

TO GOD WE BELONG, TO HIM IS OUR RETURN

(An Islamic Perspective on Death and Dying)

By Shahid Athar

Death remains a mysterious reality just as life itself is.

Quran says "Everyone must taste death". In fact, belief in the ultimate reality is tied to the belief in the ultimate truth.

Quran says " How can you deny God, knowing that He gave you life, then caused you to die and to Him is your return"?

Death has always fascinated me. My first experience with death was when I was 10 years old and saw my elder sister, who was paralyzed because of a childhood injury, die from an epileptic seizure. In the last moment of her life, my mother tried to put some water in her mouth and the child in me was asking "What is the use? She is going to die anyway".

In 1962 I entered Medical School and was assigned to a dead body (cadaver) to dissect and learn anatomy. To me the mysteries of the human body, was "the book that lead me to my Creator". (My article on this is in the book "Health Concerns for Believers" by Kazi publications).

During my subsequent years as a medical student 1962-1967, then as a Physician in training 1967-1974 and in private practice 1974-present, I have seen fellow humans die in front of me. I became sad but their death had not affected me much personally.

After my sister's death, the next death that affected me was of my grandfather, who died of terminal lung cancer while I was a 3rd year medical student.

I did my best to relieve his pain by removing the fluid from his lungs so that he could breathe better. As his breathing improved and he could speak, he thanked me and prayed for me. Men do not cry but as he was being laid into his grave, I and my father both cried.

Subsequently, there were 3 more deaths of persons close to me which occurred. All of them were back home about 20,000 miles away. I could not even get to their funerals. This was very painful.

In 1984, I got the sad news that my dear mother died suddenly without any known illness. Loss of mother was very hard on me. For weeks I cried and was in a state

of shock. I used to remember when as a child when I would come home tired, I would lie down with my head on her lap and go to sleep. So when I found the white sari she had left here when she was visiting, I made a pillow out of it and slept on it for months. That was the best thing I could do to be close to my beloved mom.

Ten years ago, my father died too, again of few days of illness and I could not be there. I was not too close to him but after all he was my father and I was his son. The only other time I saw tears in his eyes was when I was leaving for the USA in 1969.

Two weeks ago (August of 2000), again misfortune struck me as my dearest elder brother in Pakistan died suddenly of a massive heart attack. Death of a close sibling is hard enough and the feeling of such helplessness from a distance that you can not be there to see them before they are buried is very hard. But we Muslims are advised to say "To God we belong and to Him is our return". We are also told to "Seek help (from God) with patience and prayers, as God is with those who patiently persevere".

So death is inevitable for all human beings including myself. When Prophet of Islam was on his death bed, the angel of death in a human form, knocked on his door seeking permission to enter. His wife Ayesha, who did not know who he was, told the visitor to go away saying "Go away. Don't you know my husband is so sick and he can not talk to you"?

The Prophet who knew who was coming, told Ayesha, "Let him in. He is Izrael, the angel of death. He does not need anyone's permission to take that person's soul out".

So it does matter when one dies or where. What matters is in what state he was while dying. Was he in a state of faith or in a state of rejection of faith? Did he die doing something good or die committing a sin? Did he die in the company of pious people or wrong doers? We must not die before death. Death of faith is the death of the soul before death of the body.

A person's achievement in earthly life can not be measured by his wealth, degrees, speeches or writings, not even by his moral character judged by others, but by what he did for fellow human beings. Whether he was a good man or a bad man can be decided on the basis that if more people are sad that he died or more people are happy "Thank God he is dead".

If we want to be near our dead loved ones in the life here after, we must do acts while we are still alive to meet those goals. I can not pray for my parents or my

elder brother to be in Heaven, while I do acts which (unless forgiven by God), may take me to Hell. This is by logic.

Lastly a story told to me by a Muslim friend is very touching. As my friend was boarding a train in India, on his way to Hajj in Mecca, one of his Hindu friends, a doctor, came running to bid farewell to his friend and made a request. "Please bring me some zam zam, the holy water from Mecca". My friend was surprised and asked "you are a Hindu, what do you need Muslim holy water for"? The Hindu doctor replied " I use it for my dying Hindu patients as I have observed that when I put zam zam in their mouth while they are dying, they die peacefully".

Quran says "O you soul at Peace, return to thy Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Return as My servant, return to My Heaven." (Surah Al Fajr)

This quote is meaningful to me at many levels and I want to share it with the reader.

"In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we are all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quietly now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words....I was going to die, if not sooner then later whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me."

--Audre Lorde