

A SMALL INCIDENT

EXCERPTS FROM *THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY—EXPLORING THE PROMISE OF DEATH*

BY EKNATH EASWARAN



*We all need deeper understanding of the unity of life and greater compassion for ourselves and each other in the face of death. Eknath Easwaran tells us why natural death is such a profound and fundamental event in our lives. He invites us to take pause and helps us to better understand how natural deaths can teach us to be better stewards.*

*Eknath Easwaran invites us to open our hearts into a grounded relationship with the world that honors all life. When out of harmony with the natural ebb and flow of life, we perpetuate practices that cause unnatural deaths in the animal steward communities and in the world. We become ineffective in ending negative patterns that maintain misguided customs. Easwaran lets us know that it is through changing our daily habits that we can make changes for the good. When we step up into more aligned leadership and deepen our capacity to be reflective and compassionate in our giving and work, we can become more loving stewards in the co-creation of our destiny.*

—Karla Boyd

Following are excerpts from the book *The Undiscovered Country—Exploring the Promise of Death*, By Eknath Easwaran, founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation. Copyright 1996; reprinted with permission from Nilgiri Press, P. O. Box 256, Tomales, California, 94971. [www.easwaran.org](http://www.easwaran.org).

A few years ago a friendly stray cat showed up at our place and he quickly wove himself into the fabric of our lives. My friend Mary, who has a weakness for cats, called him Charles, and he soon learned that if he showed up at certain times of the morning and evening, he would get a little dish of bread with milk and a place of his own in the hierarchy of dogs and cats that roam the neighborhood.

Charles's need for affection went very deep. Every evening as I went out for a walk, he would come out of nowhere to rub his body against my legs as if trying to trip me up. And when my walk was over he would lurk in the shadows, crossing and recrossing the path while I gave the dogs their goodnight snack. Then, once the dogs were gone and he was sure no one would chase him away, he would come to the door to get his treat too. I would stroke him as he gobbled his tidbit and purred like a little sewing machine.

Then one day he did not come. I waited awhile, then left his snack on the back porch. In the morning I found some birds pecking at it, but Charles never came. Nor did he come the next evening. The next morning Mary told me that Charles was no more.

Now there is no one to trip me up on the sidewalk as I walk home in the dark. And I miss him—miss his nightly panhandling, his responsive purr, all the little impediments he placed in my path each evening. Such a small incident, we might say. Just a footnote to a busy day. But in a profound sense it was a deeply significant event.

One night Charles was rubbing against my legs, eating at my feet, purring under my hand. The next day he was gone. He was here on earth for ten years or so. Has he now disappeared? When someone dies, has that person simply vanished? Someone whom yesterday we loved and cherished, who today has faded away like last night's dream?

In village India, it is impossible to be ignorant of death. Lives are too interconnected. Everyone knows everyone else, and it is not uncommon to hear that someone you saw only the other day, or with whom you went to school, or whose mango tree you used to climb, has passed from this life completely. It is a continual reminder of the transiency of all life. There is no isolation from the dramas of birth and death as there often is in this country; life ebbs out in the presence of family and friends. But whether in India or America or any other land, in the presence of death the sensitive person can't help asking, "Where has this favorite uncle gone? Just last Christmas, he was visiting with us. The girl I knew in college, whose smile was so radiant and whose laugh was so free—is she no more? Or has she, as one mystic put it, simply stepped into another room? If they have not just vanished, where have they gone?"

If I had to explain what happened, I would say, "They are dead, yet they are not dead." The intellect may turn away in confusion from such statements and say, "Impossible!" But it is not impossible. To myself, I do not use a phrase like "she is dead." She has shed her body, but she was not that body. The body was her house; she was the resident, the Self. It is not necessary to accept reincarnation to live a life of wisdom. But for anyone with an open mind, the theory of reincarnation offers some sound explanations that cannot be easily dismissed. Against the backdrop of reincarnation, we have been shaping ourselves, life after life, through our personal pattern of living. As human beings, we have the capacity to choose to live violently or nonviolently, to live selfishly or selflessly, to live in such a way that our spiritual awareness grows, or to hinder our fulfillment. Once we enter the human context, the Buddha says, everything is in our hands. No fate compels us; no outside power can take from us the responsibility for wise choices which is our human heritage.

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In this context, each of us is continuously evolving. Just as we pass through the stages of life from birth to death, at the end of one life we pass on to another. If we find this difficult to understand, it is largely because our idea of who we are is so riveted to the physical level, the biological organism.

On the physical level, of course, death seems to be a much more sudden and final change than aging. But as far as our thoughts, desires, aspirations, and values are concerned, the same personality continues after the physical body falls away. Once we rise above a strictly physical perspective, we see the thread of continuity through all these changes.

The Bhagavad Gita, the treasured Indian scriptural classic, says:

*As the same person inhabits a body through  
Childhood, youth, and age, so at the time of  
Death he or she attains another body. The wise  
Are not deluded by these changes.*

Just as you and I were once babies, grew into children, went to school, perhaps went on to college, each year a little different, so through the inexorable passage of time we enter old age. Finally, like a snake sloughing off its skin, the Self within us sheds the old body in the hour of death and prepares to take on a new one.

I can illustrate this on the level of every day experience. Just as Charles left us recently, so, in a different sense, did the son of a dear friend of ours. Christo is in the air now, on his way to Greece with his mother and grandmother. We will miss him, but at the same time we know that after fifteen days he will be back. We believe this because we believe in geography. After all, the only thing we really know is that Christo and his mother are gone. But we believe that there is a country called Greece, even though we have not been there. We believe there is a village called Milochori, even if scarcely anyone has been there. We believe that a jet plane can bring these people back. We believe in geography, we believe in jet planes, but we find it hard to believe in the words of the Buddha. Shakespeare, too, said that death is a kind of place: “The undiscovered country from whose bourne / No traveler returns”—at least, not with the same name and form. The jiva does return: “not the same person,” the Buddha explains, “but not someone different either.”

Again, look at Christo. His mother will come back very much the same as when she left, in a tearing hurry to attend to all the correspondence that has piled up on her desk while she was gone. But Christo will have changed a little. Five is an impressionable age. He will have picked up a few Greek words, like “Eureka!” He will probably have new clothes and a new way of walking, and when I ask him who he is today, he will not be a fireman or a cowboy; he’ll be a princeps. But we will not be fooled. We know that he is still Christo.

Similarly, in the next life, the jiva is a little different, yet still the same. There is a continuity to the deeply ingrained ways of thinking and feeling and acting which we have developed over many lives. These deep habits are what Indian psychology calls samskaras, and they shape our actions, our behaviors, our very destiny in life after life because those which we are not able to work out in one life carry on to be worked out in the next. Understanding this continuity of samskaras brings tremendous motivation to live wisely. You know that everything you do is shaping your personal character and prospects, not only tomorrow but in the life to come.

Read any great spiritual teacher, East or West. Behind every line will be their personal testimony that preparing for the inevitable journey into our next existence is the most relevant issue in life. Imagine us packing our boxes, hoarding, planning what we’ll carry with us on our forth-pound allotment and what we’ll send ahead. “Man,” the Buddha would say, “you can’t take any of this! Work on what you can take with you”—in fact, on what you can’t help taking with you. Every thought we are going to take with us, every word, every deed, every desire. Those which do not bear fruit in this life will bear fruit in the next, as they go on shaping our destiny.

N A M A S T E   G L O B A L   V I S I O N  
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With every thought, the Buddha would say, we are working on our destiny. When a sculptor creates an elephant, each touch of the chisel shapes the stone. While carving an eye the artist barely strokes the surface, but those delicate touches are as vital as the rough shaping blows. There is no such thing as an unimportant blow. Similarly, every thought shapes our lives. There is no such thing as a little thought, no such thing as an unimportant thought. It may be heavy, it may be light, but it always should be well directed.

Aldous Huxley, well before he became interested in reincarnation, ascribed personality to chance in a short poem:

*A million million spermatozoa,  
All of them alive:  
Out of their cataclysm but one poor Noah  
Dare hope to survive  
Among that billion minus one  
Might have chanced to be  
Shakespeare, another Newton, a new Donne—  
But that one was Me.*

Huxley made this observation with great surprise. I would say, “Aldous, it had to be you.” To me it is so obvious. Each of us had to be who we are.

This is not an intellectual conclusion; it is an experiential realization. When it comes, you accept yourself completely. After all, no one else has made you the way you are.

When you understand this on a deep level, it lifts an immense burden. There is great joy in this understanding, no jealousy, no envy, no self-pity, no “why wasn’t it otherwise?” or “if only I could have been...” Everything is just right for you to deal with your problems, contribute to the rest of life, and grow. Toward the end of his life, Swami Vivekananda, a distinguished spiritual teacher from Bengal, wrote to a close disciple: “I am glad I was born, glad I suffered so, glad I did make big blunders, glad to enter peace.” Everything falls into a complete pattern; even your mistakes, when you look back, are a part of growth.

