

Comment on Katy Butler's *Knocking on Heaven's Door*

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I truly appreciate the author's courage to share her personal experience and feelings as well as various practical information about dying. It was very helpful for me as I recently lost my father and am struggling with my mother's dementia. Many other people must have experienced, are experiencing, and/or will experience similar events. The book must be enormously useful for them to go through their own experiences.

As I went through the book, I thought about three areas where the author could have dug deeper and others might be able to benefit even more.

First, I wished the author had discussed some more books on death and dying, including: Callanan and Kelley (1992), Callanan (2008), and Levine (1982). Both of Callanan's books are rich in content and moving. What her books truly convey can be summarized in the following quote:

"You have learned powerful and uplifting lessons from this dying person you love, you have shared them with others, and you will carry this knowledge forward into any future dying experiences you may have. Now you can see ahead to your own dying--not in fear, but as a most brilliant opportunity to write the last chapter of your life in a way that truly reflects the unique, caring, and generous person that you are. Appreciate what you have done, and who you are."

Levine too is very inspiring, with a lot of eye-opening statements, such as the following:

"Perhaps real acceptance is the first time we take death within. Where death is not the enemy but instead becomes the great teacher that directs us toward our fear and encourages us to relate to it instead of from it. Death's teaching is to relate to your life as a whole rather than some fractured reality from which you wish to escape."

These books seem to complement Butler on many fronts. In addition, I felt that the author should have discussed Kübler-Ross (1969) or any of her other books.

Second, I wished the author had discussed the relevance of attachment theory (as pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth) to relationship issues. Throughout the author's experience,

the relationship issues are visible. Much of these seem to stem from insecure attachment. With some knowledge of attachment theory, the author could have been more aware of what were going on among the family members. Since issues associated with insecure attachment are ingrained deep in the unconsciousness, it will be extremely difficult to squarely face them. For most people, the first crack at the issues can be through intellectual understanding of the mechanism underlying the phenomena as described in attachment theory.

Third, I wished the author had benefited more from Buddhism. While there were numerous references to Buddhism, the majority was about rituals. Rituals too can be helpful, but what Buddhism can offer is much deeper. Unfortunately, I was not sure whether the author was actually benefiting from that part of Buddhism. For example, while she discusses the “two arrows,” basically the difference between the pain (physical, emotional, etc.) and the suffering (ringing from the pain), she seemed to have continued to “suffer” throughout the process. Although the author cites Sogyal Rinpoche (1992), little seems to have been gained from the book. For example, by referring to a Tibetan mystic, Sogyal Rinpoche tries to teach us the following point:

“[H]e was not really impressed by someone who could turn the floor into the ceiling or fire into water. A real miracle, he said, was if someone could liberate just one emotion.”

She could also have looked into Bernhard (2010), which discusses various teachings of Buddhism.

In fact, the second and third areas discussed above are strongly connected. One of the best ways to overcome attachment insecurity would be through mindfulness (one of the main themes in Buddhism) as pointed out by Siegel (2007). It would require a lot of practice, but it may be the best bet.

Finally, I would like to point out the current situation in Japan. As you might know, Japan is a rapidly graying country, with a much higher proportion of the senior population. We can also suspect that its high life expectancy is partly supported by unnecessarily prolonged lives, e.g., using a feeding tube. Thus, the end-of-life issues have been a very hot topic in Japan. Reflecting this condition, dozens of books on natural death were published during the past several years. At the same time, also in Japan, death and dying is increasingly more like a commodity, as can be seen in the movie film *Departures* (2008). Note that this film was inspired by Aoki (2002), which is referred to by the author. As a result, the exploding senior population and increasingly dehumanized treatment of death and dying collide with unprecedented consequences. I think that more information about the Japanese situation would be quite useful in other parts of the world.

References

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