

Befriending Death

Death is an obvious dimension of life on this planet and a condition for its evolution. We must give death its due if we are to appreciate the beauty and wonder of terrestrial life. After a century and a half of evolutionary science, we can begin to understand the randomness, contingency, and terrible costs of evolution in the 3.8 billion-year history of life on this planet? Ecological destruction of planetary proportions is the subject of widespread lament and anxiety. In contrast, there is another sense of diminishment as in the words of the Johannine Jesus: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Here, an inevitable and even positive sense of diminishment is subsumed into the ultimate hope for transformation and communion.

It remains, however, that death is the price to be paid for the evolution of life on earth, making possible the emergence of differentiated, complex living beings in a world of wonderful biodiversity. Unless we belong to the mortal world of life on this planet, human beings would never have come into existence. Moreover, there is a sober, scientific backdrop to the death of individuals and species, the eventual collapse of the solar system, even if billions of years from now. And that will entail the extinction of all planetary life. The law of entropy is built into the cosmos itself.

In the meantime, though human history has always known its catalog of natural disasters, famines, earthquakes, plagues—“acts of God.” We now live with the eerie possibility of death-dealing human activities affecting the planet in the era of the Anthropocene. Biological warfare, thermonuclear incineration, and ecological destruction still menace life on this planet. Huge technological systems shape the ecological, social, political, and economic world. The consumerist economy is insatiable in its demands. Enormous military arsenals at the disposition of dozens of governments openly include weapons of mass destruction designed for biological or thermonuclear warfare. This range of lethal capacities is the material expression of a readiness to wipe out whole populations if the necessity arises. Given that the possibilities of mega-death are taken for granted in the contemporary environment, the Christian spiritual task is to draw attention to the mystery of life, its source and goal.

Indeed, the dread of death goes some way in explaining morbid aspects of modern culture. Obsessive consumerism, deracinated individualism and careless destruction of the environment, all alike arise from the failure to give death its due. As creatures, we are immersed in the totality of nature, connected to it, caught up and carried along by it. Authentic life arises only by accepting the limitation and contingency of our existence within this universe, yielding ourselves into ourselves

into the stream of life and death. The human person is caught between inevitable limitations on our being in the world, and, on the other hand, openness to the uncanny gift of life and existence.

Faith is contemplative in its reverent openness to the mystery of creation and the Creator. It exercises, also, a redemptive effect in causing human beings to be less driven to self-destruct, and more disposed to realise the divine image in the works of love and justice. The authentic self, therefore, is realized in its connectedness with all creation,—in contrast to the tiny scope of the fear-driven, illusory self, fabricated by denying death. The true self emerges only by befriending the mortal character of existence in true humility. Our human being is earthed, grounded, bound up with the immense dynamism of nature into whose processes we are each and all immersed. Humility connects us to the whole, immersing each and all in a wondrous universe of gifts and giving. And out of humble acceptance of mortality and the de-centring of the self can come the wisdom to coexist on this planet as “our common home.”

And yet death is shrouded in a darkness deeper than the inevitable termination of biological life. Death, Paul declares, is the “wages of sin” (Rom 6:23). The implication is that death is the consequence and manifestation of sin—alienation from God, and the refusal of communion—with the Creator, and

creation. It is the choice for self-centered ego against all others. As a result, the seemingly natural fact of death becomes the carrier of a profound sense of rupture and guilt. It looms through life as “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26).

The more human existence is turned in on itself, the more it occupies a shrinking universe. In that self-centred world, I exist by competitive self-assertion against the Other. In this respect, death is the deepest threat. Death holds no promise of life; it is the carrier of all that is meaningless and threatening to the life we have made for ourselves

And yet life contests the reign of death as total, for ordinary lives know sudden impulses of wonder, nameless hope, and the exhilaration of great loves, just as all are humbled before the strange grandeur of moral achievement. In such moments, there is an uncanny, death resistant “more” in the experience of the mystic, the artist, the martyr, the prophet, the thinker, the scientist, and the activist. There is an intimation of eternity-in-the-making. The thrust of human life is toward fulfillment—*in*, and even *through*, death. The dynamics of personal existence that moved and motivated life in its normal course have been largely hidden from consciousness, only to surface at the moment of death into full awareness. The full dimensions of our being unfold. In this respect, the self dies out of the limited individuality of the ego, into a more deeply relational form of being. This is to

become aware of itself within the universal whole.

And yet, this unfolding is most deeply a meeting with God, the boundless Other who has been present in every stirring of existence. The deepest mystery of the Creator has worked within all the elements and causes that have formed us, our earth, our universe. In the light of God, we are brought to a moment of final decision, whether to accept God and the totality of creation, allowing ourselves to be carried along by the flood of life, and being and belonging, toward an eternal fulfillment.

Going to God does not mean merely escaping from the earthly existence in which we lived and in which Christ has been our earthly brother. Rather, ultimate fulfillment must include this earth redeemed, transformed, and brought to fulfillment in God, all in all.

Here, Christ, crucified and risen, is the focus of faith and hope in the all-creative mystery of compassionate and transforming love. The death of Jesus was indeed deadly. It occurred as failure, betrayal, isolation, condemnation, torture, and execution. God's love felt the force of the human problem of evil. However, the love that gave itself to the end (John 13:1) was not defeated by the power of evil. For the death of the crucified Jesus enacts and embodies the ultimate form of life as he surrenders himself to the Father in solidarity with the defeated and the lost. The

ultimate point of Christ's self-offering reveals God as a love stronger than death. In Christ, crucified and risen, those receptive to the divine Gift are summoned to pass from a self-serving existence into the God-centred realm of eternal life, already inaugurated in the gifts that will last—faith, hope and love (cf. 1 Cor 13:13).

Death remains as the limit of this form of earthly life, but as then transformed into an act of ultimate self-surrender—to the Father in union with Christ, and in the creativity of the Spirit. The entropy affecting each individual biological existence is dissipated to allow for a higher realization of communion, in relationship to the “all” and participation in the whole. The individual self becomes a wave of communion, a truly relational self. The upward vector of ascent for the human being moves from electrons, to atoms, to molecules, to proteins, to cells, to organisms, to the complexity of the human brain, and to the cosmic overture of human consciousness. In all this, the direction of life is one of transformation in increasingly rich and complex relationships. In this respect, death cannot mean terminal dissolution but rather the expansion of the self into its fullest relationality. Death would not be an alien intruder, but a relative—“Sister Death,” as St. Francis could pray—within the cosmic promise of the fullness of life in Christ.

Only a transformation of our whole embodied existence can answer the hopes written into life. By participating in his rising from the tomb, the entropy and

limiting individuality of biological life, is definitively overcome. In him a new creation is anticipated in Christ "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). The realism of this new creation is expressed in all four Gospel narratives in regard to the empty tomb. It is the historical marker of the cosmic transformation that has begun in Christ: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17).

Hope nonetheless remains hope. It lives always in the in-between of what is, and what is yet to be, as it waits on the mystery of final transformation. Even the New Testament writer soberly concedes, "As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb 2:8f). Yet for all the sobriety of Christian hope, the great conviction remains firm. In Christ, the universe has been changed. Death has been radically "Christened." Christ did not die out of the world, but into it, to become its innermost coherence and dynamism. Indeed, in his death, resurrection and ascension, the mystery of the incarnation is complete. For the Christian, dying in Christ is to be conformed to the crucified and risen One, in order to be newly embodied in the future form of cosmos itself: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death.... When all things are subjected to him, the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:26–28).

All mortal existence is poised, therefore, over an abyss of life. The empty

tomb, a sign of the creative power of the Spirit, is of cosmic significance. It suggests the full-bodied reality of resurrection, and seeds history with questions and wonder as to what great transformation is afoot. The empty tomb, so soberly recorded in each of the four Gospels, offers no salvation in mere emptiness. It functions as a factor within the awakening of faith as a new consciousness of life unfolds. It moves, first, from the empty tomb, discovered as a puzzling fact. It then awakens to cosmic surprise over what had happened, for Jesus appears as newly and wonderfully alive: "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever" (Rev 1:17–18). Then faith returns to the tomb as an emblem of the new creation. From there it expands into the limitless horizons of a transformation of all things in Christ. Such faith is not primarily looking back at a death, but facing forward into the promise of eternal life, in a universe transformed.

Christian theology is focused in the paschal realism of Christ's death and resurrection. It offers no super-theory to explain death away. Questions necessarily remain. First, is our theology sufficiently humble? There can be no theological theory or ecological system that controls death, nor any egomaniac subjectivity able to appropriate death to its purposes. Inscribed into the course of our lives is an elemental rupture; and any expression of hope that represses the lethal force of death is not starting from scratch. A beautiful sense of nature or the wonder of the universe unfolding through its billions of years cannot camouflage the finality of

death in all living things. Theologians may find themselves offering a guided tour of the world of eschatological fulfillment, but to no avail. In the face of death, all must “wait in a condition of openness toward miracle and mystery, in the lived truth of creation.”³³

In other words, are we really letting ourselves and others—even Jesus himself—really die? In our Easter celebrations, we may have been too inclined to hurry past the caesura of Holy Saturday. The liturgy graphically portrays this in the stripping of the altars and emptiness of the tabernacle. It drives home a basic truth: before death can mean resurrection, it must mean being dead—even for Jesus himself. He went down into the realm of the dead, as in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, he “descended into hell.” The Crucified was dead and buried. Christian hope is not a video replay of highlights once the team has won. In Holy Saturday, a healing providence makes time for all our human griefs and lamentations, in a world of apparent God-forsakenness, failure, and waiting for God to act in God’s appropriate time; in God’s own way. Jesus was not only dead, but buried, descended to the depths of universal dread. To hurry past the deadly reality of the cross to a kind of automatic resurrection would obscure the need for a time of waiting before that Friday can be affirmed as “Good” and that Saturday as “Holy.” Only by waiting on that unfolding, can the imagination be christened, and hope expand beyond repressive optimism to its authentically God-centred character.

The horizon of hope is shaped by Christ's self-giving unto death for the sake of the world's salvation. This gift occurs so that "by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9), and "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:14–15). In the gift of Christ, a multi-dimensioned giving is at work: Christ gives himself in death for the salvation of the world; and the Father so loves the world as to give the Son into such a death (Rom 8:32; John 3:16). The gift of the Spirit breathes faith into the mortal existence of Christ's followers: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, they will live" (John 11:25). The crucified and living One embodies the ultimate life-form: "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:18).

Though hope relies on the God whose love is stronger than death, it has the realism to admit that "in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death" (Heb 5:7). The God of life has acted. But the Father did not save Jesus from death, but vindicated and glorified him in his death for others by raising him to a new order of life. As the form and source of new life, he is the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18). In the light of his death, hope looks through death and beyond it. But it does so, first, by being a way into it—in union with Christ in his death: "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same

things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death” (Heb 2:14). To be united with him in his death is to share his victory over all the demonic forces that work in human culture through the threat of death.

By sharing in his death, hope is already sharing in his resurrection (cf. Rom 6:3–5). Still, hope remains hope. It is never immune to the darkness of life. It must show its own patience. It means waiting for the mystery of love to prove itself stronger than death and all the demonic powers that use the threat of death for their purposes. The New Testament expresses a sober realism:

As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Heb 2:8–9).

There is a further edge at which theology trembles: the mystery of God. Though the holy and immortal God does not die, there is something about the way God is God, about the way the Trinity is these three self-giving divine persons, which leads death into the deepest darkness of all. This deeper darkness is not a threat, but an intimation of life in its Trinitarian and most vital dimensions. Union with Christ in his death is most radically self-abandonment to the Father. It yields to the incalculable creativity of the life-giving Spirit. It means incorporation in the Body of Christ. In this Trinitarian frame of reference, a self-surrender is inevitably asked of

each mortal being. But that is to share in the unreserved self-emptying of the divine three in relation to each other, and to the world which they have created and drawn into their communal life. Death, in this respect, is the last, and perhaps the only truly genuine act of adoration of the God whose life is self-giving love. Only by dying out of the cultural and biological systems and projects structuring this present existence are human beings remade in conformity with the self-giving and communal trinitarian life of God.

Befriending death means greeting 'Sister Death' in the great conversion inherent in the firmness of faith, in the surrender of hope and in the desire of love.