# 1

# Understanding Death



Life surrounds us. Wherever we find ourselves, we are conscious that countless other living things exist alongside us – animals, plants, insects, microbes, as well as strange combinations of not-quite-animal, not-quite-plant life, like sea anemones. Death surrounds us. From the mosquito unconsciously slapped on an arm to the daily news stories that are of passing notice, to a loved one whose loss brings prolonged grief and mourning. In general, however, we tend to think deeply of death only when it becomes part of our emotional experience, and even then, the business and busyness of life is like a river that carries us along past the numerous moments of other deaths until our own moment arrives. One feels helpless in the face of inevitable death – what can one do about it, really? It is easy, therefore, even in the midst of death to avoid contemplating death, to turn to life where we can have some kind of control, where we can do something about it. I invite you to consider this book as a space in which you can take the time to consider questions like: What is

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death? Who dies? Where do we go from here? Do we go anywhere? And, as you will discover, these questions are much the same as asking: What is life? Who lives? Are we going anywhere now? In the complex symbol system that is language, however, words like "life" or "love" or "death" are bound up with feelings, emotions, and ideas that are very complicated; those that surround death have a long and complex history – you might think of it as the history of becoming who and what we are. When we look at the sacred stories of various cultures and religious traditions that aim to explain death and how it came into the world, we find that at the same time they tell of how we became human, how we became mortal. Take, for example, the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. Their life in the Garden of Eden is one of innocence and joy in the presence of God. Without work or toil, they enjoy the fruit of all the trees, but tempted by the serpent, they disobey God's commands and eat of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Gen. 3:1–7)[1]

Due to this transgression, God banishes them from the Garden. They must make their way in the wilderness beyond, working hard for their food, the woman experiencing pain in childbirth, and eventually they must return to the earth from which God made them.

But this is not only a story of temptation, disobedience, punishment, and the suffering and death that are an inevitable part of the human condition, it is also a story that acknowledges human powers of reasoning and judgment, the attraction of wisdom, thirst for knowledge overcoming rules and regulations, and the responsibility and danger that come with the knowledge of good and evil. Ultimately, the story points to an understanding of humankind as partaking of divinity in that knowledge.

> Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:22–24)

The immortality that was denied to humans in the Garden of Eden, eternal life in the presence of God becomes a primary goal of Biblical traditions. Stories such as this relate the mythic events of our past and tell us why we must die; they also look to the future and tell us where we go when this life is finished.

Throughout human history, there have been many who claimed to have made the journey, many who believed that they received a glimpse of that future; a life beyond life in a time beyond time and a place beyond place. One of the earliest literary accounts of what would be now called a "near-death experience" comes from the Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE). It is the story of Er, a soldier who died in battle and returned to life on his funeral pyre:

> He [Er] said that when his soul departed, it made a journey in the company of many, and they came to a certain demonic place, where there were two openings in the earth next to one another, and, again, two in the heaven, above and opposite the others. Between them sat judges who, when they had passed judgment, told the just to continue their journey to the right and upward, through the heaven; and they

> attached signs of the judgments in front of them. The unjust they told to continue their journey to the left and down, and they had behind them signs of everything they had done. And when he himself came forward, they said that he had to become a messenger to human beings of the things there, and they told him to listen and to look at everything in the place. (Bloom, 1968, pp. 297–298)

Such reports have inspired faith among some, disbelief or skepticism among others. In the last century, the personal accounts of those who have been declared dead or appeared dead but revived have received increasing attention both from the spiritually thirsty and from scholars who seek to analyze and understand the nature of these experiences. Carol Zaleski (2006) notes that in comparison with ancient and medieval stories of afterlife journeys, the theme of judgment and the fear of death as a prelude to hell have mostly disappeared from modern accounts, as they have from the following memoirs of another soldier who was also felled on the battlefield more than 2,000 years after Plato.

## Return from the Dead

It is 1915 and 20-year-old Vaughan Ivan Milton Henshaw is a Canadian soldier on the frontlines of World War I. What follows is his personal account recorded by his granddaughter, Linda Henshaw.

> *On the first of September, it started to rain and the rain never stopped day and night and what were trenches turned into canals – the water waist deep. The dugouts were the same; we'd put stuff under our heads at night to keep our head and shoulders out of the water. We had no protection standing around in the rain, at night we'd sleep in the mud and rain. On November 6$^{th}$ the rain stopped and turned to sleet, great walls of sleet swept in on 20–25/hour winds. That was the day we were to leave for a 6 day so-called rest.*

That was also the morning that Henshaw was scheduled to escort the colonel and the doctor on a morning inspection tour of the

line. As they arrived at the front line, Henshaw noticed the presence of a sniper. He knocked the colonel into the mud and was hit by the sniper's fire. *"I was badly hit; the blood was running out of my nose and mouth. My left side was mostly blown away."* He has a chance to live if he is transported immediately to the hospital, but the wounded are only taken out at night due to the danger of enemy fire. Despite the danger, however, Henshaw's comrades decide to carry him out wrapped in a rubber sheet and lashed to a pole. They emerge from the trench carrying the makeshift stretcher, falling in shell holes and scrambling out, mud halfway to their knees: *"The air was torn to shreds* [from gun fire]*."* They finally make it to a protected knoll. Many years later, at a reunion, Henshaw learns from one who was there:

> *When we first saw you, your face was just as black as my shoe but in about a minute or two, suddenly your eyes closed and you turned as white as a sheet and one of the boys said, "he's gone," and I don't mind telling you many tears were shed over your doggone frame.*

But for Henshaw, something else was happening:

> *As for me, when that happened apparently that was when I thought I was being airlifted. I thought the boys had picked up the pole and started to carry me on. Instead in a split second I was in a great concourse of people stretching away as far as I could see to left and to the right. I call them people but later I discovered that they weren't people at all . . . However, what caught my attention almost immediately was a wall, like a blanket or sheet, a white covering of some sort and behind it was a bright light, the brightest light I ever could see. There was something about that light that was different from any ordinary light. It seemed to fill me full of the greatest desire to penetrate that sheet or whatever it was and see what that white beautiful bright light was all about. When I had a chance to look, I couldn't move my head or my hands or anything at all because of the people – later I thought they were not really people, they seemed more like objects or shapes, all black in long lines; they were moving forward as if they were on an escalator only there was no escalator – we were just drifting forward. I was so impatient I felt like brushing them all out of my way to get to that wall and see what that*

*bright light was all about. I could hardly contain myself. Then I watched these black shapes; when they reached this so-called wall, they entered one by one. They just seemed to fade through. I could see them as far as about a foot and a half into the wall and then just barely make them out, and then they would dissolve. That went on all the while we were drifting forward. I don't know how long it was before I reached that transparent white wall. What it was made of, I don't know, but it was plain to be seen that those black figures weren't solid because they made no motion at all when they went through – if it had been any solid body passing through, there would be some commotion in the hole where they went through but that wall never moved. Finally it came pretty close to my line with only one line ahead of me, but even then I couldn't see how the line ahead of me could pass one by one through the same place in that wall without a ripple and yet not hold up my line or the lines behind. How that could be done, I couldn't understand. The line passed through one by one, and we were still drifting forward with no hesitation whatsoever and finally it came my turn. I was just ready to dive head first through that beautiful white wall, but when I attempted to do it, in one split second I found myself floating back to earth about 40 feet in the air. I saw my comrades standing off to one side talking. I saw the great walls of sleet blowing in making the puddles and ponds of water into foam. Then I saw a man lying in the mud and I thought "how pitiful! That poor fellow far miles from home lying there dead in the mud. What a place to die!" and by then I was getting a little closer and to my amazement I found I was looking at myself. I couldn't understand how I could be in two places at once – one dead and one seemingly alive. All the while I was drifting down and then presently I saw myself more plainly – but how can I see myself when my eyes are closed? And then a feeling of utter desolation swept over me so deadly that in the next second I was home and opened my eyes, and that feeling of utter desolation was so great that two tears were rolling down my cheeks, something that had never happened before in the wide world – my tear ducts had dried up long ago. Well, I heard one fellow cry out in a voice so full of excitement. In a loud, loud voice he yelled "He ain't dead yet."*

Although the term near-death experience (NDE) would not appear in popular literature for another 60 years,[2] Vaughan Henshaw's experience is a classic example of this phenomenon. Moving through darkness, encountering other beings, visions of light, feelings of joy

or excitement, a sense of dying, observing one's own body from a distance, and finally the return to the body and to life are all standard features of NDEs documented by researchers studying the experiences of people who were assumed or declared dead but later revived.[3] In this account, Henshaw, a soldier grounded in the physical realities of life and death, struggles to make sense of the immateriality of a world that, nevertheless, appears physically external to him. He is confounded by the fact that even while perceiving his own dead body, he is experiencing himself as alive. As we will see in future chapters, other cultures interpret similar experiences as an aspect of the dying process. For example, in Tibetan Buddhist literature, the newly dead experience themselves as existing in another "in-between" state that intersects with this world. They are, therefore, thought to be confused about what is happening to them and in need of help to understand that they are indeed dead, as well as guidance in learning how to negotiate this new reality.

According to a 1997 survey, over 15 million American adults claim to have had a near-death experience (Carr, 2006, p. 235). But what does that mean? Have these people encountered an objective reality beyond the hallucinations and psychological projections of a dying brain? Does this constitute proof of survival after death? Is this what happens to all of us when we die? Perhaps for those who have been profoundly affected and altered by their experience, for those who no longer fear death because of it, such questions, and their answers, do not matter; do not change the event or what it means to that individual. Nevertheless, in the face of spiritualist or transcendentalist interpretations, scientific researchers and theorists have proposed various explanations for the thousands of anecdotal descriptions that feature NDE. Most of these take a biological or psychological approach.

Thomas Carr provides the following breakdown of these differing interpretations. On the psychological side, NDEs manifest (a) an *emotional response* to the shock and trauma of death resulting in a state of depersonalization or detachment from the body; or (b) represent *fantasy and wish-fulfillment* in the face of the horror of death; or

(c) result from *mythological archetypes* buried in the brain that surface under extraordinary circumstances and are of evolutionary survival value in creating calm in the person facing death. On the biological side, NDEs can result from (a) *metabolic disturbance*, i.e. severe imbalances in the body arising in the process of dying or sickness, for example due to lack of oxygen or high fever; (b) *drug overload*, of anesthesia, for example, during surgery – many NDEs come from those who report what they heard and saw while undergoing surgery; (c) *endorphins*, a tranquillizing substance released by the brain during times of shock or exertion that results in feelings of calm and happiness, experienced for example by long-distance runners; (d) *limbic lobe seizure*, the seizing up of the area of the brain that controls mood and memory; (e) *visual cortex hyperactivity*, which explains the sensation of a bright light approached through darkness or a dark tunnel due to the hyperactivity of the area of the brain responsible for processing visual stimuli (Carr, 2006, pp. 235–236).

Scientific research concludes that NDE relates to the nature and functioning of the physical brain and its relation to the body and perception. Nevertheless, despite decades of study and many theories regarding the exact nature of the relationship between ourselves as creatures of body and creatures of thought or mind, most of us are still as mystified as Vaughan Henshaw was by the how and why of consciousness and its connection to bodies that live and die. This book does not propose any answer to those questions; I raise the issue of NDE here because it represents an enduring theme of return from the dead – underpinned by diverse human experiences and formalized in the death teachings of many religions.

Regardless of the narrative content, whether it comes from contemporary reports of NDE or medieval Christian accounts of visitations to hell or the reports of those the Tibetans call *delok* ("returned from the dead"), a crucial aspect of the narrative is that the person has returned to this world to act as a living witness to the experience of dying and the encounter with what lies beyond death. However, from another perspective, if death is defined as a state of no return, then perhaps such people have not died at all.

## Debates and Definitions

Death from which there is no return would appear to be a different matter altogether. How do we know when *that* death takes place? What happens then? These are questions that raise many debates among scientists and theologians. In the past, the clues that indicated a state of death were related to the condition of the physical body. Does it move, breathe, or have a heartbeat? Does it emit heat? Is it in a state of decay? At a certain level of physical destruction, the condition of death is not ambiguous – whether we are talking about a goldfish floating belly up in a fish tank or distressing television pictures of victims of violence, there is no confusion as to who is living and who is dead. However, before decay or destruction is apparent, there are living states that can be mistaken for death. In Victorian times, the fear of being buried alive was so widespread that safety coffins were developed in which a bell was attached by a cord to the hand of the person who could ring it as an alarm upon awakening.

Although the final condition of death is not ambiguous, the moment when that which is alive becomes that which is dead is a lot vaguer, a lot more confusing and subject to error because death is both process and event. As an event, it marks the beginning of preparations to dispose of the body, the final physical separation from the living. The weightiness and mystery of death lie in that physical absence. In modern western cultures, prior to the technology that allows us to keep the body "alive," dying was understood, as it still is by most ordinary people today, to be a passage, a process, the ending of life, which both culminates in the event of death and transforms into the processes of burial, grieving, and remembrance. Mistakes were certainly made in the past, based on the traditional determination of death as the cessation of breath and heartbeat, but when developments in technology and expertise opened up a new frontier of possibilities, such as transplanting the organs of the dead to give life to others,[4] then the magnitude of the error of mistaking that which is alive for that which is dead became even greater, the

interconnection between life and death more difficult to disentangle, more crucial to separate. The organ to be transplanted must be living but the person from whom it is taken must be declared legally dead, otherwise the procedure constitutes murder. You can see, then, how urgent the need would be for the medical establishment to identify more exactly when death had taken place, both for the one who waits for a life-giving transplant and for the one whose death allows for it.

Other technologies developed in the mid-twentieth century required not only a definition of death but a definition of life. Mechanical respirators and electronic pacemakers meant that the physical body could be kept functioning like a machine without any brain activity or apparent conscious activity – a boon for those who pray that a loved one will eventually awaken from a death-like coma, or for those who seek for an organ transplant to provide a chance at continued life, but an ethical dilemma of profound proportions for those who must consider the question of whether or not the costly machinery is merely animating a corpse. The decision to remove someone from life support depends on whether or not we consider "life" or "death" to be present, and if life is present, then is it the kind of life that is to be maintained? Is death always an evil to be suppressed at all cost? Is life always a value to be promoted at all cost?[5]

The first response to these dilemmas came from the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School. It should be noted that they did not set out to define death; as the chairman of the committee stated: "Only a very bold man, I think, would attempt to define death" (Bleich, 1996, p. 29). They proposed to define irreversible coma by establishing the characteristics of a permanently non-functioning brain. This would replace the traditional criteria of death as cessation of breath and heartbeat. A person could be declared dead if brain function was irreversibly lost even though heart–lung activity was present due to mechanical support. The confirmation that all brain activity had permanently ceased was assisted, though not determined, by the use of an electro-encephalograph (EEG). This became known as "brain death" and passed into

popular culture in any number of hospital and medical television shows that dramatize the moment of death as a flat line on the EEG monitor – your grandmother passed away at 11:52 p.m. But is brain activity more definitive of life than respiration and blood circulation? Must all brain activity be permanently lost to declare death or only the higher-brain functions that support consciousness, sensation, and mental factors like thought? Is it life that we seek to define or human life? These questions remain unresolved; they continue to fuel religious, philosophical, and legal debates. In his book *Death, Dying, and the Biological Revolution*, Robert Veatch provides the following general definition: "Death means a complete change in the status of a living entity characterized by the irreversible loss of those characteristics that are essentially significant to it" (1976, p. 25). The question then is this: what is essentially significant to a human person, so much so that when it is lost – that is called death? Veatch suggests four possible answers.

1. Irreversible loss of the flow of vital fluids and functions such as blood circulation, heartbeat, and breathing – this refers to the traditional heart–lung definition of death. Since machines can maintain these functions for the body, then according to this definition, for however long heart–lung capacity is maintained, the person is alive.
2. Irreversible loss of soul – for many cultures, life-force is encompassed in the notion of soul; death results from the permanent departure of the soul. This definition would depend on being able to scientifically determine exactly what the soul consists of, where it leaves the body, and how one would know when it has left.
3. Loss of the capacity of the body to regulate its own vital activities due to the irreversible loss of whole brain functions, called "brain death." This definition is challenged by those who regard human life as more than simply body functions.
4. Loss of capacity for social function due to the irreversible loss of higher-brain functions. (1976, p. 30 ff.)

The last answer seeks to establish that what makes us human is our capacity for social interaction with our world, but this definition depends on our understanding of "capacity for social interaction." Simply because a person in a deep coma has no capacity for interaction that we can perceive, are we convinced that such a person is unaware of his or her environment at every level of consciousness? Is consciousness to be exactly equated with the physical activity of the brain?

What should be considered essentially significant to human life? Breath? Soul? Brain? Or the conscious ability to communicate and interact with one's environment? When does the loss that constitutes death take place and the process of dying become the event of death? That may appear to be a biological question, since we are accustomed to thinking of ourselves, at least in part, as biological organisms, but does it have a biological answer? Or, in the last analysis, is death a social construction, a condition that is so when we agree that it is so? What exactly is the relationship between mind and body?

In considering the body–mind relationship, Ornella Corazza refutes the dualism inherent in concepts of mind *and* body, a dualism that leads to confusion when body and mind appear to be separated as in near-death experiences. In her explanation of NDE, she draws on the work of Japanese philosophers and theorists who propose a vision of the human body as extended in space, and who explore what it means to be a body. According to this view, "Our use of tools creates a semi-definite body-space around us, while our visual and tactile perception extends this dimension still further until it reaches the immensity of space" (Corazza, 2008, p. 1). In other words, I not only have a body, I am my body, and "from within" my body-space is indefinite, and as vast as the universe. Still, the question remains: who or what is this "I," this "person" that has a body or is a body; that has a mind or is a mind? Who dies? This question was raised by Richard Zaner (1988) in his critique of the whole-brain criteria for death. According to Zaner, if we are to determine when the death of a person has taken place, surely there is a prior need to establish the meaning of "person" relative to the death that takes place. The debate turns on where we place the emphasis; emphasis on the

loss of physical body functions underlies strictly defined biological definitions of death, emphasis on the loss of personhood underlies a "societal" or "ontological" approach that seeks to define death as the loss of what makes a person a person.

In her review of the issues, Margaret Lock (2004) points out that the biological approach is criticized because it presumes that a person is identified solely with the body; the societal approach is criticized because personhood is culturally constructed, therefore subject to varying interpretations, and could be easily manipulated according to the interests of the society without attention to the interests of the individual. However, Lock also highlights the fact that the body is equally a cultural construction when it is regarded as "precultural, an aggregation of natural facts amenable to rational experiment and manipulation" (Lock, 2004, p. 95). In other words, even the physical body is not simply a "given" fact understood in the same way by all peoples; different cultures conceive of the body and its meaning in different ways. For example, among the Wari' of the Western Brazilian rainforest, the word for flesh or body is the same as the word for custom or habit. They explain personality and behavior not with reference to mind but as located in the body. "Peoples' habits, eccentricities, and personality quirks are explained in phrases such as 'His flesh is like that' . . . or 'That's the way her body is'" (Conklin, 2004, p. 248). For the Wari', the body does not become a mere corpse or shell upon death. The dead body still retains the personal identity of the deceased, which is transformed through their funeral rites into the "body" of an ancestor. The Wari' believe that their dead ancestors live in an underworld beneath the rivers and lakes where there is no hunting or fishing because all animals have human forms there. However, to feed their children, the ancestors emerge from the water and return to life in the human world as peccaries (a type of wild pig) that are hunted as food for the community. The peccaries, then, are kin who are roasted and eaten by humans. This was symbolically reflected in the mortuary cannibalism practiced by precontact tribes. In a very formal, solemn, and sad ceremony the corpse was dismembered, roasted, and eaten by the relatives of the deceased. In the eating of their dead, the Wari' affirmed the relationship

between those who eat and those who are eaten. Through the ritual, the body of a human who was an eater of animals is transformed into the eternal spirit of an ancestor who appears in the form of a peccary to be slain and eaten. The funeral ritual then constituted "the dead person's first offering of self as food" (Conklin, 2004, p. 256). Regardless of the fact that many may regard such practices as barbaric or repulsive, it is a powerful reminder that human beings construct their worlds, their identities, and their bodies in many different ways.

## Death and the Self

When asked, "Who are you?" in our society, most people will respond first by giving a name. At the same time, we know that the mere name is not definitive of who I am. That story involves many more people, places, events, thoughts, emotions, accomplishments, and so on, all of which underscores a sense of personal existence, a feeling of "me-ness" that, despite all description, remains undefined by the details of our lives. The story of "me" is also shaped by the way we understand words such as *self* or *identity*. In 1992, at the Fourth Mind and Life Conference held among representatives of Tibetan Buddhism led by the fourteenth Dalai Lama and western scientists and humanists, the philosopher Charles Taylor explained that the modern western way of describing the essential nature of oneself as a *self* rather than a "soul" or "intelligence" is related to the history of how we regard ourselves within the larger context of our existence. From Plato in the fourth century BCE to Descartes in the seventeenth century, philosophical notions of selfhood and identity have been contingent on the ways in which we reflect on being human and on our capacities for self-control and self-exploration. Taylor's conversation with the Dalai Lama appears in the proceedings of the conference narrated and edited by Francisco Varela under the title *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying* (Varela, 1997, pp. 11–21). According to Taylor, these attitudes to the self are crucial to the modern view of being human, but at the same time they exist in tension with

each other. For Plato, self-control was a function of the capacity of human reason to understand the greater order of the universe and to align with it. For the fourth-century theologian Augustine, reason led to the discovery of one's innermost self as dependent on God. For Descartes, self-control meant that a human being had the capacity to control body and mind as one controls an instrument. In his review of the historical development of the self in the West, Taylor says,

> [W]e had these two spiritual directions: one, Plato turning outward, and the other, Augustine, turning inward, but still with the intention of reaching something beyond ourselves, which is God . . . Descartes reinterpreted human life as the way we concentrate on ourselves as instruments. We came to see our bodily existence as a mechanism we can use, and this happened in the great age when a mechanistic construct of the universe arose.
>
> The modern idea of self-control is very different from Plato, because the order of the universe is no longer important or relevant. It's not in control. I am no longer even turning inward to get beyond myself to God; instead I have a self-enclosed capacity to order my own thoughts and my own life, to use reason as an instrument to control and order my own life. (Varela, 1997, p. 13)

Self-control, however, has an inhibiting effect on the freedom implied in self-exploration and self-expression. Taylor finds the common source of the modern view of both self-control and self-exploration in "a conception of the human being that focuses on the human being in a self-enclosed way." He continues:

> Plato could not grasp the human being outside the relationship to the cosmos, and Augustine couldn't grasp the human being outside the relationship to God. But now we have a picture of the human being in which you may also believe in God, you may also want to relate to the cosmos, but you can grasp the human being in a self-enclosed fashion with these two capacities of self-control and self-exploration. It also has meant that perhaps the most central value in the moral and political life of the west is freedom, the freedom to be in control or the freedom to understand who one is and to be one's real self. (Varela, 1997, p. 15)

*Understanding Death*

In our exploration of religious responses to death, we will find differing approaches to the discovery of "one's real self" – some seek to find and know the self, some seek to lose the self. From infancy, consciousness of our needs and desires influences our actions and responses to our environment. As one grows and becomes conscious of "myself" as the one who desires, then "I" becomes unquestionably present in all my conscious hours, whether waking or dreaming. Under some conditions, such as deep sleep or deep states of meditation, this sense of personal existence may disappear, only to return upon waking or coming out of meditation. The persistence of "self"-consciousness is a strong theme in Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, the story of a young Brahmin man who seeks to escape both life and death by escaping the self through meditation and ascetic practices.

> He waited with new thirst like a hunter at a chasm where the life-cycle ends, where there is an end to causes, where painless eternity begins. . . . He lost his Self a thousand times and for days on end he dwelt in non-being. But although the paths took him away from Self, in the end they always led back to it. Although Siddhartha fled from the Self a thousand times, dwelt in nothing, dwelt in animal and stone, the return was inevitable; the hour was inevitable when he would again find himself, in sunshine or in moonlight, in shadow or in rain, and was again Self and Siddhartha . . . (Hesse, 1957, pp. 16, 17)

The "me" that I am continues from birth to death and is a little-understood combination of material and immaterial factors, whose nature and relationship have been argued by philosophers, ancient and modern. The fact of death is a severe challenge to the common human awareness of personal existence. In life, the body constitutes an inescapable, recognizable form that situates a person in space and time. As near-death experiences attest, even if I wander far from my body in dreams or altered states of consciousness, paradoxically, the body that I perceive separate from me is still me, but who am I, where am I when my body no longer exists? Materialists, from

ancient times, will answer, you are not; you are nowhere. Death is the end of personal existence and identity. In the contemporary scientific world, the Nobel prize-winning scientist Francis Crick does not mince words in his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* when he says:

> The Astonishing Hypothesis is that "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. (Crick, 1994)

For those who equate consciousness with brain activity, the other side of death is simply oblivion like a deep sleep from which one never wakes, but the idea that consciousness is not entirely physically determined has never lost its hold on human thought.

Descartes, following the ancient Greeks, concluded that the essential "me" is not the physical body but the immaterial soul or "thinking being," which, although intimately connected to the body, is an entirely different order of being whose continuity does not depend on the body. The question is – how can that which is immaterial be connected to that which is material? This is the so-called mind–body problem and, ever since Descartes, it has elicited various responses from philosophers, theologians, scientists, and psychologists. With regard to the continuity of the individual beyond death, such responses generally fall into three categories. There are those that support a wholly physical explanation for the sense of a persisting self. Their focus, like Francis Crick's, is on the function of the brain as the seat and source of consciousness. Then there are those who support a type of Cartesian dualism, according to which some immaterial aspect of a person, whether called consciousness or soul or mind, persists after departing the body upon death. This would include all religious traditions that propose the existence of an innermost self or soul that supports personal identity and experience during life and after death. Finally, there are those who seek the roots of the mind–body connection in a holistic approach to both the body and the mind. Scientists like Francisco Varela (1997) have drawn on eastern meditative systems and their philosophies to generate a new

science of consciousness, to reconceive what it means to be a body, and to seek new answers to the problem of how subjective experience arises from physical processes. We may know, for example, that the physical occurrence of rapid eye movement indicates that a person is dreaming, but we still don't know how the subjective dream arises; the gap between immaterial consciousness and physical brain remains.

In the field of consciousness studies, Corazza's work on NDE aims to redefine or, more accurately, undefine the body so as to reveal it as "an indefinite entity, which is always changing and has no physical boundaries or delimitation such as the skin" (Corazza, 2008, p. 126). Nevertheless, despite such research, despite the teaching of philosophers, the experiences of meditators, and our own moments of unitary feelings, our ordinary experience is that I cannot be in two places at once, that in life, I am bound to my body, which is very much defined and will one day be destroyed. Although there are many living states that mimic the immobility and inactivity of death – sleep, hibernation, dormancy, coma, states of catatonia, deep states of meditation – nevertheless, the physical condition of death is unmistakable. Dead bodies rot, and it is this irreversible transformation that underlies our sense of the finitude of death. That which was, no longer is. For the most part, we accept this as a fact of life. Dead leaves are burned or turn to mulch; dead animals are cleared off the road by the sanitation department; the goldfish floating belly up in the bowl is flushed or buried. However, for the majority of human beings, evidence of the finitude of death in the decomposition of the physical is challenged by the feeling that "persons" are not constituted merely of material bodies and physical processes.

The idea of a fundamental duality underlying the complexities of human nature is common to societies past and present. In her linguistic analysis of soul discourse, Anna Wierzbicka (1989) suggests that soul concepts present in cultures around the world reflect a universal belief that the visible material body is only one aspect of a person, and that to be a person involves an immaterial counterpart, interpretations of which vary widely. She notes that regardless of

the way in which the immaterial aspect is understood or analyzed – whether as soul, mind, heart, life-force, or consciousness – cross-culturally, the linguistic terms for "person" or "self" or "I" assume a relationship between the physical body and something other than the body. This "something other," when understood in terms of the spiritual or transcendent aspect of a person, becomes the basis of beliefs in a future beyond death. Just as we have rituals that mark birth, the beginning of our life's journey, or farewell parties that express sadness at separation, or good wishes at the start of a new adventure or phase in one's life, so humans have developed rituals that mark the transformation that death entails, both for the living and the dead. Just as, in this life, we imagine our future and then make preparations for it despite the fact that our future is not at all guaranteed, similarly, humans have considered it prudent to prepare for a future after death despite the undetermined nature of such a future. Death rituals signify that most undying of human characteristics – hope. Of course hope in the future depends on the strength of one's belief that one's actions now can bring about a desirable state in the future. This is the primary support of self-cultivation, social activism, and religious teaching on death and afterlife.

## Ritual and Transformation

High on the Tibetan plateau, it is still possible to observe the ritual dismemberment of a corpse, which is then fed to the waiting vultures. The Tibetan Buddhist sky burial emphasizes the impermanent nature of the body and underscores concepts of universal compassion and responsibility for the well-being of all living things. On the other side of the world, until 1969, the Wari', as mentioned above, consumed and cremated their dead to respect the corpse, which should not be allowed to touch the cold, damp ground. Their practice reinforced their understanding that the ancestors care for them by becoming the animal flesh that they hunt and eat; it was their way to recognize the transformation that is death. In Varanasi, in India, at the edge of the Ganges River, corpses are burned on great

pyres of wood and their remains thrown into the river. Hindu cremation rites represent the understanding that upon death, the person's higher self, the unborn, undying soul, has left the body to be reincarnated in another form, to enter into another birth, life after life, until the final goal of liberation from any embodiment is achieved. These rituals may be very different from the ones with which you are familiar, but they all represent ways in which humans have disposed of their dead, ways in which they have interpreted the action of removing the body from among the living. As we examine the mortuary rituals of different religious traditions in the subsequent chapters of this book, it will become clear that death rituals reveal, perhaps more than any other type of ritual or custom, the ways in which a particular group of people understand what it means to be a person in life and in death.

Funeral practices and death rituals can be related to geographical, economic, social, and political concerns – the presence or absence of wood for burning, the cost of burial or cremation, the need for memorials that celebrate national heroes or commemorate private loss. However, in this book, we will focus on death rituals as both signifying and acknowledging the transformation that takes place when a person shifts from a living to a dead status. Death rituals are cultural constructions that tell us when this shift takes place, where the person is located after death, and what kind of status they have now attained. They reflect the values and beliefs of a community regarding the essence of personal existence and the meaning of life and death. Beyond that, they highlight the intimately interconnected nature of the person as biological organism and as socially constructed self. Death rituals not only indicate what a community believes regarding self or soul and a person's future after death, but also how a community regards the physical body and what kind of transformation is enacted by death upon the body.

Despite the great variety of religious beliefs and teachings about the meaning of death, all of which emphasize the continuity of the person in some form or other, not everyone regards death as a gateway to a future or alternate existence. For many people death is simply oblivion, like a deep sleep, from which one does not awake – a

comforting thought because at least there is nothing to fear in oblivion. However, since death is a state of no return, doubts and questions linger. This is Shakespeare's point in the famous passage from *Hamlet*:

> To die, to sleep.
> To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause. (3.1.72–76)

What dreams may come? The religious response to this question is what we will examine in the future chapters of this book. It may be good to bear in mind that all the stories we hold dear, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish narratives – of heaven and hell, of the first humans, of a great flood, of judgment and the afterlife, of spirit or soul – all have antecedents. These stories were old when they were new; they create the tapestry of religion, and in them we can find the threads that connect us individually with our common ancestral heritage as human beings. They are not the property of one culture or tradition; they may have been preserved by a particular culture, but they are our common human heritage. For some people, the religious narratives that they have been taught about death and life after death are true. Others "just don't know what happens." And there are those who would say – all your speculations and ideas about life after death are merely wishful thinking, just coping strategies for dealing with the reality of the loss that is death; there is no reason to believe the stories of religion – death is simply the end of life. This may be so; I do not have the personal experience to contradict it. However, let me suggest that there is more to learn from all the various propositions of myth and religion than the truths they claim. Because it is in contemplating these different ideas, teachings, and stories of death and future life – no matter how strange or alien some of them might seem – that one may come upon what is actually important for one's own life and death, if only

to arrive at a deeper understanding of what it is that I don't know when I say – "I don't know."

## Notes

1. All Biblical quotations throughout the book, except where otherwise stated, are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd edition, New Revised Standard Version, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
2. The term near-death experience (NDE) first appeared in Raymond Moody's book *Life after Life* (1975).
3. For a history of the research into NDE, see Corazza (2008).
4. The first successful kidney transplant took place in 1954 and the first successful heart transplant by the South African surgeon Dr. Christiaan Barnard in 1967.
5. For a full discussion of these and other ethical issues, see Beauchamp and Veatch (1996).

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