

ON LIFE AND DEATH

THOUGH IT IS
FUTILE TO
FIGHT AGAINST
DEATH, ONE
MUST FIGHT
FOR LIFE

by Suma Varughese



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Although the prospect of old age and disease frightens me, death does not.

For those of us who know that we are immortal spirits and not flesh, there cannot be anything too frightening about casting off our bodies, especially if we have used the lifetime to grow however much we can.

My favourite analogy of life is school, and I think of death as going home from it. God then is the eternal parent to whom we run to in between enduring the rigours and joys of school-life. Death will allow me to experience the joy and pleasure of home, of being in my true domain, among my own kind. My absolutely favourite imagery of dying is to have God (undoubtedly male – my Christian background will out) wait for me outside that famous tunnel we have heard so much about in near-death experiences, and when I arrive, clasp me in His arms and say, “Well done.”

This is probably a simplistic notion of the afterlife, but it gives me enormous comfort. I say all this apropos to explaining why I have all this while had a fairly insouciant attitude towards death. I was determined not to make too much of a fuss about it.

My mother and I have had an understanding that when her time to go has come, we will allow it to happen instead of desperately hanging on to life. I would not fight death, of that I was certain. Why should I when I saw it not as an enemy but as a liberator?

However, recently, I had a skirmish with that force, when my dearly loved cat fell dangerously ill. We could not figure out what the problem was, and first the doctor diagnosed her with failing kidneys. The treatment he followed failed to have the requisite effect, and I began to give up on the cat, thinking that her kidney problem was beyond redemption. As she dwindled and weakened by the day, retreating into a dark corner behind the bed, I started working on coming to terms with her death.

And then she revealed a new symptom. When I mentioned it to the vet, he immediately arrived

at a fresh diagnosis. She had an enlarged uterus, which goes by the name of pyro metra. An operation could possibly set her right. A second opinion was taken, and the vet, a professor of surgery, told me that I had a difficult decision to make. If I did not have her operated she would surely die, but if I did opt for the operation she may not live through it, because she was in such a weakened state and with a faltering heart to boot. What should it be? Certain death or a shot at life?

In the end I took that shot at life, because this is what I am realising: one has to fight for life. Life is precious, a great gift. One must never throw it away; on the contrary one must fight hard for it with all one’s resources. One must be able to take a stand for life. Not just one’s own but the life of all that one is entrusted with. *I still maintain my old stand, that I must not fight death, but today I do believe that I must fight for life.*

How will I know when the fight for life becomes the fight against death? I suppose it is this distinction that we must all struggle to be aware of. And as with much else, I think it lies in the motive. Have I done everything within my capacity to save the life of the being I am caretaking? Will going any further only preserve the shell without an increase in the quality of life? Am I holding on to the person for my own needs? If so, then we have gone over to the other side.

And yet as with all the big questions, it is never easy to make the decision. Yesterday, I met a woman, who, by all reckoning, did not appear to have much of a quality of life. At 85, she was a small shrunken hunched-up figure in a wheelchair, taken care of by a maid. A succession of strokes had rendered her virtually immobile and speechless. She even had to be fed. Why would such a lady want to live, a burden on her family, and surely in grave discomfort? Nevertheless, her husband tells me that she has a fierce appetite for life. Incomprehensible as I find it, it has to be respected.

Oh, and by the way, the cat’s doing fine! ☺