

THE LITTLE DEATHS

by Lester J. Start

Undated

A Funeral Address

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“If a man die, shall he live again?” Job 14:14

As we stand before the evidence of death, the age-old question of Job comes to mind. “If a man die, shall he live again?” At first the answer seems obvious. There is such an awful finality about death, that we cannot help feeling that “it is finished”, and this is the source of our sorrow. And yet there are so many intimations of immortality in the hearts of men that we cannot fall prey to the despair which holds that life must end in death. The hope springs eternally in the human breast that death rather ends in life, that “life is ever lord of death and love can never lose its own”.

This much is clear. This conviction is an ancient and universal one. It is an insight found in all religions among all peoples. The primitive looks forward to a kind of life after death as evidenced by his practice of burying useful objects with the dead. The old Chinese practice of ancestor worship is evidence of the conviction that life does not end in death. And Hindus worship the dread goddess Kali, the bringer of death, in the conviction that death is a welcome release and initiation into a new kind of life.

Life and death are not opposites which cancel each other out. They are intimately related in the life process in which we have our being. The seed dies in the soil, but as Jesus pointed out, if it so dies it brings forth the fruit of the plant. The bud dies to form the blossom. The blossom dies to form the fruit. At each point there is a death and a life. It is this intimate relationship of life and death - not their separation - which we should consider. This is why the Hindus worship the goddess of death. This is what made Augustine refer to human existence as “this living death, this dying life” and John Donne suggests that life is a series of little deaths and new births. Birth itself, human birth as we know it, marks the death of the life which went before. The security and the warmth of the earlier life dies with a cry in a strange and cold new world. But we rejoice, and properly so, in the beginning of a new life because of the untold possibilities and richness which lie ahead of it.

We can consider the various stages on life's way and see that all of them mark the death of what went before, but the birth of something new and infinitely more rewarding. There comes the time of a child's first day at school. This marks a little death, the ending of the child's exclusive home protection, the beginning of a new experience of independence - but how rewarding is the new life which is born. If the fond mother sheds a tear at the knowledge that this marks the death of the infant, she is glad at the birth of the child to be.

There are the spiritual deaths which fill our lives, so dreadful to face, which nonetheless are the occasions for new births in a deeper sense of life. Perhaps someone remembers the terror of a little child facing the dread of the darkness in his room, dying to his fears and fantasies, but emerging reborn with a new confidence and strength. We can think of the suffering of someone nourishing a secret guilt, knowing he will die if he has to confess it, who nevertheless does confess and finds that the injured self which died is the occasion of a deeper and truer self being born. There is the nerve-wracking experience of someone being compelled to undertake a task seemingly too great for his powers. As he faces the undertaking, he finds that only the fears which were his measure of his task die, and a new, more confident self is reborn. Surely these are little deaths which are necessary for the birth of a finer spirit.

Thornton Wilder in his play "Our Town" presents a moving scene of a wedding. As final preparations are being made for the ceremony, the two principals give expression to their anxieties and fears. Both are terrified at the prospect of marriage, and wonder how they ever got into such a mess. Only the stout support of the parents encourages them to take the final step in what we feel sure will be a happy marriage. This intimate scene reveals the crisis of marriage as a stage on life's way. Surely it marks the death of the life which went before with all its joys and security and irresponsibilities. No wonder there is momentary panic at the ceremony. But just as surely it marks the beginning of a new life with greater joys and security because they are shared, and the deep happiness which comes from responsibilities undertaken.

The more we look at life, the stronger this seeming paradox appears. All life as development is a process of dying little deaths, and the deaths are the occasion for a richer life. We should not stand appalled at death. Instead of being the absolute negation of life, it may well be the last in a series of little deaths leading to a great new birth.

Contemplating the little deaths of life does not, of course, give us absolute proof that life is lord of death. The conviction rests upon an affirmation of faith. But contemplation of the little deaths, and, more important, the practicing of them, will illumine the nature of that faith and strengthen us in the face of death. At every point where there is a little death and a new birth in life, it is essential to believe in life rather than death, new beginnings rather than dead finalities, a world of infinite possibilities and goodness, rather than a world measured by our fears.

It has been said that immortality is a dream held by those who are afraid of death. It would be truer to say that mortality is the sad conviction of those who are afraid of life. Perhaps the most complete and cogent arguments for mortality ever worked out were written by the ancient Roman, Lucretius. The most interesting thing about the arguments is the passionate eagerness with which they are presented, the almost desperate desire to prove that when you are dead you are dead. The conclusion seems inescapable, especially as one reads elsewhere in his book about the miseries of life, that the writer believes in death because he is afraid of life and welcomes the release of death from the pains of life. In the little deaths of existence, he believes in the deaths, not the births.

Death and life are intimately related. The little deaths of life suggest they cannot be separated. We must face both equally as they come. But we do have a choice in how we face them. We can

by our faith believe in life and not in death, because all we have enjoyed from God gives us confidence in the unknown which lies ahead. As we practice the little deaths, may we seize with confidence the new births as they appear, and see the final death as just another of those little deaths which are the occasion of a deeper and truer life.