

A Child's Eye View of Mortality

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with excerpts from a book by

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While on a sailing vacation with my family and friends in Hawaii this summer, I took a shore boat ride into Lahaina. Our boat was anchored off this site and on this particular ride, I was joined by a number of children heading in for a swim. My seatmate was Adam who is 3 ½. At the dock was a fishing boat that had just returned from a successful fishing trip, and the crew was hoisting a large sailfish up by its tail. It was bright blue, Adam's favorite color. I thought he would be thrilled to see this big blue fish. But that was through my eyes. Adam's first words upon seeing the swordfish were, "They killed a dolphin." I said, "No, they didn't. It's a sailfish." He looked closely into its eye and said, "Is it dead?" I began to realize this was not going the way I had expected. I answered honestly that the fish was indeed dead. He then said, "There won't be anymore fish in the sea." His face looked sad and his mood had changed from excitement to sadness and pain.



He did go on to swim that day, and enjoyed the water and companionship of his playmates. I walked away feeling pained at my lack of attunement to how this scene would impact Adam.

My father, Robert Firestone and his colleague, Joyce Catlett have written about the impact of the realization of mortality on the developing child in their recent book *Beyond Death Anxiety: Achieving Life-Affirming Death Awareness*. In the book, they suggest that the acceptance of death and dying as a reality and awareness of the typical defenses that people develop to counter the dread can be life-affirming rather than leading to cynicism or depression. The act of challenging psychological defenses formed in childhood and reinforced by death anxiety can lead to more personal satisfaction in living and expand the opportunity for self-realization. They stress that

facing our mortality, allowing ourselves to feel the appropriate emotions of sadness, anger, and fear can give greater meaning to life and make it all the more precious. This awareness also places our experience in perspective, helping us avoid trivializing our existence.

The authors felt strongly that a book needed to be written to bring the subject of death out of the closet. People need to be free to think, feel, and talk about the subject. Addressing the issues surrounding death has a therapeutic effect. However uncomfortable or painful this may be, it is preferable to the emptiness of the unexamined life.

The two-column sections of this article offer excerpts from Chapter 3, "Children's Dawning Realization of Death." The single-column sections contain my experiences with children.

Death anxiety is a powerful force in shaping human experience.

The human infant is born into the world in a state of complete and utter helplessness and dependency. Left on its own, without care and

sustenance, it most surely would die. When frustrated and hungry, the baby wails until milk is provided or the diaper is changed, and then follows the satisfied sounds of relief and contentment. When the mother, parent, or caretaker provides adequate, timely, and sensitive care, the child develops a secure pattern of attachment. *However, when there are misattunements, insensitive treatment, or otherwise destructive machinations on the part of caretakers, as well as a consistent failure to repair such misattunements, the baby will suffer from emotional pain and frustration with negative consequences for his or her future. Even in the most ideal situations, it appears virtually inevitable that some of the foregoing will occur. These patterns become hardwired in the still-developing brain of the infant during the early years and thereafter bear strongly on the future development of the individual.*

Faulty parental responses and the inevitable separation experiences of childhood also have a traumatic effect on the developing infant. The child compensates for emotional deprivation and separation by developing fantasies of fusion as well as self-nurturing patterns of behavior in order to partially allay the anxiety. Thus, the infant develops defenses early in life to ward off emotional and physical pain. These primitive defenses are intensified, confirmed, and become rigidified when the child first becomes aware of death.

Our theoretical approach, known as Separation Theory, elucidates this relationship between separation anxiety and the dread and anxiety surrounding death - the final separation from self and others. One emotion inherent in both instances

is the fear of being cut off from others, alone and isolated from fellow humans. This fear of object loss recapitulates the infant's anxiety at being separated from the mother.

Children's Reactions to their Evolving Knowledge of Death

The concept of death and the realization of a finite existence generally evolve gradually as the young child matures. For many children, their first encounter with death occurs when a pet dies or when they accidentally come across a dead bird or animal.

ACHIEVING LIFE-AFFIRMING DEATH AWARENESS

BEYOND DEATH ANXIETY



I witnessed this riding on a train with my niece Siena, who at the time was 3 ½ years old. Through the window, we saw a sheep-herding dog. As she pointed the dog out, one of the older children we were travelling with said, "Muffin died." Muffin was an elderly sheepdog who had been a family pet. Siena said, "I don't want Muffin to die. We are all going to die. I don't want to die." My first thought was, how did I end up in this serious conversation (one that most parents dread)? What do I say since her realization and feelings are accurate and appropriate? I attempted to reflect her concerns and offer what comfort I could within the limitations of honesty. I think for most parents this period (somewhere between ages

3-7) is painful as they witness their children starting to talk about death and face the feelings associated with it. In giving our children life, we inadvertently give them death. Many parents attempt to assuage their child's feelings and concerns by offering false reassurance or espousing religious ideas they don't believe themselves.

We observed that children's responses upon

discovering death typically include: a withdrawal from close personal contact with their parents when they begin to think in terms of their own death or when they comprehend that their parents are vulnerable to death. They intensify the

imaginary connection with parents through regressive, dependent behaviors that elicit caretaking responses, while relinquishing real closeness and affection.

At a social event, my brother's business partner talked to me about the recent uncharacteristic behavior of his 10-year-old daughter. Usually the most outgoing of his three children, Laurie had recently become terrified for either of her parents to leave the house in the evening, and had taken to spending the hours after sunset in whatever room in the house her parents occupied. When I inquired if anything had occurred in Laurie's life recently that was new or unusual, my brother's partner replied that Laurie's closest friend's father had terminal cancer. Laurie was the one her friend confided in and cried to about her father's deteriorating condition and impending death. As he spoke, he also remembered that the previous week one of the parents of another student in Laurie's school had been killed in a car accident on the same highway he drove everyday to work. I reflected that these two incidents had made it clear to Laurie that she could lose her parents. She was holding on tightly to her parents in a futile attempt to never lose them. We went on to discuss how he might talk with his daughter and address her feelings and concerns.

We have found that many children (beginning around age 3) have nightmares filled with themes about death and feelings of vulnerability about their bodies. These terrifying nightmares seem to occur more frequently in children who have not yet successfully repressed their emotional reactions to the knowledge of death. Common themes of children's nightmares include being threatened, pursued, or killed by monsters, ghosts, witches, "bad guys," and so forth. The subjects that seem to recur in these nightmares are similar to the topics of many fairy tales, stories that are both frightening and fascinating to young children

In her study of children's understanding of death, Sylvia Anthony (1973) observed several children who protected themselves against the knowledge of death by imagining a reunion with their parent after death. Anthony's findings tend to coincide with our observations and the hypothesis that the unconscious, fantasized connection with the mother is associated with a general sense of immortality in children. As the child advances through the stages of intellectual development, he or she does not necessarily abandon the primitive thinking characteristic of earlier stages, especially with respect to ideas about death.

The majority of healthy children gradually learn to

repress the direct realization of death. However, in some cases, there is a failure in repression, and children, especially those who may have suffered unusual trauma and early losses, tend to find it difficult to successfully rid themselves of morbid thoughts. These children often develop symptomatic or maladaptive behavior patterns.

Answering Children's Questions about Death

Most parents, feeling protective and wishing to spare their children anxiety, avoid the subject of death in conversations, especially with their young children. Often mothers and fathers try to reassure their children with platitudes or clichés that deny the fact of death and block out the painful feelings associated with the child's growing awareness of his or her personal mortality. They offer counsel and beliefs such as: "You don't have to think about that at your age." "Only old people die." "Your father and I would never let anything happen to you." "People don't really die, they go to heaven."

However, in his book, *Talking about Death*, Grollman (1990) tells parents: "Death is a universal and inevitable process that must be faced by people of all ages.... Your children are human beings, worthy of respect and openness, not

pretense and equivocation. Two of their greatest needs are for trust and truth” (p. 40).

We suggest that the key concept in talking with children about death and dying is to allow them to fully express their ideas and feelings on the subject. First, it is important that parents take their children’s inquiries about death seriously and not attempt to change the subject or brush it aside with platitudes. The time that a child first becomes aware of the temporal nature of life constitutes a true crisis in that child’s life. Sometimes a sudden change in behavior is the only clue parents have that the child is beginning to be aware of his or her predicament. The child who begins to act out of character (e.g., a quiet, reserved child becoming loud and rebellious, or a usually well-behaved child provoking punishing responses from parents) may be experiencing anxiety related to this unsolvable dilemma. At this juncture, understanding parents would sense that the child’s defensive actions are probably motivated by deeper feelings of insecurity, fear, terror, and/or confusion.

Rather than punishing or ignoring the child, they could ask, “Is anything bothering you? You don’t seem to be feeling very well.” Parents who are genuinely concerned about their children’s well-being could then listen respectfully to any feelings the child is willing to express, without offering false protection. When children use this opportunity, as they usually do, to ask direct questions about death, parents could honestly share their own feelings on the subject while answering their inquiries.

Parents’ answers to their children’s questions about death should be individual to each child and appropriate to his or her respective age and emotional maturity. Children of any age, and

especially young children, need not be given long, elaborate explanations or more information than they asked for at the time.

Ideally, in answering questions, parents would talk with their children openly, honestly, and with feeling. In being comfortable with and respectful of their child’s feelings, parents do not try to ease a child’s pain and sadness by offering false explanations about death, for example, that only sick people, old people, or careless people die. By not interrupting the feeling process with false reassurances, parents teach children that even the most painful emotions can be tolerated.

In contrast to many conventional views that children should be protected from the knowledge of death, we believe that parents must refrain from attempting to soothe them by covering over the truth. Parents can honestly communicate the fact that the process of dying and death is a mystery, and that they do not know all the answers, without making the child feel insecure or fearful. For example, if the child asks if everybody dies, a parent could say, “Yes, we’re all going to die, but I don’t really know when or how it will happen or what death actually is. Some people believe there is an afterlife, but no one really knows.”

Being honest and straightforward with children about this subject tends to arouse painful feelings of sadness in parents about their own mortality. The purity and intensity of children’s dismay, pain, and sadness also stir their parents’ feelings about death, emotions that they may have been suppressing for years. Parents who are less defended against these feelings are better able to respond appropriately to their child’s feelings, that is, to not cut them off, but to encourage the child to go through the feelings. They are aware that even emotions as intensely painful as those about death



are better felt and not avoided. These parents accompany the child through this process by offering empathy, compassion, and understanding as the child expresses his or her distressing thoughts and emotions.

In another book, *Compassionate Child-Rearing* (1990), Firestone wrote, "If parents are willing to endure the sadness and pain of acknowledging their child's mortality as well as their own limitation in time, they can develop a true sense of empathy with their children rather than becoming alienated" (p. 215). Thus, when children are facing the issues of death, parents would be providing them with the greatest security by facing these existential issues themselves, telling the truth to their children, and allowing their children to experience their own feelings about these deeply disturbing subjects.

[In a concluding note, Robert Firestone shares this personal experience.]

I initially thought that my fear of death began during my adolescence, but then I remembered that it was much earlier. In thinking about it, I recollected that when I was something like four or five, I learned about death and thought of my parents dying. I remember that I couldn't stand thinking about it because the pain was too great. The thought of losing my mother or father was unbearable.

I was an intelligent child. It was only a matter of time until I stumbled on the obvious inference that I faced the same fate myself. It would happen to me and it was unavoidable. As I propelled this notion into the far future, I thought, thank God. It will happen later when I am old, and by then it won't matter.

Now, in my later life, I do not find my age to be of any consolation. I still appreciate my life as I did previously. I hope to live as long as possible and place as much value on my life as ever.

Robert W. Firestone, PhD, psychologist and author, has been affiliated with the Glendon Association as its consulting theorist since its inception. His innovative ideas related to psychotherapy, couple and family relationships, suicide, parenting, and existential issues have been the inspiration and cornerstone of Glendon's research and publications. His studies on negative thought processes and their associated affect have led to the development of Voice Therapy, an advanced therapeutic methodology to uncover and contend with aspects of self-destructive and self-limiting behaviors.

Joyce Catlett, MA, author and lecturer, has collaborated with Dr. Robert Firestone in writing ten books and numerous professional articles. A founding member of Glendon Association, she has been a national lecturer and workshop facilitator in the areas of child abuse prevention and couple relations. You can contact Ms. Catlett at jcatlett@glendon.org.

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