



Wilhelm Schmid

Surviving Death

Coming to Grips with the Unfathomable
(Original German title: Den Tod überleben
Vom Umgang mit dem Unfassbaren)

141 pages, hardcover

Publication date: 11 March 2024

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2024

Sample translation by Joel Scott

pp. 7–24

Preface

It really threw me for a loop. I was passing through the security controls at Brandenburg Airport in Berlin. I had placed my keys, wallet, belt, and other bits and pieces from my shirt and trousers pockets into the special tray, as instructed. But the detector beeped anyway. The security guard behind the gate waved me to the side and began to carefully pat me down from head to toe. Nothing. Then he thought of a joke: “Do you have a wife with you by any chance?” “What the hell? What kind of a question is that?”, the female colleague standing next to him reproached him. “Just guy talk”, he said, excusing himself. I smiled at him conspiratorially.

Could he have sensed something? I had indeed pleaded with my wife to come along with me on this trip, which we had initially wanted to take two years earlier. But nothing came of it, there was no way she could fly anymore – cerebral metastases. A year later she was gone. We had promised to stay together, “regardless of our state of matter”, as she used to say. That we are still close in an energetic way is something that I feel every day, wherever I am. Could that be what caused the blip at the security gate? Was the detector activated because somebody walked through with the energy of two people?

Surviving death, how does that work? That was the question I was confronted with once my wife was no longer with me in physical form. That is the immediate challenge for the one who is left to dwell among the living for a little longer. Since then, the thing that has helped me most is the feeling of being imbued with the energy of this wonderful woman. Our love was so huge that it effortlessly outlived death. Even as young lovers learning Latin together, we had been taken by that old phrase *omnia vincit amor*, love conquers all. But does it also conquer the Grim Reaper? People like to personify death. In German, *der Tod* seems to be a man, in French, *la mort*, a woman. But actually, *it* is neutral, it is a phenomenon.

One of the more popular ways of surviving death consists in not talking about it. Not that it is a taboo, but for many people, it's simply not a topic of interest. "Nobody likes talking about it", I hear someone say. In a society that is no longer confronted with death face to face, it leaves us speechless. So living means not thinking about the end. *Don't mention the end*, as it were. Most people don't want to live with a consciousness of death, they want to enjoy life as much as they can. And why shouldn't they? The life that precedes it is more important than death. Living a happy, eventful life, perhaps even a wildly eventful one, is better than living a miserable life in anticipation of what is to come. However, receiving the odd wave from the end of the line can actually encourage us to live life while we have it. That is something we get from every death that comes even vaguely close to us. The shockwaves that it brings stir up thoughts of our own end, which we have resolved not to mention. When a person we knew is "gone", we are suddenly confronted by a series of questions: What about my own life? What can I still make out of it? And what would happen, if ...? Is it possible to still love life while having a full consciousness of death?

From a human perspective, death is a catastrophe, in the double meaning of the word: something horrible that also overturns everything. For some, it brings the release they had desired, from melancholy, pain, and suffering. There are those who see it as a natural process

that awaits everyone sooner or later, at an undetermined or predetermined time. Some view it as an outrage that we would do well to eradicate. Will it ever be possible to truly survive death? There are research projects and pharmaceutical developments whose objective is to delay it, and ultimately to overcome it entirely. That would fulfil the ardent desire of so many to finally put an end to the end.

But this too raises certain questions: What will happen when death dies? Is it something we can do without? What would provide life with a force of renewal? And if there is no new generation from the here and now making it across to the other shore, will the hereafter die out? Will humans become extinct if, having survived death, we are finished off by the crushing weight of boredom? Until now, life has resembled a football match. When players ran themselves ragged, they were taken off the pitch so that others with unexpended energy could bring fresh impulses into the game. Nobody has yet invented a better way of regenerating life. A life without death might reveal itself to be an evolutionary dead-end. Accusations that this is a “Darwinist” perspective are irrelevant to nature, which plays by its own rules. As far as nature is concerned, death has always been successful.

However, should it be possible to overcome death, we can imagine that from the perspective of *distant eras*, a nostalgia for death might emerge: ah, how simple life was back then, when death still existed. At some point, it befell everyone, regardless of who they were. Looking from *distant places*, we could also ask the question of whether earthly death represents an exception in the cosmos. If it turns out that there is life on other planets scattered around our solar system, either in the galaxy known as the Milky Way or even farther out in the infinite universe, it would be fascinating to know if life there is also subject to temporal limits. Is death an earthly exception or the cosmic rule?

For the time being, though, death remains the end of life for everyone on Earth. Nobody needs to jump the queue. Everybody will have their turn at some point. Everybody is treated

equally. The only difference is the time, place, and the way we die. Mostly, death comes too early and leaves behind a great deal of suffering. Joy is rare. Sometimes, it refuses to come despite having been invited. It can be the conclusion of a long process, but it can also put an abrupt end to a life. The end is almost always a drama, both for the person departing the realm of the living and for those who are left behind and have to live with this death for a long time. Can the drama be lessened by the belief that death is not really the end of life?

That would be one way of surviving death. This is something that has troubled people ever since we have been able to think: Where does the person “go” when they’re gone? To another life? To another world? For my wife, dying was a part of life, and was unquestionably followed by another life, in her words: “taking leave of life on Earth, transitioning into another phase of life.” This was her answer to questions she was asked as part of a course to become a volunteer carer in a hospice: “Death exists only in the eyes of the beholder and with regards to life here on Earth.” One of the things that was particularly important to her and helped to make life worth living was being in contact “with my people”, and she wished to maintain this contact even after leaving the finite dimension.

Her passing has changed my stance toward death. For a long time, I was seized by fear that my death would take me away from her. Of all the beauty that life has to offer, she was the most beautiful thing for me. I never wanted that to end. But it did end, and she went ahead of me. Now I know how it goes. I have experienced the inconceivable from up close. The only way death can come closer to me now is when it is my own. But then it will be the bridge that takes me to her. When it comes time for me to cross the threshold, there will already be somebody waiting for me to joyfully embrace me. She will be there, even if I don’t quite know where that will be. “Dying is a transition”, she noted down before her death. And what will life be like in the other dimension? “It is what it is, and I don’t know what it is.”

I

Where is my wife?

Are there human constants? Things that are the same across all human lives? Perhaps that most people hope to enjoy a good portion of happiness in life and in love. Unfortunately, though, life has other constants in store for us, such as a temporal limit. For lovers in particular, that is incredibly painful. There is no solace to be found in the endless void that is left behind by a beloved. Life stands still. The only thing left is the past. A future is of no interest. That's how it was for me when my wife passed away after a long fight with cancer, at home, thankfully, surrounded by our children and me, after almost 40 years of shared life, at just 59 years of age.

What happens at the moment of death? That is utterly mysterious. Death is a magical moment, surreally powerful, profoundly distressing. It poses questions to which we can find no answers. What does the person who dies feel? What exactly can they still perceive? What is their experience? What is new about it? Our sense of hearing is active right until the end. Was my wife able to perceive how much we were weeping as her eyes lost their light? "Eyes, of which no one knows what they still see, are pushed shut, we cannot withstand the gaze, are horrified, confronted by the gaze of eternity" (Ulla Berkéwicz, *Überlebnis*, 2008, 107).

From the internal perspective of the person experiencing death, this most extreme of moments might feel entirely different to how it does for those who are left behind. It might resemble the experience that lovers so dearly crave, and which they also reach at times: a melding of energies, a divine experience, referred to for millennia as *unio mystica*. The "little death" (*la petite mort*) of amorous ecstasy might be a presentiment of the great act that death itself is, the most violent moment of life, in which the self streams out of itself, a frenzied

dissolution of life in this form. This ultimate ecstasy leads not only to a “displacement” (*ekstasis* in Greek), but to a complete departure out of the self and life.

And what comes after that? Where does the person disappear to when death definitively arrives? What kind of relationship is it still possible to have with the person? Can they really be dead? How might we imagine the state of a person beyond biological life? Is it a different life? These preoccupy me relentlessly. The only answer is that death and what follows it are entirely inconceivable. One day, I too will enter into this mystery, just like everyone else. But nobody will ever return to tell us about it. It is more likely that we will one day travel to distant stars than solve this mystery.

Together with my wife, I have often speculated about what distinguishes the dead from the living. We were convinced by one thing most of all: the *energies* are no longer in the body. Not some mysterious energies, but well-known ones like warmth, verifiable by mere touch, and electricity, measurable by an ECG, which reflects the fluctuations in the electrical charge of the heart, or an EEG, which measures the electrical activity of brainwaves. Until nothing else can be measured. In this view, energy would be the essential element of a human being (and all beings). It animates the body. If it departs that body, it signals the death of that body. But not the death of the energy.

Energy can be infinitely transformed into other forms of energy, but it can never be destroyed. That is part of the law of energy conservation (the first law of thermodynamics), which was articulated for the field of physics by Hermann von Helmholtz in 1847, based on the groundwork of Julius Robert Mayer, a researcher from Heilbronn. As a physiologist, Helmholtz also applied this principle to living beings, for understandable reasons: biology is based on chemistry, which in turn is based on physics. The significance of energies for the practice of life is clear to anybody who tries to will the arrival of the spring sun in the middle of February. The human being dies, but not the energy within them. Nothing is lost. That the

energy that animates a human being continues to exist after their death is not necessarily an indisputable truth, but it has a great deal of plausibility, according to what we currently know. As such, the feeling that the deceased person “is still here” can have real causes. Many people report this feeling after someone close to them has passed away: that their energy is still circulating in the room, despite being unable to pinpoint it, invisible and yet palpable. “Stark wie zwei” (As Strong as Two) sang Udo Lindenberg in 2008 about the experience that he too had been forced to go through. It is as if the dead person gifts their energy to the living, who remain with the dead through their thoughts and feelings. How can we explain this?

Perhaps through magnetism. The two people might act as magnetic poles that attract energy, at least that of those that are “calibrated” to them. If they do not recoil away from the dead person, they can perceive their energy, absorb them, and bring these energies back with them to their life, after the great disorientation of death. The new spirit with which they are filled comes from the energies that the deceased person no longer needs, leaving them to the person who remains in relation to them. In this way, the essential core of the person lives on in the living, enriching them internally.

What is it like for me after the death of my wife? The feeling that her energy is with me is very strong. Does that give me solace? Yes, absolutely. I perceive her energy as being like a large, light, warm cloud that is constantly moving with me and gives me strength. Sometimes, it overwhelms me with the intensity of a sun, but I have also had moments where an icy shudder runs through me, I’ve no idea why. I miss the breathing presence of my wife immensely. It is completely inconceivable to me that she is no longer physically there. *Where is my wife?* In what state is she now? Is this state connected with any kind of consciousness? Is she still a person? Can I speak to her? Does she still bear her divinely beautiful name, Astrid, with which I can address her?

It is impossible to know whether the person continues to exist on the other side of death. Having a consciousness and being able to say “I” are actions carried out by the brain, which require a physical existence, as far as we know. The inconceivability of death might entail the instantaneous transformation of the person into energy. But so many odd things have happened since my wife’s passing that I would also not rule out the continued existence of her as a person. At the sight of a vibrant bed of flowers that would have thrilled her, I cry out: “Wonderful! Do you see that?” Does she see it? Perhaps through my eyes? I look at my watch. It is 17:17. She died at 19:19. Months later, as I am reading over this passage, it is 17:17 again. Almost every day, these kind of double numbers glow back at me from the clock when I think of her. I see them as “messages” from her. Each time, we smile at each other and I take a deep breath. I am a philosopher who always prefers the soberness of scientific explanations. But I am also aware of their limitations. People do not know how much they do not know.

Could it be that life is much more expansive than the life of a person? Is something like a higher consciousness possible after all? I think about that time and time again. After real life there could be another, *surreal* one, a bodyless one, that we could understand as a kind of sleep. Until they are “revived”, to use a familiar term from religious contexts? Just as is the case with normal sleep, one of the reasons for the *sleep of being* might be regeneration, but which unlike during life, is not granted to the momentary state in which body, soul, and mind find themselves, but to the entire existence of the human being. With the dissolution of their physical form, they would be able to regenerate, and after an indeterminate period of formlessness, perhaps return to real life in another form.

But for the moment, I stand at the grave into which the “mortal remains” of my wife have disappeared, and it remains completely inconceivable to me, despite all the possible explanations. If these remains also contain her energy, then I can be near to her here. As I

approach, I feel more strongly than usual how her warmth envelopes me. Her calmness unfurls within me. Am I just imagining it or is that really the case? I cannot know for sure. Subjectively, I feel how after her death, some of the energy that she exuded has entered into me, and moves me to think, feel, and act more like she did, more friendly, more open, more generous. The new levels of sincerity with which I approach others undeniably comes from her. With increasing frequency, I notice that I am adopting her slow and cautious steps, instead of storming forth as I usually would.

She was convinced that nature on Earth was embedded in the cosmic nature that formed the foundations of everything. Indeed, everything that lives on the Earth draws its energy from the cosmos, particularly from the sun, without which there would be no life at all on Earth. Until at some point the sun gives its energy over to the cosmos, and new suns emerge from it. All energy remains in this closed system that the cosmos is said to be. And to what would it be open? Another word for this all-encompassing energy could be the omnipotence of God. Right up until the end, it was important for my wife to “remain in contact with God”, but in her own way: God as an expression of the “flow of energy and manifestations”.

What gives me solace more than anything else? Reading her words, which she left behind in letters and notes. Looking at pictures of her and our family, which bear witness to their beautiful existence. Great love is no illusion. It really exists. I experienced it. And love is energy. It makes us strong and maintains its existence after death, eternal love. The promise that I made to my wife even in her very last moments – “we’ll stay together” – applies until we are eventually reunited in the sea of energy.