

CARITAS FELLOWSHIP
Truth & Consequences 3: Death
10 February 2011

Worldview in Medicine:

Where am I going after death? How do I come to terms with death? What, if anything, happens after a person's brain and heart stops working?

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death, From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

GENESIS 2.15-17; 3.1-8

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 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. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

MATTHEW 22.31,32

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.

1 THESSALONIANS 4.13,14

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

1 CORINTHIANS 15.3

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then

those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

50 I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

55 “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

REVELATION 21.3-5

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

CHRISTIAN BURIAL, *BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*

...Through Jesus Christ our Lord; who rose victorious from the dead, and doth comfort us with the blessed hope of everlasting life; for to thy faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body doth lie in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens...

Thou only art immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and unto earth shall we return. For so thou didst ordain when thou createdst me, saying, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

DAVID P. GOLDMAN

Sadly, Sherwin listens neither to Heschel nor Rosenzweig. His book is yet another mawkish meander through the fever swamps of transactional therapy, ethical Judaism, out-of-context Hassidic anecdotes, and random quotations from such spiritual authorities as William James and Erik Erikson. The former says, “The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.” Erikson says, “I am what survives of me.”

I don’t know how to say it more politely, but I don’t want to hear anything more about the meaning of life. I don’t care about the meaning of life; I want life, not “meaning.” The religion I learned from Rosenzweig and Heschel does not understand the problem of what will outlast my life or survive me, for it tells me that I am not going to die – not forever in any case...

...And that is just what Rosenzweig says about Judaism, with the keen eye of a baal t’shuvah. The blessing that concludes each section, or “ascent” of the Torah reading, blesses the Lord who has given us his Torah and planted eternal life among us. We say this again and again, presumably because it is the most important thing of which we require a reminder. God is faithful, we pray thrice daily in the Eighteen Benedictions, to those who sleep in the dust. He gives life to the dead. This life never will end, not even when God wears out the universe like an old coat and must replace it, as the Psalmist (102: 25-28) tells us:

25Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of thy hands.

26They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed:

27But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.

28The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

In one way, I suppose, I have been “in denial” for some time, knowingly burning the candle at both ends and finding that it often gives a lovely light. But for precisely that reason, I can’t see myself smiting my brow with shock or hear myself whining about how it’s all so unfair: I have been taunting the Reaper into taking a free scythe in my direction and have now succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even me. Rage would be beside the point for the same reason. Instead, I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I’d worked hard enough to earn it. Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade Center rise again? To read—if not indeed write—the obituaries of elderly villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger? But I understand this sort of non-thinking for what it is: sentimentality and self-pity. Of course my book hit the best-seller list on the day that I received the grimmest of news bulletins, and for that matter the last flight I took as a healthy-feeling person (to a fine, big audience at the Chicago Book Fair) was the one that made me a million-miler on United Airlines, with a lifetime of free upgrades to look forward to. But irony is my business and I just can’t see any ironies here: would it be less poignant to get cancer on the day that my memoirs were remaindered as a box-office turkey, or that I was bounced from a coach-class flight and left on the tarmac? To the dumb question “Why me?” the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?

P.J. O’ROURKE

I looked death in the face. All right, I didn't. I glimpsed him in a crowd. I've been diagnosed with cancer, of a very treatable kind. I'm told I have a 95% chance of survival. Come to think of it ~ as a drinking, smoking, saturated-fat hound ~ my chance of survival has been improved by cancer.

I still cursed God, as we all do when we get bad news and pain. Not even the most faith-impaired among us shouts: "Damn quantum mechanics!" "Damn organic chemistry!" "Damn chaos and coincidence!"

PSA+

I love the little details that emerge in the different accounts that we have in the four Gospels of the Resurrection of our Lord – little details, by the way, that are the marks, the sure signs, we might even say the precious relics, of eyewitness testimony. We have here a couple of those precious relics unique to St. Matthew's Gospel. I love that these women, through Matthew, have preserved for us this detail that as they approached the tomb on that first Easter morning, expecting to anoint the dead body of their friend Jesus, the angel, the messenger from God, is sitting on top of the stone he had been charged with moving, and chose to do so by means of earthquake. That stone – that sign of the utter finality of death, that door through which all must pass but none emerge, that stone which seals the grave as the final commentary on the human condition - that commentary is so completely contradicted by God's love that the stone is reduced to a convenient resting place for one of the Lord's servants. God's love mocks death's power...

...When we were on the parish retreat at Kanuga a couple weeks ago, I picked up a brochure describing the various wildflowers one might expect to see when hiking in that area. And on the cover was a picture of the Acony Bell, a rare flowering plant that grows in the southern Appalachian mountains. The Acony Bell is a small and perhaps not especially impressive flower, but to folks who live in the Appalachians, it is special – and not just for its rarity, but also for its timing. The Acony Bell is the first mountain flower to bloom, often pushing its way up through a crust of snow. The Acony Bell is the sign of winter's death and spring's birth; it is the "firstfruits" of the mountain flowers. When you see the Acony Bell in the mountains, you know that snow and ice and cold are not the last word. In fact, when you see the Acony Bell, you know

that Spring is already here; it's already happening, even if it's hard to see. There may be a good deal of cold and dark yet to endure, but Spring is there, and it is overcoming Winter.

One of my favorite singer-songwriters is Gillian Welch. She has a knack for writing brand new folk songs that sound like they're a hundred years old. She wrote a song about the Acony Bell; it goes like this:

*Just a simple flower so small and plain
With a pearly hue and a little known name
But the yellow birds sing when they see it bloom
For they know that spring is coming soon
And so I'll sing that yellow bird's song
For the troubled times will soon be gone.*

Friends, the Acony Bell has bloomed. Earth's long winter of sin and death is ended and the eternal Spring of life is a-borning, because, Alleluia, Christ is risen, the firstfruits of the dead.