

Deaths, and aging, stir thoughts about life hereafter

Patricia Herchuk Sheehy

A friend of mine died recently of cancer. Another died last year of a heart attack at age 40. And, lately, I'm spending more days than I'd like to count helping friends bury their parents. A few years ago, my own father died. I understand now what older people mean when they say the first thing they do in the morning is read the newspaper obituaries. If their name isn't there, they know they're still alive. It might even be a nice day. I'm starting to feel a little like that myself.

At age 47, I'm closer to dying than I am to birth. My husband and I sat recently on the screened porch — it was a silent, summer night, the black sky lit by thousands of stars — and talked about our friend whose liver had been invaded by a large tumor. We felt sad and helpless. And, suddenly, very vulnerable. In the end, the conversation came back to us.

"I'm 55," my husband said. "If I'm lucky, what do I have left? Fifteen years, maybe?" My stomach turned over; tears quickly sprang to my eyes. I didn't want to hear this. It was worse than those conversations about wills and life insurance. Fifteen years? We've been married 19 years and that's gone by in the blink of an eye. How fast will the next 15 go by? He'll be 70. I'll be 62. We won't be young. We won't even be able to pretend we're young. We'll have more memories and past than plans and future.

Maybe it wouldn't be so scary if we knew what was on the other side. I mean if we really knew. Now it's all faith and supposition. Every religion talks about life hereafter, painting it as a beautiful reward for a well-lived life.

Some religions tell us that this time on Earth is a one-shot deal: Do it right, and you'll have eternal reward. Do it wrong and it's eternal damnation. Now that purgatory has been erased from the heaven-hell mix, there's no longer that comfortable in-between place where you could repent on the other side for a few major faux-pas and eventually get to heaven. Now, it's either heaven or hell, with one earthly chance to get it right.



On the other hand, some religions tell us there's no possible way to get it right the first time around. That the soul has to grow, to learn, to become enlightened before wending its way back to nirvana. And the only way that will happen is through earthly reincarnations — coming back this way time and again until we've atoned for our negative actions and enlightenment is achieved. Eventually, we will stop our personal cycle of reincarnations and attain our heavenly reward.

Whether it takes one lifetime or many, is it true that something waits for us at the end of our earthly existence?

While each religion might have a different spin on getting to heaven, every religion and every spiritual being embraces some form of the hereafter. They can't be all wrong. And, at this point in my life, closer to the end than the beginning, I need to know that they're right. I need to know there is something beyond the veil of darkness that falls at death — that my actions have meaning and consequence and that my small part on this Earth is, indeed, part of a greater plan.

I talk to my dad a lot about this. So far, he hasn't answered. I don't visit his grave much. I don't like the starkness of granite headstones all in a row, engraved with names and dates and, sometimes, a pithy message, each

arranged far enough apart for plots and private praying. Instead, I talk to him out by my garden or in my office while I'm working. His picture is on a shelf just over my left shoulder. I talk. I ask questions. Sometimes, I ask for help or guidance. Mostly, I just want to know.

Just one brief sign. That's all I need. A phone call maybe. Heaven should be fairly high-tech by now. Maybe even a fax: "Hey, the weather's grand here. No pain. Lots of sun. Lots to see and do." Or maybe a message from the road; perhaps a place called Karmic Boulevard: "I'm not there yet. It's a long trip, you know. Have to do the Earth thing over again. See you soon."

I just want to know. It won't change how I spend the next couple of decades. No matter what the answer — one lifetime or many; Earth, with no heavenly reward; Earth, with heaven waiting in the wings — I'll still do volunteer work, try to improve myself and work at seeing the redeemable in all of human nature. And, I'll still make mistakes. I'll still have petty, selfish moments and unkind thoughts, and I'll still forget to choose spiritual enlightenment over a new silk blouse or another gold bracelet. I still won't be perfect. But knowing what's ahead would sure give me peace.

I just want to know.

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