

DEATH AS A MOTHER

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Peter Kreeft has been hailed as the second coming of C. S. Lewis. A professor of philosophy at Boston College, Kreeft earned his PhD at Fordham. His uncanny ability to ask the right questions grows out of his training in philosophy and combines with his disarming sense of humor to make him a formidable apologist for Christianity. Among his published works are *Between Heaven and Hell*, *The Unaborted Socrates*, and *Making Sense Out of Suffering*.

One of Kreeft's earlier books, entitled *Love is Stronger than Death*, was originally published by Harper & Row in 1979. Ignatius Press republished it in 1992. In his introduction Kreeft makes four vital points. First, "life is either totally meaningful or totally meaningless, depending on what death is. Therefore we had better try to find out what death is."

This leads logically to his second point: "Much has been written lately on the medical and psychological aspects of death, and on the cultural and sociological aspects of death; but the primary question is surely the philosophical one, What is death? How we approach death, feel about death, cope with death, and actually die depends on what death is. What is its essence, its meaning? That is what we explore in this book."

Third, Kreeft explains that his goal in writing this book "is not to be current, challenging, clever, comprehensive, contemporary, complete, or comforting—only true. I write today about death not because it is a timely topic but because it is a timeless topic. What is timeless is always timely. The 'spirit of the times' is soon dated; what is most up to date is most quickly out of date, like a date itself. I seek, like Thoreau, to 'read not the *Times*; read the eternities.' If this sounds snobbish, it shouldn't; it is the opposite of snobbery. The merely avant-garde thinker is the real snob. The object of his snobbery is not the living but the dead, the great 'silent majority' of pre-contemporary thinkers who are disenfranchised not by accident of birth but by accident of death. I want to extend the franchise; I want to practice what Chesterton called 'the democracy of the dead.' For most of what I have learned about death I have learned from the dead.

"One last point: this book is condensed. When I read the average three-hundred-page book, I wish the author had condensed it to one hundred pages. Words and time are two of our most precious commodities. I shall try to use both sparingly. Such a book should be read in a special way: slowly and thoughtfully. . . . Don't rush; relish, savor, pause, explore, poke around. Enjoy."

Perhaps it strikes you as a bit incongruous to invite the reader to "enjoy" a book about death. But having read it, I find myself echoing Kreeft's invitation. Kreeft observes that "at every stage of our journey we meet death, the same death. But death is not the same to us at every stage of our journey." Therefore, consider the proposition that

death wears five different faces. Death is an enemy. Death is a stranger. Death is a friend. Death is a mother. Death is a lover. And the sequence is important. We must begin at the beginning. We must confront death as an enemy, and as a stranger, before we can see death as a friend, a mother and a lover.

Commenting on the recent literature that encourages us and our children to accept death as a natural part of life, Kreeft says it “fails to see death as an enemy; and even if it truly causes us to see death as a friend instead of ignoring it or treating it as a stranger, the idea is premature. Like a radically premature baby, its life expectancy is not great. It is an answer without a question; it comes too soon. It is like an ideological indoctrination given to a docile, unquestioning child. . . . Perhaps the acceptance of death as a friend is the answer (or at least an answer), but death as an enemy is the question.”

After we have seen death as an enemy, as a stranger, and as a friend, we come to death as a mother. And although at first it might seem an unlikely image, Kreeft suggests, “Let us suppose that dying is a kind of being born.”

“The process of being born looks like the process of dying. Labor and delivery is the most radical and rapid change a human body ever experiences. We are thrust violently out of a comfortable, homey, confining place. We seem to fight for air as we are forcibly expelled from our old body, the womb. In the womb, we were not clearly conscious of our body as distinct from the womb; the whole womb was our body. Now that we are being expelled from it, it seems as if we are being expelled from our body, rather than being born into our body. Just so, when we die, it seems as if we are separated from the body, not that our true body is then born.

“The place into which we are thrust does not appear as home but as ‘unhomely,’ *unheimlich*, uncanny, terrifying, the great unknown behind the door. Yet it is in fact our truer home, just as the earth is more ours than the womb, which is not our womb but our mother’s womb. We have only tenanted it; it was ours only on loan. So the world after death is more ours than this world, which is only tenanted. . . .

“Unless we are told by some word from another world, by some outside observer who stands to us as we stand to a fetus, we do not know from our experience of this world alone whether or not death is a birth and the fulfillment of our deepest desire, just as the fetus cannot know (as we objective observers can) whether birth is its fulfillment, until it happens. . . . Unless we are told by some word from another world—but that word can be accepted only by faith, by trust in the report based on trust in the reporter. It cannot be proved by worldly experience and reason. . . .

“When a few people do seem to catch a glimpse of the other shore, whether through mystical experience or through medical death (or near death) and resuscitation, it is only a distant glimpse; it is a vision of another country from afar, not a living in it. (In fact, since they return, it is not an experience of true death, since death is essentially irreversible, nonreturnable, a one-way trip. No one has simply returned from death.

Even Jesus did not return to his mortal body but resurrected to his immortal body.) One feature reported by all such travelers is the ineffability of the experience: 'Words can't describe it.' For language is the horizon of meaning, or at least of communication; and at death the ship of self passes under that horizon.

"Shortly after birth, how much does a baby know of this world? About that much, or less, in our analogy, do such travelers in the country of death know of life in the next world. We should probably take their accounts seriously, but only as we should take the account of a baby. The death-traveler, like the birth-traveler, is a neophyte; he cannot comprehend his new world at first any more than a newborn baby can. There is indescribably more to it.

"Imagine a little fetus; here it is, ejected from the womb, traveling the great journey down the birth canal; now it plops out into the world. It seems to be born. But its umbilical cord is not yet cut; therefore it is not yet born, not irreversibly born.

Through an extremely unusual feat of medical technology, it might be returned to the womb. Just so, a dying patient who seems, both to himself and to others, to have died, but is then resuscitated, has not died—not irreversibly died. He has not crossed 'the border.' Now suppose this fetus, somehow put back into the womb, tells another fetus about 'life after birth.' (Suppose there is a fetus language and communication, for the sake of the story and its parallelism.) It would use such words as life or pleasure or consciousness to describe life outside the womb. Such words would mean something like fetus life, fetus pleasure, and fetus consciousness, but also something vastly different. . . . Just so does our present language use words like bliss, vision, union, and so forth to describe life after death. These words are meaningful symbols, pointers down an infinite corridor; they can point our thought in the right direction, but they cannot carry it to its end. . . .

"Both egresses—from the womb and from the world—are unfree, unwilling, unasked for. The two most important things that happen to us in this world are the only two in which we have absolutely no choice. How fortunate! For if we were asked, we would surely prefer the security of the womb, both wombs.

"But if death is like birth, then 'we're like eggs at present. And you can't just go on being a good egg forever. You must hatch or go bad.' The 'immortality pill' would prevent us from hatching, and thus make us go bad. What a basket of rotten eggs a world of immortals would be! A deathless life would be like a birthless fetus. . . .

"A further consequence of our thought experiment is that just as the little world of the womb is part of the unimaginably larger world that opens up to us at birth, so this world is part of—and not apart from—an unimaginably larger world that opens up to us at death. Death is not entering a coffin, a confined box in the earth. It is precisely leaving a confined box in the earth! For that is what our present body is, a confined box in the earth. . . .

“Both our mother and our earth are our greater body; narrowing the boundaries of the body to the epidermis is not innate but learned. I like to call it ‘epidermiolatry,’ idolatry of the epidermis. . . .

“The universe is our mother. Time is her pregnancy. ‘The whole creation has been groaning in travail together.’ Our physical birth is her conception, the first appearance in time of this individual soul-baby. Our body’s individual life is the universe’s second pregnancy, a pregnancy within a pregnancy. Her first pregnancy bore our body; the second bears our soul. The goal of the first is a bodily life that ends in death, a life that gives itself up, like the placenta, to bear another, a soul-baby. Life is a process down the cosmic birth canal, a ‘being-towards-death.’

The goal of the second pregnancy, the goal of our body’s life, is also a death, a death to the womb-within-a-womb that is our body, for the purpose of being born into a deathless life. Our death is a mother. It gives itself up to bear life.”

Kreeft is obviously widely read, and his copious notes give credit where credit is due. But he does not make any reference to Martin Luther’s “A Sermon on Preparing to Die” (AE 42:99-115). It was intriguing, after reading Kreeft on death as a mother, however, to go back and reread these words of Luther: “Just as an infant is born with peril and pain from the small abode of its mother’s womb into this immense heaven and earth, that is, into this world, so man departs this life through the narrow gate of death. And although the heavens and the earth in which we dwell at present seem large and wide to us, they are nevertheless much narrower and smaller than the mother’s womb in comparison with the future heaven. Therefore, the death of the dear saints is called a new birth, and their feast day is known in Latin as *natale*, that is, the day of their birth. However, the narrow passage of death makes us think of this life as expansive and the life beyond as confined. Therefore, we must believe this and learn a lesson from the physical birth of a child, as Christ declares, ‘When a woman is in travail she has sorrow; but when she has recovered, she no longer remembers the anguish, since a child is born by her into the world’ (John 16:21). So it is that in dying we must bear this anguish and know that a large mansion and joy will follow (John 14:2).”