

Dealing with Death and Dying

by Herb Silverman

How do we differ from religious people in this pandemic era, when as of this writing over half a million Americans have lost their lives to Covid? Since you are reading this, you haven't died from the virus, perhaps because you listened to science rather than to unfounded conspiracy theories.

In dealing with death, we know that human life is a sexually transmitted disease with a 100% mortality rate. Yes, we are all going to die someday. We are fragile creatures who have been dying from the moment we were born into a universe that has no purpose. I feel "blessed" that I've been alive for 78 years. I have no memories of the other 13.8 billion years the universe existed without me. The same will be true when I die, hopefully not for many years. I was not in distress before I was born, and won't be in distress when I'm dead.

There is no purpose *of* life, so we all need to find purposes *in* life. Regarding purpose, I am guided by a quote from **Robert Green Ingersoll**:

"Happiness is the only good.

The time to be happy is now.

The place to be happy is here.

The way to be happy is to make others so."

We don't delude ourselves into thinking we will have an afterlife, so we ought to decide what we want to accomplish in this, our one and only life. I am comforted in knowing that I can contribute something useful in the world. Sometimes our choices and their repercussions live longer than we do, impacting on family, friends, people we don't know, and future generations. I've made plans to go to medical school when I die, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I'm alive, but I hope others will be able to make good use of them when I'm dead.

Something I didn't do when I was young, but do now, is read the obituaries in my local newspaper. Too often I see that a friend or acquaintance has died, usually someone who was younger than I am. While I'm sad when I read of those deaths, I'm ever more grateful to be alive. Staying alive is better than the alternative, and both young and old should take the time to appreciate being alive.



Since we don't know when our time will be up, planning for end-of-life care in the form of advance directives is not just for the elderly. For me, regardless of age, what's important is quality of life, not just length of life. I think I would like to stay alive as long as I am able to communicate effectively, but if I develop some form of dementia like Alzheimers, I might not be competent to request a peaceful death. I told my wife, **Sharon Fratepietro**, that one sign to pull the plug on me would be if I said I believed in God.

Sometimes we need to communicate with religious family members or friends whose loved ones have recently died. I understand the appeal of religion. Fear of death can lead to a longing for an afterlife, where we can be united forever with our loved ones in eternal bliss. Or perhaps we could come back reincarnated as a better person. Religions might have been created by humans as a means to cope with their own mortality, but it's important to distinguish between the world as we know it and the world as we'd like it to be. For those imagining they will have some sort of afterlife, this life may not seem as precious.

Believing in God can help some people better cope with death and dying. Sharon was a volunteer for hospice, established for people with terminal diseases who are approaching the end of their lives. Some of the people Sharon consoled would say things like, "I'm at peace knowing that I'll soon be with God." Sharon, an atheist, did not say what she was thinking, "No, you won't." Instead, she would say something like, "I know that this belief comforts you a lot."

As humanists, I think we should go out of our way to comfort and show compassion to the bereaved. Using rationality and logic may help process the loss of a loved one when the survivor is an atheist, but not so much for a religious person. The question arises about whether to lie. I have trouble doing so, but I can understand the justification. If someone in dire straits asks me to pray with him/her, I might go through the motions because it makes the other person feel better, even though the prayers are meaningless to me. Praying with others might relieve their pain, and knowing that our prayers are only heard by human beings makes them completely harmless. If someone says to me, "I'll pray for you," I thank them and resist giving a snarky response like, "OK, I'll think for both of us."

I've never understood why people look down when they pray. Isn't that where Satan is supposed to be? Why not look up to the "heavens," where God is supposed to be? I've been at public meetings, like City Council, where they start with a prayer. I always look around to see if there are other people who don't bow their heads. That's a good way to meet other atheists.

If a person has been in agony for a long time before dying, I can even agree with someone who says, "He's in a better place now." Atheists can understand and accept suffering that can only be relieved by death.

There are honest ways to comfort someone (atheist or not) who has lost a loved one. If someone has lost a father or mother we can say something like:

"Grief is difficult, how may I help?"

“Your father is alive through you because you are carrying his genes and have many of his positive attributes, including his looks and personality traits.”

*“I am so sorry to hear the news.
I extend to you
my sincerest condolences.”*

*“You are in our hearts and
on our minds because you mean so much to us.
Please know that you are in our thoughts.”*

*“I wish you the strength
and resolve to cope with your loss.”*

It helps to mention something good you remember about the deceased. Mourn his or her death, but also celebrate the life that he/she helped give you. That’s what a person would have wanted. When I die, I hope my memorial will consist of people sitting around telling funny stories about me.

Though you will grieve with the loss of a loved one, you can also smile when you think about the good times you had together and some of the fond memories. We mourn, but the pain will likely eventually subside. Remember that the loss is ours, not the deceased who no longer feels any pain.

Some will find solace in their beliefs, their religion, and their religious community. Others of us will find solace through close friends, family, and loved ones. We take comfort from our loved ones and comfort them in turn.

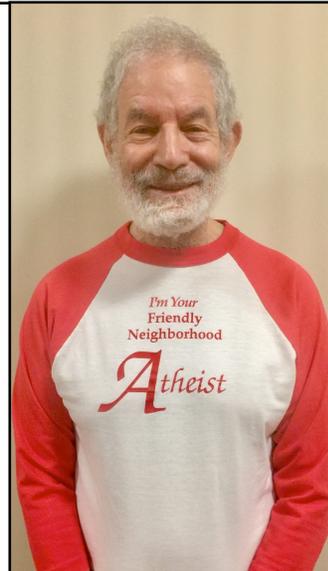
Whether we are religious or atheists, we grieve and life goes on.

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society ezine.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*.

Both books are available through Amazon.com.

Designating “The Freethought Society” as your AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization’s funds.



A Look at the Christian Science Religion

by Margaret Downey

I married into a family and later discovered that the family’s religious background included a one-time adherence to the Christian Science religion. I decided to learn a bit more about it and today I’m sharing a few Christian Science facts with readers of *The Freethought Society News*.

The Church of Christ, Scientist was founded in 1879 by **Mary Baker Eddy**. She was an author and teacher who believed in spiritual healing. Her beliefs included the premises that:

- * Matter does not exist
- * Only a God-created spirit is real
- * Illness does not exist since humans are a reflection of God
- * Illness is a result of sin, fear or ignorance of God’s true nature
- * Illness can be healed with prayer and devoted spirituality

According to Eddy the purpose of life is to understand God’s infinite goodness, and to destroy sin, sickness, and death. The key texts of this religious sect are the Bible and Eddy’s book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. Adherents are expected to take Bible lessons and learn core passages from the book.

Adherents also follow Eddy’s bylaws for the religion entitled *Manual of the Mother Church* and faithfully read the church’s newspaper the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The activities of the church include Wednesday night testimonial meetings, where people share prayer-healing stories. Attendance at Sunday services is also required to help followers continue to find strength using “divine science” to help with all life issues.

One of the best written criticisms of the Christian Science religion was written by **Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens**. His

book *Christian Science* was written in 1907. It is a collection of essays beginning with an article that was published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1899. Clemens declares, “There is nothing to Christian Science; there is nothing about it that appeals to the intellect; its market will be restricted to the unintelligent, the mentally inferior, the people who do not think.”

The church has opened many Christian Science reading rooms in order to encourage followers, and the curious, to study religious texts that are found to be divinely inspired. The reading rooms can be found worldwide.

Many Christian Science followers do not feel the need to pay for health insurance. Prayer heals so there is no need to see a doctor or stay in a hospital. It is perfectly all right, however, to visit dentists, optometrists, obstetricians, and physicians for broken bones.

If illness persists, a Christian Science practitioner can be called in to strengthen the prayer healing. Many cases of excruciating death, especially involving helpless children, have been reported when prayer is the chosen course of action, however. No HMO will cover visits of Christian Science practitioners. They truly believe that prayer used in conjunction with modern medicine can worsen an unhealthy condition. You will not likely find Christian Science doctors. Well, maybe a doctor who no longer practices medicine due to converting to the Christian Science religion!

The life of a Christian Science adherent is not completely free of stress, even though they contend that “all problems are illusory.” Church members are expected to battle public school regulations that demand the immunization of children. Even though the word “science” appears in the name of this cult, don’t expect too many Christian Science members to get the Covid vaccine! □