

Towards the Preparations for Death and Post-Death: the Role of Initiatives

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Abstract

It is a very well-known fact that death is as natural as to that of birth and whoever is born must die ultimately putting an end to the life lead between birth and death. Many people go scary of death and live in a delusion that it can be conquered in the much technologically advanced medical scenario. But when death occurs, they cannot cope with the grief. So many philosophers and spiritual practitioners strive to educate the people to face the death as it is inevitable and one must be ready to accept it, irrespective of age. The fear of death causes lots of tension and a kind of trauma in the aged people as well as people suffering from severe ailments. A sense of insecurity pervades in the aged people mainly because of their thoughts about the death. Being very sentimental, many people do not even try to utter the word “death”, even by mistake, as they believe that gods will grant it if listened to it. What makes the people to go scary about death? How to overcome the fear of the death? What are the preparations to face it? Against this backdrop this paper intends to make an enquiry into the role of certain organizations in the Indian set up to prepare people to talk about death and to face it.

Keywords: Death cafes, meditation, death philosophy, palliative care, cultural reluctance, bereavement support..

“Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death.

If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.”

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

In contrast to the above quote on death, it is very clear that ‘Death’ is considered an event in many cultures. The article, titled, “Let’s Talk About Death” by Reshmi Chakraborty is the main source of this paper on how to prepare ourselves for death. Death will always be in minds of those people who see their loved ones nearing death as they see the limbs falling and memory fading out. Instead of asking the beloved ones how they want to leave this world or how would they like to be remembered, many of the conversations in Indian families around death are limited to the medical and pragmatic aspects of it- medication, wills, division of assets etc. rather than addressing the emotional aspects.

In this context, through the above-mentioned article, we come to know about an interesting personality like Manisha Sheth, a Pune-based environmentalist who runs the social enterprise “eCoexist”. Manisha Sheth has witnessed her mother, Dr. Madhuri Sheth caring for sick and dying relatives at home. She could remove the unfamiliarity of death as she watched their departure from this world. As Manisha says, “I grew up in a family where death was a very common topic of conversation. My mother wanted to normalize death and familiarize us with it. It was not a taboo topic.” Perhaps this familiarity with death

made her to watch her mother (Dr.Madhuri) suffering from tumour and dying with all acceptance her mother's death without any fear and with a detached attitude. For this, Sheth had had a lifetime of preparation. Her mother eventually passed away at home, in her arms. In her own words, "Even on her last day, she did not want a doctor. She had brief panic attacks, just once or twice.

I could only stand and watch without getting carried away by own emotions or fear, because all my life she had prepared me for it.

In her final moments, I was telling her 'Ma, let it go now, please, don't hold on anymore', and she nodded and left."(Reshmy Chakravarthy)

As per Sheth this was possible only because they were death literate. She considers her mother's demise the most powerful experience of her life. In fact, talking about death with her mother inspired Sheth and enhanced her care giving journey. This has led to support others to do the same through a close knit online study of a group of 50 members, called 'Dying to Learn'. A few could grow up with the exposure to death that Sheth received from her mother.

In contrast to the understanding of Sheth and her mother about death, in many situations in India, talking about death is considered inauspicious, thus leaving us to think about death- avoidant society. This is mainly because of the cultural reluctance to talk about death which in turn leads to people avoiding taking important decisions such as end-of-life care, organ donation, and even funeral preferences. Besides this, people are not interested in knowing about the information about options such as Advanced Care Planning, Advanced Directives, and eco-friendly funeral practices. These things are not accessible and scattered as many people avoid talking about death.

As talking about death is not encouraged in India, it remained in the 67th out of 85 countries in the 2015 Quality of Death Index, which ranks end-of-life care globally. India could attain only 59th rank in 2021 Outcomes of Quality of Death Index. The attitude towards death has of course got changed drastically due to COVID pandemic situation in India and other countries as well. Death became the focal point and forced many individuals to embrace the mortality. Still, it leaves us many questions on how many could become death literate. A lot to be done to educate people to talk about death and this is the reason many of the platforms have come forward to introduce death literacy initiatives to orient people towards death.

Some Influential Initiatives:

Maajhi is a death literacy platform initiated by a researcher Krittika Sharma in 2020. It creates experiences and tools to empower people to prepare for the end of life in meaningful ways. It is intended to create an awareness of the concept of accepting death. As sharma puts it, "Death literacy is the development of knowledge, access, and make informed choices about their loved ones,". *Maajhi* means 'ferryman in Hindi. It was suggested by Krittika's father Rakesh Sharma, a retired Wing Commander, the first Indian citizen in space. He suggested this name because, people in many cultures believe that the ferryman takes the soul across after death.

Four Aspects of *Maajhi*: 1. Obituary to Self, 2. The Last Dialogue, 3. Death Meditation and 4. Collaborations. The chief concerns of this platform include;

1. Conducting death meditation sessions;

It is a common notion that thinking about death is bad or that it creates more pain, fear, and suffering. However, it is a gift to think about our mortality for it allows us to reflect on the life we have lived, or how

we wish to live it. Learning how to die as we're going to do today begins to shift our perspective on what is most important in the life that we have, and possibly even bring joy to one's life.

The idea of death meditation comes from the idea that by reflecting on death, one may find deep insights into living life more fully and with more meaning. The Bhutanese, commonly touted as the happiest people on earth, are expected to think about death five times a day. They believe that death and life are interrelated. Essentially, this meditation is about life that offers questions and direction towards impermanence and purpose

2. Offering people a chance to write their obituary ;

Traditionally, an obituary is written after a person's death, by the survivor of the loss. *The Obituary to Self : A Journey of the Living* proposed that people call on their agency and imagine, reflect and write their own obituary. Maajhi has received obituaries from an age range of 7–93. This is like narrating a story that has a beginning, middle and an end. Endings help gain a sense of closure, allow us to face a narrative in its entirety and, in some cases, produce another beginning.

3. Helping the bereaved to navigate their loss by providing an access to a toolkit called 'Last Dialogue';

This tool kit contains the twenty-one prompts of the Last Dialogue inspired by various conversations in psychology, medicine and academia. As Sharma says, "What was the one thing that your loved one never took credit for?" is her favourite prompt which gently nudges the participants to remember the loved one, not with a heavy heart but with a fond memory. Here, memory acts as a tool to come out of the grief.

Last Dialogue began as a conversation at the Karunashraya Hospice in Bangalore in 2017. It evolved and has come together with the help of palliative care experts, counsellors, wisdom collectors, and behaviour designers. Consisting of 21 key prompts derived from primary and secondary research across various disciplines, they have been experienced by people from the ages of 11–70. The key is that it is important not to immortalize the lost loved one, but to keep them human and love them, thereby seeking a sense of compassion for them and for oneself. The questions can be asked in present and past tense as a way to bond with our loved ones and create deep connections. By engaging in these conversations, we can remind ourselves that the people we love will always stay with us, and we will always be a part of them. It can be used individually, with loved ones, or with a counsellor or facilitator.

In times like these, we must remember that we are not alone in this human experience. This gift is an invitation to explore our beautifully designed mortal spirit and unearth meaning, and a guide to building your own questions and rituals.

4. Collaborations;

Fearvana;

Maajhi is currently doing a year-long *In Still Death Meditation* course for The Fear chasers Alliance. It helps people in their journey towards self-growth and is committed to the pursuit of mastery. It is curated and conducted by Akshay Nanavati, a USMC Veteran, ultrarunner, adventurer, philanthropist, and founder of Fearvana.

Institute of Palliative Medicine(IPM):

It is a Kozhikode based institution in Kerala which was started inspired by a story narrated by a research scholar, Benna Fathima, who was left in shock after the death of her close friend, Fasil, due to muscular dystrophy. Having the bond of friendship since the schooling days and knowing that Fasil's days were numbered, Fathima pushed that thought to the back of her mind as the two went about town, spending

time at the beach and with other friends. Unfortunately, Fatima was in Delhi at the time of Fasil's death. She laments that she could not even take the last photograph with her friend. That's when she realized the suddenness of death. Fathima and Fasil had never spoken about his imminent death. She now wonders how Fasil would have liked to be remembered and wishes they had spoken about it. "Memories can help us process grief. And talking about grief and death, while helping us face our own mortality, can also provide tools to support others in their loss." (Reshmi Chakraborti) With this intension IPM organized a two-day workshop in Bereavement Companionship, in collaboration with Death Literacy Institute, Australia in 2021. Training modules around different stages of grief are offered in this program once in every month both offline and on-line mode. This kind of initiation helped people to come out of grief in a more meaningful manner. To make people to accept death as natural and a part of life is the main idea of IPM. Volunteers from across Kerala organize a cultural festival, help facilitate death cafes and encourage conversations around death and dying, and urges every group to have these conversations.

Death Cafes:

Death café is a global initiative, a very novel idea of spreading the thoughts about the understanding death. People are invited to these cafes to discuss their ideas about death over coffee and cake. It is a very informal gathering in which the kids also come out with their stories about death. This concept was first introduced in London in 2011, inspired by Switzerland's Cafe' Mortel Movement. These cafes are intended to spread awareness about the bereavement support. Generally the bereavement support involves cooking food for the kids and family by friends and neighbours, and children will be taken care of. According to Mr. Mohammed, the felicitator of these death cafes says that people are not aware of how to address grief beyond practical help. These death cafes felicitate the people to think about the emotional support to be given to the bereaved families rather than the practical help. An atmosphere is created in such a way that everyone is encouraged to share their thoughts and worries. Though they hesitate to speak out initially they reflect on personal topics gradually and discuss the matters related to their legacy, how they wish to die, and the importance of discussing these matters with their family members. They come up with the ideas of organ donation, and the rituals to be followed by the family, the type of flowers to be used, the way of doing funeral rites etc. Some participants come with the objects their late loved ones had left behind and discuss their fond memories. "Participants realise that discussing death is not a bad thing and go home and talk about it. It is a chance to reflect on life." says Mr.Mohammed, the coordinator of a death café in Kerala. Conversations around death will lead to thinking about one's life purpose and priorities.

Ritual Book Talks;

The Final Farewell is a very meticulously researched book written by Minakshi Dewan in 2023 about the rituals and funeral rites being followed in India . It created a lot of curiosity among the readers of all ages. Whenever the writer holds the discussion or book talk on the book there will be a lot of questions on the concept of death because it is not much discussed among the people. She says, "I get questions around theological concepts, body donation, why Hindus prefer cremation, why Parsis are not open about cremation and burial, and, so on. This is because avenues to talk about death are limited." Written after her father's death, Minakshi could explore the eco-friendly funeral options which she could not find as an alternate at the time of her father's funeral. Through her book she has taken an initiation to create awareness on the choices to be opted and to prepare for an environmental -friendly funeral options.

Dead in Benaras is a 2022 written book by Ravi Nadan Singh in which he has explored the funeral prac-

tices in Europe. He says that the people in Europe are more open in discussing the death matters. They decide whether to be buried or cremated and even choose the font of inscriptions on their tombstones. The author points out that there is a lot of scope in Europe to organize these discussions and death forums by the event organizers but in India there is a very little scope since people are not willing to talk about death. He says, “In India, there is now a small space for conversations around death but often that does not get connected to a larger one within the community.”

Another pioneering work is, *Walk with the Weary: Life-Changing Lessons in Healthcare*, written in 2022, by M.R.Rajagopal, a palliative care expert. As the founder of Pallium India, a palliative care NGO, he has spent a lifetime caring for patients in pain, for which he has been awarded with Padma Shri in the palliative care. His book offers so many insightful thoughts on health care and to give an opportunity to die a dignified death. He critiques the modern healthcare and urges the people for transformation. It is all about the author’s observations as a professional in the medical field and his calling and the world of Indian palliative care, how to care for others deeply and compassionately, irrespective of their background. This book teaches the readers a valuable lesson that accepting death as a natural part of life. The irony is that the professors in medical colleges who teach daily about diseases and cures, are unaware of the need to talk about death. In this regard, this book offers so much understanding about the need to talk about the death. In the words of Shashi Tharoor who has written the foreword to this book, “Pain ultimately takes away one’s dignity. Therefore, if you can ease pain, you are actually strengthening the dignity of a sufferer, and contributing a great deal to easing the memories left behind in the hearts and minds and souls of the survivors and the families. Dr.Rajagopal’s work and writing makes clear that it is truly an embodiment of that famous expression; ‘to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always’”. So, the first palliative care unit established by Dr. Rajagopal in Kerala is doing a great job to provide the utmost support to the people to come out of pain.

Arun Shourie, the politician-economist discusses in detail the last five months before the death of five persons in history in his book, *Preparing for Death* to provide a clear-cut perspective on death. He is of the opinion that everyone must understand that death is not a destination but a companion in one’s life, walking arm-in-arm. The lives of Guthama Buddha, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ramana Maharshi, Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave are discussed from this perspective by the author in a very inspiring manner.

Books such as *Karya* by Aravinda Malagathi in Kannada is all about the death ceremonies in the oppressed communities and the need for the social change. Another interesting book is, *Death: An Inside Story* by Sadhguru Jaggie Vasudev in which he dwells on the more profound aspects of death that are rarely spoken about. From a practical standpoint, he elaborates on what preparations one can make for one’s death, how best we can assist someone who is dying and how we can continue to support their journey even after death. It is must read book by everyone who shall eventually die.

The role of all these initiatives is highly commendable in making the people death literate and to offer a solacing and comfortable ambience and security to those at their most vulnerable and provide them the opportunity to not only live healthy lives but to die with an awareness about death. These initiatives, especially the palliative care centres emphasize on how to treat the patient and not just the disease. It is very important that people should think louder about talking death and break the traditions that consider it as a taboo. All the efforts made by these initiatives are to make everyone realize that death is a new beginning, a new journey, a new adventure and its not the end of our story. To conclude with apt words by

Leo Buscaglia, “Death is a challenge. It tells us not to waste time. It tells us to tell each other right now that we love each other.”

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