

DEATH MAKES  
LIFE  
POSSIBLE

REVOLUTIONARY  
INSIGHTS on LIVING,  
DYING, and the  
CONTINUATION of  
CONSCIOUSNESS

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Foreword by Deepak Chopra, MD

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## TRANSFORMING OUR WORLDVIEWS

Someday you will face your own mortality.  
At that moment, I hope you see that your life  
has been well led, that you hold no regrets,  
and that you loved well. On that day, I hope  
that for you, it has become a good day to die.

LEE LIPSENTHAL, *ENJOY EVERY SANDWICH*

Lee Lipsenthal was fifty-three years old when his doctor told him he was dying. He'd been living with esophageal cancer for about two years. After a dance with remission, the disease had returned full force. As a physician who was married to a physician, Lee knew that allopathic medicine had run its course. Dying was now what he was doing with his life. While his days were ebbing, he was living each moment as if it were his last.

For a decade, Lee had served as the research director for Dean Ornish's Preventive Medicine Research Institute and had also served as president of the American Board of Integrative Holistic Medicine. Despite his scientific training, he held a strong metaphysical view that guided him toward his death. Through a deep meditation practice and shamanic journey work that expanded his sense of self, he understood that his worldview structured what he believed was coming next.

Lee and I were friends and colleagues for more than a decade. During our heartfelt talks over the years, he reported remembering significant, spontaneous past-life experiences that connected him to

God, Jesus, and Buddha. When asked how these past-life experiences with religious figures informed his experience with cancer and dying, he explained:

There's a big story there. . . . At one level, it gives me a sense of peace that this may not be all there is. But on the other level, it's just a small part of why I'm feeling well in the process of supposedly dying. The other pieces to me are a deep appreciation for the life I've had. I've had a blast. I'm a music fanatic, and I've hung out with and played guitar with some of my favorite rock 'n' roll heroes. I've had a really good ride in my fun life. . . . I've had work that has been fun, challenging, and creative. I have thirty years of a marriage to someone I'm still deeply in love with, two kids who are really wonderful people. So if I were to die now, that's fine. I don't really need more of that. That's one reason I'm at peace.

The other reason is I truly know that I have no control of whether I live or die . . . so the combination of accepting a lack of control over my own death and a very deep gratitude for the life I've already had is my real reason for being at peace. I look at people who have survived a major health crisis, and they've transformed dramatically through that crisis. Is that bigger than losing your body? I don't know.

Lee's worldview allowed him to feel a fluid connection between living and dying. It was a belief structure that gave him a sense of hope and possibility. Given his own experiences with past lives, I asked him what he thought might be coming next, after the death of his body. "We are all limited by our own experiences and how we interpret them," he explained to me. Such interpretations or worldviews may be shaped by our parents, our education, our religion, what we read. And, for Lee, they were also informed by experiences of past lives and mystical states:

I think we come back into life for new and different experiences. The purpose or the meaning of that . . . I'm not going to pretend that I honestly know. I think that we progress over time in our multiple lives, we change . . . we learn from these past lives, and we become . . . let's say, better, deeper, shinier. That's my belief structure. I'll try to let you know when I get to the other side—that's all I can say.

## UNDERSTANDING OUR WORLDVIEWS

As Lee demonstrates, our views on life, death, and the afterlife are informed by diverse and sometimes competing worldviews. Religious beliefs often shape our views of death and what happens after. And there is an evolving spirituality that combines traditional religious elements, emerging insights from science, and personal practices to help address core existential questions that influence people's beliefs about life after death. When Americans are asked the standard question posed by the Gallop Institute, "Do you believe there is a life after death?" about 75 percent say yes.<sup>1</sup>

As a nation, Americans have their own unique perspectives compared to other nations. In 2013, George Bishop, a professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati, reported on two cross-nation surveys for the International Social Survey Program (ISSP): "On this score Americans were more certain of a hereafter than anyone else (55%): twice as sure as people from the Netherlands or Great Britain, five times as confident as the Hungarians, and nine times as convinced of it as the East Germans."<sup>2</sup> My own observations reveal that, independent of religious beliefs, people throughout the world are asking deep questions about life and death. Indeed, there is a growing hunger among people from all walks of life to talk about death and what may happen after.

Our views of death may also be informed by our occupations. For example, a nurse's or physician's approach to death may focus on fighting it, keeping it at bay, and trying to use whatever heroic measures are available to sustain the survival of the body. In the

armed forces, people are trained to be fearless in the face of death. Still, their own religious or spiritual orientation can inform how they see the possibilities for what may come after, providing them with a sense of hope and possibility, even in battle.

Working with animals has given Margaret Rousser, zoological manager at the Oakland Zoo, a deep appreciation for the cycle of life and the transformative nature of death. She explained:

The circle of life may be a cliché, but it really is true. You need all aspects of life and death to have this beautiful planet that we have. When an animal dies, the carcass becomes food for vultures and for beetles. When a plant dies, the fallen leaves make the soil richer for the next plants. We really do need all of these things to live on this beautiful planet.

I would say that the unnatural cycle of death would be the cycle that's sped up by things that we as humans are doing incorrectly or that are harmful. There's a certain amount of a natural progression: you grow old, you age, you pass away, and you become part of the earth again. But there are things that we're doing that are causing those things to happen too quickly. We're putting toxic chemicals into our planet that are causing animals to change and mutate. So those are things that are disrupting the natural cycles. And those are the types of things that we need to take a look at as a human race and civilization. And make those changes.

As Rousser notes, death is natural. Attempts to disrupt the natural cycle are what create pathology, within our individual lives and in our relationship to nature.

A similar view was expressed by Rick Hanson. I first met with Hanson at a small café in Mill Valley, California. The founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom, Hanson is a psychologist who studies evolutionary neuropsychology.

Given his background, it isn't surprising that Hanson's understanding of death is informed by a big picture of the natural cycle of life:

Death clears the way for young to come forward, and it enables a species itself to adapt and improve itself over time. In other words, if members of the species do not die, the species could not evolve. So we're sitting here today, 3.5 billion years after life emerged on the planet, at the top of the food chain, in some sense aided and handed off to by all of the creatures that have died before us, so that we may live here today. It's in that context that I find myself experiencing gratitude and appreciating those who have died and the role of death in life.

Hanson is a Buddhist practitioner. Although he's a scientist by training, his personal philosophy about life and death have also developed based on his spiritual practice:

The nature of dying is a teaching about the nature of living. In other words, as we die, the body decomposes and its elements spread out, one way or the other. As the mind dies, its elements spread out, decompose, and disperse. All eddies disperse eventually. That reality of death and of dying is also the reality of living. In any moment, the body and mind are constantly changing, made up of so many parts, so many patterns emerging, coalescing, organizing, stabilizing, and then moving on. Just like the little kid says at the end [of a meal], "All gone." That's the nature of every moment. The ending of a lifespan helps us appreciate and turn more into the peace and the wisdom of seeing the ways in which every moment itself has a living and a dying.

Hanson's perspective illustrates the multidimensional nature of our personal worldviews. He holds scientific, clinical, and spiritual



perspectives simultaneously. His particular worldview, in turn, inspires his approach to life:

Starting back in my twenties, I began appreciating the wisdom of Don Juan in Carlos Castaneda's books. The teacher, Don Juan, essentially says, live in such a way that you're prepared for death at every moment. I think there's a lot of wisdom in living that way because you just literally never know. We all know people who suddenly stroked out or suddenly got cancer, and they were dead ten days later, or ten months later, or maybe ten years later. But it also is in that context that it makes me appreciate hugging my kids every night, enjoying every sandwich, relishing every sunrise. . . .

If you know the movie is going to come to an end, at least as far as you're concerned, it really motivates you to make it as good a movie as possible, enjoy it as much as we can, and not ruin it for others.

## APPRECIATING WORLDVIEWS

As an anthropologist, I have studied worldviews and how they shift or stay the same.<sup>3</sup> Worldviews are fundamental to our lives. They are the lens of perception through which we experience, understand, and interpret ourselves and the world. They inform and are informed by our beliefs about and perceptions of our human experience and the cultural and physical environments around us.

Our worldviews influence how we adapt to changes in our life circumstances. At a fundamental level, Lee Lipsenthal's worldview provided a frame of reference for his understanding of his imminent death. It provided a context that helped shape his intentions, his actions, and his emotions. It offered him solace when he confronted his own mortality.

Developing our appreciation for the power of worldviews may be understood as developing a type of literacy.<sup>4</sup> Each of us can learn to better understand and appreciate our own worldview and those of others. Harnessing our capacities to listen and examine multiple

perspectives with humility and curiosity can open us to new ways of being. As we explore worldviews, we have a chance to not only reflect upon, comprehend, and communicate our own worldview, but also to recognize that our beliefs come from our particular life experiences and personal values. We may learn to better appreciate that other people hold different and potentially equally valid models of reality out of which their assumptions and actions arise. This capacity to appreciate other worldviews involves the growth of our own cognitive and cultural flexibility. It compels us to draw on our deepest creativity and resilience in the face of differing points of view. Improving our worldview literacy prepares us to adapt to new insights that come when we encounter different perspectives, customs, practices, and belief systems. At the most fundamental level, worldview literacy allows us to bring awareness to what is true for each of us about life, death, and what may lie beyond.

I am captivated by the diversity of worldviews about living and dying. And I'm not alone. There is increasing interest and need for people throughout the world to understand the changing cultural and religious landscape. Record numbers of people are looking for ways to make sense of the many different and competing truth claims that coexist. It can be challenging to realize that many people are reading from different scripts, reciting from different prayer books, living in different models of reality. Yet increasing numbers of us are seeking to discover our own authentic truth and expand our consciousness by reveling in the life paths of different cultures, worldviews, and belief systems. It is the premise of this book and its companion documentary film that understanding diverse truth systems about death and the afterlife, while at times challenging, can renew our sense of connection to the whole of life. Ultimately, encountering and appreciating alternative worldviews enriches each of us.

## **HOW WE VIEW DEATH MIRRORS HOW WE EMBRACE CHANGE**

Consciously transforming our worldviews involves appreciating the ways in which we experience the world. Our worldviews about death

are a key to understanding our own identity and what happens to it when we are no longer embodied. As we begin to understand and dive more deeply into death as a rich and complex component of life, we have an opportunity to look at our own assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. Indeed, looking at how we view death is a way of seeing how we may overcome our fear of it to live more deeply. In turn, how we view death often mirrors how we transform and change throughout our lives. Mingtong Gu, a qigong master and teacher, shared his insights on why it is important to contemplate death.

My first response is, we're all going to face death sooner or later, so we might prepare in some way, early enough.

Secondly, life is about . . . embracing all expressions of change—change from childhood all the way to adulthood and aging. And in the change, we're constantly learning to listen for how to embrace change. The change often challenges us to find a deeper capacity to embrace the change and the challenges that come with that. It's a deep listening we're learning here. It's part of life.

Contemplating death can really bring us peace, knowing the impermanency that is underlying all life. Without impermanency, there is no change, there is no life. Can you imagine your life without any change? It doesn't exist in the universe, as far as I know. So the deeper level of contemplating death is about embracing change, embracing impermanency. In that deeper level we can increase our capacity to embrace life, but also find a deeper peace in the midst of all these dramas, all this impermanency, all this disappointment, and even all this excitement.

Like Mingtong Gu, Brother David Steindl-Rast teaches that we are given the opportunity to grow and change in every moment. Embracing transformation is a way of embracing life and its cyclical nature.

Brother David is both a scholar and a Benedictine monk. Born in 1926 in Vienna, he studied art, anthropology, and psychology, receiving a doctorate from the University of Vienna. In 1952, he followed his family who had emigrated to the United States for new opportunities. In 1953, he joined the newly founded Benedictine community in Elmira, New York, Mount Saviour Monastery, of which he is now a senior member.

Spiritual transformation, he told me, is what the universe wants from humans. Our incarnation allows humans to

transcend the natural creation and dissolution of form and to find that point within ourselves, which is the watcher or the still point of the dance, if you want, and in that sense step out of that natural process in which forms come to be and then decay again. In the midst of all this coming and going of forms, there is this hunger in every human heart for that which lasts. If it is misunderstood, then we cling to this form or that form.

To make his point, he described an outing in San Francisco when he came upon the store Forever 21. The lesson for him was that if people cling to being twenty-one, they won't be happy. By resisting aging, people deny a fundamental aspect of their human experience. "You can't possibly achieve it, so you might as well go with the flow and not insist on being forever twenty-one," he said. The nature of our worldview must be fluid, not fixed at a particular place or time in our mind. He continued:

The misunderstanding would be that we cling to one form in this process. The right understanding would be that we go with this flow because it's a given—we can't help it anyway. We better go with the grain, rather than being dragged by our ears, and at the same time transcend this flow of form. Go to that realm beyond space and time. Language cannot express it

very well. In the first stage, we observe this flow. So we are no longer identified with it. We are in the present moment and no longer caught up in the past and future; we observe it. Then the next stage of this inner development, this unfolding, would be that we allow the power and the energy that brings forth all these changes in the creation of forms and the destruction of forms, to flow through us. Realize that we are one with it, that we are really not only created, but [also] one with the creating force.

It is very clear our physical bodies are decaying and will eventually disappear, and other bodies will come. We may have something to do with it because all the raw material will be recycled and used somewhere. We are not detached, not completely separating ourselves. We are only detaching ourselves sufficiently so that we can watch it and realize that we are part of that cosmic force that drives it.

## **UNDERSTANDING WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION**

Worldview transformation involves a fundamental shift in the way we see and interpret the world. It also involves a change in how we see ourselves and our relationships to others. It's not simply a change in our perspectives, but involves a different way of understanding what is possible. It defines what gives us meaning and purpose in our lives. As we transform our views of death, we can begin to understand our own mortality in a new light. Frances Vaughan, a transpersonal psychologist who has worked at the interface of living and dying for many years, explained worldview transformation this way:

It's the capacity to expand your worldview so that you can appreciate different perspectives so that you can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. You're not just moving around from one point of view to another,