

Death And The Notion Of An Afterlife Described By Emily Dickinson

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One truth that unifies all human beings, irrespective of age, sex, or race, is the idea of death. All religions have described and explained the phenomenon in different ways, theologies and mythologies. Whatever the beliefs, customs, and traditions might be, the truth remains that death is the end of life, or the absence of life is death. Death and the notion of an afterlife are always associated with apprehension and fear. It strikes fright into the hearts of many people. Everyone thinks and comprehends, according to their perceptions and thoughts, how death will occur and what will happen after that. A dead and a living person can never be the same. This idea is well described by Emily Dickinson in her poem, "It was not death, for I stood up." The main comparison of the living and the dead is depicted in the title of the poem. Emily says in lines 1 and 2,

*"It was not death, for I stood up,
And all the dead lie down;"*

If a person can stand up and move, then it implies that it isn't the death which befell that person. He or she is considered a living being who can breathe, move, and perform any action and can also feel different emotions and sentiments. The condition or state the poetess was going through wasn't death, as she explained that she could move and stand up. She illustrates the idea by comparing death with the darkness of the night and life with the ringing bells of the noon, as in lines 3 and 4,

*"It was not night, for all the bells
Put out their tongues, for noon."*

This comparison of the living and the dead is common and is well-understood by the people. Here, a living person is referred to a being who breathes while there are those people as well who are dead but are living in the hearts of the people. Many people do not die a natural death or die while living their normal routine. Rather, they die for a cause or a special reason. This difference is also well explained by Emily in the first stanza of the poem "I died for beauty" (lines 1-4),

*"I died for beauty but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb
When one died for truth, was lain
In an adjoining room."*

People die for many reasons. They give up their lives to accomplish something great. Emily says that she died for beauty while the other dead person lying in the adjoining room of the tomb died for truth. Whatever the reasons might be, no matter how great they are, people forget their names and what they did (lines 11 and 12). Here, the moss refers to the forgetfulness of the living beings, which did not let the names of the dead ones stay alive. Rather, it covered it forever so that nobody would ever know who these people were and how and why they died.

*"Until the moss had reached our lips
And covered up our names."*

Just like things get old, memories fade, moss and fungus grow on old things, walls and buildings, and names of great people also become something unknown with the passage of time. They all stand in one place irrespective of the causes and the reason they gave up their life for. All are equal or 'brethren' (lines 5-8). Their causes of death are forgotten equally, and their names and identities have been hidden under the cover of forgetfulness of the people who are still living.

*"He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For beauty," I replied.
"And I, for truth, themselves are one,
We brethren are", He said."*

People often forget their dead loved ones. In today's time, even the living and the breathing ones are treated as dead. Such treatment makes a living person feel like dying inside. Sometimes, such a pang

of sadness or despair starts prevailing inside the heart of a person that even he or she is unable to recognize the cause of that sadness or numbness, which makes him or her uncomfortable and feel like a dead person. A sense of life is absent even though the person is breathing.

“And yet it tasted like them all;

The figures I have seen

Set orderly for burial,

Reminded me of mine.”

Stanza 3 (lines 9-12) of the poem “It was not death, for I stood up” clearly describes such a situation where a person is living but still dead from inside, just like the body’s orderly set for burial. Everything around and the whole environment feels like death, or in other words, the absence or lack of life. When a person is suffering from absolute depression and despair, he or she almost feels like dying inside. Just like a dead person is unable to feel any emotion and not able to think or do anything, a depressed person undergoes a phase of numbness and feels lifeless as if nothing can make him happy or sad, and he or she can’t do anything about that feeling as the cause is not known. It seems like time has stopped, and there’s a complete silence around (lines 17-20).

“When everything that ticked has stopped,

And space stares, all around,

Or grisly frosts, first autumn morns,

Repeal the beating ground.”

One type of sadness exists whose reason is known, and a person can be brought back to a happy life. However, the sadness and despair Emily mentions in her poem are extreme sadness, which leads the person to a dead world and makes him or her feel that nothing can be done and no solution exists. Extreme hopelessness prevails, and the sufferer doesn’t seem to see any chances of change or rescue. There seems to be no existence of a ray of hope or a pole of support (lines 21 and 22).

*“But most like chaos, stopless, cool,
Without a chance or spar.”*

Hence, we can conclude that death isn't just the absence of oxygen; it can be taken as the absence of joy, happiness, and meaning in life. When a person starts feeling that there exists no meaning and no purpose in his life, he or she considers himself or herself equal to a dead person buried under the ground. Ability to breathe and move isn't enough for living a life, ability to feel and sense are also important to be considered a living person. Dead people are forgotten with the passage of time, no matter what they die for. And then there's death, which occurs while a person is still breathing and moving. We have many people around who go through each of these kinds of deaths. Many people at different times are observed dying for a social cause and for humanity. They all are forgotten, maybe not in the sense of taking their names or writing about them, but in the sense that the responsibility they put on our shoulders for continuing their mission is ignored and forgotten soon after the death of those people. The poetess Emily shows these kinds of deaths and the contrast between the living and the dead person in both of her poems.

Works Cited

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