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### The Unfamiliar Process of Death, and the Afterlife.

I find it hard to think that when I die, pass away, or expire, that I will just sit as ashes on my family's fireplace, or lay in the ground, or inside a columbarium forever. I'm not religious, so I don't have an explanation of what is supposed to happen to my soul after my body is gone. I don't have a clue as to what happens to me, and I think that's what lured me to this topic of other people's views on death and the afterlife. Hopefully researching how other people feel about death, and what they think happens after you die, I can come up with an idea of my own, and have something to look forward to, not just this life and then nothing.

People have asked me "would you rather know you're going to die, or have it be random?" Before I did this documentary, I wasn't quite sure which one I would pick. When you know you're going to die, you are able to tell your loved ones goodbye and finish any business you need to. On the other hand, I think I would be scared and depressed the whole time, because I want to live and I know that no matter what I do, I can't change the fact that my days are numbered. I don't think I'd want to die randomly either though. I wouldn't be able to tell my loved ones goodbye and I feel like I would have left them with all of my unfinished business, but I do feel like if I were to die randomly, it would be more appropriate, because I think its nature's way of dealing with death.

For Roy Damonte, he knew he was going to die. "At least a year before he died, it was very clear that he was in the last stages of life. It wasn't something he was going to

turn a corner and get better from”, as Dirk, Roy’s son, describes. “Finally, about six months before he died, he had been in the hospital for quite a while so the doctor was even preparing us that he may never get out. My mom was just determined to bring him home, so she convinced the doctor to put him in hospice care. The doctor said he couldn’t see any way he could recover.”

As the days passed, Roy wasn’t going easily. ” You know, my dad left this world kicking and screaming. He did not want to go and he held on with everything he had. It helped me see that it’s unique to each individual and it can be a very difficult process.” Though Roy had a difficult time leaving, it wasn’t always a negative process. Carol Damonte, Dirk’s wife, explains Roy’s experience with “the lady in black”. “One of the stories that comes out to me was at a period of time; maybe a couple months before he died, he shared with us about the lady in black. And I was really fascinated with this because it was clearly a spirit form and he said ‘she didn’t say anything, she was just a presence that was very vivid.’ And I asked was he scared, and he said ‘oh no, it was very peaceful’”.

This lady in black makes me wonder if everyone has their own version of some figure to guide them along on their way to death and the afterlife. Maybe our guardian angels come into our reality to provide us with comfort, and visual evidence that there is something after the life here on Earth, and maybe they are there to say “yeah, this will be tough all the way to the end of your life, but you’ve got a whole new world to discover soon.” Some of you may say “there are way too many maybes in that sentence”, but that’s what I love about this subject of the afterlife, you will never know for sure until you’re there. A poll done by beliefnet.com and Newsweek asked 1004 people, “which

best describes your views about what happens when someone dies?” and 79% percent of people with traditional views and 59% of people with non-traditional views believed that the soul goes to heaven or hell, while only 3% of people with traditional views and 6% of people with non-traditional views thought there was no soul. So I think its best we say maybe to everything, because no one has the ability to say, “No, that’s not what happens”. Carol Damonte has similar feelings; “I think the lady in black also ties into other spirit forms that I know that have come in forms of angels...I know my parents have both been visited by angels, my nephew when he was two, my sister when she nearly died a year and a half ago. She was aware enough to see in the corner of the room, just the whole part of the room was filled with angels, and she was clear it was angels. And she said ‘I wondered ‘is this my time? Am I going to die?’ she said ‘but I wasn’t scared.’” Carol continues to talk about her views on the afterlife; “The thing that’s great about faith and afterlife is nobody can tell you it’s wrong, because nobody knows. So when people say, ‘oh you’re wrong. This tells us this, and this tells us this, and my faith tells me this, and this book tells me this, if I’m a person of no faith, or this is just the way I think is, you know, whatever’ nobody is right, and nobody is wrong, because we don’t know”

So now that I’ve taken a look at what it was like for Roy and his family to go through a loss, knowing Roy was going to die, I turn to the other point of view, not knowing you were going to die. Like I said before, I’m not sure if I would want to die randomly. I think I would have left so many things open and unresolved for my family to take care of. But at the same time, I wouldn’t have time to be scared of death, and hopefully it wouldn’t be painful.

My mom, Holley Eichner, and her best friend Nancy Imamura have been friends for almost 40 years. They went to grade school together, had both of their kids at almost the same time, and were in constant communication. Whether it was calling each other during the week, seeing each other on the weekends, or sending cards through the mail, they knew everything about one another, and living on different sides of the bay area wasn't going to break their bond.

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005, my best friend's 17th birthday, my mom's best friend Nancy, passed away from a stroke. My mom describes the day she found out Nancy had died. "I was at work, and on my break, I got my cell phone out of my purse just to see if I had messages, and it was a message from my other best friend Stephanie, saying that 'Nancy's no longer with us'. And I just wasn't sure that's what I really heard, because two weeks before, another friend had passed away from an aneurysm in her sleep...So I was still thinking about Elaine dying in her sleep, so I didn't expect two weeks later to get a call from Stephanie saying that Nancy passed away. I just couldn't believe that's what I'd heard. I still think about it, and that was 2005. I still think about it, and it's like 'It really happened.'"

Nancy's death didn't just affect my mom's life. It affected mine. I had known Nancy since I can remember, and when she died, all I could think about were the memories of camping in the summer time, and sleeping over at her house with her daughter Leslie, who was only a month younger than me. Then I realized I can never go camping with Nancy again. And then I thought about Leslie. She is the same age as me, and she lost her mom, the person she was closest to in her family, in her life. Leslie didn't get to say goodbye to her own mother, because her death was so unexpected. I asked my

mom where she thought Nancy was right now, and she quickly replied “If there is such a thing as watching over, then I know she is with her kids, watching over them. If that’s at all possible, I know that’s what she is doing.”

I knew talking about Nancy’s death with my mom would bring up these memories, but after we started talking about her, I felt like it did way more good than bad, for both my mom and I. We had talked about Nancy before this, but never talked about what my mom’s feelings about death were, and where she thought Nancy was. It almost made me cry to hear my mom talk about it. “When death happens it is so sad and it’s so hard for the people that they leave behind. Even when you know that person is in a better place, or at rest it’s how bad you feel until you get to a point where you can actually feel good about the memories, and you’re not so heart broken.”

Nancy died randomly, and that had major affects on everyone who knew her. Her own daughter didn’t get to give her one last hug. Her husband has to live with the fact that he couldn’t do anything to help her, and her friends have to live with their last words to her, whether it was “I love you” or a bitter disagreement. I know for a fact that everyone would have done everything completely different if they would have known she was going to die, but it’s hard, if not impossible, to detect when a stroke could happen.

I feel this documentary has definitely opened my eyes a lot more to views on death and the afterlife. Before, all I knew was that I was scared to die, and that I didn’t want to leave my family, randomly or if it were to be expected. Listening to Carol and Dirk Damonte talk about Roy, and really talking with my mom about Nancy, helped me realize that we all die, and whether its random or expected, this life might not be the end of me, or at least my spirit. I definitely believe that there’s something after this life, and I

don't care if it can be proven, because the "maybe" is what I think will make death a more interesting, and less painful experience for me, and for the people in my life.

## Bibliography

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