traditional Buddhists, on the other hand, much more realistically anticipate change; they are less likely to imagine themselves as being the same in the future. So . . . it would seem . . . that traditional Buddhists are more realistic about death and impermanence and thus, according to your hypothesis, they should be less fearful, less xenophobic, and more kind. Right?

Guy: That was more or less what I was suggesting, yes. Taking death into account, not falling prey to the illusion of permanence, they can act within an understanding of how all is transitory and interconnected.

Carolina: Well, you are wrong. Again. That is not what the data (so far) shows.

The Tibetans and Bhutanese, most deeply acculturated to the Buddhist view of impermanence, consistently show up on all measures as *much more fearful of personal annihilation*. Deep personal conviction about impermanence, which you suppose would mean acceptance of death and which you suppose would reduce death anxiety, does not reduce death anxiety at all. Instead, it seems to increase fears of annihilation.

And that is not all. Will people in a culture that encourages awareness of impermanence and death, which puts intentional meditation on death in the foreground, actually be more kind and caring? To test this, study participants were asked to imagine that they had been diagnosed with a terminal disease that gives them only six months to live. They were told, however, that there is a medication that can extend their life for an additional six months. But there is only one dose of this medicine and there is somebody else, a very similar person, whom they don't know, who also needs it. Now, they were asked how long that

medicine would have to keep this other person alive before they would give up the dose themselves. The possible answers range from one month to 5 years. Most Christians and Hindus reported greater willingness to give up the medicine if it kept the other person alive for two or more years. Most Buddhists, however, would not give up the medicine even if it would keep the other person alive for more than five years.

Guy: Well . . . that is not what I was expecting. So what do *you* think it means?

Carolina: It means, my dear one, that to be our best as human beings, we *need* our illusions. Brooding about death, as I argued, just expresses and reinforces a tendency toward self-centeredness. It doesn't matter at all whether talk about "The SPIRIT of LIFE" or "God" or "Eternal soul" are realistic or not. What matters is that they help. They help people live better, happier, kinder lives. And—unlike you—I have scientific evidence to suggest that this is true.

Guy: One finding there *is* consistent with what I expected: the more afraid one is of self-annihilation, the more selfish and egoistic one will be.

Carolina: Yeah, but the Buddhists—who are all about impermanence and death—turn out in this one large-scale study to be the most afraid and the least altruistic.

Guy: I think this is because it is not so easy to come to terms with death. Just being in a culture that foregrounds its reality does not seem to be nearly enough. Maybe among Buddhists or others who meditate on death for a long time, we will find that the results are completely different.

Carolina: Maybe. But right now, the evidence is that if you want to become less egoistic and less fearful of death so as to cultivate greater care for others, *a little Buddhism may be worse than none at all*. This is consistent with the xenophobia that emerged

when non-Muslims were asked questions about Muslims in front of a cemetery after 9/11. That's why we sing about the spirit of life, not the spirit of the disintegration and impermanence. Our hymns don't focus on the collapse of the twin towers because bringing that up does not inspire people to be better.

For Christians and Hindus, the doctrine of an immortal soul gives people a sense of security and comfort. While that security may be false, and while the sense of security may not be bone-deep, even that shaky illusion of security allows people to release some fear and open their hearts to strangers.

Liberal Protestant groups and UUs—and from what I have seen, liberal Judaism and even Americanized Buddhist groups—none of them offer much of a dogmatic security blanket . . . and so some of us compensate by avoiding the topic of death altogether, preferring to focus on enhancing LIFE, where LIFE is in all caps.

And if you *force* people to face death—as Rev. Nana did when she was our one-quarter-time minister and gave sermons on death and her own traumatic losses—then you will just make them anxious and squirmy. And, the research suggests—they will as a result become even less kind. You will stir up fear that will make them selfish.

Guy: Um. Well. I guess I would point out that these studies aggregate data; they don't tell us what is best for each person or what is best of a particular person in a particular moment. For example, when someone is in the throes of grief, it can be annoying and alienating to be around death-avoidant people.

Or, think of it this way: if one gives everyone antibiotics, one might increase the average health of the population for a while, but some people will be allergic and will be

catastrophically harmed. Plus, over time, the antibiotics will lose the capacity to help anyone. Inculcating everyone with ideas about immortal souls has to be something like that. A bunch of people buy it and act nicer for a while; a few allergic people puke and purposefully become jerks; and over time the whole thing—because it is not reality-based—is exposed as a scam.

So . . . don't we need a model that allows different medicines for different patients? Different ways of relating to death, according to what is helpful in each moment?

Carolina: That sounds right, maybe. We'll wait for the data. Meanwhile, I hope I have shown you that your ideas about the universal importance of reflecting on death are naïve and dogmatic.

Guy: Ok. But in each individual case, right now, how will we know whether is better to suggest that others be more mindful of death, per Rilke, or that they rest peacefully, without fretting, within their animal bodies, per Wendell Berry?

When you are talking to one person, face to face, heart to heart, you have a case study of one, single subject design. *You can't wait for data*; it is not a lab, it is real life in real time. How do you know what will be helpful to that person at that moment?

Carolina: You don't know.

Guy: But you still have to say or do something. I guess you have to pay close attention, seek to become as attuned as possible to that one person right there. Maybe that is more helpful than study results.

Carolina: Yeah, but what if you are giving a sermon to a whole gaggle of UUs, who are—
by virtue of being UUs--all very different. It's just like your example of throwing
lots of antibiotics into a crowd and hoping for the best.

Guy: Whatever we say, someone is going to get hurt. [Reflects, pause}

If our motto is, First Do No Harm, maybe we should not give sermons at all. We
could sit together in silence.

Carolina: Well, that sounds very Buddhist. Or maybe you are a closet Quaker. Here we
can sit in silence for exactly 45 seconds, no more!

Anyway, you have to admit the limitations of silence. It can cause great
harm; it can feel abandoning. Silence often seems to leave us all alone. *You have to
say something.* Don't you?

Guy: Yeah. Usually. I guess. But we don't know what to say.

Carolina: But at least we know that we don't know.

Guy: Well, you could say that.

Carolina: I did.

Guy: Amen?

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