

THE STING OF DEATH

BY BONNIE MILLER-MCLEMORE

“Although we no longer live in a world constructed around imagery of heaven, purgatory, and hell, a look at past attempts to comprehend the ‘great riddle’ of death, as Augustine remarked, might help us. Listening first-hand to the words of Augustine, Calvin, or Kierkegaard vividly illustrates the tenor of the changes that have occurred over the sweep of more than nineteen centuries—but also the constancy of human experience beneath the changes. . . . [T]hey depict a reality we know, and in a way that can help us think about it more clearly.”

A SHIFT from traditional religious and moral views of death to more naturalistic understandings has taken place in Western society. This coincides with a shift from fear of judgment to fear of extinction. Prior to the Enlightenment, death appeared as a flaw in human nature due to transgression and involved final judgment before the Creator as well as hope for eternal life. To the modern ear, the traditional orthodox belief that we die because Adam sinned sounds quaint. In mainstream society, churched and unchurched alike tend to dismiss the whole issue of the relation of death, sin, judgment, and grace as antiquated. The original doctrine appears logically and empirically inconsistent with the modern worldview of death as a natural part of life. It seems to hold little relevance for the “living of our days.” It does not even seem worth reinterpreting. If the traditional paradigm of death contained any theological and moral truths, they have been subsumed under modern paradigms. Images of grace, judgment, and eternal life are either stereotyped or, in some cases, dropped out of everyday usage altogether. Unfortunately, the more general awareness of death as a spiritual or moral event has also been lost.

Medicine’s so-called exhaustive explanation of death in scientific, “morally neutral” terms virtually eliminates appreciation for religious questions of meaning, mystery, and moral imperative. Many persons disregard notions of divine providence that explain death, ideas about grace that resolve guilt, or conceptions of commitment that dictate action. The church struggles for relevance in a world that considers its concerns about guilt, sin, faith, and health to be, at best, secondary, private, subjective, and, at worst, simply fantastical. Lacking adequate resources for dealing with failed responsibilities before illness and cut

Bonnie Miller-McLemore is Assistant Professor of Religion, Personality, and Culture at Chicago Theological Seminary.

adrift from cultural definitions of norms which in times past guided the exit from life, persons can no longer prepare for death.

But in many cases persons with terminal illnesses await death over an extended period of time. They have concerns and questions about their situation and how to live under the heavy restrictions of this limited time. Although a grasp of the idea of five stages of emotions helps, they need ways, now long lost, to talk about deeper realities. Even an eighty-nine-year-old man with Alzheimer's disease senses that his "craziness," as he expressed it to his sixty-six-year-old daughter, reaches beyond psychological categorization. In a significant moment of lucidity, he acknowledges his awareness that he is "going to die," that he "can no longer take care" of her nor make any contribution—"I am not good for anything any more." How do we respond to the deep moral ambiguities that color our final days?

I

The Christian tradition has resources both for answering this question and for challenging some of the popular answers of modern culture.¹ Although we no longer live in a world constructed around imagery of heaven, purgatory, and hell, a look at past attempts to comprehend the "great riddle" of death, as Augustine remarked, might help us. Listening firsthand to the words of Augustine, Calvin, or Kierkegaard vividly illustrates the tenor of the changes that have occurred over the sweep of more than nineteen centuries—but also the constancy of human experience beneath the changes. If we can move past self-consciousness about our own framework of thought through disciplined, responsive conversation with some classic texts, we will find that they depict a reality we know, and in a way that can help us think about it more clearly. For instance, while Augustine's use of terms such as "heaven," "hell," or "immortal soul" assumes a frame of reference foreign to modernity, we may still be caught up in the truth disclosed if we can experience the response of each writer to the "world" of the text. Theologians writing in the fifth, sixteenth, and nineteenth centuries who, as we read them now,

¹Too often, resources within religious traditions have been ignored. I would speculate that when persons ask clergy in largely white, mainstream Protestant traditions what they can read that would help them through the difficult moments surrounding dying, death, grief, and bereavement, clergy refer them most often to *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' well-known book, more often than any other text on the subject. In this way, death becomes not only secularized and technicalized, but progressively psychologized. Frequently, when clergy and others struggle to find meaning, they turn to psychology and its practitioners for their often sensitive answers—not to theology, Scripture, or the church community and its traditions. As Joseph H. Fichter notes in his introductory editorial in an issue of *Theology Today* (April, 1981) that addresses this problem, caring ministry to the sick and dying seems "less pastoral than psychological." Liberal clergy "water down the religious content" of the caring role, according to Bernard Spilka and others in the same issue. My work and the recent work of others in the field of practical theology attempts to correct this tendency by reviving the meaning of theological language and values.

render their own worlds to us would agree that contemporary understandings of human mortality neglect basic moral and spiritual considerations that are intrinsic to their own. And they would wonder about our narrow definitions and acceptance of psychological or medical platitudes in the place of serious moral reflection.

Much of the contemporary discussion of death completely ignores the historical realities that shape present dilemmas, leaving significant gaps in our knowledge. However, we must know our history. We cannot understand current dilemmas in this area apart from it. Moreover, the major constitutive myths of religious traditions offer us a kind of repository of options. Without necessarily affirming or rejecting the tradition, we can acknowledge that it contains within itself permanent human possibilities that merit our consideration. In addition, traditions shape our emotive, prerational responses beyond our wildest knowing. They “still possess us, [even] if we do not possess them.”² With a morally hazardous and potentially pathological issue like guilt, we must attend to how they do so or risk suffering the negative consequences of irrational possession.

Augustine plays so crucial a role in shaping Western attitudes that we do ourselves a disservice when we ignore him. While Paul planted the idea that death is a punishment for sin (Rom. 5:12) and that it is overcome on our behalf by Christ (Rom. 6:23), it is Augustine who “first wove the dark themes of guilt, remorse, and punishment into the tremendous drama of creation, fall, incarnation, heaven and hell which has dominated the Christian imagination in the West until within the last hundred years or so.”³ He lived in a period of general familiarity with death—“tamed death” as historian Philippe Ariés calls the first phase in Western attitudes.⁴ Similarly, neither the Hebrews nor Paul seem inordinately preoccupied with anxiety about death. Of greater consequence is the larger moral drama surrounding death—corporate judgment, vindication, and restoration—of the historical community of chosen people.

Between the twelfth and the early sixteenth-century, persons began to fear death and judgment in a more intense way. The corporate drama moves to the bedside of the individual: judgment of the individual soul acquires new meaning. The deathbed becomes a battleground between the forces of good and evil in the soul, determining an individual’s fate for all eternity. Each person’s biography and manner of dying gains tremendous moral significance. Earlier, Aquinas had given these ideas

²Eugene Goodheart, *Culture and Radical Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 15, cited by Martin E. Marty, “Tradition and the Traditions in Health/Medicine and Religion,” *Health/Medicine and the Faith Traditions: An Inquiry into Religion and Medicine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 23–24.

³John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 207.

⁴Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 1–25.

force and cogency within the metaphysical framework of Aristotelian philosophy; he carefully considered such questions as the relation of specific individual sins to punishment. As Bosch's paintings dramatically reveal, persons began to envision the particular tortures of hell that awaited them based upon their particular temptations. A penal attitude had thoroughly attached itself to death. In some ways, we live with the heritage of these pictures, whether or not we formally acknowledge it.

Clearly, we can identify problems in this heightened punitive attitude. Why retrieve such a factor? Does it really help us understand the father with Alzheimer's or the friend with cancer? Although exaggerated in form, the images of death from Augustine through Calvin do point to an element of human nature, a moral uneasiness still known to us today. They suggest ways to talk about and deal with it. Augustine describes his mother in *Confessions* as gathering her son and his friends to her side for her final declaration of faith as she awaited the death that did not arrive until five days later.⁵ His mother had learned through religious, social, and mythic tradition to anticipate and ceremoniously approach death. Persons often awaited death far in advance. Openly, publicly, they carefully prepared for its arrival. They participated in clearly-defined, solemn rituals that included expression of sorrow, pardon, absolution, a turning from the world to God, and, then, silence until death comes, whether immediate or not.

Calvin's letter to a friend following the death of his wife reflects a similar appreciation for the proper act of dying: the act demands witness, admonition, exhortation, and prayer for the dying and for the dying person's friends and family.⁶ The shift away from corporate pronouncement to the individual reckoning of good and bad deeds on life's heavenly balance sheet made the ritual even more dire. The reformer's contention that no pious activity in purgatory or intercessory prayers from relatives on earth could alter one's fate made the final moment all the more critical. Today, many express a preference for sudden rather than lingering death, thereby avoiding the hardships and fears. Persons of earlier centuries dreaded the former; it would rob them of a last chance for repentance, confession, and reconciliation. This moment symbolized a high point in the Christian's career.

Hence, although certainly susceptible to distortions, these overarching pictures of death and judgment foster ways of approaching death as a moral and religious, not purely physical, technical, or psychological turning point; it always possesses some moral and religious message. To cross over this boundary, persons need some kind of "art of dying"—the

⁵Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 202.

⁶John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin Compiled from the Original Manuscript and Edited With Historical Notes by Jules Bonnet*, trans. David Constable et al., 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1958); letter numbered CCXXXIX; I, 333-335.

ancient tradition of a structured ritual prior to death that forces discernment of moral and religious sensibilities. In some ways, this art begs for retrieval. We hunger, sometimes without knowing, for the “right words” or the right actions to ferry us through the trying transitional moments that mark perhaps the most difficult of all “rites of passage.”

As late as the eighteenth century, Kant reprimands the minister who seeks only to comfort the dying, declaring this attempt to apply “a sort of opium to the conscience,” “an offense” against both the individual and survivors. Rather, clergy must help the dying by stirring up and sharpening the conscience, so that the person can as far as possible render good and “wipe out . . . the remaining consequences of [one’s] evil actions.” Before “the reproaches of conscience,” death is indeed a moment of moral anguish, according to Kant.⁷ Woe to the person who approaches the dying with only the Rogerian tool of “reflective listening,” thereby sacrificing a final opportunity for necessary reconciliation. We must hurry to “make friends” with our “accuser” lest we be turned over to the judge (Matt. 5:25). How odd this strikes those of us encouraged *never* to impose our own values or views. Hospital chaplaincy training and contemporary models of pastoral care heavily influenced by psychology and its eductive mode of responding have taught clergy and others to focus instead on eliciting a person’s needs and desires and meeting them when possible.

Granted love and accepting presence—an “unconditional positive regard,” to use Carl Rogers’ term—is absolutely indispensable. But we miss other crucial dimensions when we assume that with it we have exhausted the possibilities and ignore the ambiguities of the person’s character and actions. A richer kind of love includes recognition of the latter in some shape or form. Beyond evoking feelings and gratifying final wishes—a style that Kübler-Ross borrowed from Rogers and established as the law of proper hospital care—this alternative approach looks at the pain and loss behind the expressed feelings and desires and considers the call for moral and spiritual mediation.

Certainly, this kind of response is more difficult than “listening reflectively.” It requires a deeper empathy with the person’s suffering in all its complexity, an awareness of the place of rage, insult, guilt, shame, and ways of responding to these—emotionally and religiously. While simply “sitting and listening” has an importance of which Kübler-Ross reminds us, so has awareness of moral failure, spiritual suffering, and disappointment as life ends, and, ultimately, of the need for moral and religious, not simply emotional, solace. Again, these are moral and spiritual concerns, not purely psychological ones.

⁷Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 72.

II

Contrary to my own original presuppositions, I now realize that the popular psychological responses are the ones that come up short.⁸ Their portrayals of dying and death simply fail to encompass much that matters in this arena. For Freud, death was merely a return to "inorganic lifelessness."⁹ He held little regard for the moral or religious qualities of its victims. In most instances, under his tutelage psychologists and psychiatrists reduced moral activities and sensibilities to their psychological meanings.

In a recent case conference, several pastoral psychotherapists and an attending psychiatrist discussed the situation of a young man who had taken a handful of pills in a fit of suicidal rage. In the conference, the psychiatrist recommended sending the man to a psychiatrist for evaluation for medication that might control some of his erratic emotions. The next week the man, perhaps knowing something more fully than any psychiatric assessment could judge, told the story to his spiritual director. The director offered him a penance that required that he ponder the good gifts given him. This had more impact than any psychological assessment.

In an extremely significant way, this spiritual response deserves recognition far beyond what it receives. Our psychological age has led us to mistake emotions related to moral quandaries—guilt, remorse, regret, depression, anger, blame, and so forth—for merely emotional "hang-ups" that need to be "worked through" or medicated. We fail to see that they may require increased sensitivity to moral obligation, failed commitments, or a need for some kind of moral and religious restitution by either party involved. Whether by intention or not, Freud and his followers reduce guilt and fear of judgment to pathology. Only the rational process of analysis or therapy, they believe, can relieve civilization of this neurotic discontent. From this perspective, religion and moral theology have outlived their purpose. Rather than giving us ways to speak about guilt and anxiety concerning actual wrongdoing, they

⁸I have addressed some of the specific problems and contributions of writings on death in psychology elsewhere. See, for example, *Death, Sin and Death: Contemporary Cultural Interpretations of Death* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); "Doing Wrong, Getting Sick and Dying," *The Christian Century* (February 24, 1988), pp. 186–190; and "Reassessing the Death and Dying Movement: A Study in the Formation of Culture," *Second Opinion* (forthcoming). Others within the fields of theology, philosophy, and ethics have criticized Kübler-Ross for various prescriptive statements. See Larry R. Churchill, "The Human Experience of Dying: The Moral Primacy of Stories Over Stages," *Soundings* 62 (Spring, 1979), pp. 24–37; Roy Branson, "Is Acceptance a Denial of Death?" *The Christian Century* (May 7, 1974), pp. 464–68; and more recently, Geroge Kuykendall, "The Dying: A Kübler-Ross Critique," *Theology Today* 38 (April, 1981), pp. 37–48. However, none of these authors situate their criticism of her work within a larger cultural context or broadened the analysis to include others within the death and dying movement. I believe that this broader cultural, ethical, and philosophical investigation is necessary for a comprehensive critique and understanding of what has happened in this arena.

⁹Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 19.

simply perpetuate oppression and mental disturbance through moralistic and religious anachronisms.

Likewise, according to several prominent psychologists in the death and dying movement, the anxiety that modern persons feel about death is merely anxiety about the terrifying possibility of nothingness. Or so argues Herman Feifel, an instrumental figure in modern psychology's attempt to have the final word on death. The "fear of death no longer reveals fear of judgment" as it once did, he contends, but simply "fear of total annihilation and loss of identity." Death signals "threat of loneliness," not "salvation and atonement."¹⁰ Other psychologists follow suit: in general, they see fears about dying as no more than fears about the impending disintegration or dissolution of one's self and world. Even theological ethicist Paul Ramsey reflects the subtle influence of psychological culture upon his thought when he asserts that the chief sting of dying is not sin but solitude or desertion—dying alone;¹¹ hence, "the dread of death is the dread of oblivion."¹²

Certainly, should we stop to examine exactly what we fear when we consider our death—"one's own death" as Kierkegaard would remind us—we do find genuine apprehension about a void where there is absolutely nothing rather than something, and where we cannot even know that there is no-thing. In dying, we face irreparable loss of everything that constitutes who we have become and everyone whom we have loved. Death irreversibly tears us from life and casts us into "nothingness beyond," in Ramsey's words.¹³

In addition, in its negative meanings fear of judgment deserves retirement. Freud and others have rightly revealed the problems of neurotic, guilt-ridden obsessions with rigid legalisms. The punitive attitudes toward AIDS of some branches of conservative Christianity exemplify such a misuse of narrowly-conceived moral language. Similarly, persons reduce the rich ideas in the Christian tradition about life's intricate moral and spiritual balance to the simplistic idea that a "good" life results in eternal bliss, a "bad" life in eternal damnation. This orientation promotes the false stereotype that Christianity offers no other moral guidance than the bribe of heavenly security or the threat of condemnation. In these instances, religion does perpetuate oppression as Freud warned.

But the sting of death is not purely solitude or the dread of oblivion. The sting of death includes despair and the sin that brings it about. To discount completely the concern about judgment as antiquated or as neurotic blatantly passes over something in the experience of dying, even

¹⁰Herman Feifel, "The Problem of Death," in *Death: Interpretations*, ed. H. M. Ruitenbeck (New York: Delta, 1969), p. 126.

¹¹Paul Ramsey, *The Patient as Person* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 143.

¹²Paul Ramsey, "The Indignity of 'Death with Dignity,'" *Hastings Center Studies* 2 (May 1974) 2, p. 50.

¹³Ramsey, "Indignity of 'Death with Dignity,'" p. 50.

if no longer well-articulated, that still troubles even the most emotionally and spiritually stable person. It is precisely the problem of life's unfinished business that makes mortality troublesome, not simply the possibility of extinction. In despair, not death, we come to the end of our rope. To be sure, death threatens us with almost unimaginable cataclysmic loss. But the spiritually and emotionally highly developed self encounters death's threat on a level that crosses through and yet beyond that of the threat to self-object permanence, bodily existence, and psychological connections. Indeed, Christianity teaches us "to fear judgment more than death."¹⁴

How tempted we are toward the simpler, more natural regard for death advocated by the Greek Stoics and stoicism in general. We know through science and our own experience of the changing seasons and cycles of life that death is, indeed, a natural part of life. Yet, we rob ourselves of fuller grasp of life's suffering if we believe that to exhaust the possibilities. The Stoic view of death as completely natural fails to address the whole of the human experience. It does not fully recognize human brokenness, or brokenness as a matter of personal responsibility and guilt. Therefore, as Paul Tillich contends, the Stoic does not face death with the "utter desperation" of the full human experience that includes sin, guilt, and condemnation.¹⁵ Guilt "adds to the natural 'having to die' an anxiety which it would not have without guilt, namely, the feeling of standing under judgment."¹⁶

Kierkegaard understood this better than most. He recognized a "sickness unto death" far worse than death itself or even anxiety over finitude. He stamped this premise upon human consciousness: the moral and religious dread of guilt takes up and surpasses the dread of fate.¹⁷ The former attests to a height and depth of human spirit that the latter does not contain. Where fate threatens the human on the dual level of body and mind, guilt threatens us three-dimensionally as the body and mind strive to achieve the synthesis of spirit—the full actualization of self in time. The more complete the self, the more complete the tension between actuality and possibility, body and mind; the more freedom, the greater the sensibility to one's own inevitable yet necessary fallibility.

We are both nature and spirit, in the world and yet transcending it. We stand in neither alone; we stand at the *junction*—a third point where we can experience guilt about the synthesis. The term "guilt" reflects a "much deeper level of human reality" than an emotion or the voice of a chastizing conscience; guilt expresses "a permanent rupture" in the

¹⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 1:523.

¹⁵Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 17.

¹⁶Tillich, *Meaning of Health*, p. 190.

¹⁷Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 92–98.

structure of the self itself.¹⁸ By ourselves, we are powerless to mend the division.

The sting of death, therefore, has these two dimensions: we fear death because it threatens annihilation of bodily existence *and* because it involves, in Calvin's characteristic terms, chastisement in which the soul feels the curse of God.¹⁹ All persons, not just believers, intuitively sense these two aspects. All fear extinction. Augustine, great psychologist of human nature that he was, recognized a deep resistance to annihilation even in senseless plants and irrational animals. Movingly, he addresses his congregation: "You do not want to die. And you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again, as . . . dead . . . , but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire. This is the deepest human feeling: mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it."²⁰ Jesus himself knew this dread and sorrow as he struggled in the Garden of Gethsemene.

Yet, death holds a second, equally important dimension that twentieth-century renditions have preferred to ignore, one that disappeared entirely in the preaching of early industrial society. All fear death because, through their conscience and ability to discern good and evil, they experience death not only as annihilation but as some kind of judgment. Death has a twofold purpose: it is ordained, in Calvin's words, "not only for the dissolution of man, but also to make him feel the curse of God."²¹

Augustine uses other terms—"first" and "second death"—to get at the same existential concern. The "first death" of body and soul happens to all as a result of disordered love—a turning away from God, the highest value, towards lesser goods. It may lead to the "second death." The second death—eternal alienation from God or "eternal death without any possibility of dying"—occurs only to the unfaithful after an interim following the first death.²² Significantly, it is not the first death that is rightly to be feared but the second. The first happens to everyone; the second only to the godless. Above all else, he warns us, we ought to fear alienation from God rather than death itself.

These views on the relation between sin and death, outmoded as they may seem to some, enable exploration of a dimension of human dying

¹⁸John W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 179.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, Vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 127–28.

²⁰Augustine, *Sermon*, 344, 4, cited by Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 431, n. 6.

²¹Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 267.

²²Augustine, *City of God*, an abridged version, trans. Gerald G. Walsh *et al.* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 269–71 (XIII.2); *idem*, *Enchiridion, Or Manual to Laurentius Concerning Faith, Hope, and Charity*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Richard Clay, 1953), pp. 79, 98.

that often eludes modern reflection. We may find the idea of death as “curse” due to God’s “judgment” confusing and alien. Yet, these terms reveal a moral and spiritual side of death. Death is not simply a physical transition but a moral and spiritual passage, which we rightly fear, mourn, and traverse in trembling, repentance, and faith. Whether described in terms of first and second deaths, fear of annihilation and judgment, dread of guilt, or unfinished business, the problem of moral and spiritual rather than purely physical and even psychological disruption deserves our attention. It is “the terror of this spiritual and eternal death,” Calvin observes, “which makes bodily death—in itself already an evil—still more terrible.”²³

Modern persons wrestle with physical death, demanding that it yield up some tangible meaning. This is impossible—or possible only in an extremely limited way. Individual, biological death in and of itself cannot confer an authentic existence upon the person as some existentialists believe. This was not Kierkegaard’s intent, as the forerunner of existentialism, when he argued that “earnestness” about one’s own death can teach us how to live. He did not mean that this would help increase our temporal happiness. When the death and dying movement borrowed his idea that we should “live each day as if it were our last,” they forgot the rest of his words—“*and at the same time the first in a long life.*”²⁴

So, instead of advocating that we “enjoy today,” “find what turns you on,” and “not worry too much about tomorrow,” as Kübler-Ross does,²⁵ we live in a moment of time that intersects with past, future, *and* present moments. We live in a moment for which we bear moral responsibility and spiritual accountability in relationship to others and God. This fact in and of itself produces a necessary and unavoidable moral and spiritual anguish before death. We must “number our days,” as the Psalmist incants, so that knowing “thy wrath,” we might gain a “heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90). With a new heart, we shall know a good death is not simply a human fact, but an act of faith and of moral and spiritual reconciliation.

III

The source of meaning, then, lies not in earnestness about or even acceptance of one’s own physical death, but in an extended web of relationships. These relationships are established in time between self,

²³John Calvin, *Comm. on Rom.*, cited by Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), p. 76.

²⁴Søren Kierkegaard, “The Decisiveness of Death (At the Side of a Grave),” in *Thoughts on Crucial Situations in Human Life, Three Discourses of Imagined Occasions*, trans. David F. Swenson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1941), p. 107. Emphasis added.

²⁵Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Living With Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), p. 48; *idem*, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. xxii.

neighbors, and God, but have the potential of affecting all eternity in some way that we can never fully know or understand. Although Augustine understood the literal consequences of this idea far differently, the meaning still makes sense: the very act of dying “faithfully and laudably” acquires a unique and crucial importance as a “precaution” against a more drastic death.

A partial death is certainly accepted, but that is so that total death may not come, so that second death may not supervene, that death which has no end. . . . The separation of soul from body is accepted, so that the soul may not be separated from God.²⁶

We must dread, therefore, not simply the possibility of physical extinction, but total death that severs us from connections that rise through our physicality yet travel far beyond it. We foolishly “seek with all our power not to die,” observes Augustine, fearing the very death that we cannot avoid. Rather, urge Augustine and Calvin, concern yourselves with “not sinning” and with the death that you can avoid, that which they depict as “godlessness.”²⁷ Accept and endure death, not as a good in itself, but “for the attainment and possession of a good.” Accept it so that total death, separating a person from God’s love, may not come. Only in this way is life truly received.

By acceptance of death, I have something very specific in mind that differs dramatically from the Stoic or Kübler-Ross definition of a disciplined mastery over passion before a fate which is merely part of the natural cosmic order. Acceptance must entail moral and religious content, similar to what Kant described as a sharpening of conscience. It presumes acceptance of one’s character throughout the whole of life, an area where we never totally succeed on our own account. Life is always to some extent a life of estrangement. No matter how long we prolong it—one of today’s focal bioethical dilemmas—we must admit that we cannot bring about its consummation in any completely satisfactory way. This problem tests the limits of human power for solution and points us toward our need for a transcending power greater than the constrictions of finitude. While mediated through a companion sufferer on life’s way, grace brings us fresh hope that more abundant life does abound.

Knowing this, acceptance must contain some aspect of believing in the undeserved, absurd possibility of forgiveness, however mediated. It must include the message that human guilt has been conquered, a promise that goes beyond promise of psychological peace. Christianity has “only one ‘argument’ against death,” according to Tillich: “the forgiveness of sin and the victory over him who has the power of death.”²⁸ In response

²⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 517.

²⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 45 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), p. 150.

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), p. 172.

to dying, we must address not only the fear of extinction but the place of judgment, the reality of guilt and sin in relation to finitude, and the need for forgiveness. Comprehensive response necessarily involves a graced completion of human incompleteness and a cleansing of human guilt by graced judgment and mercy.

Given our natural inner aversion to pain of any kind, most persons would rather not consider the harsh connections between sin, judgment, and death, still hoping for a more "simple way out of the sinfulness of human history."²⁹ Yet, when we give in to this temptation, we shatter the crucial connection between the physical and the moral as well as the individual and communal aspects of death and dying. Human death is far more than individual, biological transition of animated cellular material to inanimate matter. It involves questions of moral and spiritual commitment to life in community, to values that make life meaningful, and to the source of all life. Certainly, death is a natural part of life; of this, the death and dying movement has graciously reminded us. However, this reminder need not become an invitation to disregard death as a specifically moral and religious passage requiring careful guidance and normative instruction.

We cannot abandon the concept of judgment and sin, especially in relation to death. The idea captures the freedom, albeit limited and often handicapped by destiny, we have to determine (or fail to determine) our destiny in relation to ourselves, others, God. This freedom and its constrictions become all the more earnest and certain in the face of death. Modern psychological and medical language limits comprehension of the problems of estrangement, disobedience, and infidelity, not to mention the mythical representation of sin as bondage to Satan. Religious tradition can limit our horizons as well, of course. When the church reduces the moral tradition to truisms about a "bad" life and eternal death versus a "good" life and salvational reward, perhaps it is not a bad idea to question it. But we stand to lose much if we throw out everything. There are rich resources in these ancient traditions that we moderns desperately need.

²⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 3, cited by William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), p. 298.