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| Reflections on DeathGustave DreifussLecture presented in a workshop, organized by a program for psychotherapy in Jungian orientation, the Kibbutz College, Tel Aviv. We are almost daily confronted with death, death of soldiers, victims of terror and accidents, of Palestinians, but also victims of earthquakes and floods. We register this but are not personally touched. Yet, when somebody close to us dies, it is another matter. We mourn, we suffer, we cry. The encounter with death brings on a reflection on our own mortality. Thus I came to write this paper by reflecting on my own mortality.Nobody can really know what death is, but from the very beginning of recorded history, death has been a constant preoccupation of the human soul and continues to be so today. The mystery of death and the mystery of birth are dealt with in mythologies of all peoples, in religion and in mysticism and in all forms of art, because death and birth transcend human understanding. Personal reflectionsLet me first say something about my personal experience in confrontation with death. I was five years old when my grandmother who was over 80 years old and no longer able to take care of herself, came to live with us. I had a warm contact with her. Then, after one or two years, she died peacefully. I can still see my father crying, expressing his sadness. This made a big impression on me.When I was 8 years old, a classmate died of a terminal illness. The class together with the teacher mourned this untimely death.At the age of 10, I saw several people standing by a stream, which runs through a part of Zurich. Coming closer, I saw some men in a boat lifting a dead man’s body out of the water. This image of the dead man stayed with me for several days or weeks. At the age of 13, I was informed that a cousin and friend had died by a bee sting. When I was 21 years old, a student-friend died in a plane accident during a military exercise. My mother died of a brain tumor, at the age of 57. I was then about thirty years old. I was at her bedside during the last minutes of her life. The moment of her last breath was a sad yet numinous experience. Also I was intellectually and emotionally prepared for her approaching death, her actual death was a very painful, deeply felt experience. Her body was still the same as a few moments ago, but without breath, which is to say she had died. I could understand the idea that the breath is often looked upon as being the soul. In Hebrew, the word “soul” and “breath” have the same root (“Neshamah” and “Neshimah”). The child is born and starts breathing, one dies and stops breathing. Breath thus equals life and soul. The soul leaves the body with the last breath, thus giving a notion, a hint that the soul returns to its origins. A conscious awareness of a kind of death experience happens during analysis, when one goes through many transformations, which often appear in dreams with the symbol of death. It is as if old patterns have to die so that the personality can be renewed. This symbolic death is a painful experience, which is often accompanied by intensive suffering. It could be that this kind of symbolic death, consciously realized, helps to accept actual death as the end of life.Statistically I am close to death, yet children, youngsters and people much younger than I am die of terminal illness, accidents, wars, terror attacks etc. How did I get to this octogenarian age? I don’t know! So far it has been a blessing, but what awaits me?Whenever I am confronted with death, I ask myself what is really the most important thing for me in life. It is a kind of stocktaking. I also ask myself what I would do today if I were going to die tomorrow. My answer is usually that I would do the same, but the question also makes me ponder what is really important to do now.I want to share an active imagination of year ago. A Chinese woman, an anima, had appeared in a dream. I asked her what she wanted to tell me further. She says, take your time for your immortal soul. I see a bubbling well and I think, even when I shall not live anymore, the well will go on bubbling. Then I fantasize walking to my clinic. I see people I meet every day in the street, but also many people I don’t know. Traffic streams. Everything goes its usual way. Then I remember my mother when she was close to death, saying in a sad voice, “when I shall be dead, everything will go on in its normal course.” Then I see again the bubbling well and I turn into a drop of water. I rise as a drop and fall down on the ground, which is humid, then into the earth, into the roots of the tree, then up to the crown of the tree. The eternal cycle! And here comes my inner doubter and says, “rubbish! You die-that’s it. Nothing will remain of you. Children and grandchildren shall live their lives. Maybe, that once in a while they shall remember their grandfather. You will be buried, that’s it”. Then Sui-me, symbol of the Self, with whom I have been in an inner contact, for many years, appears and says, “Leave these speculations on life after death. Accentuate life, what you have lived and what you can still live today. Accept that you cannot know anything about life after death-it is the mystery of death. And hope that dying will be easy.” Now I see Sui-mi in a robe like that of a king or priest. I fall on my knees and say, “Oh you great Sui-mi who endures time. For millions of years you exist, are here. You appeared to me. I sense your greatness, you wisdom. Tell me, how can I still find meaning in my old age, with my reduced strength?” (I breathe deeply. I am excited.) The Sui-mi answers, “Look back on your life, time and again, on what you have experienced and suffered and in your work and in your relationships.”Clinical examplesAs a psychotherapist I am often confronted with the archetype of death, by patients who survived the Holocaust, bereaved parents, brothers, sisters and wives of fallen soldiers of the Israel wars. I also remember soldiers who had been close to death in battle or were close to a comrade who was killed.Here are some examples:I had a moving experience with a woman-analysand, about 60 years old. She had been recently widowed, lived alone. She was deeply involved in writing an MA thesis on romantic literature, from a Jungian perspective. She was extremely slim, but all medical examinations were negative. When later cancer was diagnosed, no treatment was possible. During the last two years, as her body weakened, her creative work was the center of her life. Finally her thesis was accepted and well received. Shortly after, she was hospitalized, but soon sent home. She became weaker and weaker, could not leave the house anymore. She phoned me and asked that I may visit her. We talked together and I held her hand in silence. The following day she phoned and told me that holding her hand was a deep experience for her. She died within a few days. Her death was the accomplished individuation process. The non-verbal contact to me, when she was on her deathbed shows that this basic human physical contact was more important and helpful than words. In the course of analysis death as a symbol often appears in dreams and in active imagination. Mrs. U. studied art in Germany and had to leave the country because of the persecution of Jews. After decades of working as an art teacher and as an artist, she felt a need to better know herself (as she put it). Thus she came to analysis. She was 60 years old and while in analysis painted over 200 pictures. I would like to discuss two of them. In a dream about nine years before her death she had the following dream: “I put my room in order. It seems to me that I expect a visitor, who is dear to me, as I am in an elated mood. Then I hear a strong knocking at the door. I go and open the door, but nobody is there, nothing, only total darkness. Extremely terrified, I woke up.” When she painted the dream, and called the picture: “I saw the nothing”, she felt that she had to put a star into the dark of the open door. This comfortd her, as it gave her some hope, some light in the dark.Death often appears in dreams when one’s previous attitudes and beliefs are no longer valid and should undergo transformation. A middle-aged woman had lost her husband in a road accident. During the first weeks after his death she saw him in her dreams walking around in the apartment, standing in front of his bookshelf. Later she found a certain peace of mind and acceptance of her husband’s death when she dreamt of him having become a star circling in the cosmos. The star symbolizes eternity. The dream connected the death of her husband with a feeling of indestructibility and opened her to see life in the perspective of eternity. This realization helped her to accept her fate of being widowed. A mother visits the grave of her dead son daily and talks to him. She is 75 years old. It is a kind of a daily rite for her. Her previous depressions were augmented by the untimely tragic death of her beloved son. Every morning, while having breakfast, she sits by his photograph. She is very creative as a painter and also wrote poetry. Her creative side helped her to compensate for the death of her son. I supported her creative activity, as I felt that without this, she would fall into a deep depression. In my work with bereaved persons I found that the Jewish way to deal with loss is very helpful. After the funeral there is the “shivah”, seven days of mourning at home, when friends and family come to console the mourners. Then there is a month of mourning and finally, after a year, this way of mourning comes to an end. It means that one needs time to adjust to the new situation and come to term with it in some way. Bereaved persons have to live with the tragedies of their lives and try to again find meaning in life. **My own death**While writing these pages I am 81 years old and naturally concerned with my own death. I consulted the “I Ging” with the question how to adjust to the forthcoming end of my life. The answer was number 16, the “Enthusiasm”, which surprised me very much. It means not to be depressed, to live, to enjoy, and not to be afraid of death. The commentary goes on to say that movement and obedience are important. It explains that the law of movement along the line of least resistance corresponds to the law for natural events and for human life. “The Judgment” explains that enthusiasm furthers one to install helpers and to set armies marching. I had to move on, seeing some analysands and writing, being creative. Creativity is life, new life. It gives meaning and is the opposite of death. Enthusiasm was necessary to overcome doubt. When breathing in meditation, my Self-figure, which I called “Sui-Mi”, appeared and told me to calm down. “Now you are confronted with the mystery of death”. I ask: “What was it all about, this life?” He says: “you lived and loved a lot. You also suffered. It was your task in this life to help people, to become conscious and to accept suffering.”**The archetype of death and rebirth**This archetype inspires all fantasies and beliefs in an immortal soul and in a life beyond death: eternal life of the soul after the death of the body, migration of souls, reincarnation (Karma), rebirth, resurrection in messianic time etc. In myths the soul formulates what cannot be rationally explained. The imagination weaves a story around a mystery, like the myth of the night-sea journey of the sun, or the story of Jonah the prophet, or the “rebirth” of the sun after the long night of December 21.In his *Psychology of Transference* (CW 16, passim,) Jung shows how in the analytical process of transformation (individuation) there always occurs a symbolic experience of death. The old personality, the old attitudes, the infantile wishes die and give way to a new personality. This kind of death which occurs during the process of inner growth is connected to re-birth, that is, to the becoming a different individual. The meeting with the archetype of death can achieve a feeling of eternity, it can connect us with the irrational side, with the immortality of the soul. Like life, death is a mystery.In nature we can experience death and resurrection, “stirb’ und werde”. The plants die in the fall and will be “reborn” in the spring. The sun dies at sunset and will be reborn in the morning, This cycle in nature can also be a reason for the beliefs in the immortality of the soul. For those of us who are not contained in a religious belief, the cycle in nature can give us a notion of life after death.**Death Marriage**There is something in the human psyche which cannot accept that the death of the body is also the death of the soul. Thus myth and popular beliefs about life after death abound.Jung (CW 14, par. 524) describes the return of the soul to its source at the moment of death as a marriage, the wedding of the lamb. In the *`­Akedah* (the binding of Isaac), Isaac himself represents the lamb and Abraham prepares the altar as though he were preparing a wedding feast. Jung (in Jaffe, p.314) also refers to this episode when he discusses the idea that death can be seen as a joyous event. "In the light of eternity, it is a wedding, a Mysterium Coniunctionis", for "basic to the antique mysteries... is the identity of marriage and death on the one hand, and of birth and of the eternal resurrection of life from death on the other."Kaplan (p. 86 and p. 127), quoting Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, recounts how when the great saints felt their time coming, they would start to meditate so deeply that they became one with God. They simply let their souls be carried away from their bodies and died in a state of ecstasy, which was called "death by the Kiss of God” (*Neshikat Movet).* There are elements of love and sex in relationship to death. The experience of orgasm is psychologically a momentary death of the Ego. In Elizabethan English "to die" also had the meaning of having intercourse, with particular reference to the moment of orgasm. Some people, who are concerned with their death and afraid of it, may have difficulties to get an orgasm! They cannot "let go". Therefore the fear of death can also be a reason for impotence.It is interesting to note that an erotic element of death is also found in the motive of the death marriage or mystical marriage. Jung(CW 14, par. 658), quoting Kerenyi, writes that "basic to the antique mysteries...is the identity of marriage and death on the one hand, and of birth and the eternal resurgence of life from death on the other". Also Von Franz(1984, p. 80) mentions the motive of death marriage and states that in antique Greece, the relationship of death and Eros was well known. And she continues (p.81) that death marriage is the becoming one with the soul of the universe...in the bosom of nature.Von Franz (1984, p. 80) relates that death in the Kabbalah e.g. is portrayed as a mystical marriage. She continues “that one finds the motive of the so called death marriage in folklore in many variations. This means that the unconscious psyche often describes death as a union of opposites, i.e. an inner becoming whole.”In the Zohar (III, 296,b) one reads that at the funeral of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, his disciples heard a voice saying: “Come and assemble the wedding of Rabbi Shimon. May peace come and may they rest in their encampments”.To end I want to add a poem I wrote a few months ago:I am eighty-one years oldI long for the kiss of death. Life was mostly good to me,But still say yes to my life With some suffering here and there.I want to work and create, But I am grateful, all in all To live and to love. For a good fate - so long. BibliographyJung, C.G. CW 14Jung, C.G. CW 16Von Franz, M. -L.: Traum und Tod. Muenchen: Koesel‑Verlag, 1984. Jaffe, Aniela: The Myth of Meaning in the work of C. G. Jung:  Daimon Publications, Einsiedeln, Switzerland, 1984.Kaplan, Aryeh: Innerspace, Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and  Prophecy, edited by Abraham Sutton, Jerusalem: Moznaim  Publishing Corporation, 1990, p. 689The Zohar, III, 296b |
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