

WHAT IS DEATH?

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Once when my son was about seven or eight years old, I, my husband and my son Srijan were engrossed in a conversation. Suddenly, the conversation took an altogether different turn when my son asked, what is death? "Death is the end of life, look around yourself- there are so many different types of plants, birds and animals and during their life they all perform many different kinds of actions, but after sometime they are unable to perform these actions, they even stop eating and drinking. This means that their lives have come to an end." In a shivering voice my son asked whether human beings also die in a similar way. "Yes, all those beings that possess life die in the same way", answered his father.

Srijan asked "what do you mean when you say that life stops?"

"This means that on death, the organism mixes with the soil" his father answered. I am sure that you must have seen dead cockroaches, what do you think happens to it?

"The ants come and take it away."

"What do you think the ants do with the dead cockroach?"

"They eat it up, what else."

"Does this mean that the cockroach's life is over?"

Srijan was extremely silent now.....and very very serious.

Taking the conversation further I said "I just recall that about one or two months ago the bush next to our gate had a dead kitten. Can you remember? It was because of the stink from the carcass that we were able to locate it. What did we do once we had found it?"

"Over the kitten we had put a lot of sand and ashes" said Srijan.

"What would have happened to the little kitten, should we go and find out?"

"What would have happened by now?"

Srijan had asked the question but seemed unwilling to physically go and explore the site. Possibly he was afraid, his voice and facial expressions proved that.

From my own side, I said "We wouldn't be able to find the cat there anymore; it would have now changed into soil"

"Does that also mean that humans turn into sand upon death?" asked Srijan.

When Srijan was asking this, his voice clearly reflected the fear in his heart.

At this point his father said, “do you know something interesting, while on one hand some dead carcass is turning into sand yet on the other a new child is born into the world, see here in our bush a kitten lost its life and in our own neighborhood Mathkar uncle’s cat gave birth to four kittens. This has been the rule of nature since the beginning of time. If there was no death then imagine how heavily populated this earth would have been, there would have been no space on this earth.”

He was listening to this whole conversation with absolute interest but once again he pulled back the discussion on the topic of death and asked “when both of you die, who am I going to live with?”

Now both I and my husband were perplexed, we regretted bringing this conversation up to this point and for not having ended it earlier. We had believed that it was important to answer a child’s questions and that is why we were trying to explain things to him. But seeing our son, so passionately immersed in the topic we were worried and kept silent for a while.

Srijan said “after death both of you would be born somewhere else, if I could find out where both of you will be, I would come and live with you.”

It seemed extremely necessary to speak up something now and so I said to him that when we are not alive, he too would not be alone and would have his own wife and children. The moment he heard me saying this he angrily said “stop ma, why do you keep saying such nonsense?”

Shifting the centre of our conversation from death to some lighter topics, he began talking.

I felt extremely relieved when we had finally been able to leave behind the topic of death, as I was worried as to what kind of questions Srijan would ask. Until many days after this conversation, I kept asking myself whether it was right to talk in such a straightforward manner about death especially with children.

One day, Srijan and his friend were reading something from the newspaper and conversing among themselves. Actually, one of their classmate’s grandfathers had expired and his name and photograph had appeared in the newspaper. After a while both of them came near me and Srijan asked “maa, Sandeep’s grandfather is going to turn into sand, isn’t it? I have been trying to convince Tanmay but he refuses to understand. I told him that whatever he had explained was right, perhaps nobody had earlier explained about the matter to Tanmay. I persuaded them not fight over the matter. Both of them went out to play.

On many occasions, hearing about somebody’s death Srijan would conclude that they would turn into soil. We would assure him of his understanding. It became clear to me that Srijan had accepted death beautifully and ceased to be afraid of it anymore.

Today, Srijan is about eight and a half years old. Some time ago two of Srijan’s cousin sisters had come to spend their holidays with us. One of them was in class tenth while the other was in class sixth. Both of them were really inquisitive about the way that I lived, thought and spoke. They were also quite comfortable and easy with me.

One day during our conversation, they asked “Aunt, why don’t you wear a sari every day, why don’t you wear a mangalsutra, why aren’t there any idols in this house, why haven’t you changed your paternal surname even after marriage, have your mother or the other women in the family not enlightened you about any of these things, do you not believe in God?”

I was answering their numerous questions, when they asked me, “Aunt, do you believe in after-life?”

I answered “there is nothing like after life, once a human being is dead, it’s all over. Nobody is born after death.” I could see that the two sisters were extremely surprised by my words and perhaps they were listening to this kind of a point of view for the first time in their lives, Srijan was also listening to our conversation very carefully. Probably, a lot of what we had said had actually gone much above his understanding capacity. He was familiar with the word after life, so he came up to me gently and asked, ‘ma after death there is no life, does that mean that everything is completely over?’

In a lighter mood, I nodded my head. After a while everyone went to sleep.

After this incident I began to notice significant changes in Srijan’s behavior. Unlike before, now he began to be afraid of many things. Especially the idea of death began to scare him terribly badly. It was during these days that the awful tsunami and earthquake took place in Japan entailing a loss of both life and property; it was also the time when there was intensive news coverage of the Jaitapur Atomic Project- Srijan used to keenly listen to all our conversations about these topics. Sometimes a natural disaster, sometimes a tragic accident- any news of death used to frighten him immensely. In the morning hours- with his growing fear, he used to lock up himself in a room. He would ask me, “ma so many people have died in Japan, will they never be alive again? An earthquake could happen here also. All of us will die? Ma, I am not going to go anywhere alone, I am always going to be with you and papa. If I happen to go somewhere and an earthquake comes..... he kept saying things of this kind very often.

I tend to associate the fear in his heart with the conversation of that night when his cousins and me were talking about life after death. Earlier, my son used to accept death so naturally but today he is unable to do so as easily. He fears the destruction of his world- his parents, his relatives and friends. We have consistently tried to explain things to him in more ways than one. But I feel that on that night when I spoke so unhesitatingly about life and death before Srijan, that has affected him so badly and now I feel that I should not have been so open about this issue.

Earlier the fact that, while somebody dies a new child comes into this world, used to give his heart a lot of hope and balance out the fear generated from the idea of death. But now the understanding that once a man is dead, he can never be born again, had changed the very way he saw and related to the world around himself. This worries me tremendously and once again I seek to contemplate on the issue, I ask myself that what could be done about the fear in the child’s heart about death and its ambiguities?

Is it alright to put the entire matter aside, by just telling ourselves that the fear of death is completely natural and one should not be bothered so much if this fear arises?

The most fundamental question is how and what do we explain to our children about the topic of death? Just because it consoles the child's tender heart should we convey the false idea that there is indeed a life even after death? When in front of children, should all discussions on death remain very superficial or should we as parents and educators penetrate deeper into the questions of death?

I am myself looking for answers to these and many such associated questions regarding death.

Would you help me in finding the answers to these complex questions?

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