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## DEATH AS HOMECOMING

*By Abraham J. Heschel*

OUR FIRST QUESTION is to what end and upon what right do we think about the strange and totally inaccessible subject of death? The answer is because of the supreme certainty we have about the existence of man: that it cannot endure without a sense of meaning. But existence embraces both life and death, and in a way death is the test of the meaning of life. If death is devoid of meaning, then life is absurd. Life's ultimate meaning remains obscure unless it is reflected upon in the face of death.

The fact of dying must be a major factor in our understanding of living. Yet only few of us have come face to face with death as a problem or a challenge. There is a slowness, a delay, a neglect on our part to think about it. For the subject is not exciting, but rather strange and shocking.

What characterizes modern man's attitude toward death is escapism, disregard of its harsh reality, even a tendency to obliterate grief. He is entering, however, a new age of search for meaning of existence, and all cardinal issues will have to be faced.

Death is grim, harsh, cruel, a source of infinite grief. Our first reaction is consternation. We are stunned and distraught. Slowly, our sense of dismay is followed by a sense of mystery. Suddenly, a whole life has veiled itself in secrecy. Our speech stops, our understanding fails. In the presence of death there is only silence, and a sense of awe.

Is death nothing but an obliteration, an absolute negation? The view of death is affected by our understanding of life. If life is sensed as a surprise, as a gift, defying explanation, then death ceases to be a radical, absolute negation of what life stands for. For both life and death are aspects of a greater mystery, the mystery of being, the mystery of creation. Over and above the preciousness of particular existence stands the marvel of its being related to the infinite mystery of being or creation.

Death, then, is not simply man's coming to an end. It is also entering a beginning.

There is, furthermore, the mystery of my personal existence. The problem of how and whether I am going to be after I die is profoundly related to the problem of who and how I was before I was born. The mystery of an afterlife is related to the mystery of preexistence. A soul does not grow out of nothing. Does it, then, perish and dissolve in nothing?

Human life is on its way from a great distance; it has gone through ages of experience, of growing, suffering, insight, action. We are what we are by what we come from. There is a vast continuum preceding individual existence, and it is a legitimate surmise to assume that there is a continuum following individual existence. Human living is always being under way, and death is not the final destination.

In the language of the Bible to die, to be buried, is said to be "gathered to his people" (Genesis 25:8). They "were gathered to their fathers" (Judges 2:10). "When your days are fulfilled to go to be with your fathers" (I Chronicles 17:11).

Do souls become dust? Does spirit turn to ashes? How can souls, capable of creating immortal words, immortal works of thought and art, be completely dissolved, vanish forever?

Others may counter: The belief that man may have a share in eternal life is not only beyond proof; it is even presumptuous. Who could seriously maintain that members of the human species, a class of mammals, will attain eternity? What image of humanity is presupposed by the belief in immortality?

Indeed, man's hope for eternal life presupposes that there is something about man that is worthy of eternity, that has some affinity to what is divine, that is made in the likeness of the divine.

The biblical account of creation is couched in the language of mystery. Nothing is said about the intention or the plan that preceded the creation of heaven and earth. The Bible does not begin: "And God said: Let us create heaven and earth." All we hear about is the mystery of God's creative act, and not a word about intention or meaning. The same applies to the creation of all other beings. We only hear what He does, not what He thinks. "And God said: Let there be." The creation of man, however, is preceded by a forecast. "And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The act of man's creation is preceded by an utterance of His intention; God's knowledge of man precedes man's coming into being. God knows him before He creates him. Man's being is rooted in his being known about. It is the creation of man that opens a glimpse into the thought of God, into the meaning beyond the mystery.

"And God said: Let us make man in our image [*tzelem*], after our likeness [*demut*]. . . . And God created man in His image, in the image of God created He him" (Genesis 1:26 f.).

These words, which are repeated in the opening words of the fifth chapter of Genesis — "This is the book of the generations of man. When God created man, He made him in the likeness [*demut*] of God" — contain, according to Jewish tradition, the fundamental statement about the nature and meaning of man.

In many religions, man is regarded as an image of a god. Yet the meaning of such regard depends on the meaning of the god whom man resembles. If the god is regarded as a man magnified, if the gods are conceived of in the image of man, then such regard tells us little about the nature and destiny of man. Where God is one among many gods, where the word *divine* is used as mere hyperbolic expression, where the difference between God and man is but a difference in degree, than an expression such as "the divine image of man" is equal in meaning to the idea of the supreme in man. It is only in the light of what the biblical man thinks of God — namely, a Being who created heaven and earth, the God of justice and compassion, the master of nature and history who transcends nature and history — that the idea of man having been created in the

image of God refers to the supreme mystery of man, of his nature and existence.

Image and likeness of God. What these momentous words are trying to convey has never ceased to baffle the biblical reader. In the Bible, *tzelem*, the word for "image," is nearly always used in a derogatory sense, denoting idolatrous images. (Numbers 33:52; I Samuel 6:5, 6, 11; II Kings 11:18; Ezekiel 7:20, 16:17, 23:14; II Chronicles 23:17). It is a cardinal sin to fashion an image of God. The same applies to *demut*, the word for "likeness."

"To whom will ye liken God? Or what likeness [*demut*] will ye compare to Him?" (Isaiah 40:18). "To whom will ye liken Me, and make Me equal, and compare Me, that we may be like?" (Isaiah 46:5). "For who in the skies can be compared unto the Lord, who among the sons of might can be likened unto the Lord?" (Psalms 89:7).

God is divine, and man is human. This contrast underlies all biblical thinking. God is never human, and man is never divine. "I will not execute the fierceness of Mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man" (Hosea 11:9). "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent" (Numbers 23:19).

Thus the likeness of God means the likeness of Him who is unlike man. The likeness of God means the likeness of Him compared with whom all else is like nothing.

Indeed, the words "image and likeness of God" conceal more than they reveal. They signify something which we can neither comprehend nor verify. For what is our image? What is our likeness? Is there anything about man that may be compared with God? Our eyes do not see it; our minds cannot grasp it. Taken literally, these words are absurd, if not blasphemous. And still they hold the most important truth about the meaning of man.

Obscure as the meaning of these terms is, they undoubtedly denote something *unearthly*, something that belongs to the sphere of God. *Demut* and *tzelem* are of a higher sort of being than the things created in the six days. This, it seems, is what the verse intends to convey: Man partakes of an unearthly divine sort of being.

An idea is relevant if it serves as an answer to a question. To understand the relevance of "the divine image and likeness," we must try to ascertain the question which it comes to answer.

Paradoxically, the problem of man arises more frequently, as the problem of death than as the problem of life. It is an important fact, however, that unlike other Oriental religions, where the preoccupation with death was the central issue of religious thinking, the Bible rarely deals with death as a problem.

There is no rebellion against death, no bitterness over its sting, no preoccupation with the afterlife. In striking contrast to its two great neighboring civilizations, Egypt with its intense preoccupation with the afterlife, and Babylonia with the epic of Gilgamesh who wanders in search of immortal life, the story of the descent of Ishtar, and the legend of Nergal and Ereshkigal, the Bible is reticent in speaking about these issues. The Hebrew Bible calls for concern for the problem of living rather than the problem of dying.

Its central concern is not, as in the Gilgamesh epic, how to escape death, but rather how to sanctify life.

Man is man not because of what he has in common with the earth, but *because of what he has in common with God.* The Greek thinkers sought to understand man as *a part of the universe*; the Prophets sought to understand man as *a partner of God.*

It is a concern and a task that man has in common with God.

The intention is not to identify "the image and likeness" with a particular quality or attribute of man, such as reason, speech, power, or skill. It does not refer to something which in later systems was called "the best in man," "the divine spark," "the eternal spirit," or "the immortal element" in man. It is the whole man and every man who was made in the image and likeness of God. It is both body and soul, sage and fool, saint and sinner, man in his joy and in his grief, in his righteousness and wickedness. The image is not in man; it is man.

The basic dignity of man is not made up of his achievements, virtues, or special talents. It is inherent in his very being. The commandment "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18) calls upon us to love not only the virtuous and the wise but also the vicious and the stupid man. The Rabbis

have, indeed, interpreted the commandment to imply that even a criminal remains our neighbor (Pesahim, 75a).

The belief in the immortality of the soul seems to be derived from the belief that man is created in God's image. In Solomon's Wisdom (2:23 f.) we read: "For God created man for immortality, and made him the image of his own peculiar nature; but by the envy of the devil death entered into the world."

According to the Psalmist, however, it seems that not all people are saved from being perished. It requires an act of God's ransoming the soul from the power of Sheol for the soul to be saved.

While there is no assurance that all souls are saved from Sheol, the Psalmist does express the belief that some souls are saved.

Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
Death shall be their shepherd;  
Straight to the grave they descend,  
And their form shall waste away. . . .  
But God will ransom my soul from  
the power of Sheol,  
For He will receive me.

(Psalms 49:14-15)

Thou dost guide me with Thy counsel  
And afterward Thou wilt receive me  
to glory.

(Psalms 73:24)

While the theme of image and likeness of God implies no dichotomy of spirit and body, another theme describing man's coming into being implies such a dichotomy.

"The Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Here the distinction is sharply drawn between the aspect of man that is derived from dust and the aspect of man that goes back to God. In the spirit of these words Ecclesiastes (12:7) speaks of the eternity of the soul: "The dust returns to earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

"It is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand" (Job 32:8).

The song of Moses calls upon man: "O that they would consider their latter end" (Deuteronomy 32:29). Man is made of the dust of the earth, and dying is "going the way of all the earth" (Joshua 23:14; I Kings 2:1-2). Death is "a return to the ground, for from it you were taken: For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). [Yet the general conception is not of death as a return to dust, a dissolving into nothing.]

There is a certainty of faith that the human soul will not be lost but rather be "bound in the bundle of living in the care of the Lord your God" (see I Samuel 25:29).

We are told:

Our existence carries eternity within itself. "He planted life eternal within us." Because we can do the eternal at any moment, the will of God, dying too is doing the will of God. Just as being is obedience to the Creator, so dying is returning to the Source.

Death may be a supreme spiritual act, turning oneself over to eternity: The moment of death, a moment of ecstasy. A moment of no return to vanity.

Thus afterlife is felt to be a reunion and all of life a preparation for it. The Talmud compares this world to a wedding. Said Rabbi Bunam, "If a man makes every preparation for the wedding feast but forgets to purchase a wedding ring, the marriage cannot take place." Similarly, a man may labor all his life, but if he forgets to acquire the means — to acquire the ring — the instrument of sanctifying himself to God, he will not be able to enter the life eternal.

Death may be the beginning of exaltation, an ultimate celebration, a reunion of the divine image with the divine source of being.

Dust returns to dust, while the image, the divine stake in man, is restored to the bundle of life.

Death is not sensed as a defeat but as a summation, an arrival, a conclusion.

"O God, the soul whom Thou hast placed within me is pure. Thou hast created it; Thou hast formed it; Thou hast breathed it into me. Thou preservest it within me; Thou wilt take it from me and restore it to me in the hereafter. So long as

the soul is within me, I offer thanks before Thee. . . . Lord of all souls. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who restorest the souls to the dead."

The meaning of death is in return, regardless of whether it results in a continuation of individual consciousness or in merging into a greater whole.

We are what we are by what we come from. We achieve what we do by what we hope for.

Our ultimate hope has no specific content. Our hope is God. We trust that He will not desert those who trust in Him.

O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!  
 Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 thou discernest my thoughts from afar.  
 Thou searchest out my path and my lying down  
 and art acquainted with all my ways.  
 Even before a word is on my tongue,  
 lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.  
 Thou dost beset me behind and before,  
 and layest thy hand upon me.  
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
 it is high, I cannot attain it.  
 Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
 Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!  
 If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!  
 If I take the wings of the morning  
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
 even there thy hand shall lead me,  
 and thy right hand shall hold me.  
 If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,  
 and the light about me be night,"  
 even the darkness is not dark to thee,  
 the night is bright as the day;  
 for darkness is as light with thee.

(Psalms 139:1-12)

The ultimate hope for a life beyond the grave was not born in reflection about the soul but rather in reflection about God and what He does and means to the soul. God's being a shelter and a refuge forever held meaning to life here and now as well as to life beyond.

The meaning as well as mode of being which man hopes to

attain beyond the threshold of dying remains an impenetrable mystery. Yet it is the thought of being in God's knowing that may be both the root and the symbol of the ultimate hope.

As said above, man's being in the world is, according to the Bible, preceded by man's being known to God. Human existence follows divine anticipation. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). We live in the universe of His knowing.

What guides and sustains our thinking about afterlife is relatedness to God. Apart from such relatedness and trust, there is no ground for such a hope.

The real issue is whether my existence here and now is exclusively being-in-the-world or whether it is also being-in-God's-knowledge, whether being in the world is not also living in the presence of God, transcended by His knowing, escorted by His radiance.

Righteous men are regarded as living even after they die (Berakhot 18a). Just as there is a life that is really death—"The wicked are dead while they are alive" (Berakhot 18b)—so there is death that is really life.

It is the experience that those who trust in Him are not abandoned while being in the world that gives strength to the hope of not being abandoned after passing the threshold of death and leaving the world.

Daily we pray: "In Thy hand are the souls of the living and the dead as it is written 'In His hand is the soul of every living thing, and the spirit of every human being'" (Job 12:10). "Into Thy hand I commit my spirit, O Lord, faithful God Thou savest me" (Psalm 31:6).

Life after death seems to be a transposition to a unique mode of being, presumably to being in the universe of divine knowing.

The primary topic of biblical thinking is not man's knowledge of God but man's being known by God. Man's awareness of God is not awareness of God as an object of thinking but of a subject. Awareness of God is awareness of being thought of by God, of being an object of His concern, of His expectation.

Surviving after death, we hope, is surviving as a thought of God.

The question that looms in relation to my own self is: Am I worthy of surviving, of being a thought of God? What is it about myself or my existence that has affinity to eternity?

Survival beyond death carries, according to Judaism, demands and obligations during life here and now. Conditions are attached to the hope of survival.

Eternity is not an automatic consequence of sheer being, and survival is not an unconditional epilogue of living. It must be achieved, earned.

Eternal is a moment of simultaneity of the human and the divine, a moment in which God and man meet.

The religious quest is a quest of the contemporaneity of God.

Simultaneity with God is the only element of permanence in the world.

In speaking of God we have faith and a sense of presence, but no image. In speaking of life after death we have hope and a sense of trust, but no image.

Death, what follows death, is a mystery defying imagination. Facing it, our language is silence. Yet while the body descends into the grave, trust remains, hope persists and enters a simile.

Marvelous and beautiful is life in the body, but more marvelous and more beautiful is life in a word. The word is greater than world; by the word of God all was created. The Book, Scripture, is an everlasting constellation of holy words. When a good man dies, his soul becomes a word and lives in God's book.

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

The decisive message of this passage is that death is not the final act, that there will be an awakening of those who sleep in the dust.

This is the hope that in dying I become a seed and that after I decay I am born again. Must the self remain the same rather than become the seed of a new self, a new being?

We trust Him who made us what we are and will make of us what He pleases.

In spite of the excellence which the afterlife holds in store

for the righteous, there is no craving for death in the history of Jewish piety. While it is true that the condition of the life beyond is eternity, it was maintained that the quality of living here and now has an excellence not given in the afterlife: freedom, serving Him in freedom. It is greater to struggle on earth than to be an angel in heaven. Earthly life, mortal life, is precisely the arena where the covenant between God and man must be fulfilled.

The love of life calls for resistance to death, resistance to the last, unconditionally.

Life here is where partnership abides between God and man. With death, man surrenders his freedom, and only God's will is done. The soul is receptive, there is no room for freedom.

Life here and now is the task. Every moment can be an achievement.

The body is not a prison, but an opportunity. Still for all its glory, life here and now is regarded as a vestibule, as preparation. Yet no one looked forward with pleasure to life after death.

Just because the afterlife is a completion, life here and now is an opportunity, and it was considered a loss to leave the realm of here and now because once the threshold is crossed the opportunity is gone.

Life is revealing of the divine, while death is concealing. To be alive is to be in the midst of the people, and we must resist being taken away from the midst of the people. But once the moment of parting comes, a benediction is uttered: Blessed be Thou, our God, King of the universe, the true Judge. Amen.

We must distinguish between being human and human being. We are born human beings. What we must acquire is being human. Being human is the essential — the decisive — achievement of a human being.

Human being finds its end in organic dissolution. But being human is not an organic substance, it is an action and a radiance of the personhood of man. The unity, the sum total of moments of personhood, is a presence that goes on in terms surpassing mere existence.

The organic process is of ambiguous significance in regard to the formation of being human. On the one hand, the or-

ganic process may compel the person to struggle for realization, but it is not always promoting it. Organic living is certainly not the total form of living.

The meaning of existence is in the sanctification of time, in lending eternity to the moments. Being human is a quest for the lasting.

Craving for God, longing for immediate perception of the divine, for emancipation from selfish desires and inclinations — such freedom can only be achieved beyond death.

It is a distortion to characterize the life of man as moving toward death. Death is the end of the road, and while moving along the long road of days and nights, we are really moving toward living, acting, achieving. Death is the end of the road, but not its meaning, not a refutation of living. That every moment of life is a step toward death is a mechanical view. Every moment of life is a new arrival, a new beginning. Those who say that we die every day, that every moment deprives us of a portion of life, look at moments as time past. Looking at moments as time present, every moment is a new arrival, a new beginning.

A man's kind deeds are used by the Lord as seeds for the planting of trees in the Garden of Eden. Each man brings about his own trees; each man creates his own Garden of Eden. In Judaism the primary dimension of existence in which meaning is both sensed and created is the dimension of deeds. Sacred acts, deeds of kindness, not only imitate the divine, they represent the divine.

Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai states: "Honor the *mitzvot*, for the *mitzvot* are my deputies, and a deputy is endowed with the authority of his principal. If you honor the *mitzvot*, it is as if you honored Me; if you dishonor them, it is as if you dishonored Me."

And the secret of spiritual living is in the sense for the ultimacy of each moment, for its sacred uniqueness, for its once-and-for-allness. It is this sense that enables us to put all our strength into sanctifying an instant by doing the holy.

Every moment is a kingdom wherein every one of us is a king by the grace of God. Does the king know what to do with his might? Our task is to design a deed, a pyramid of deeds.

There are two separate themes: death and after-death.

Death we must seek to understand in relation to life. After-death transcends that relation and must be thought of in different terms.

Death is not understood as the end of being but rather as the end of doing. As such it is a dramatic break, a radical event: cessation of doing.

We do not dwell on death. We dwell on the preciousness of every moment. Things of space vanish. Moments of time never pass away. Time is the clue to the meaning of life and death. Time lived with meaning thus is a disclosure of the eternal.

The problem is not how to mitigate the fear of death but how to conceive the meaning of death to which the meaning of life is related.

From the perspective of Love, the death of an individual is absurd and without consolation. No argument can be advanced that would offer comfort to those who mourn. The words we offer to those in mourning — "May the Lord comfort you among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem" — carry the hope that there is comfort for those who mourn just as there is comfort for Jerusalem when in ruin.

The thought of death is a necessary component for human existence. It enables us to be open to ultimate demands regardless of personal needs.

Anxiety about death is really an anxiety about the ultimate confrontation that follows death. In other words, it is an anxiety about the afterlife rather than about dying itself.

Life with its conflicts and contradictions, absurdities and perplexities, hurts us with a puzzlement that may lead to despair. Afterlife or the hope for the afterlife is the hope for clarification, a hope for a participation in understanding the enigma of life on earth.

One motif that is continually coming to the fore in the research dealing with attitudes toward death in terminally ill patients is "that the crisis is often not the fact of oncoming death per se, of man's insurmountable finiteness, but rather the waste of limited years, the unassayed tasks, the lacked opportunities, the talents withering in disuse, the avoidable evils which have been done. The tragedy which is underlined is that man dies

prematurely and without dignity, that death has not become really his 'own.'"\*

There is a paradox in relation to life. To be alive is cherished as the highest value. Yet when faced with the choice of either living or committing murder, for example, we are told, Be killed rather than kill. In the course of the ages, we have been admonished to cultivate readiness to die for the sake of sanctifying the name of God.

[Death is the radical refutation of man's power and a stark reminder of the necessity to relate to a meaning which lies beyond the dimension of human time. Humanity without death would be arrogance without end. Nobility has its root in humanity, and humanity derived much of its power from the thought of death.]

[Death refutes the deification and distorts the arrogance of man.]

He is God; what he does is right, for all his ways are just; God of faithfulness and without wrong, just and right is he.

Just art thou, O Lord, in causing death and life; thou in whose hand all living beings are kept, far be it from thee to blot out our remembrance; let thy eyes be open to us in mercy; for thine, O Lord, is mercy and forgiveness.

We know, O Lord, that thy judgment is just; thou art right when thou speakest, and justified when thou givest sentence; one must not find fault with thy manner of judging. Thou art righteous, O Lord, and thy judgment is right.

True and righteous Judge, blessed art thou, all whose judgments are righteous and true.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Daily Prayer Book, from the Burial Service

In a broken world, cessation of living is a necessity. But someday "He will swallow up death for ever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8).

[When Rabbi Bunam was lying on his deathbed his wife

\*Herman Feifel, *The Meaning of Death*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1959, p. 127.

wept bitterly. When he noticed it he said to her, "Why do you cry? All my life has been given me merely that I might learn how to die."

The afterlife is thought of entirely in terms of one's trust in God.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me.

(Psalms 23:4)

We do not know how to die in grace, because we do not know how to grow old gracefully. Growing old must be a process of cleansing the self, a way of getting ready for ultimate confrontation.

[If life is a pilgrimage, death is an arrival, a celebration. The last word should be neither craving nor bitterness, but peace, gratitude.]

We have been given so much. Why is the outcome of our lives, the sum of our achievements, so little?

[Our embarrassment is like an abyss. Whatever we give away is so much less than what we receive. Perhaps this is the meaning of dying: to give one's whole self away.]

Death is not seen as mere ruin and disaster. It is felt to be a loss of further possibilities to experience and to enhance the glory and goodness of God here and now. It is not a liquidation but a summation, the end of a prelude to a symphony of which we only have a vague inkling of hope. The prelude is infinitely rich in possibilities of either enhancing or frustrating God's patient, ongoing efforts to redeem the world.

Death is the end of what we can do in being partners to redemption. The life that follows must be earned while we are here. It does not come out of nothing; it is an ingathering, the harvest of eternal moments achieved while on earth.

Unless we cultivate sensitivity to the glory while here, unless we learn how to experience a foretaste of heaven while on earth, what can there be in store for us in life to come? The

seed of life eternal is planted within us here and now. But a seed is wasted when placed on stone, into souls that die while the body is still alive.

The greatest problem is not how to continue but how to exalt our existence. The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending to the grave. Eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual presence. He has planted in us the seed of eternal life. The world to come is not only a hereafter but also a herenow.

Our greatest problem is not how to continue but how to return. "How can I repay unto the Lord all his bountiful dealings with me?" (Psalms 116:12). When life is an answer, death is a homecoming. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalms 116:14). For our greatest problem is but a resonance of God's concern: How can I repay unto man all his bountiful dealings with me? "For the mercy of God endureth forever."

This is the meaning of existence: to reconcile liberty with service, the passing with the lasting, to weave the threads of temporality into the fabric of eternity.

The deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that his destiny is to aid, to serve. We have to conquer in order to succumb; we have to acquire in order to give away; we have to triumph in order to be overwhelmed. Man has to understand in order to believe, to know in order to accept. The aspiration is to obtain; the perfection is to dispense. This is the meaning of death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine. Death so understood will not be distorted by the craving for immortality, for this act of giving away is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift of life. For the pious man it is a privilege to die.