

Dying Without Religious Belief

A talk given by Zoë Fairbairns
at [St Christopher's Hospice](#) in south London
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You may have heard the saying: “there are no atheists in a lifeboat.”

I've never been in a lifeboat, and I hope never to find myself in one, so I can't comment on this.

But by the same reasoning, it might be claimed that there are no atheists in a hospice.

When people feel close to death – their own, or that of someone they love, whether it is on the high seas or in a hospital bed – it is said that they discover or rediscover belief in God.

They call on him - if it is a him, as it usually seems to be – to save them or at least soothe and console and strengthen. They beg him to forgive their sins and not punish them in the fires of hell. They find comfort and reassurance in the idea that God exists, God is watching over them, and everything that happens is part of his great plan.

But not everyone feels this way. There *are* atheists in hospices – patients, medical professionals, carers, visitors and friends. People who don't believe in God or his great plan, and wouldn't feel reassured by it if they did.

I am one such person.

Another was my partner John who died here at St Christopher's Hospice in April 2014.



On his first day here, he was given a wide-ranging interview, by two kind, courteous, friendly, highly professional nurses. I was present, but the nurses and John did most of the talking.

They asked him about his sickness and his health, his family circumstances, his food preferences and whether he wanted any kind of spiritual or religious care or support.

“No thank you,” said John. “I am an atheist.”

I nearly fell off my chair.

I had lived with him for 40 years and had never heard him say such a thing, certainly not to strangers.

It wasn't that I thought he was a believer – I knew he wasn't. But I also knew that he didn't like labels. He thought that people who made a big display of proclaiming themselves atheists, agnostics, humanists or secularists, were missing the point as surely as those who made a public show of being Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews.

He thought religious belief and non-belief were a private matter.

He wasn't under pressure during the interview – other than the pressures anyone might feel when being admitted to a hospice. It wasn't a confrontational moment – no-one was trying to impose anything on him. He was not, as far as I knew, in pain, or drugged.

He was utterly himself, stating a fact, nailing his colours to the mast of the lifeboat: “I am an atheist.”

I thought then and I think now that these were not the words of a person who feared that in the aftermath of his impending death he was going to find himself up against a being who would condemn him to eternal torture for daring to disbelieve.

A being who was powerful enough to do that.

A being who was cruel enough.

And that is my first answer to those who wonder how a person dying without religious belief can find comfort and reassurance. To me the idea of dying without religious belief *is* the comfort, *is* the reassurance.



Let me say briefly what I mean by religious belief.

I was born to parents who ticked the boxes for Church of England, but who nevertheless thought it a good idea to send me to a Catholic convent school for my entire primary and secondary education. This included religious knowledge lessons at least once a day, and organised prayers up to seven times a day.

I also went to confirmation classes at an Anglican church.

So I think I am reasonably well-informed about the things Christians believe. I just don't believe those things myself.

What do I believe?

I am quite open to the possibility that at some point in the unimaginably distant past, there may have occurred a big bang, or a gravitational pull, or an evolutionary great leap forward, or a collision between particles, or some such momentous phenomenon that set off a sequence of events which over billions of years brought into existence what we recognise now as the universe.

If some people want to call this phenomenon God, I'm not going to argue about it. It seems as good a name as any.

But I part company with those who turn that scientific phenomenon into a living being.

Not a human being, but a person - or in the case of Christianity three persons in one - with humanlike characteristics.

These characteristics include the capacities to love and to hate; to be kind and to be cruel; to reward and to punish; to make plans, some of which work out and some of which are thwarted. He is also thought to have the power to alleviate suffering or to make it worse.

This being is supposed to be all-powerful and all-knowing and all-wise, but in spite of this is insecure enough and vain enough to require to be worshipped, loved, admired and deferred to by us humans, through the process we call religion.

When I say I am an atheist I mean I do not believe that such a person exists. There is no evidence for his/her existence, no reason for it, and the stories around it make no sense. If I did believe that he or she or it existed, I would not see any reason to worship them or defer to them, except possibly in the way that, out of a wish for self-preservation, one gives in to bullies.

And what is the point of giving in? Everyone knows that you can't trust bullies to keep their word or treat people kindly even if they do give in. In the words of American ex-Catholic writer Mary McCarthy, author of Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, "I should not care to spend eternity in the company of such a person."



I'm not saying this to attack anyone's world view – I'm just explaining why I do not share it. I want to be clear about where I am coming from when I speak on the topic of looking at ways in which we, who will all die one day, with or without religious belief, can find, give, share and receive comfort and solace.

First there is the all-important matter of ritual and ceremony.

If you belong to a religion – and have been in it for a long time, perhaps all your life you will know about the rituals and ceremonies that it provides for dying and dead people, and for those who are left behind. You will know about the words that are spoken, the actions that are performed, and the theology behind them. If these feel right to you, you can make sure that your minister, your family, your imam, your rabbi, knows that that is what you want.

If some people find comfort in established rituals and ceremonies, that is good.

For some of the rest of us, it was the content of those very rituals and ceremonies which, among other things, turned us away from religion.

If we want rituals and ceremonies of our own, we have to be pro-active. We have to decide what sort of ceremony we want. Do we want music, candles, poetry, words of wisdom? Whose? Do we want flowers, or donations, or both? Do we want to leave space, in our god-free ceremonies, for people who do believe in a god? How much money is it appropriate to spend? We need to think about these things – preferably before we find ourselves on our deathbeds - and tell someone.

John did not want a funeral. He wanted his body to be donated to a teaching hospital to be used for research and education, and for the rest of us to have a party to celebrate his life.

He and I spent a lot of time in his final days downloading stuff from the internet about body donation, and filling in forms.

In the end, the teaching hospital was not able to accept his body, so I was left with the question of how to dispose of it.

My first instinct was to have a private cremation with no ceremony at all. But there were other people to consider, including at least one close family member who wanted an occasion to say goodbye. On reflection, I wanted that too. With the help of a lovely humanist celebrant called [Hester Brown](#), I devised a very small, secular, family-only gathering. I thought of it as the funeral John would have wanted, if he had wanted a funeral.

There was music from John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen, words from family members, and opportunities to write messages on the cardboard coffin. We had flowers from people's gardens and window boxes. We had a family lunch at John's favourite cafe – the [Cafe St Germain](#) in Crystal Palace, highly recommended - and, some weeks later, a big party to celebrate his life.

That's one way of doing it. It wasn't exactly what he wanted, but it was close. It combined his stated wishes with the wishes of others and the practicalities of the situation. People who don't want religious ceremonies can devise their own, often with the help of celebrants from organisations such as the [British Humanist Association](#)

To do this can be comforting, for the person who is close to death, and for those they leave behind.

Dying people, religious or not, will often grieve over all they are losing by dying. But a non-religious person has no reason to believe that their suffering will continue once they are dead.

That is a comfort.

Another comfort lies in the freedom non-religious people have from the more troubling answers to the question WHY?



I don't mean the sorts of *why?* that we may all ask – *why did I, or my loved one, get this disease? Why isn't the treatment working?* These are human questions, and if we want to find answers we can look to human resources for the answers – doctors, researchers, books, the Internet.

But you won't find convincing answers on Wikipedia to such questions as *why is God doing this to me or to my loved one?*

Why, if he is all-powerful and a god of love, does he allow such suffering?

And how am I supposed to go on loving and honouring this god as my religion requires me to do, when this god is doing such terrible things to me and my loved one?

People who don't have religious belief, don't have to answer these questions, or ask them. If you don't believe that there is a god, you don't have to worry about the anger you feel against him.

There are of course many reasons why there may be anger at, or close to, any deathbed.



A person without religious beliefs is just as likely as a believer to be angry with their medical team for - as they see it - getting it wrong. Missing a diagnosis, or choosing the wrong treatment or making a mistake.

A person without religious belief is just as likely as a believer to be angry with the government for running down the NHS, or with family and friends for not giving the right support.

Whoever you are, you may be angry with an employer for not being more generous with sick leave, or the Department of Work and Pensions for not paying the right benefit.

You may be angry that an ex-lover has turned up at the bedside.

You may be angry that an ex-lover has NOT turned up at the bedside.

As a dying person, you may be angry with yourself for lifestyle choices that may have contributed to your illness. You may be angry with businesses that profit from those lifestyle choices.

And let's not even get started on the anger that may flare up around funeral arrangements and wills.



But these are all human angers. They can be dealt with in a human way. Even if the person or institution you are angry with is unavailable, or won't talk to you, you can express your anger to others – friends, counsellors, carers, family members, or even lawyers – without fearing that the simple fact of being angry is going to make things worse for you in the afterlife.

We all have things to feel guilty about. As the old Book of Common Prayer has it, 'we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.' That applies to nonreligious people too. And we can all – religious or not - deal with our own wrongdoing in a human way. We can acknowledge the wrongs we have done to others, apologise, make amends. We can do good things too - make a will, give gifts, donate our bodies or organs, send messages, offer comfort to the people who are comforting us, thank people, reassure them. None of this is the exclusive province of one group. We've all broken human rules.

But the person who doesn't believe in God doesn't have the added burden of guilt for breaking God's rules. Some of these are, of course, good rules, and should be followed by everyone, with or without religious backup. I'm thinking of 'thou shalt not kill' 'thou shalt not steal', 'love thy neighbour' and some of the beatitudes.

But other so-called divine laws are, by most human standards, petty, cruel and incomprehensible: rules about what consenting adults are allowed to do with each other in bed, for example, or what foodstuffs you are allowed and not allowed to eat, or what you can wear, or read, or say, or the exact form that ceremonies should take.

If you don't believe those rules are God-given, you don't have to worry about what God will do to you if you disobey them.

Some religious people believe that there is life after death. That they and their dead loved one will be reunited.

This idea has its attractions.

How lovely to find, like bereaved, heartbroken Nina, played by Juliet Stevenson in the film Truly Madly Deeply, that your dead lover has returned and is holding you in his arms.



But as Nina discovers, renewing a relationship with a dead person – however much you loved them when they were alive - isn't always as easy as it sounds.

The idea of life after death raises as many questions as it answers.

Will it only be your lost loved one who will be waiting for you beyond the grave, or will you also have to encounter people you never liked much in the first place?

Will he or she have been watching over you in the interim, disapproving of the way you conducted your life? Will they reproach you for infidelity, or demand to know why you treated their precious collection of Jean-Luc Godard DVDs in such cavalier fashion?

Will your loved one still be the same as they were before, or will they have been changed by the experience of being dead? If so, how? If not, why not?

If they are the same as they were before they died, or before they became ill, does this mean that their illness and suffering are still ahead of them? Is that what we want for them?

Some religious people believe that these issues will be irrelevant because their dead loved one will be in some sort of transfigured, glorified state. But that is just another way of saying their dead loved one will be a stranger. And who wants to be reunited with a dead stranger?

Then there is the matter of grief. Some religious people turn to God for comfort, and if they find it, good.

All the comfort I have found, I have found from human beings: friends, family, and the total strangers who work for the [Samaritans](#)

I've never been suicidal – but you don't have to be, to call the Samaritans. If I need to phone them at three o'clock in the morning and weep uncontrollably over my loss, I know I can.

If I just want to talk about bereavement and death and dying and listen to the thoughts and experiences of other people, I can come to the [Deathchat](#) group here at St Christopher's Hospice. In the dark months immediately after John's death, this group was a beacon of light. However bad things got, I knew there was always Thursday evening at the hospice – wine, cheese and good conversation with people who know what you are going through because they are going through it too, or are at least close to it.

I want to thank St Christopher's Hospice, and Andrew Goodhead in particular, for setting up the Deathchat group, which has been of huge value to me and, I know, others.

To sum up then. All deaths are individual. As bereaved people, as people aware of our own mortality, we know this.

Whether we are dealing with dying people professionally, or as friends, relatives or loved ones, we can only meet them where they are. The deathbed is no place to start doing missionary work, or seeking to refute deeply held beliefs, as long as these provide comfort.

We can and should listen to what the dying person says and, unless it actually compromises our beliefs, do what they ask for.

If it does compromise our beliefs in a way that is unacceptable to us, we should try to find someone who has the same faith or world-view as the dying person and ask them to help.

If a religious person is troubled by fears of hell, there is probably not much point in telling them it doesn't exist. If it exists for them, then it exists for them. But if they ask what we think, we can let them know that we don't share their fears, and remind

them that as far as we are concerned all that lies ahead is peaceful oblivion – like the time before we were born.

If they have practical tasks that they want help with, we can do that, or direct them to other sources of help, such as solicitors, or the online organisation [Dead Social](#), whose representative spoke here so interestingly a few weeks ago about managing your online presence during your dying and after your death.

When death comes, we all seek comfort where we can find it. First and foremost that means efficient, effective, modern, kind, professional medical care.

For some people it also means religion.

For those of us who do not find comfort in tales of the supernatural, there remain our fellow human beings: their skills, their kindness, their ingenuity, their practicality, their wisdom, their humour, their reliability, their creativity, their common sense and their love.

When my time comes, I trust that those will be available to me, and that they will be enough. And I wish you the same.

Thank you.