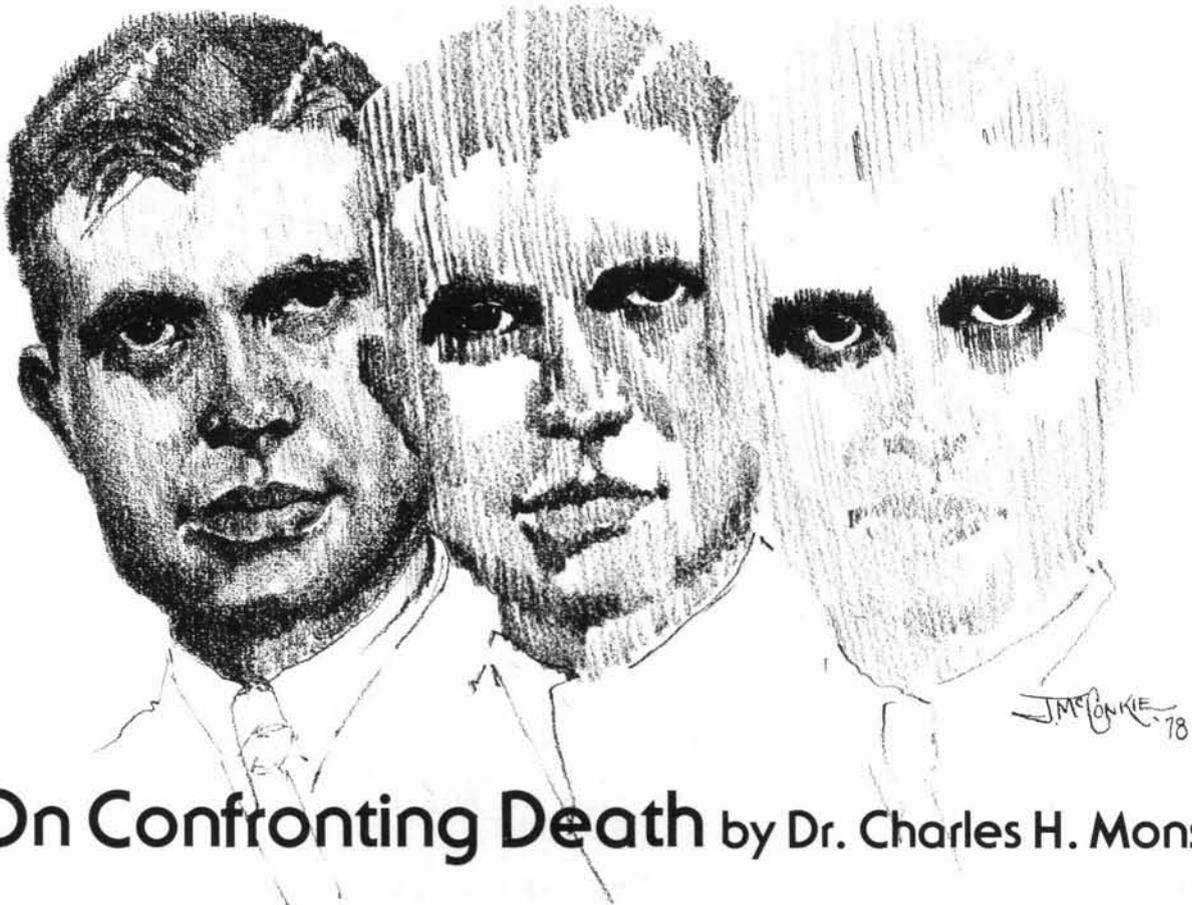


ESSAY



Illustrated by Judi McConkie

On Confronting Death by Dr. Charles H. Monson

Dr. Charles H. Monson, Jr., a popular professor of philosophy at the University of Utah, delivered the following address at the funeral of his brother-in-law in October, 1974, the day before his own unexpected death.

Death is not a particularly pleasant topic to discuss. Even though each of us has experienced or will experience the death of a mate or a friend, an uncle or a child, a parent or a neighbor, none of us knows how we will react when that death occurs, and the literature on the subject is surprisingly meager.

Yet death is universal, and so we should know something about our reactions. The question, then, is "How do people react when a loved one dies?" Is there any general pattern in the way we, the living, react to the death of one who has been close to us? Most importantly, is there

any counsel on how we should react when we are confronted by death?

If you will look at your own experience, I suspect you'll find that you usually react to the news of a loved one's death first with a sense of *shock*. "Why, I just saw him yesterday, and now you tell me he is gone. I can't believe it." "But I talked to him just an hour ago."

We are shocked because the time of death is never expected. Intellectually, we all know that everyone will die, but emotionally we cannot accept our own knowledge. The time for dying is never *now*. This is true even when an extended illness has made the inevitability of death more apparent; indeed, the shock of passing frequently is felt most strongly by those who know that death is imminent. But the occurrence of death always comes at an unexpected moment; and when the close ties we have had with the deceased

are severed—ties which in a very real sense have made them a part of ourselves—then a portion of our own “self” is lost with them. Our spirit cannot experience such a wrenching without feeling the shock. However, knowledge of the permanence of death usually leads one rather quickly to another reaction: *grief*. Grief is expressed in many ways: loud wailing and soft crying; emotional trauma and numb acceptance. It can be felt deeply and for a long time, or on a smaller scale.

The experience of grief is intimately related to the joy of love. Both Erich Fromm today and Paul of old have told us that love is empathy, the ability to experience others’ feelings and hopes, despairs and joys, as they experience them. So when we love someone, then that person’s aspirations and defeats become our own and we “rejoice as they rejoice, weep as they weep.” We become “of the same mind one towards the other.”

And then, suddenly, they are gone. And a part of our self is gone, too. Their joys, which were a part of us in love, have been terminated, forever; never will we know them again. And so we grieve, not merely because a loved one is gone but because a portion of us, too, is gone. We are empty, void of a portion of our previous life, and filling it again requires energy, time, skill, analysis, and patience. No wonder we grieve at the death of one whom we have loved.

But grief, especially profound grief, is debilitating; one cannot live long with such a demoralizing feeling, so usually—not always, for one’s grief can be so total and one’s recuperative powers so limited that he soon withers away himself—grief is replaced by *sorrow*.

Initially, sorrow is regret, a feeling of disappointment created by the memory of good times past and the knowledge that death is not reversible. “I’m so sorry he’s gone; we can’t play checkers anymore.” “No more of those good talks we used to have.” And since sorrow constantly feeds on the knowledge that something meaningful and good is now gone forever, it can return one to grief very easily: “How will I ever get along without her?” Frequently sorrow takes another form, too. “He had so much to offer, why did he have to go now?” This is the sorrow of unfulfilled promise, the regret that potentiality was unrealized. This kind of sorrow is especially strong when death occurs to someone between the ages of 10 and 50. Before 10, potentiality is generalized and specific contributions can only be guessed at; so the sorrow of unfulfilled promise is generalized, too. “He was a fine young man.” After the age of fifty, and increasingly as the years mount, one can think that much of the potentiality of the deceased already has been fulfilled: “She was a wonderful mother.” “He did his job conscientiously and well.” “They lived a good life.”

Frequently grief and sorrow are accompanied by feelings of *guilt*. “How I wish we had taken that trip he wanted to take.” “Why wasn’t I kinder to her when she was so sick?” Guilt arises from the knowledge that one could have been better, and the feeling that one should have been better. Guilt always requires a before and an after, a time span, to compare what is with what might have been, and to assess how one’s own actions, or their lack, could have made the difference less acute.

And in a curiously inverted way, guilt sometimes turns into *self-pity*. “I could have done better; why didn’t I? Why am I so weak?” “Why couldn’t I have been a better

husband?” Self-pity involves comparing what one should be and might have been with what he is and wasn’t. It also involves realizing that the self of the loved one, now deceased, was not developed as it could have been, and blaming oneself for the loved one’s loss. Nourishing that sense of one’s own inadequacy is easy to do, and so our mourning enables us to say, “I’m sorry,” meaning, “I know what I did to you by what I didn’t do to myself.”

But few of us can live long with this congeries of feelings. Grief, sorrow, guilt and self-pity are essentially negative feelings. They prevent us from living constructive lives, from contributing and learning, even from interacting and rebuilding. This is why, in time, most of those who grieve begin to replace these feelings of loss and regret with a *Stoic acceptance* of death.

This is the attitude which most of those who have spoken or written about death have advocated. Jesus told us that death was merely a step into the next world. Lao Tse praised Chuang Tse, who sang and beat his drum following his wife’s death, for “the substance which was her has now assumed a different form, and like the sequence of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, she has now passed into an eternal sleep.” Epicurus gave a well-nigh invincible argument for being imperturbable: “For when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not.”

“What will be, will be.” “Learn to accept the laws of nature as they are.” “His time was up.” “He was called home.”

Imperturbability takes the sting out of death; it can even remove the grief. When one realizes that events happen because of causes which he cannot control, then he feels less personally responsible for those events. “We did all we could, but it wasn’t enough.”

Also, developing a sense of the inevitableness of death begins to create a new kind of feeling in those who mourn: *a memory of things past*.

Both grief and sorrow involve a memory of things past, but in addition, as the shock of death recedes into the past, we begin to reflect on the life of the one we have loved. We recall events, conversations, even glances and mannerisms, which were once taken for granted but which, like all things ordinary, become a part of our loved one’s life. The limbo of forgetfulness. Slowly life begins to be relived but this time in memory rather than living experience, and so love is renewed. Joys are shared once more as experiences are recalled; hopes and aspirations are felt again; and the void in the self is filled once more with the memories of the past.

Memories, however, are not discriminating. The loved one may have been angry or selfish or cruel, and respect for the dead, not to speak of one’s own need for equilibrium, almost demands that we move to still another stage in our attitude toward death: *memories of goodness and wisdom*.

Marc Antony was wrong when he said that “the evil men do live after them, the good is oft interred with their bones.” Men usually are remembered for the good things they did, for the wisdom they expressed, for the kindness they showed and the responsibilities they accepted rather than their drunkenness, lechery, selfishness, and concivance.

Funeral sermons are made from such materials, and

so, in time, are the memories of a loved one now departed. The poor judgments he made can be explained by his lack of knowledge; his selfishness by the other good he achieved; his anger can be compensated for by his effort and energy. Similar explanations can diminish the importance of his faults, and every strength can be demonstrated by numerous examples, especially when one is looking for them.

And so one's own self begins to fill again, first with the pleasant and productive memories of a past. But memories can be dangerous materials to fill a self with, for they can easily recall pleasant events now gone forever and so reawaken sorrow and grief, pity and guilt. Rebuilding a life on a remembrance of things past is less satisfying, ultimately, than recognizing the importance of satisfying the needs of the present, continuing to live in this world, rather than longing for a time now gone. And then one day, usually in the midst of memory, a smile occurs. It is not merely another joy recalled but a new insight: *gratitude*, profound gratitude, for having shared life with such a wonderful person. "How could I be so lucky as to have been her husband?" "My life was richer because he was my father." "There never will be another one like him."

Faults have been discounted and strengths magnified; memories have been recalled and self-pity purged: The one who has lost a loved one has gone through the depths of despair and yet, if he goes through all these stages he emerges, curiously enough, a stronger and more mature human being. He is not weaker for the loss of his love; he now has more memories than he had before, and they are of the good and the beautiful. Moreover, he has a greater sense of the inevitability of death and of the importance of savoring life and all that is in it while it is present.

Not everyone can reach the level of gratitude in their thinking about the death of a loved one. Sometimes the grief is too profound for us ever to begin to fill the self again. Sometimes the sorrow of unfilled promise is too acute. Sometimes the memories are of cruelty or selfishness, and when death is not regretted, life cannot be appreciated. Sometimes self-pity becomes a way of life.

Nor does reaching the level of gratitude come easily. Our feelings are very much our own, and reason, even understanding, frequently has little influence on them. It takes time, sometimes years, to repair the damage to the self resulting from the death of a loved one.

This is to say that the death of another is a profoundly important experience in human life and cannot be treated casually. Indeed, psychologists tell us that the loss of a mate is the most traumatic experience we ever have; nevertheless, experiencing the death of a loved one need not be a destructive experience. It can be a time for a deepened appreciation of life and living, an enlarging of the self and a profound and reflective gratitude for that which is good.

How far along the line of responses one can bring himself—whether he stops at grief, or gratitude, or some point in between—determines how much he can use his experience to develop these understandings and appreciations; and more importantly, the place at which his development stops determines what kind of life—stunted and crabbed or rich and rewarding—he will continue to live.

the weightier matters

by Dr. Lowell L. Bennion

