

Dealing with Death in the Secular Family*

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The human impulse to deny the reality of death is deep and ancient. It affects us all both as individuals and as a culture. Nevertheless, death confronts us all, including our children. One of the challenges of parenting is to introduce this subject and help them respond to it in developmentally appropriate ways. There is a great deal of helpful literature about how children deal with death, and both secular and religious children have much the same needs for reassurance and support when they begin to confront mortality. The particular challenge for secular families is the absence of comforting answers supplied by doctrines and images from various faith traditions. Yet by telling the truth, providing emotional comfort, and validating the child's own experiences, secular parents can give their children the tools to understand and accept death as a natural part of life and to find meaning in their grief.

The reality of death touches our lives in at least three distinct ways. The most obvious is when someone important to us dies. In a child's life, this will often be an older relative or beloved pet. Other more traumatic or violent losses are less common but require even more thoughtful responses. At such times, we need to help our children move through the dynamics of grieving – often while grieving ourselves. A second way in which death confronts us is at those developmental points when we realize, sometimes quite suddenly, that we ourselves must someday die, or that people we know and love will eventually die. A third way we encounter death is through fiction and the media. Whether through cartoons, action movies, or the evening news, children in our society are bombarded with images of death and need help to understand and process what they see.

* This reading is by Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, Senior Minister, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, MN, USA. Excerpted from "Chapter 6: Death and Consolation" in ***Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical Caring Kids Without Religion***, edited by Dale McGowan. Copyright ©Dale McGowan. Published by AMACON Books, a division of American Management Association, New York, NY. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
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Dealing with Ordinary Death

Natural death is still challenging for children, as it is for all of us. That grandparents and older relatives may die while a child is young is always a possibility, and the death of shorter-lived pets is inevitable. In such situations, secular parents will want to emphasize the naturalness of such deaths, and how they are part of the cycle of life. But no matter how expected such a loss may be, it still requires all of us, children and adults alike, to move through the process of grieving. Grief is a process of healing, growing, and learning that takes place over time. It is a journey without shortcuts, and if it is approached with acceptance, it leaves us wiser, more mature, and more loving than we were before.

One of the important gifts that parents can give their children is the knowledge that adults also grieve, and that it is painful and hard work for everyone. At the same time, parents know what children do not, which is that healing and growth will come, and something precious will be gained through the process. We can help our children to grieve in a healthy way by assuring them that the process does move forward, even when it feels endless.

We are all very sad right now, and it's okay to feel that way, but I know that after a while we will feel better again. We will be able to think about Blue and be happy while we remember him. It just takes time.

It is also important to acknowledge that grief takes many forms and is changeable. A child may experience obvious sadness and withdrawal, but at times may also exhibit manic energy, regressive behavior, anger, fear, or oblivious denial. All of these are normal feelings and coping strategies which adults may have as well. Recognizing these reactions as part of the grieving process can make them easier to deal with, for children and parents alike.

It can be harder to go to sleep when you are thinking how much you miss Grandma. I miss her too. Would you like a night-light, or your old blankie for awhile?

It is useful to remember that children are paradoxically both concrete and magical thinkers. On the one hand, they will make visible, tangible realities out of abstract concepts; on

the other hand, they often think themselves responsible for events that are entirely outside their control. Thus in dealing with death, it is important to assure a child that he or she is not responsible for a person or a pet dying, no matter how clear this is to the adults. The child may imagine that his or her momentary feeling of anger towards the deceased brought about their death, or that had he or she been more loving or responsible or attentive, the death could have been prevented. Children may not speak of these apprehensions, so it is wise to offer the affirmation unasked.

Grandmother died because she was old and ill. We all took the best care of her that we could, but it just wasn't possible for her to go on living. It wasn't anybody's fault.

Both ceremony and ritual may be helpful to children – and adults are not immune to their benefits either. Ceremony is a formal act that is thoughtfully planned, even though it may only be done once. Ritual is usually something repeated, that gathers meaning through being done more than once. While both of these activities can be associated with religious beliefs, they do not have to be. They can be public, or private, or personal. A formal memorial service in a church would be a public ceremony; going alone to visit your grandfather's favorite park every year on his birthday would be a personal ritual. Ceremonies help to structure the time of grieving, which can feel very amorphous and hard to define. Working with children to make a plan, so that they have something to anticipate, can give them a sense of landmarks, as well as permission to move forward in their mourning.

Tomorrow afternoon, let's bring all of Tuffy's toys and dishes and put them in a special box to give to the animal shelter. If you want, you can choose something to keep. We can take turns saying things that we remember about him.

Why don't you come to the store with me in the morning and pick out some flowers? We can take them to the retirement home where Uncle Gordon lived, and sit on his special bench for a few minutes.

Rituals help to reassure children that the world is still dependable, and that the person or pet they have lost will continue to be part of their lives through memory.

Each year at Thanksgiving, we'll have a toast to Grandma, and remember the time she dropped the turkey.

Before you go to sleep each night this week, let's write down one thing that you liked about your teacher Mr. Gonzales.

It is important to keep in mind that once a child adopts a ritual, he or she may find comfort in it long after the adults have moved on to a different stage. Be patient with a child's attachment to whatever comforts him or her, and help children to develop personal rituals that they can maintain as long as they need to without placing unreasonable demands on the rest of the family.

Five Affirmations in the Face of Death

There are five affirmations that everyone needs to hear when confronted with the death of a loved one. These assurances may be part of public ceremonies like a memorial service, or we may need to work through them in our own ways as a family, or as individuals. Parents can help their children by making sure that each of these statements is clearly made, and some of them may need to be repeated more than once.

1. Acknowledge the reality

The first affirmation is that death has actually taken place; it is the antidote to denial. It is because of the importance of this awareness that most cultural traditions arrange for wakes, viewings, funeral services, and burials; it helps the reality of loss to sink in. Even a fairly young child can be consulted about whether he or she wishes to view the body or attend public ceremonies, if this is an option. On the one hand, children may find seeing the body of their grandparent or pet reassuring, since it may be far less terrible than their own imaginings. Being denied this opportunity, if it is something they want, may create a lack of closure. On the other hand, being pressured to do so if they do not wish to can make a difficult moment feel more traumatic. A sensitively attentive parent will listen carefully to the child's preferences, and help him or her to make a choice based on the child's wishes, rather than the parent's expectations.

The wishful impulse of denial can be very powerful in a child's thinking, so that the fact of death may need to be repeated more than once over time. The idea of permanence, that something may vanish without being able to reappear, is something that develops over time in the mind, and a young child may struggle with it. Though it may be difficult for a grieving parent, the reality of a death should be calmly restated whenever the child questions it. He or she is not being silly or uncaring, but trying to understand how the world really works.

No, honey, Grandpa won't come for Christmas. He died, and dead is for always.

2. Validate sadness.

The second affirmation is that loss is painful, and sadness is appropriate; it is important to acknowledge the reality of powerful feelings that we do not control. Telling anyone "Don't cry," or "Don't feel bad," is not helpful at the time of bereavement, but it is especially confusing to children, who may take this as a cue that there is something wrong with their emotional responses. In point of fact, when we have loved someone or something, our sorrow is a function and measure of that love. Loss would not be painful if there had not been a profound attachment, and in the end it is our capacity for such connections that make our lives fulfilling and meaningful.

3. Acknowledge the unknown.

A third affirmation of particular importance to secular families is that death is a mystery; whatever we may think happens to a person after they die is speculation. One of the most powerful lessons parents can teach is that adults don't know the answers to everything. This does not mean that we cannot communicate our own convictions to our children, but in this realm as in others, it is important to leave room for them to explore their own ideas. Much has been written about the significance of not telling children that death is like sleep, as this has often been observed to disrupt their sense of safety in falling asleep themselves, or allowing others to sleep. In their concrete thinking process, children may want to know where the dead person 'goes'. It is all but inevitable in our culture that their peers or others will talk about the idea of heaven, and perhaps even of hell. They may also have fears about the dissolution of the body, that this process will be painful for their loved one.

Secular parents will most likely want to affirm their own conviction that death is the end of all personal experience, that there are no places where the spirits of the dead 'go', and that no pain or suffering is now possible for the deceased. It may be helpful to present these as 'I' statements – this is what I believe – and to acknowledge that there are many other ideas, including those which the child may have been told of, or be exploring in

their own minds. It can be comforting even for adults, who have no actual belief in such ideas, to imagine the kind of next world or existence that would be particularly gratifying for the deceased; such pleasant fantasies may have a healing effect as long as they are acknowledged as wishes rather than realities. Such imaginings on the part of children can be treated as part of the grieving process, and affirmed as feelings rather than facts.

Dog heaven is a lovely idea. I think Blue would like a place where he could run through the grass and chase sticks all day long, and never get tired. It's good to think about what we would wish for him, isn't it?

People have lots of different ideas about what might happen after someone dies, but no one knows for sure. What do you like to think Aunt Chandra might be doing?

Before you were born, you didn't exist – you didn't feel anything at all. I think that's what it's like for Gramps now; he isn't there any more, so he can't think or feel, and certainly nothing can hurt him. What do you think?

4. Celebrate individuality.

The fourth affirmation declares that each individual is unique and not replaceable; this is what makes our memories precious. It is also the reason for allowing an appropriate period of mourning to pass before seeking another pet. Children need to have permission to remember their loved one in ways that are meaningful to themselves. This may involve quietly looking at pictures, or visiting a grave; it may take the form of talking about or wanting to hear stories about the deceased; it may be more active, such as drawing or writing about what they remember. Parents can affirm the child's perception of what was irreplaceable about the lost one; it is seldom helpful to argue that other people can take the dead person's place, or that other pets will be equally loved. At the same time, the child may need to be reassured that his or her life will go on in a safe way; there will be change, but the change will be manageable. Children may cling to artifacts of the deceased – clothing, a stray key, a pet's bowl – for a long time, as a tangible vessel for their memories. If possible, parents should not interfere in this, but indicate that the child will know inside him or herself when the time comes to put the object away.

Blue did some funny things, didn't he? Remember how he always loved to lie in the sun? And how he could always hear you coming? He had the best hearing of any dog I've known.

We can still go fishing together, but it won't be quite the same without Uncle Miguel to dig our worms for us, will it? He was really good at that.

5. Affirm the continuity of life.

The final affirmation tells us that the universe remains dependable; life goes on, and what we trusted in before the loss can still be trusted – love, integrity, family and friends, the world of nature. This assurance is communicated by parents more by how they speak and behave than by most of what they say, particularly by how honestly reflective they can be about acknowledging their own feelings. To be able to say, “It’s kind of scary sometimes to think about living in a world without my Mom, but then I remember all the other people who care about me, and what a brave person she was, and I think we’ll all be okay,” says to the child that feelings are both real in the moment as well as changeable, and can be faced. The most basic affirmation of all, that the opportunity to share love is worth the pain of grief, is as important to children as it is to the rest of us.

I'm glad we had Kitty as part of our family, even though I'm sad that she died.

Particularly Difficult Situations

It is also possible that death may touch a child’s life in a more traumatic and difficult way. When someone is killed by violence, or in a sudden accident, it is not a normal part of the cycle of life. When a sibling or friend near the child’s own age dies, it often feels more tragic and wasteful to the adults, and bewildering to the child, because such things are not ‘supposed’ to happen. The same is true when a pet is hit by a car, or runs away and disappears. Despite the extra tragedy of such situations, children need much the same sort of reassurance, honesty, and permission to grieve as they do in more ordinary bereavement. The advice of psychological professionals can be very helpful, and should be seen as an entirely ordinary resource. Just as one would consult a doctor to be sure of healing properly from a physical trauma, checking in with a knowledgeable counselor would be a routine aspect of handling such an emotional upheaval.

When confronted with a death by violence, children need to know that everything possible is being done to keep them safe, and that it is very improbable that anything like this

will happen to them. The specifics will depend upon the situation, but it may help to emphasize that even adults do not always understand why people make the choices they make, and do what they do. Children will usually take comfort from the knowledge that the authorities are trying to catch and punish the perpetrator, because this communicates a sense of moral order in the world. Yet it is not helpful for them to displace all of their anger about death onto that individual, because in the long run this will make healing more difficult for them.

When a young person dies of a disease, it is also important to assure children that they do not have the disease themselves, and are likely to live for a very long time. This is another time when it must be confessed that adults don't know everything, even though they try as hard as they can. Secular parents generally reject the explanations that god has a plan, or wanted the person in heaven, and so on. Children are able to grasp that random events sometimes happen, for no good reason, and that bodies do not always work the way they are supposed to.

When death is the result of an accident, such as a car wreck or a drowning, parents may be tempted to drive home the moral of the story with reference to the child's own potential behavior. Not only does it seem like a relevant object lesson, but assigning responsibility for carelessness is often a mechanism by which adults attempt to cope with random tragedy. However, a child may interpret such explanations as meaning that death is a punishment for something wrong that the deceased did, and that sorrow is therefore unjustified. To whatever extent an accidental death may be someone's fault, it is important to emphasize that death is a disproportionately severe consequence.

Care must also be taken not to make the child unduly fearful; secular parents cannot offer their children guardian angels; instead, we want them to assess risks rationally, and to respond with courage as well as good sense. The child may be sensitive to particular circumstances, such as riding in a car following a bereavement by car accident, or going in the water after someone has drowned. This kind of hesitation should be treated with gentle respect, but at the same time parents can express their confidence that fatal mishaps are very rare, assuring the child that appropriate safety precautions – seat belts, lifeguards, etc. – can minimize risks.

Confronting Mortality

It is entirely possible in 21st century Western culture for an individual to be well into middle age before a loved one dies. Children may not be confronted with the process of grieving for a person or pet they care about during childhood. Nevertheless, it is an inevitable part of the developmental process that they will be exposed to the idea of death, and the dawning realization that they themselves could die, and someday will die, as well as that people they care about and depend on might die, and in fact someday will die. These realizations of mortality will occur whether or not a child has an intimate personal experience of loss.

The secular parent will wish to respond to this growing awareness with both realism and reassurance. The younger the child, the more important it is on every occasion to announce that neither parent nor child should expect to die for a very long time yet. It is always good to explore a little when such questions are raised, and see if there is some particular incident or comment in the child's mind, before embarking upon a philosophical discussion. That said, the moment will come when the child sincerely wants to know how parents have reconciled themselves to the thought of dying, and how to make sense of this unwelcome news about the human condition.

It may be helpful to begin with the recognition that our evolutionary history has built into our species a very powerful instinct to want to live. People whose minds and bodies are healthy want to live, and to go on living for as long as possible. This desire helps us to measure risks carefully, and to do what is necessary to take care of ourselves. Knowing that other people want the same thing helps us to know how to treat them fairly, and encourages us to learn as much as we can, and to give as much help as we can, so that everyone can live a long and good life. It is natural to think that we would like to live forever ourselves, and for those we care about to live forever.

Nevertheless, in spite of how much we would like it, that's not the way the world works. Rather, new life keeps popping up, and old life at some point dies. Nobody deliberately made it

that way, that's just how evolution turned out, and how it happens to be. For a child old enough to understand the outlines of the scientific origins of life, parents can emphasize how delicate and fragile was the first coming together of chemicals that resulted in living organisms, and how essentially unstable a process life is; any given individual is such a complex set of functions that it could not possibly operate correctly in all regards forever. Everything wears out eventually – even machines, even rocks.

Many people – including, presumably, most of those reading this book – believe that death is probably the final end of all personal experience and do not expect to continue their existence in some other life or other world. In this view, it is precisely the fact that our lives are limited that makes them precious. How we choose to use our time is all the more important when we know that we won't have the opportunity to do everything. The fact that we can lose the ones we love makes it urgent for us to resolve our quarrels, forgive our injuries, be as thoughtful and kind as we can, and be sure to let those we love know about it. If we were immortal, it would not matter if we chose to spend our time being bored, cranky, or spiteful; as it is, we don't have time to waste our lives with such unproductive and unpleasant attitudes.

Secularism at its best can turn negative appraisals of death into affirmations of life. For a secular person, the question is not *Why did a universe designed for our benefit have to include death?* but *Isn't it amazing that we have the matter of the world arranged in such a way that we find ourselves with this incredible opportunity for consciousness?* What is surprising is not that our awareness must cease to be at some point in the unknown future, but that it has arisen now in the first place. That we are able to think and feel, to learn things and to love people, is a gift. It might just as easily not have happened. This gift of life is as arbitrary as the fact of mortality; both came about without consulting us. These are the terms on which we are here, and they are not negotiable.

There is a certain existential heroism and tragedy about living in the shadow of mortality, which teens in particular sometimes find quite romantic. This is usually a philosophical/spiritual developmental phase that in its most dramatic form eventually passes, but may be quite sincere

and deeply felt at the time. A sympathetic parent can acknowledge how trivial many mundane concerns may appear in this light, and still insist that they be attended to. In general what secular parents can most helpfully do for their children is to demonstrate that a full, happy, satisfying life can be lived even in the awareness that death comes at the end – perhaps even in part because of that awareness. Paradoxically, although many popular religious cults focus on attaining an afterlife and escaping the reality of death, in their origins many of the world’s highest spiritual and philosophical teachings summon people to live with a clear awareness of death. Such practices are meant to lead to maturity, serenity, and an enhanced capacity for deep happiness. I know from personal experience that it is possible to grow from a secure childhood into a well-balanced adult without ever supposing that death is anything other than the absolute end of personal consciousness. Because of this conviction, I know how urgently precious my own life and the lives of those around me are, and I find that awareness to be life-giving.

It seems reasonable that there has been evolutionary value in a fundamental fear of dying; it makes us take action when necessary, and precautions when appropriate; a person with no fear of dying might be too careless or daring to survive for long. Moreover, our brains are designed to make any prolonged concentration on the inevitability of our own non-existence extremely uncomfortable; we don’t have the conceptual apparatus to do it effectively, and indeed, why should we? Thus it is normal to feel afraid when we think of dying, and to be reluctant to think about it much. Hence the famous difficulty in getting people to complete their wills, even when they agree that it’s a good idea. Secular parents can assure their children that all human beings have these feelings to a greater or lesser degree; they are appropriate and even useful, and we find various ways to live with them. When children express fears related to death, it is helpful to discover, if possible, something about the content of that fear. Are they afraid that those they depend on will die, and leave them without protection? Are they afraid that the process of dying will be painful? Are they troubled to think of not existing any more, or are they afraid that it would hurt to be dead? The more specifically the issue is identified, the more effective a

parent's reassurance can be. In the end, the child will have confidence in the parent's honesty if they calmly acknowledge that the same fears affect them.

It's hard to talk about any of us dying, isn't it? Even for me, it can be scary. I love you so much, and I want to be around to take care of you, and watch you grow up, and have all kinds of good times together. I know it's true that some time, a very long time from now, I will die, but I know that your love for me will still live in your heart, and I will be part of your memories always, and that helps me feel better. So let's make sure that we are as good as we can be to each other, and make those memories happy ones, okay?

Death as Entertainment

It may be that the greatest challenge for a parent in 21st century western society is not to reassure children in their fears about death, but to help them come to take seriously what death really means when they are surrounded by cultural trivialization of it. As previously mentioned, the idea of permanent absence, that something or someone can disappear and not be able to come back, is a concept that requires a certain level of cognitive development for a child to grasp. For young children, the image of a cartoon character who is squashed flat and then pops back up unharmed is not fantasy; for all they know, the world may really be like that, at least in some cases. The ability to distinguish between the imaginative and the realistic develops gradually as a function of both experiential learning and increasing sophistication of the cognitive process.

There are strident arguments and competing sets of data about the extent to which exposure to violent imagery in movies, TV shows, and video games influences the behavior of children. However, there is no dissent about the power of parental influence, through both example and teaching. Secular parents who hope to raise compassionate, ethical, and life-valuing children cannot take refuge in a packaged set of religious commandments; rather, such parents must do the work of reflecting on why they themselves believe in honoring and protecting the lives of others, or in what circumstances different values take precedence and killing becomes acceptable. They must then express these convictions over time to their children, and engage their children's own ideas, questions, fears, and emergent beliefs. When a

parent makes a decision that is an expression of conviction, this should be explained to the child, so that he or she begins to understand the connection.

While death can be accepted in the healthy mind as a convention of fiction and play, and even humor, parents must exercise some judgment about when to remind children that in the real world, dying is a serious matter with indelible consequences. As children mature enough to be able to imaginatively identify with others, parents can invite them to reconsider stories in which death is made trivial or taken for granted.

Who do you think might be sad that that character died? How do you suppose the hero's friends would have felt if he lost the fight, and got killed?

Responding to Religious Doctrines and Cultural Images

It is all but inevitable that children will encounter ideas about death and what happens to the dead that will differ from those of their secular parents. Such alternative images may be appealing, because they are more dramatic, colorful, or certain than what secular parents have offered. These may include ideas about heaven, hell, ghosts, reincarnation, and communication with the dead. It is certainly true that many people have experienced some sense of presence of loved ones who have died; a naturalistic explanation of these sensations need not deny that they can be comforting and healing, or alternatively, frightening. With older children it is possible to explore both the psychological reasons why people who are grieving might have such sensations, as well as the ways in which unscrupulous others might try to take advantage of them. In some of the same ways, the ideas of heaven and hell can be discussed as present states of mind, rather than future states of existence. With younger children, for whom the line between fantasy and reality is more permeable, it may be best to help them identify such concepts as 'stories'; which can be pleasant to think about, either for themselves or others. Endorsing the child's capacity for imaginative comfort does not require the parent to affirm false realities.

The kind of heaven your friend is talking about seems to me a pretty picture, though I don't see any evidence that it really exists. I know that you would like very much to think of seeing Grandma again some day; what would you like to say to her, if that could happen?

For me, hell is not meaningful as a place that bad people go after they die; once a person is dead, I don't think there is anything left to 'go' anywhere. But I do think that people are sometimes in a place like hell while they are still alive, when they are stuck in their own minds, lonely and suffering.

Conclusion

Death confronts the secular family both as a challenge and an opportunity to clarify and communicate our convictions. It is part of the larger world that children encounter as they grow, a world which parents must help them understand. Ever since the origins of our kind, human beings have pondered death as one of the ultimate mysteries, and sought to soften its great shadow over us. Perhaps none of us is ever fully reconciled to the loss of those we love, or to the inevitability of our own demise, but we learn to live as fully as possible within the unknown limits of the time we have. Living in the secular world gives us freedom from the dogmas and superstitions of the past, but it does not eliminate the mystery and power of life's endings. When parents share those essentially human feelings with their children, they are engaged in the profound task of making meaning together, which is one of the great privileges of parenthood, or indeed of any human relationship.

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