

Preparing for the BIG question: What happens when we die?

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'Solace' is the name of the room where I sit most days and support people through their dark nights of loss. Mostly, it feels as if this is the work I was born to do; and no, I don't find it depressing. I feel uplifted by witnessing grief transform. And I know that positive transformation through the unthinkable is possible because I have lived through this life-altering process myself and thrived.

My clients are usually facing the death of close loved ones and are more often than not deeply shocked that death could touch their lives in this way. The reality that death is an unavoidable part of life still seems to pass people by, and despite the relative ease with which information can be found, rarely are they remotely prepared for such a fearsome possibility.

The one thing that does upset me in my work is witnessing the raw grief of those who believe with surety that physical death is the end of existence and that their loved ones are lost to them forever. Although I welcome all clients in grief and can do much to support them within their paradigm, it is no mean feat to sit there with a richness of experiences, both personal and professional, and thirty years of reading on the subject telling me the opposite is true - that our existence is continuous and that love does not die.

Clients who have categorical beliefs about death being the end have no requirements of therapists for more information, but from my experience, most bereaved people sit with a new longing to know if it could be possible that there is life after death and how they can find out more. However, I wonder how safe most clients feel to voice the question given that there is such a stigma around the subject. And, if they do dare to ask, how well equipped are we as therapists and counsellors to support them in their quest? I'm not talking about having and giving answers, but about pointing people in a direction they can follow to form their own answers. This whole area of the continuity of consciousness is, I believe, still generally left untouched in the counselling/therapy realm and to my knowledge there is no nutshell of education available from one source on this subject, except the courses that I occasionally offer myself. It is a matter of each therapist to his/her own in deciding how to respond to the inevitable questions from those who have 'lost' loved ones.

When I attended a Bereavement Training many years ago there was no mention of the importance of addressing this fundamental question: What happens when we die? In fact, whenever I mentioned the subject myself I detected fear of entering such a taboo subject. 'Leave it alone, it is out of our remit,' seemed to be the unspoken response. But are our own fears a good enough reason to sidestep the subject with clients for whom the question is paramount in their grief process? The most obvious route to take would be to deepen our relationship with this question ourselves by conducting our own

enquiry and preparing ourselves to more fully to bear the inevitable future loss in our own lives as well as to support clients. This article is about assisting this process.

Some of us have taken this fascinating journey already and may have stories to tell of our findings. I admit to having had a head start in the enquiry. The subject of the continuity of consciousness has been an inexplicable interest of mine since I was nineteen, and thank God it has because the quest for this particular knowledge prepared me extremely well, not only for the shocking death that was coming my way, but also for life itself.

When my first-born son, Benjaya, was in my womb way back in 1986, he delivered an indelible message: four sentences that turned my linear understanding of birth and death on its head in an instant. My interest in the true nature of birth and death and what lies before and after these great transitions of life intensified still further with his words.

I was about six months pregnant and leading a workshop at the time it happened. From one minute to the next, for no apparent reason, I felt choked with an emotion that was definitely not my own. I began hearing words in my head and knew, as crazy as it may seem, that if I opened my mouth my child-to-be would speak. With my heart beating wildly, I begged support from those present (most of whom I knew well) and allowed the words to come spilling out:

You may think that we don't have fear here, but I am afraid. Birth to me, and to those with me, is like a death – death to who I really am. Just as there is death in birth, so there is birth in death. Please remember this and keep me conscious of who I am when I come.

In the celebratory atmosphere of his birth a few months later, surrounded by smiles, flowers and cards, I remembered his words and gave recognition to the presence of death for him. Five and a half years later, Benjaya, drowned after falling into the ice-cold river Avon while playing: a poignant echo of his water birth. The words 'Just as there is death in birth, so there is birth in death' entered my anguish as I sat among a sea of flowers in my bedroom with family and friends speaking in hushed voices as if nervous of disturbing the sleeping newborn.

My unshakeable knowing that the essence of my son lives on has been a balm in my healing process. I have been blessed to have had countless undeniable experiences of communication with him after his death and have continued to read prolifically on the subject of the continuity of consciousness and to compare my experiences with those of others. Listening now to so many stories of the bereaved is also quite an eye opener. The similarities both in the live stories and in literature from across the world is astounding. And there are so many ways that we can be informed of this continuity if we are open and look. Here's a brief list:

1. Near Death Experiences (NDEs)
2. Regression Sessions/Reincarnation information and experiences
3. After Death Communication (ADCs) i.e. sudden and unexpected communication using the senses, dreams, symbols and physical phenomena
4. Contact through sensitives/mediums
5. Out of body experiences
6. Spontaneous insights/ visions/ meditative experiences/ dreams

So how then do I relate to this subject with clients? If they don't bring up the question and I sense that it is present, I might ask them about their spiritual beliefs and faith and whether these are a nourishing resource. Usually this will lead to them daring to voice their beliefs about the afterlife and hitherto unspoken questions – often questions that their religion, if they have one, can't shed much light on. It may be partly for this reason that death sorely tests religion and why many turn against their 'God' at this point. I don't have a reference for this but I spoke to a man in the U.S. a few years ago who was involved in research that indicates this to be true in the western world. Although from my experience, Buddhists seem to retain their faith after loss.

I think it is important to ask whether clients would prefer to live with the questions or if they are interested in finding out more. If they do want more, I tell them about the different avenues they can explore (see above), lend them books from my increasing library on the subject, and an in-depth article I have written on the subject (see website). Sometimes, if I am being asked direct questions or if it seems appropriate, I come clean about my own experiences or the experiences of others I know. I always tell clients that I do not have *the* answers – only answers to my own quest. I ask them to beware of believing anything from any source as truth unless it resonates for them as such.

The question of what to say to clients who want to use mediums to attempt contact with loved ones is a tricky one because the psychic arena is rife with individuals whose information is questionable and littered with interpretations. Also, the potential for further heartbreak is very real for those who are desperate for proof that their loved ones are still around. Some people are both urgent to go to a medium to discover there is life after death and petrified to go in case they discover there isn't. They probably need help here.

I can only tell you what I do in the instance of someone telling me they want to see a medium. I check out that they are willing to face disappointment if the loved one does not show, as they often don't. I enquire whether they have the name of someone who has been recommended and suggest they do their homework first and not rush too fast down this track. I attempt to help them to become non attached to outcome and, if they intend going this route anyway, I will give them the name of someone who I know has repeatedly been both accurate and given tremendous comfort to the bereaved. I do always say that the responsibility is with them for this choice and that nothing is ever guaranteed. If you do want to recommend someone to those who are keen to explore this avenue, your nearest Spiritualist church should know of the best mediums as mediums give regular addresses and demonstrations of clairvoyance at the church. Yes, I know the Spiritualist church is judged and frowned upon, but have the judges ever been? It could be a surprisingly interesting experience to check it out first hand. Otherwise, ask someone you know and respect who might have information about trustworthy sensitives or know someone who does.

Of course, there could also be a moral issue for some therapists who believe that we should not 'dabble' (often the loaded word used) in the other world, in the unknown. If this is the case then it will be near impossible to support a client along this route. We obviously have to remain in our integrity as therapists.

To my relief, I have found that even those who seem to have the most categorical beliefs and fears do usually have a smidgeon of openness to the possibility of there being something else. In fact, it seems that many people desperately want to believe in

something beyond the material life but remain stoically sceptical for fear of being gullible in their vulnerability. And it doesn't help that fears of the after-life are constantly fuelled by the media's portrayal of death as the prime subject of horror movies - something to be avoided like the plague as we strive to stay forever young.

Although death *is* slowly coming out of the closet, many have not yet been exposed to the vast array of positive information and solid research now easily available on the subject of the continuity of life. It is there for the taking, online at the press of a button and in an ever-increasing number of books (see suggested booklist below) – not to mention the unrecorded personal experiences that you may find are abundant if you dare to open up the subject in conversation.

I will run affordable day-long courses on LIFE AFTER LIFE?: Exploring the Continuity of Consciousness for any interested group and will talk to groups of ten or more within easy travel distance on the continuity of consciousness, transforming through grief, or the loss of a child.

I look forward to the day when we are open en masse to exploring the continuity of life without being catapulted there by the death of a loved one, and to the day when the big question, 'What Happens when we die?' is explored in schools and in training for therapists and counsellors as a matter of course. The available evidence, which is experiential and subjective, cannot of course be proven as we are dealing with a non-material world beyond facts and logic, but I challenge all sceptics to do their homework thoroughly before denouncing what to the bereaved can be a life-line, and what we may possibly all experience one day to be an essential sacred truth.

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Recommended reading for therapists and clients with open minds:

Recovering from grief; seeing the bigger picture

B'Hahn, Carmella, *Mourning Has Broken, Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity*. Crucible Publishers (2002), Bath, U.K. (see www.heartofrelating.com).

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All books below are available from Amazon

Wisdom about death

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Wienrich, Stephanie and Speyer, Josephine (editors of reprint), *The Natural Death Handbook*, Ebury Publishing, Random House, U.K. (2003).