

We are tragically vulnerably

A mother grieves over the gravestone of her beloved daughter. A widower wanders the empty house remembering his dear wife. A son sits by the waters edge awash with the grief of his father's death.

Though you may not experience a concern about death, you do taste it in its emotional form. Though you never call it by its name, you experience it on a daily basis and that is in your experiences of vulnerability. That constant sensation that, no matter what you do, you are at the mercy of life and what it throws at you. This, believe it or not, is your emotional sensitivity to death

All great literature and religion down the ages reminds us of our vulnerability in life – how one is never truly safe. Vulnerability is your everyday emotional experience of your mortal woundedness – that fate can and will strike at some point. Your emotional vulnerability and everyday anxiety is, at its deepest level, your sensitivity to the tragic motif that runs through all of life – that suffering and death are part of living.

We prefer to keep death at a distance, cordoned off from our everyday living. But it cannot be achieved because our body reacts to the threat of it (when we get a ‘fright’), our mind reacts to the symbols of it (we are troubled by the mangled remains of another car accident), and our emotions react to the derivatives of it (our anxious helplessness and depressive powerlessness). In life we therefore seek to avoid most situations that remind us of our mortality and vulnerability.

We encounter death though in a thousand symbolic ways every day. We react to the emotional evocations of death, the tentacles that wind their way into the chambers of our heart on a daily basis - be it the cold shoulder of our lover, the harsh rejecting word, the uncertainty of our future.

The reason that love relationships are so intense, and dangerous, is because one’s lover is usually the only one in your life with the power to expose you to the intense and essential truths of your, at times, pathetic helplessness and inadequacy. He or she is the only one that can break you with grief, awaken your rage, or prove your ultimate impotence. And on an everyday basis we are reminded of this in form and symbol. Your partner forgets you, dismisses you, leaves you, brings suffering and pain to you, or inadvertently rejects you. These things upset you, not only because your self-esteem gets wounded, but because you feel exposed to the truth you want to keep at bay – that you are helplessly inadequate in your mortality.

When your partner rejects you, puts you down, makes you feel small; he or she, in those moments, is death snatching at you. You want your partner to make you feel important and significant because when you feel this you forget your true cosmic status. Make no mistake about it, though we deny its importance, we are sub-consciously obsessed by death.

In superstitious ways we keep the fact of our mortality and our tragic condition at arms length. Each of us is faced with a very real question in life: How can we function with a sense of power and control in a life over which we have only a little, and over a fate over which we have none.

We have two choices: We can operate on the basis that because life is inherently vulnerable and tragic we must all the more compulsively seek to control and manage our relationships to keep vulnerability as far away from us as possible. We can strive to dominate life and others in such a way as to try and secure our sense of power, status, and significance. Or we can seek to embrace that helplessness. To not see our partner, children, work, or life as that which makes us feel helpless and trapped, but that which reveals our vulnerable humanity.

The first option is to choose a life of control – doing battle on a daily basis against a life that is reluctant to surrender to us. The second is to realise that we are not all-powerful. That life is not supposed to co-operate with us.

So ask yourself? How do you want to die? Kicking and screaming, trying to defy the destiny that was given you from the moment of conception? Or can you find the courage to walk through its door with a confident self-acceptance? If you want to know the answer to this question see how you respond to your children when they defy you? See how you respond to your partner when he makes another mistake? Notice how you react when that driver cuts you off at the roundabout, when life does not cooperate with you.

Is it with grateful acceptance or with hostile rejection? With compassion or with competition?