
REACTIONS TO A SMALL DEATH

by

Kenneth A. Cyr

September 11, 1983 - A little girl died last week - the blonde, chubby 5-year-old next door. Thirty feet away for a year, 12 months, 365½ days, 20% of her short life - but I did not know her well.

I know how she died. A mosquito, almost too small to see, bit her and injected an invisible virus. The virus lodged in her brain, multiplied, gave off poisons and caused fever, convulsions, coma, death. Encephalitis - I know the name of the virus, and it frightens me. Here in the tropical Philippines mosquitos are plentiful, and so are their bites. All three of my sons have mosquito bites on their arms and legs. Could they die or, perhaps even worse, suffer permanent brain damage, paralysis, deafness, blindness, retardation, or lie interminably in a coma neither dead nor alive? Of course not, (I deny the possibility to myself), children don't die - only sick old people or reckless youths, but the little girl next door . . .

I did not know her well, but I know she liked to play, sing, talk. I could hear that through the thin walls of my duplex. I know her name. I know her three older brothers and younger sister. I know her mother and father, her maid and gardener, but I

don't know them well. I know them on sight, on speaking terms. I know they are different (strange?). They see life, death and the universe through different eyes, from an entirely different vantage point - but they live right next door to me. I guess I don't really want to (or try to) know them well. Sometimes it's hard for me to accept people as they are. I'd like to change them but into what? Perhaps into an image of my own less than perfect, but not so unpredictable, self?

Despite my impulse to affiliate, to associate or interact with other people, I also have the impulse to avoid them, to stereotype them as "strangers", to feel anxious and uncertain about them. Of course some of these feelings go away if I get to know people, but it takes time and energy to get close to others. Sometimes I just don't want to spend the time or the energy. Besides, if I know many people well, they might make more demands on me for help, for attention, for material things. Why take the risk with someone "new"?

They're so different from me; the more different someone is, the easier it is to reject them - to attribute to them a certain

"inhumanity" or alien status. Or perhaps more correctly, to perceive them as less human, less likeable, less capable, less approachable, and more threatening than I am. After all, who knows what they might say or do, or which of my cherished values and beliefs they might disagree with, in their "strangeness"?

Some experts believe that we judge people and relationships on a "social exchange" basis. Will I give more than I receive or, more basically, might I be hurt or rejected? From someone else's perspective, I too might be strange, different. Doesn't rejecting or avoiding others before they can reject me help to protect me from the anxiety and uncertainty of contacting and approaching other people? Isn't it reasonable, rational, and self-protecting to select friends and associates - to form relationships - based on similarity of values, beliefs, likes, dislikes and common experiences?

But how can a child hurt me - a sophisticated, educated, experienced professional man? Adults might hurt me. After all they have the experience, self-confidence and ammunition to attack or reject, but a child? I suppose sometimes I still think of myself as a vulnerable child, subject to hurt from other children. Remember how children call each other names and taunt each other? I thought I had outgrown this. I'd certainly like to avoid it if I can.

Even though it may lessen the richness of my own life and limit my experiences, avoiding anxiety, disagreements and conflict are more important - more psychologically rewarding to me - than the possible

rewards of a new relationship a.e. I must try to realistically decide what might be gained in a new relationship or friendship. Still, I feel some degree of discomfort in realizing that I may be depriving myself of certain interpersonal rewards or gains. Yet, the need to avoid anxiety and conflict by avoiding other people often wins out.

It takes energy, effort and a certain amount of risk to interact with others. Often I don't take the time or spend the energy. Then too, I need a sense of self-control over my life and space. Defending one's territory or turf seems to be a basic behavioural trait of many animals, man included. Don't I have the right to keep others from invading my personal and physical space?

Right now my sense of control is low. I strongly need to control my physical space. Belongings and territory (house, shrubbery, etc.) are an extension of my self - solid proof of my existence, efforts and ability to control myself and make my own decisions (although I feel I have given up much of my self control to someone else). Should the neighbours, even though they don't understand my needs, have the right to intrude into my space, to erode my already fragile sense of self-control?

Daily they invade my territory with their noise, their physical presence and their nosiness. The limits of my tolerance to such invasions are narrow. Perhaps in another time or place this wouldn't be so, but right now it is. Then too, their "difference" makes it harder for me

to accept. My patience always has been limited. Experience, time and education have not increased it much.

Their children, especially the boys, are noisy, boisterous, destructive (zestful? energetic? lively?). They like to throw toys around and crash their bikes into the walls and into each other. They break the branches off my shrubs and step on the flowers. I suppose the plants will heal, regrow, live on, but **they belong to me!** The toys they break are usually broken forever, like the little girl is dead forever.

Dead, it has such an unreal can't-touch-me-or-mine sound. Dead-toys can be replaced, but children cannot. No other child can replace or substitute for her. Each child is unique, original, precious - no matter if we have one, three, five, or twenty. Dead. How final and uncontrollable it seems to me. I realize that I and mine must ultimately confront and experience death but it seems so distant, so unreal. But right next door is close, and five years is a short, quick time.

It is hard to conceive of nothingness (if that's what it is, I'm unsure about that, too). I am, after all, a major part of my own universe. Will I cease to be? Is there really something else, a continuance or repetition, an awareness, after this experience of life? No one can definitely answer me. This brings anxiety and I prefer to avoid it, to repress it, to ignore it, to deny it; but a death next door is obvious, unavoidable. Don't I lose opportunities and a certain part of my sense of self with the death of an

acquaintance, family, friends or even strangers? Death, and other crises, milestones, successes or failures make me aware that we all share certain human experiences.

But these things seem distant and abstract; closer to me right now is the realization that her brothers don't respect my property and possessions (what child does? aren't we taught to share?) - a two-dollar toy, a broken bush.

I built a fence of distance and wood to keep my 3-year-old in and to keep the kids next door out. Why are they so nosy? Why do they look outside whenever anyone comes, goes or makes a noise? Why do they ask a million questions? Could they be lonely, anxious, afraid, seeking human contact, interested in life and learning, concerned about their neighbours? To me they are usually annoying pests. Maybe they only wanted recognition or a friendly greeting which I so seldom gave to them - or to her.

For several days she was in a coma, then Monday she stopped breathing. The doctors said her brain was dead. Machines kept her heart and lungs going. I knew for all practical purposes she was dead. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday - why did her parents keep saying she was the same or a little better? Was it so unusual for them to deny the possibility of losing her? To hope in the face of hopelessness? Why were they so indecisive about stopping the artificial life supports?

I knew she was dead. The doctors knew she was dead. If she were mine, would I have been able to

disconnect any chance of recovery, any chance of life, to finally surrender to death? I think I could, but she was not the child of my heart, my blood, my hopes, my memories, my future.

Yesterday my wife and I went to the memorial services for her and for her family. The speakers said that death was a transition, a stage in eternal life, a birth into immortality? I don't know, but I know she is gone from this sphere, from our lives, from the lives of whomever she might have touched in the future, beyond our ability to touch or be touched.

I tried to remember things I'd done for her - an infrequent word, a few seconds of time, some candy I sent because Halloween fell on a Sunday and her parents felt it improper to "trick or treat" then, some nuts I cracked for her and her brothers under the tree in the backyard at Christmas time, a few Christmas cookies we baked. What opportunities had I lost or missed to enrich her life or mine?

I knew she liked to talk. I could have spent a few more minutes with her now and then to listen, to recognize her existence, to make her feel important, to help her feel optimistic about other people, to

help her learn. I could have stopped, sat down or kneeled to make us more equal in size; but I usually stood there briefly, or rushed by - busy, important, big and imposing.

At the service I saw her father's and mother's tired, drained looks and realized their vulnerability, helplessness and pain. I didn't think about their anger or resentment, but they might have been feeling that too, against God, against me, against others who have not lost a child.

I imagined what it felt like to lose a child - to lose the future, hopes, plans, sharing, aspirations, companionship, growing and learning, all without a choice in the matter. I imagined the pain, the disbelief, the denial, the magical wish that this was a bad dream, an illusion.

A small death? Obviously a paradox. No death is small. The death of any person we know or have a relationship with touches us, moves us, changes us in many ways.

I cried for all of us - for them in their sorrow and pain, and especially for myself because it could happen to me, for my failure to give, love, understand, accept. With the next child - with the next person - with the next stranger - I'll try to remember.