On Death and Dying

By Mitsuo Aoki

Dr. Mitsuo Aoki was one of the featured speakers at Campus Center this summer, presenting a six-part series on death and dying. The following are excerpts from his presentation.

Photographs by Fred Smith

Concepts about death, says Aoki, do not make death concrete for us. "Some one has claimed that the greatest sin of mankind is to take the concrete and make it abstract."

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The Meaning of Death

Let me begin with a couple of general comments.

First of all, death is a "many-splendored thing". It means different things to different people in different situations. The term is used literally and metaphorically: it is understood in an absolute sense and a relative sense. The more we probe into the meanings of death, the more complex those meanings become.

Secondly, death can be viewed and understood from many different perspectives—theological and philosophical, psychological and sociological, anthropological and biological, artistic and cultural, political and economical, individualistic and cosmic.

Death cannot be a subject of thought alone. We say many things about it. It is tragic, absolute, the end, a transition. The trouble with concepts about death is that through them, we think we have come to grips with death. But concepts about death do not make death concrete for us. Someone has claimed that the greatest sin of mankind is to take the concrete and make it abstract. We need to keep in mind this story: A novitiate asks a Zen master, "What is death?" and the master says, "I do not know." With surprise, the initiate exclaims, "But you are a Zen master!" To this, the master responds, "Yes, but I am not a dead Zen master."

I encounter death not so much as a problem to be solved or as a puzzle to be pieced together but as a mystery to be experienced. Death, whatever its meaning and real nature, seems always to elude us. It is always and finally a mystery. And mystery refuses to be captured and used. We do not capture it; we are captured by it. And being captured, we can be "engaged" to death and allow it to reveal its depth and richness.

Mystery, however, is not incomprehension. It is a gateway to meaning. True, we "see through a glass darkly"—but we do see. Not everything, but enough. We see enough so that we can walk in confidence. People actually have death-awareness. We know about death as we live our life. Therefore, we in our self-conscious awareness can assume an attitude toward our own death. We can raise these kinds of fundamental questions:

Since I am going to die,
—how can I truly live?
—how can I awaken within myself the search for a more fundamental reality within myself?
—how can I truly be myself?

Toward the end of his life, Michaelangelo said, "I thought all the while I was learning how to live, but now I know I was learning how to die." His anticipation of death revealed to him that death is a key to self-understanding. It is an intellectual and moral revolution that helps us define human nature:

- By affirming death, we are on the way to becoming *decisive.*
- By remembering death, we concentrate on *essentials.*
- Through awareness of death, we achieve *integrity.*
- We who know we will die find *meaning in life.*
- Death puts us in touch with *our deepest feelings, anxiety, and hope.*

THE PARADOXICAL QUALITY OF DEATH

Since death is a mystery, I have discovered that the way to a deeper understanding of its meaning is through the language of paradox. In a paradoxical statement, we experience two meanings at the same time; that is, we say that death is both an event and a process—an element—in life. In death, we do not experience the first meaning only; the second meaning persists as well. So in paradox, the real tension remains. It is difficult to maintain both meanings without making one cancel out the other. So I say let death be death; something is redeemed in death, but death remains death. Don't romanticize it. Don't terrorize it. Only by letting death be death can it do all that it can:

- Sober us up.
- Unmask big words and grandiose ideas and visions.
- Give us opportunity to be caring, truthful, honest, merciful.
- Help us understand its mystery and meaning.

Viewed as an event, death is a once-for-all moment of life, a distant future event that awaits us. Hence the image of death as grim reaper, a skeleton with a sickle in hand, waiting to cut us down.

But death can also be viewed as an element, a part of life itself. Its reality permeates the whole of life: "In the midst of life, we are in death." Death is right here, in my life, in my body, as part of my very existence. It is always here, always with me. John Fowles in *The Aristos* wrote, "We die throughout life, and what we call death is really the end of death, the death of death."

In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Sigmund Freud wrote about life instinct and death instinct, claiming that

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Nelson Ho

death instinct is the more primitive. Death instinct, he said, is the impulse of life to return to lifelessness, to pull the organism back to the inanimate state from which all life emerged. "At one time or another," Freud wrote, "by some operation of force which completely baffles conjecture, the properties of life were awakened in lifeless matter. . .The tension then aroused in the previously inanimate matter strove to attain an equilibrium; the first instinct was present, that to return to lifelessness."

What is basic and significant about Freud's idea of this fundamental psychological drive toward death is his idea that death is somehow present in a unified way from the beginning of life. Death is an intrinsic part of life; it arises out of existence itself. It belongs to life. The issue is not "to be *or* not to be." Rather, it is "to be *and* not to be." The "and" suggests that not-to-be (non-being) is an inseparable part of being. Death belongs to the very being of man. It is not something that is added on at the last stages of man's life.

The implications of death as element are many. One is that death is the most definitive possibility of life. It stands before us in a unique way, with an aspect of totality that no other possibility has. We can know, see, eat, love—but all of these engage us only partially and temporarily. When we say man *can* die, we immediately recognize the difference: death engages us totally. The possibility of deaths enfolds, includes, and engulfs all other human possibilities completely and entirely.

Death also offers us a "way to be." It is something that we *can* do. It is a power to be, not just the power to cease to be. It is not merely something that we submit to, not something that "happens" to us. Rather, it is one of the things that human beings *can* do. When death occurs, it can be something we actually perform.

THE SECOND PARADOX

Death is also viewed as a "hostile force," but paradoxically, one with a positive, liberating effect. As a hostile force, the fact of death reveals a deep negativity, a *nothingness* in man's existence. This negativity affects every aspect of man's life and experiences. All our successes and accomplishments are penetrated by boundaries, limitations—by "No." Nothing else reminds people so strongly of their limitations, weaknesses, failures, and finitude as death does. It represents the failure and utter futility of humans' attempts to hold things together by their own power. Death confronts us with

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nothingness. We don't just die; we don't exist at all. But this nothingness is not the denial of all reality. It is a screen behind which liberation hides. Death conceals within itself the presence of *being!*

It is true that in death, all things that make up man's roles dissolve and fade away. But this process itself reveals our functions as something frail and perishable, and thus death points beyond itself. Several of my patients in the process of their dying discovered that there was nothing they needed to hold on to, nothing they needed to be or do. They could allow themselves to be "nothing." And in that moment, they were truly free; they could become what they really wanted to be.

My Own Death

When another dies, the world still goes on. This death is not usually accompanied by any overwhelming invasion of anxiety, annihilation, or alienation. We recognize that we are still in the picture.

In the death of myself, however, we are speaking of a total dissolution of my world, of me. My own death presents itself to me in extraordinary and unspeakable anxiety. It is in engagement with my own death that the real meaning of death occurs in my life.

Many writers claim that it is impossible to imagine our own death. Listen to Sigmund Freud:

> It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can conceive that we really survive as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the thing in another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.

Or Miguel De Unamuno:

> It is imposible for us, in effect, to conceive of ourselves as not existing, and no effort is capable of enabling consciousness to realize absolute unconsciousness, its own annihilation.

Erik Erikson has written that when a person tries to imagine not existing, he experiences "a chill and a shudder" and turns away.

One of the consequences of this idea that my own death is psychologically inconceivable is that when our life comes to an end, the ending is always attributed to malicious intervention from outside by someone else. In simple terms: in our conscious mind, we can only be killed. Hence, death is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening.

I believe, however, that one's own dying is not entirely unimaginable. I know it can be imagined, but only with a considerable degree of distance, blurring, and denial. I have worked with patients/survivors who encountered experiences that were instrumental in making death concrete for them—such as the death of a loved one or great pain and suffering. In such experiences, they tell me that their knowledge of death was for an instant *something that was alive in their bodies.* At that moment, extraordinary changes took place within them. The quality of time was transformed, or everything was seen as more colorful, more "real."

Furthermore, I am not convinced about Freud's statement that "in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality." We are not absolutely convinced of our own immortality: we have a need to maintain a sense of immortality in the face of our own inevitable biological death.

The Fear of Death

What is it we fear in death? And what is going on inside us when we experience "deathly fear?" I have separated fear of death into three categories.

The first is the fear about what happens after death occurs. We are concerned about the fate of our bodies, since we "are" our bodies. We fear "judgment," the final reckoning for our life's wrongs. And we fear the unknown, the lack of knowing "what comes next."

The second category of fear deals with the dying process. We fear pain, indignity, the prospect of being a burden to someone else.

Finally, we fear death as the loss of life, as "ceasing to be." This is the basic fear. All the other fears are *about* death; this is fear of death itself—the loss of mastery, the separation, the incompleteness or failure of life.

Fear of death is really fear of life. What we are fleeing from is our own life. Our own death is a problem because our own daily living is a problem. Consider Rumi's poem, "The Beauty of Death":

> Everyone's death is of the same quality as himself, my son:
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> To the enemy of God an enemy, to the friend of God a friend . . .
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> Your fear of death is really fear of yourself: see what it is from which you are fleeing.
>
> 'Tis your own ugly face, not the visage of death; your spirit is like the tree, death like the leaf.

". . . there is a compelling and universal need for a sense of connection and immortality."

Grief, says Aoki, can take us to the roots of life itself: "There is no hiding place; you see the depth of your desires and judgments. You also see the depth of freedom and love."

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On Working with Dying Persons

After working with more than 400 dying persons over the past 26 years, I have gained some understanding of the dying process and dying persons. Among my observations:

- Most dying persons know they are dying long before the doctors tell them. It is impossible to pretend in the presence of treatments that fail, gloomy expressions, and gathering symptoms of decline.
- A dying person needs to talk. What is it like to die, what is expected, what has been left undone. Many patients say what a relief it is to talk about their dying openly. Since this is so, it is rather unkind not to let them talk. Yet many doctors are reluctant to speak to patients about death. The common medical attitude is that most patients only want reassurance and do not want to raise the question of death; or that to force a discussion or insist on providing unwelcome information is risky; or that the truth is likely to be hurtful; or that the patient might lose all hope and commit suicide, become very depressed, or even die more quickly. I believe this attitude on the part of physicians is a combination of evasion and pretense, and that relying on these fallacies may lead to inconsistencies and to judgments that confuse the clinical with the moralistic.
- Dying persons resent being shut off from the daily flow of life. Friends and family members who feel guilty about being well, taking vacations, and so on are doing patients a disservice when they pretend that they, too, have ceased living (like the patient). Too often we forget that the dying patient is a living person. He has both a past and present history and his own unique interests and viewpoints.

To reiterate a point made earlier, death is one of the things a person can do. He can choose to die. In my work with dying persons, I help them take their last experience of life and make of it a great achievement. I know that dying persons can achieve what one of the most thoughtful writers in the field of thanatology today, Dr. Avery Weisman, calls "the appropriate death": one with a greater sense of completeness, accomplishment, and peace; with a resolved relationship with loved ones: with more inner tranquility, less turmoil and agitation, and fewer loose ends.

These are some of the things that I share with the dying to enable them to experience an appropriate death:

First, finish up your unfinished business. This means to open your heart and mind to one another. It means letting go of blocks to openness, love, and memories. It means letting go whatever obstructs your deepest sharing. And it works independent of results; finishing unfinished business is done of its own and for its own sake.

Second, practice and experience the "transformation" of letting go. Letting go is not about becoming something or someone; it is just letting go of those things that separate. In letting go, we discover the deeper depth of ourselves and of reality—how life is connected and interrelated, the oneness of life. And how do you let go? I say: first, focus on your primary reality (God, Nature, Light); then, let your body go; finally, let your ego go.

Third, encourage survivors to give the dying person "permission to die." Oftentimes, the dying will "hold on" to their dying for various reasons: fear, reluctance to disappoint the living, unfinished business. By receiving permission, they are more likely to "let go."

Fourth, experience the last moment of death. It is a mystery, yet we know that something happens. An awesome change takes place, a "knowing," oftentimes a few hours or a few days before death. This experience is a process of dissolving, a melting where boundaries become less defined. There is less external input. It is a process of expansion beyond oneself. Thus, in the last moment of death, a person not only goes beyond himself, but becomes himself. He gives up what is not his to keep.

Good Grief

Why do we grieve for a loved one who has died?

Usually, we grieve not for the person who died, but for ourselves and our sense of loss. We grieve because we experience deprivation. We invest ourselves in others, and with another's death, our life is diminished. This grief is an ambivalent feeling, because we suffer the loss and at the same time we're glad to be still alive ourselves. We need to go through grief and mourning to grow to a new awareness of self.

Grief can have a profound quality of healing. In it, we are forced to a depth of feeling that is usually below the threshold of awareness. Take the analogy of a tree. We tend to describe the tree in terms of everything above

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the ground—leaves, branches, trunk. But the tree is not a tree without its roots. Grief can take us to the roots of life itself. There is no hiding place; you see the depth of your desires and judgments. You also see the depth of freedom and love.

The first response in the process of grieving is that of shock, numbness, disbelief, and denial. We are overcome by the feeling of unreality; it is as though it were happening to someone else. These are other responses, too: guilt, resentment, anger, remorse, emptiness, loneliness. These are strong feelings, powerful and frightening to the bereaved. Anger and aggression are common. We feel deserted by the deceased, whose absence causes pain and hence anger. Guilt takes on many forms. It may be acted out in unreasonable accusations; it may show up as anger against others, a substitute for anger at oneself; it may show up in depression when anger is directed inward. The closer the relationship, the deeper the guilt may be.

We may also keep on searching for the dead—in everything, in dreams. We see the dead person's face in familiar places; we seek clues for his or her presence. Because of this longing, we seek comfort and consolation from others. Yet there is no real consolation, for we want the return of the dead person. And because there is no consolation, we may feel cut off or rejected.

Grief peaks about four to six weeks after the loss of a loved one and usually lasts about three months but can linger for as long as a year. When the loss is accepted, the work of mourning begins. We begin undoing the various processes that went into building relationships. All bits of interaction are reviewed, and we re-experience past relationships and memories. There is a lot of ambivalence, acceptance and negation, and a predominating sadness.

In the early part of the process, the whole external world of the bereaved seems disorganized. Everything seems pointless, and the world we thought was organized seems to collapse. Gradually, this world reintegrates. We move on to resolution and learning to begin to live

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without our spouse or loved one. We start to deal with the emptiness in ourselves and gradually regain interest in ordinary activities. The loss becomes less painful. We begin our new life—reestablishing relationships, forming new ones, unlearning old patterns and learning new ones, learning to tolerate our feelings of hostility and grief, focusing on the more positive aspects of the deceased.

Endings are a necessity. Endings let the dead person die. Working through those endings lets us redefine relationships, surrender what is dead and accept what is alive, and be more fully receptive to new happenings.

Life After Death

In the face of death, there is a compelling and universal need for a sense of connection and immortality. Life requires a perception of connection that extends beyond death. This sense of immortality is not just our denial of death. More importantly, it is our effort to find our connection with all of human history, with the continuity of life. It is a need that is part of humankind's quest for mastery, continuity, and meaning.

This sense of continuity of life is profoundly threatened today. We have a new relationship with death. We are haunted by the image of exterminating ourselves as a species by means of our own technology. As a consequence, the traditional expressions of immortality (bio-social, ancestors; theological, the need for transcendence; creative, immortality via creative works; being one with nature) by which man has maintained his sense of continuity with life have been threatened.

And yet, from near-death experiences we continue to have some sense of "something beyond." Raymond Moody in his *Life After Life* summarizes the common elements of the near-death experience:

> A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempts from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.
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> After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experience in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.
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> Later, he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.

A word of caution. Knowing and giving too many details and precise answers to what happens after death can easily become self-deception. Beware!

Dr. Mitsuo Aoki, professor emeritus of religion at the University of Hawaii, has done extensive work in the area of death and dying—a field he pioneered in Hawaii. He was instrumental in promoting and later establishing the work of Hospice and Make Today Count (for terminally ill persons) in the islands and he has trained hundreds of persons—both professional and lay—in working with the terminally ill and investigating the process of grieving and healing. In 1982, he was selected as one of 12 finalists in the U.S. for the Thomas Jefferson Award for volunteer service. In 1983, the University honored him with the Regents Medal for Excellence in Teaching. His students affectionately call him their favorite "cosmic dancer."