

*Of Death and Editors*



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After I missed my last column, a memo from our hard-boiled editor slithered off my fax machine. “Near-death is a valid excuse for not writing,” he conceded grudgingly. “But since you’ve survived, you might as well write.”

I didn’t find out I had been near death until my fourth day in the hospital. With a BTG deadline approaching and a load of GBC assignments on hold, I had begun pestering my doctor to let me out.

Giving me a severe look, my doctor sat by my bed, right next to the marvelous digital IV machine counting down drips in LED. I had come to admire both man and machine as wonders of modern medicine.

“Look,” he began sternly, “you don’t seem to understand how close you came to...” A delicate turning down of the palm stood in for the D word. “When you got to the emergency room we couldn’t get a blood pressure reading. It’s a good thing you didn’t wait any longer.

“You’ve heard about Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets? He had the same thing as you, but he delayed getting to the hospital a bit too long, and he died. You’ve been in a dangerous spot, and—you’re what?” A glance at my file. “Forty-six. Not so young anymore. So just slow down. Give yourself time to recover.”

I would have gotten a doctor’s note then for my editor, Jayadvaita Swami, but my mind was reacting to the announcement of my close call with Mr. D. I was caught up by some intense but contradictory feelings.

A spontaneous, sheerly animal elation at being alive was rising from my body. My very cells seemed to be celebrating. But this feeling was at once overpowered by one far better, and less expected: a sudden vivid awareness of the presence of Krishna. He seemed very close and very friendly.

It was, on reflection, simple enough to understand: being close to death was being close to Krishna. To be sure, not everyone encounters it in that way. Yet everyone, it seems, feels death’s proximity as the approach of an awesome, overwhelming, illimitable otherness. We totter precariously upon the brink of this mysterious infinity, and in its huge presence our life and concerns suddenly become utterly trivial and insignificant, of no more weight than blowing dust and vanishing vapor.

This is the generic character of the human reaction. But we can experience that generic character in one of two radically different forms.

If we have invested all our effort and hopes in this present life, considering it all-in-all, the awareness of death’s proximity is profoundly terrifying, and we’ll do our best afterwards to forget it. In this case, we encounter death as a hostile, malevolent Nothingness intent upon annihilating us and all we cherish. Because the threat of death is present at every moment, and because we realize that death will inevitably get its way, we are never free what has been called “the anxiety of existence.”

This very anxiety had impelled me to spend the last twenty years in a sustained systematic effort to rid myself of material attachments and desires. The death of a brother had shown me the truth about our material condition and left me unable to see any future in mundane life. So I had come to place my hopes and efforts in Krishna consciousness, in activities and relationships not subject to time.

The doctor's announcement precipitated in me the generic human reaction—a heightened awareness of an awesome otherness and the insubstantiality of this life. But I experienced this awareness concretely as the closeness of Krishna. He, personally, was that awesome Other, and I eagerly welcomed the devastation His proximity wreaks on material attachments and values; it was liberating.

If death approached me in this form, you could say it was because I had, in effect, spent the last twenty years dying. The renunciation of material activities, desires, and attachments, a renunciation devotees cultivate systematically, is a kind of death. But that renunciation is only one side of the practice.

The other side is made of the spiritual relationships we establish with Krishna and His devotees and the service we perform in that company. Over time they become more and more relishable, and as the devotee becomes increasingly absorbed in them, renunciation takes place naturally. Activities and relationships in Krishna consciousness are not material, and one fully engaged in them has already entered into eternal, spiritual life. Death—the giving up of the present body—does not disturb the devotee's activities or relationships. In that sense, a devotee does not die.

A materialist, however, has to die. Deeply attached to sense objects, bodily relationships and temporary activities, a materialist will refuse the opportunity to engage in devotional service and surrender to Krishna. The renunciation practiced by devotees seems to him like death. He will not bow down before Krishna.

Yet ultimately he must. He must give up everything and fall prostrate before a higher power. He experiences his necessary renunciation and surrender to Krishna as a horrifying process of ultimate destruction. Those who want the illusion of independence from Krishna must undergo, over and over again, the illusion of death.

Feeling the control of Krishna, being conscious of His kind presence, I spent some happy days in the hospital bed. Emergency treatment had countered the extreme dehydration, and the Ampecillin pumping into my vein from the marvelous machine seemed to be doing the job. But, warned my doctor, I was not out of danger, The pernicious streptococcus pyogenes swarming in my blood normally resides in the human intestinal tract. Had it come in from my own guts? Tests had to be performed.

I did not mind. I was interested to see what Krishna wanted. It seemed as if I were watching the world go on in my absence. At the same time, I was getting a much closer look at ordinary material life than I was used to.

Early every evening my roommate Jimmy—a horse trainer with a broken leg in traction—would be joined by his wife and children, loaded down with bags of fast foods and snacks. They would spread themselves through the room and begin eating, talking, and watching TV, all at the same time. They made themselves at home, transforming the hospital room into their living room. Jimmy and his family were remarkably open and friendly people, and they instinctively fit me right in as a guest or family friend. They politely offered me their cookies and popcorn and sodas, called upon me to join in their running commentaries on the programs and commercials on TV, and sought my judgment on family decisions or problems.

For close to a week I nearly lived with them as part of their family. It was strange. Here I felt myself on the boundary between life and death, seeing the world as if from the other side, happily disengaged from it, and yet I was willy-nilly immersed as I had never been before in the modes of ordinary, thoughtless living. I wondered whether karmic reactions of my own were not being played out in some condensed or denatured fashion. I grew to like this family, but seeing them conduct their affairs, I felt helplessly sad for them. They were nice people who were not living their own lives, for they were controlled entirely by material nature.

I was trying to be free, but how well was I doing? I felt detached, but not detached enough; close to Krishna, but not close enough. I must confess to a third feeling in response to my doctor's announcement.

In addition to the animal relief and to a sense of closeness to Krishna, there was also a sense of disappointment. Dying had its attractions, too. For twenty years I had been at war with my material conditioning—with my dispositions toward sense gratification, with my failures of character, with my envy and my inveterate laziness. By the time I so abruptly landed in the hospital, I was thoroughly fed up with this particular conditioned self. The thought of starting over filled me with relief—it would be wonderful to take a higher birth, to be endowed from the beginning with a better character, to possess natural nobility of mind, to grow up without having to do or see many things I had seen and done in this life. The prospect was enticing.

But it was not to be.

When an infected blister on my heel, contracted in India, yielded up the same virulent organism that had invaded my blood, my doctor declared me out of danger; the source of the septicemia was clear. He released me from the hospital. I got well.

As for my conditioned nature, I take it as Krishna's desire that He wants me to keep working on it. That's His decision.

If death is the final exam to test how we have spent our lives, I suppose I was given a kind of midterm. Midterm exams provide students with a mid-course bearing. I know better what I have to do.

Clearly, one of those things, as my hard-boiled editor insists, is to write. By the arrangement of providence, I am finishing this column at our Gita-nagari farm. By the same arrangement, Jayadvaita Swami happens to be here. We have been put up together in the same house. "Finished yet?" he says when he comes in the door. This is Krishna's mercy. I get the message.