Discussion Guide on the Afterlife

Conversations about death are often challenging. Conversations about what we think happens after we die take on eternal proportions, creating the potential for even more tension. It is precisely this timelessness that also creates the possibility of tremendous depth of understanding and love for those who are dying and those being left behind.

**What do we imagine happens after we die?**
**How does what we imagine or believe will happen to us after we die influence the choices we make in this life?**

These and many more questions arise from the viewing of "With Eyes Open". We offer here two possibilities for exploring our beliefs and understanding and some ideas for sharing them with our loved ones. The objective of this guide is to help you talk more openly with family and/or in your community about your desires and concerns about your "crossing over" or that of a loved one. There are two different formats you can follow. They are also helpful tools for small group discussions, in your community center, congregation, senior center, etc. Feel free to use either or both as tools for engaging in the conversations you wish to have.

Ground Rules that apply to both formats:

- If participants don't know each other well, spend some time with introductions. This is a conversation that invites intimacy. The better people know each other, the more likely they will be to participate fully. Nametags are helpful.
- There are no right and wrong answers. From the outset, set the tone that reinforces the notion that everyone's views are respected, even if they are different.
- Everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn. Try to create a healthy learning environment. Remember: no one is an expert; no one has actually been there yet!
- Be gentle with each other. Strong feelings sometimes arise around this topic. Have plenty of tissues on hand.
- Stories are very powerful; while sharing it is important to remember that everyone has a story to share. Monopolizing the conversation isn't helpful to the group.
- Take some time to add your own ground rules before you begin the discussion.
How do we begin the conversation?  
Marita Grudzen

A colleague writes: "After the initial shock of diagnosis: lung cancer metastasized to the lymphnodes, my dad's reaction was as straightforward as most of his reactions in life. "One of two things will happen to me this year; I'm going home or I'll get healed". It's been over 18 months and he's done neither. We've ridden the roller coaster ride of terminal illness together as a family. One of the bumpy places has been around the question of what will happen after he dies. His faith gives him a palpably clear sense of where he's going into the arms of Jesus. It gets a little fuzzier when he thinks about whom will join him there when it's our turn. For 25 years, he's been telling us that without Jesus, none of us will see heaven. Some of us have embraced his faith perspective; others have not. It's been a source of discomfort for many years.

So, now, as he comes to the end of his life on earth, my dad's faith is unwavering, and he is finding himself more open to the possibility that God may be larger than he's understood God to be in the past. My dad is opening his heart to the possibility that it might not be for any of us to judge God's will for any but our own life. What a gracious farewell gift to us!"

What of myself do I want to leave behind for my loved ones and my community?
How do I view the meaning of my life?
What is my story as I come to the end of my life?

For many families, there is tension in the reality that not every member holds the same beliefs. One helpful way to open a tender conversation among the differences is to think of it in terms of a spiritual legacy. It can be done in written form as a kind of Spiritual Testament and shared with one's family and friends. Too often we think of a person's Last Will and Testament in purely material terms. The Spiritual Testament can include the major spiritual stepping stones that influenced one's life and the spiritual gifts that emerged over a lifetime of service. It can be constructed as a narrative; a story of one's inner life as it developed over time. It can include the obstacles and challenges that a person faced and the inner resources that helped to surmount these difficulties. We might call this the spiritual stepping stones of a person's life (See the writings of Ira Progoff concerning spiritual stepping stones).

What have been the major turning points and spiritual stepping stones in my life?
In the Jewish tradition there is a practice of leaving an Ethical Will which embodies the deceased one's values and wishes and is read either at the grave site or at another designated time. Do I want to leave an ethical will? Who do I want to read it? When?

A Spiritual Legacy need not be limited to a written form. I learned to bake bread from the hands of Maryknoll Sister Anne Caecelia Balberis, a woman who became my spiritual mentor. She taught me the skill of bread making but also she gave me the keys to her spiritual legacy. She put all of her love and energy into her role as a bakery chef for her religious community for over 50 years. Bread making was an essential part of that dedication to her community and her friends. Eating her bread was like taking communion.

Are there particular objects that embody my writing, art, professional trade, or devotion that I want to hand on to my loved ones?
What do these objects symbolize for me?
What treasures have been handed on to me? What connections to the deceased do they hold for me?
We can help to mirror back to another person the spiritual gifts that have anchored their life experience. When my mother in law was dying, our youngest daughter wrote her this letter:

Dear Grandma,

When I heard from my mom that your condition was getting more and more serious, I began to hurt more and more. At first I was angry, and then confused, and then numb, but now I don't feel any of these things, because all I can feel is you, your presence. However unaware you are of it; each and every one of your grandchildren has been forever loved and influenced by you. And, although I've spent most of my life missing you and distanced from you, you have always been and always will be with me. You have instilled in me the kind of strength that will endure my struggle, as it did yours. And, where it is that you are going I will also be someday. Everything that you've taught me guides me. I know that you knew pain in your life, but I also know that you knew joy, and I hope that you are letting go of the pain. I want more than anything else does to be by your side now, but fate has it that I am not. But, please realize that your face is in my thoughts every waking moment, reminding me that I can, as you do, live with both dignity and compassion. I respect and love you more than I can ever say. As I said, you are with me now, and always. Please know that you live through us. Grandma, you are the most beautiful woman I will ever know. I have always lived in awe of you. I miss you and I hope that you will visit me in my dreams and watch over me from the HEAVENS.

I love you Grandma,

Simone

This letter was hand printed. Simone's Dad read to his mother. After hearing it, she asked that it be pinned above her hospital bed for all to see. Grandma wanted it to be shown to her other (very young) grandchildren. Before her grandmother's open casket, Simone read this letter at the family memorial. She then put her words in her grandmother's folded hands. This was the only object buried with her grandmother. Simone was 18 years at the time of her grandmother's death. It enabled her to realize that the gift of her life had been received and would live on in her children and grandchildren. It brought her peace and allowed her to let go.

What do I want to express to specific loved ones on their deathbed?
How do I envision an ideal death, a dignified death?
Who and what kind of support do I want from others in my dying process? Be specific.

We can also manifest a spiritual legacy through rituals and ceremonies that reflect both cultural and personal characteristics of a life. When Anthony Soto, a Mexican American community leader, was terminally ill, his family and community gathered to support him. Processing into his home bearing flowers, candles, a large picture of the Farm Worker Symbol, and Anthony's dissertation on Mexican elders, they sang Spanish hymns. Each person offered an act of thanksgiving or blessing as they passed in front of Anthony. This procession symbolized the movement of his life through the different transitions of priest, teacher, community activist and leader, husband and father. It graphically enacted the drama of his life as a kind of contemporary Gospel narrative. Down through the ages the Judeo-Christian tradition has interpreted the passage of time as a history of God's action in the lives of his people. We can recapture this sense of God's immanence in the time of our lives. We can be part of redemptive history when we see the "inner meaning" of a person's life and celebrate it in some ritual fashion.
What rituals have I participated in before and after the death of a family, friend or associate?
What elements were most significant for me?
What rituals do I want performed before and after my death?
What ways, if any, do I want my family and community to gather?

In our fast paced, youth oriented culture; we need to encourage greater respect for the spiritual legacy of our elders. In many cultures, elders are the central figures who embody the wisdom tradition of their specific culture. These wisdom traditions are part of a spiritual legacy that is honored and respected. Where they have been lost, we can renew these traditions by encouraging a variety of practices that express the particular spiritual legacy of our contemporary elders. This can be done in oral and/ or written forms, with ritual expressions of the person's life story, the handing over of physical symbols of the person's life and the celebration of a ritual meal or journey which expresses the spiritual legacy which this person embodied in his or her life.

What cultural and religious rituals are celebrated in my life, family and community?
What ways might I encourage the conscious development of spiritual legacies in our communities?

Each death, like each life, is unique to the person living and dying. Here are additional questions to help further the discussion:

What would assist or guarantee a safe passage at the end of your life?
What important things need to be completed before you die?
Would you feel comfortable with family and friends blessing you from religious and spiritual traditions different from your own?
Are you familiar with a framework for assisting and offering spiritual support to the dying that is inclusive and tolerant of diverse religious and spiritual beliefs and/ or a framework for a memorial that allows for this kind of diversity?

Now, let's take a look at the commonalities in perspectives on after death experiences from around the world.

**Sukie Miller**

Most of the priests, shaman, cultures and religions that Miller studied shared unknown to one another, a common belief in a four stage journey after death. Although some systems emphasized one stage over another, and other systems just barely paid attention to one stage while making another stage the corner stone of their beliefs, a definite 4 stage pattern of after life travel emerged.

See what your beliefs are or if you can guess the answers Miller received...

**Stage 1 of the after life journey is The Waiting Stage.**
Likened to Jet Lag where we are neither home nor truly arrived at our destination, we wait -- transforming, becoming used to not having a body, becoming accustomed to being dead.

**How long do you think that Stage 1, The Waiting Stage, lasts?**

- 7 seconds
- 7 days
- 13 days
- 1 full moon cycle
- 49 days
- 1,000 days
- 1,000 years

**answer:** all of the above. Different systems believe in different waiting times but all studied believe in the wait itself.
Stage II of the journey after life is the Judgement Stage.
Which Judgement method would you prefer?
Choose one.

1. I want to be judged by The Tally Method. I understand and accept that my good deeds will be measured against my bad deeds and which ever is higher will determine if I am a good person or a bad person and where I will go next.

2. I want to be judged by the Karmic Method. I understand and accept that this system will measure my intentions and actions over 7 generations or lifetimes.

3. I want to be judged by The Evolutionary Method. I understand and accept that I will be judged as to how I was as a human being as well as how I helped to improve the lives of others.

4. I want to be judged by The Challenge Method. I understand and accept that I will be judged on the basis of the tasks I will be asked to perform or the events that I will immediately encounter.

Stage III of the after life journey is the stage of Possibilities.
What do you think/believe happens next?
The possibilities are limitless. Here are some that are reported.
Choose one or add your own.

- Heaven
- Past the Milky Way
- Hell
- Limbo
- Under the Ocean
- On to a cloud
- Other idea

Stage IV, the last stage of the after life journey is The Return. It's time to come back. There are many "reasons" stated by different cultures as to why we return.
On what basis would you like to return?

1. After a set period of time

2. Because I am needed

3. Because I need to get some information for my after life ashram

4. Because I need to perfect myself in a particular way

5. Other

Short Quiz:
Are there cheeseburgers in the after life? YES NO NOT YET KNOWN
Are there sexual relations in the after life? YES NO NOT YET KNOWN
Is it true that most systems believe you will return as the opposite sex? YES NO NOT YET KNOWN
Do children make the same afterdeath journey as adults? YES NO NOT YET KNOWN

Resources:

Hebrew Scriptures:
Genesis 5:24, Numbers 16:33, Ps 6:6, Isaiah 38:18, Daniel 12:2

Christian Scriptures:
John 14:3, 6 2 Corinthians 5:1, 8

(Diverse Religious perspectives: Chaps. 10-14 ; Diverse Ethnic Perspectives: Chaps. 6-9.)


(The Person Who Is Dying: Chapter 8)


(Spiritual Stepping Stones: Chaps. 9, 10, 11)

(Chapter 5: Tools for Harvesting Life)

Ring, Ken Ph.D. "Life at Death." Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980.

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She shares a series of narratives followed by probing questions that give us ideas and tools for delving into these challenging, yet rewarding conversations with our loved ones and/or communities. This format is best shared in small group settings. If there is a discussion leader, your role is to help people move through the difficult places and to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak if they want to.

**Sukie Miller**, PhD, a psychotherapist, is one of the first researchers to study the cross-cultural dimensions of the afterdeath. Dr. Miller, an early director of Esalen Institute, has been a member of the Jung Institute of San Francisco and a member of Medical Quality Assurance for the State of California. In 1972 she founded and directed the pioneering Institute for the Study of Humanistic Medicine. She is currently founder and director for the Institute for the Study of the Afterdeath. She has traveled the world sharing stories and experiences with people from different nations and cultures. Travel with her. See if any of your experiences or beliefs are similar to those from around the world. This multiple choice format, with some lighthearted questions thrown in invites us into the conversation gently. Understanding the commonalities among the peoples of the world helps us to see that our experiences are more common than we might imagine. This format is good for larger groups as well as small groups and families.

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