

Charlie- Not in my seventeen years of living has a close relative, friend, or neighbor passed away. I have never been to a funeral, cemetery or morgue and have never seen a spirit or apparition. Although I am completely unexposed and inexperienced in dealing with the end of life, it strikes a chord of fascination inside me. No, this is not a phase of buying black clothes and wearing dark eye shadow while talking about my favorite death metal bands in a conveniently artistic monotone. This is more of a spiritual wonder, an interest turned obsession that I've been compelled to explore. What is death? This is the question to which I posed an answer in the form of a screenplay earlier this year: life is a long hallway with a blind turn at the end, that turning point is death. It is not an end, but it is the start of a new hallway where no one in ours has been.

Rachael- I find it hard to believe 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 for what's 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 people feel about death and what they think happens to you after you die, I can come up with an idea of my own and have something to look forward to. Not just focusing on this life and then nothing.

Ch- Perhaps the purpose of our present hallway is to ponder what lies in the next one, but for now all we know is that this is what we have. This life is our only guarantee right now; we are already here, so we should live to the fullest. To help us handle the reality of death, some of us need faith, others need religious text, and many don't believe we continue after death. Because there is no proof on what are experiences that shape people's views on death and afterlife?

Dirk- My name is Dirk Damonte, I am the minister of worship and community life at Los Altos united Methodist church. Basically what that means is I'm in charge of, well I oversee all the worship activities here, especially the music program and music staff. I plan and lead the contemporary service on Sunday nights. I also oversee all of the

program ministry here, that's the community life part. A huge part of my job is working with the youth groups especially the Starfire Singers, and the high school youth group.

Ch- This is his wife, Carol.

Carol- I'm Carol Dimonte, and I work in youth and music ministries, especially focusing on Junior High and Senior High kids, and I've been working here at the same church, Los Altos United Methodist Church, for almost 25 years. It was my first job out of college, and so, I love my job. I love everything about it, I love being in a community with people who are trying to live life now, and be present in the now instead of waiting for perhaps what's coming in the next world.

R- They both describe their views on death and the afterlife.

D- My views are: I think death is a part of life, it's a part of the natural cycle of life. I don't think it's something to be afraid of or something to try to avoid. Well, I mean, I guess you should try to avoid it sort of, but I think it's something that's just a natural part of the cycle of life. I do believe that there's something after this life, and that the soul lives on after the body gives out.

C- There's one thing for certain, that when we are born, we will all die. And there's no escaping it. It is what we do with our living though that gives honor to our dying. As a person of faith, you know, in the Christian faith, and I can't speak for other religions, but there is this idea that we are always making sure that we are working towards this afterlife, so we find our way being able to "get into heaven", and our objective becomes to get into heaven, and people who are generally more conservative in their faith than I, the idea is saving people's souls to get them into heaven. My feeling, my journey is helping people see, understand the Christian faith, and if that is what they find value in, and if they find that it helps them in this life journey, that's incredible.

Ch- Dirk describes the church's views on death and the afterlife.

D- It's funny, there's a lot of different opinions in Christianity, I mean Christianity is a huge faith tradition. I guess the most traditional view would be that there's a heaven

and a hell in the afterlife, and heaven is where the faithful go and hell is where the not-so-faithful go. There are passages in the bible that are interpreted as referring to heaven and hell, and that's probably the most traditional Christian view, but it's not the only Christian view. I, for instance; I can't believe in a good and loving God, which is a huge part of what Christianity teaches, a good and loving God who at some arbitrary point, gives up on us. We're taught that God never gives up on us while we're alive. I just can't believe that when the body dies, then God gives up on you and sends you to hell if you somehow haven't made the mark. So, I guess I believe it's theoretically possible to always choose separation from God, I think certainly there are people in this life who choose separation from God. I guess it's probably possible that even after death, it's possible to choose separation from God. I don't think God ever chooses that, I think God always wants to be in relationship with us. So for me, life is not complete until you are in right relationship with God, and that may happen after the body dies, or it may happen now.

R- We get to the story of Dirk's father, Roy Damonte, who passed away in the year 2000.

D- Well, my dad, Roy, worked here at the church also, he was the director of education. He retired in 1991 and was in sort of declining health. The year before he retired, he had a fairly major heart attack, and a lot of complications associated with that. 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. . 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, so they put him on home hospice care. It was just amazing, hospice is one of the most wonderful things our society has.

C- Probably the person that has been closest to me that has died most recently is my father in law, and it took him a long time to die, a long time. He was in bed the last year

of his life, at home. And 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

D- Part of it was just watching him, it was almost like he had a foot in each world. He would come back to reality here, and sometimes be very lucid and know everyone around him and know what was going on. And sometimes he would be just so far gone that you really got a sense that he was moving into another reality.

C: 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” and my recollection is she didn’t say anything, but the presence was calming, it wasn’t a negative dark, you know, the lady in black, it wasn’t negative, it was positive. So for the next couple months before he died, and just even right before he died, I asked him, a couple times after that “have you seen the lady in black again? Has she come back to see you?” he said “no she hasn’t been back.”

Dirk: “Dad didn’t die right in front of my eyes, but I think he died about 15 minutes after I left, so I really think he was waiting for me to leave. It just makes it much more real. I became very sure that all the things I believed theoretically about life after death, I just absolutely knew were true. And if it changed anything, it changed my belief that it’s not an easy process and it’s not like the movies where the music swells and the angels are singing and stuff. 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.”

Carol: “I think the lady in black also ties into other spirit forms that I know that have come in forms of angels, I’m not talking hovering, wings and such, but clearly in spirit form. 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”. And so the question is are these angels real? Do they come as delusional experiences? Are they coming out of clarity? You know, when you’re dying, where are you? Are you not delusional, but more clear? And so the experiences of people who have had near death experiences, which is when you die and you are medically brought back to life, when that happens I have yet to hear from anyone that they wanted to come back. You know, the same vision comes for people of all faith as people with no faith. This long tunnel of light moving towards something that feels remarkably peaceful, safe, like the journey you just are longing to get there, and at the end there’s always some sort of figure that is recognizable. For some people they see Jesus, for some people probably of other faiths, maybe they see people in their faith that are significant, I don’t know that, but generally people see figures of people who have meant something to them, perhaps who they are married to, a child who has died earlier, significant people in their lives, and they feel this sense of “ah, I’m ready to go. I just want to be there” they just want to go towards that light. And then when they’re pulled back, my grandmother said ‘I don’t want to go back,’ and she said, ‘I just want to go.’ And she was in her late 80’s, you know, she had lived a full life, but she was pulled back into this world again. But people who have those near death experiences are the only ones that I know that could have what is possibly a glimmer as to what the afterlife is like.”

Dirk: “I think more than anything, and this is actually something I said to my dad at one point, “It’s ok. It’s ok to face death. It’s ok to let go.” When the end is here, it’s a tricky thing because you don’t want to give up because that tenacity and clinging to life is a great trait to have. But there is a point where I think it’s ok to let go, and I would say be at peace, and know that those of us left here are going to be fine, and will be joining you some day, and it’s ok to let go and to trust God and trust the natural process.”

Carol: “And once again, 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”

Rachael: “Here’s my mom, Holley Eichner, whose best friend Nancy past away a year and a half ago.”

Holley: “My views on death and the afterlife are, you know it’s just not a simple questions to answer. First of all, on death its like maybe when we’re alive we tell ourselves these things so that we’ll feel better, the living, so that we can go on with 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. And then with the afterlife, is that another thing I just tell myself so that I’ll feel better. You know, I would like to think there’s something after this life on earth. I don’t know if that just makes me feel better now. Like with guardian angels, you know, there’s things like that that I actually believe in, someone watching over you. You know, I’d like to think that there are guardian angels, and there was something better after this life. Or if you’ve ever been somewhere where you think, you walk into this place and you go ‘I’ve been here before. I actually have been here before’. You knew where everything was. My sister went on a trip to Holland, and she worked for a travel agency, so they took a group of people, and one of the people she was with walked in and knew where everything was in this castle, knew where everything was and she had never been there before. It blew my sister’s mind, and the girl. There’s just certain things I really like in this life, I just wonder if it has anything to do with a past life, but you know, I don’t know, those are just what my thoughts are.

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, and that was Stephanie’s daughter’s friend’s mom, anyway we all went to school way back. 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.'”

Rachael: “So she passed away almost a year and a half ago. Where do you think she is? Do you think she is watching over her kids, or us, or do you think she is in a better place?”

Holley: “If there is such a thing as watching over, then I know she is with her kids, watching over them. If that's all possible, I know that's what she is doing.”

Rachael: “what do you hope for for you in the afterlife?”

Holley: “Well if I die before my husband, I'm going to come back and haunt him. You think I'm kidding. You know, I wonder. Everything I've done on this earth and everywhere I've been, and know, and survived, I just have a feeling that there is a God. You just go through a process where you're in a peaceful place, and a happy place, and you meet your maker. You know somebody else's Hell might be sitting in a living room listening to someone else talk about his or her vacation, and showing picture slides of it, like forever. That'd be rough. You know, hearing about somebody else's vacation 24/7 over and over and over, watching their picture slides. That might be Hell.”

Rachael: “This life is the only thing we are given when we are born, and the only thing we lose when we die. When it is our time, we leave our materials, our bodies, and our loved ones behind on earth. Something inside every human connects at some point with a force that some call science, others call the paranormal, and many call God, and this force births a natural amazement of life, death, and beyond that within our minds.“

Charlie: “This life is all we can know for certain, and perhaps in this time, it is our job to wonder what is to come.”

