

Why Not Talk About Death?

Adam Frank



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Death is not everyone's favorite subject.

Many people just don't want to talk about how we face death, what it means to live in the face of death — or, even, about our encounters with the death of others. As a group, Americans, especially, just don't want to talk about death at all.

This, to me, is a remarkable opportunity we're missing.

Death is the final and most complete of mysteries. Why can't we find a way to break through the discomfort and the taboo and take, at least, some time to collectively look death in the eye with grace and an inquisitive spirit? Why can't we have that kind of discussion? Wouldn't we all be better — and be better humans — for it?

When I was 9 years old, my brother was killed in a car accident. His loss affected my view not only of my own life, but also of my life set against stars (I was already a science/astronomy-crazy kid). In many ways, my brother's death — so terrifying and confusing at the time — also set me a path that made the universe a source of profound wonder, awe and joy.

As hard as it is for me to reflect on that story, my experience made me keenly aware of how much death in our culture is hidden away. It usually occurs in hospitals far from our homes. But

for most of human history, we died where we lived. And, in this way, as much as we might fear it, death was at least part of our experience. The loss of death's natural place in our streamlined lives is, it seems, a loss for all of us.

That's because, in the end, finding a place for this great mystery allows us to open an essential human doorway. It invites us to think, reflect, feel and finally ask each other essential questions:

-- What is this life?

-- What is to live knowing that we will die?

-- Knowing that death is part of life, how can we live more fully, completely and with compassion?

Along with several others, I talked to documentarian Helen Whitney about my experiences with death for the documentary [Into The Night: Experiences of Life and Death](#) (airing tonight on PBS).

There are conversations we could all have — and I am hopeful that we may be ready to begin learning how to have them.