

**YOU CANNOT DIE ALONE**  
**Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross**  
**(July 8, 1926–August 24, 2004)**

**Interviewed by: KENNETH KRAMER**  
*Professor Emeritus, San Jose State University*

**ABSTRACT**

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has accomplished much to revolutionize the way Americans view death and dying. The Swiss-born psychiatrist was one of the first professionals in the field to listen to the voice of dying patients and to give them a public forum. Her stages of responding to dying—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are universally taught. In this never-published 1994 interview, she touches upon several of her theories in the field of thanatology. She speaks in succession: of four quadrants—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—and of the need to develop a mature spiritual quadrant in order to deal with the fear of death; of the associated strategy of taking care of unfinished business that keeps us from being willing to face our own mortality; of her complete disagreement with the work of Jack Keovorkian; of three stages that occur after death: 1) the separation of the soul (butterfly) from the body (cocoon); 2) a return to wholeness and awareness; and 3) being embraced by the bliss of a peace-giving light; of the innovative possibility and need for developing elder-toddler centers in which dying patients would be able to mix with and receive love from very young children; and of grief and grieving in relation to her mother's dying. Throughout the interview, Kübler-Ross emphasizes both the wisdom of children, especially dying children, and trusting a field of unconditional love that awaits us.

### Editor's Note

*Omega* notes with great sorrow the death of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross—one of the major pioneers in the study of dying and death. Any history of thanatology will need to acknowledge her contribution as well as review and evaluate her role and legacies. Hopefully this interview, published for the first time, helps us to both remember her unique essence as well as contribute to that effort.

### INTRODUCTION

The following interview with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was part of a series of interviews designed to re-animate my Spring 1990 “Death, Dying, and Religions” class at San Jose State University. My purpose in the series was to initiate a forum through which accomplished practitioners in the fields of thanatology, religion, or the humanities could address the subject of death and thereafter in new ways. Due to the large number of students enrolled in each of two sections, I was assigned an auditorium/lecture hall, complete with a stage. This made it easy for me to videotape each of the interviews conducted in front of the class. However, since some of the spokespersons (including Kübler-Ross) were not able to meet with the class, their interviews were conducted later. The complete series includes: Bishop Rosamonde Miller (Gnostic Church); Brent Walters (Third Century Christian); Hamzah Yusuf (Muslim Imam); Janet Childs (Grief Counselor); Kobun Chino Roshi (Zen Buddhist); Ram Dass (Hindu); Lama Lodo (Tibetan Buddhist); Maurice Friedman (Jewish Philosopher); Raymond Moody (After Death Theorist); Brother David Steindl-Rast (Interreligious Benedictine Monk); Stephen Levine (Dying Awake Practitioner); Kübler-Ross (Thanatologist); and Masao Abe (Zen Buddhist Philosopher).

I entered each of the interviews intending to ask innovative questions (questions that would open up new insights) and to practice discernment listening (listening past judgments and associations to hear both what was really said and what may lie just beneath the spoken words). My goal was not to seek answers that would close off creative possibilities and enforce prior opinions, but to open new ways of envisioning what's possible in the face of death. At the same time, in each interview I repeated two questions so that later, I would be able to compare answers to these questions.

These questions were: *What's missing from the way most of us view death, the presence of which would enable us to have a healthier attitude toward death and dying? What happens after death?* The rest of the questions emerged as a result of the unique dynamics between the person being interviewed and myself.

The following interview with Kübler-Ross occurred in a hotel in Santa Monica, California in 1994. For several years, I pursued her for this opportunity.

At one point, she agreed to meet me after giving a lecture in Santa Cruz, California, but that didn't occur. Instead, I finally met her for breakfast in a Santa Monica hotel and, afterwards, went to her room to record the interview. However, because she was a smoker, we went onto a tiny, concrete balcony outside her room. Two floors below us, cars made their way in and out of the busy parking lot. Neither the traffic noises nor the delivery truck hampered the memorable exchange that followed.

I wish to express my gratitude to Mechthild Gawlick who assisted me in transcribing this interview and Bonnie Evans who assisted me with assembling and formatting all the transcripts.

### THE INTERVIEW

KRAMER: *The first question I would like to ask you, Elisabeth, is a question that I have asked each of the people that I have interviewed: What do you think is the missing element in the way that people respond to death and dying, the lack of which keeps them from having a more healthy attitude toward death?*

ROSS: They have no evolved spiritual problem. If they have any spiritual sense, they are in touch throughout the living world with their soul. They will know that dying is nothing to be afraid of. They are afraid to look inside, they are afraid to look to what God is all about. They don't know anything about human evolution. They worry about taxes, making a living through the year, or a tax year, or whatever, and they don't go beyond that. They are like in kindergarten. And then those human beings who are in kindergarten should not worry about those things, because they are not there yet. That's where evolution takes place. When they finally begin to worry about it, they get excited, then they get excited and then their spiritual quadrant opens and then they ask the right question and then they get the answer. You just have to ask and you find out. But you have to be at a certain level of evolution to even consider that.

### Four Quadrants

*When I heard you speak in Santa Cruz you mentioned the four quadrants: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Could you say more about this?*

Chronologically, human beings do not develop their spiritual quadrant until they are teenagers. That's the natural time for it to develop. Except if you have a dying child that had leukemia for six, eight, or nine years. Then they can develop a huge spiritual quadrant. By the time they die at the age 10 years, they have a super-evolved spiritual quadrant. That's why children are such incredible teachers. They know much more than they think. A child who is born with brain damage—they won. Their intellectual quadrant is wrongly thought of—they are

the wisest people in the world and we treat them as if they were dumb, because we only consider the intellect an important part. We are too dumb to see that they have so much wisdom. You could check that out if you would open an institute for brain-damaged children. How would you go about putting them into the right social world? We are asking for letters of recommendation and school transcripts. The most superficial level of human communication is with the intellect. And it's always contaminated by their upbringing and by teachers, and by everybody else. If you will not ask for any transcript, nor letters of recommendation, just say, "Who is interested in working in an institute for brain-damaged children?," invite them for English tea, and open some biscuits or scones, or whatever, to eat. And just leave them open and invite brain-damaged children to participate. And those children, they smell you, they know you are the right person. They go and touch your knee, and they'll make contact. And in no time they are on your lap and they love you. Grab them fast and hire them and you will have the best staff, because they use their intuition to know who feels right, and feels not right, because it is the intuitive, not the emotional, quadrant. And then you have the best staff. People can check that out. They're dumb, they're morons, you know—we label them, and they are at the bottom of our list of values. They are incredible people. They love you unconditionally. They know all the things they are supposed to learn, except they aren't behaving in the intellectual quadrant.

*In terms of this spiritual evolution of the human person, is there a way in which a person who is in touch with their unconscious—in touch with their dreams, in touch with their reveries—can begin to get some insight, some clues, about that dimension of themselves?*

There are a thousand ways that lead to Rome. The Sufis meditate. The Buddhists say this and that. But we, the Western culture, the only way I know how I can teach an average person who's not into California-style meditation, you know, meditation, all that vegetarian diet and macrobiotic diet and all that stuff. And I really intensively dislike this. I am a good representative of the Western world: I am square and straight and normal—I think! There are actually people who doubt that. But I cannot sit and meditate and advance like that. I tell them to get rid of their unfinished business. It's the most damaged quadrant in the Western world. You know how much violence we have—it's pathetic. We have shootings and killings and gang rape—and too much negativity. If you, an average person, are not a member of a gang, and not a killer who goes around killing, if you want to open up your spiritual quadrant, all the spiritual quadrant, all you have to do is very simple: every time you react negatively, to anybody or anything, you look inside. You don't blame and say that this guy is sick. You cannot really act negatively more than 15 seconds to anything or anybody, unless it's your own unfinished business. If you become honest again. The only honest people left in the world are young children, psychotics, and dying patients.

You don't have to be a dying patient before you become honest. And you can't become psychotic just to learn how to be honest. And you have missed your chance because you are no longer a child. You can become honest again and say: "What does this person do to me that I react so negatively?" And if you look deeply you will find it. [Coughs]. Then you get rid of that negativity.

The more work you do with your unfinished business, the more balanced you become between the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual quadrants. And the more you get rid of that black stuff—the "shadow" as Jung would call it—or the negativity, the unfinished business, the more spiritual one becomes. And in no time, you open up your spiritual quadrant. And then the right questions come to you. "What is all this about? Is it really to build a bigger mansion or drive a fancier car? Where do we come from—what is this all about?" And then you become excited because every time you answer a question, you come up with another one. Then your life becomes interesting. And then you become very intrigued. Suddenly it hits you like lightning. It just comes to you. And then somebody says it just comes to me. Then you know it's not from the head, it's from the spiritual quadrant. And then you pay attention. And then you start paying attention to all of the coincidences. And eventually you will learn that there are no coincidences in life. And then you get excited and ask, "Who orchestrates all this?" And then you get in touch with your guidance. What you call guardian angels, or spooks, or guides, or playmates—it's just a name. Everybody knows of a guardian angel. And if you get to know them—connect with them—make conversation with them. They're happy that you finally get it, and they help you like you wouldn't believe it. And it's fantastic. And so it goes on and on and on. And then your life becomes much more right.

### **Suicide and Dr. Kevorkian**

*I take it that you feel that one of the reasons why you are here in this life is to call people to wake up to this, that is, to let people know that what's going on here is so superficial and of such secondary importance, and that the real lesson in life is to learn about death.*

No, the real purpose of life is spiritual evolution. That is the goal. Death is one door through which you can do it. Dying is the easiest door. Because if you do it with dying patients, especially dying children, they're real teachers. They teach you everything nobody ever teaches you in medical school, or in seminaries, or in churches, or Sunday school. And if you listen to those patients, with all the listening in the world, you don't have to go and get a guru, you have your guru right here, in Huntington Beach, in Fresno, in Kalamazoo. Anywhere you go, go and visit dying children. Befriend them, start conversations with them, and they will teach you anything you want and need to know. You don't have to go to India,

or Sai Baba, or any of these really big people, because you may not be able to afford it. Nobody has to come miles and miles and miles to find the truth. You can find the truth anywhere in the world. I may live in the Virginia mountains, and I can find it there if I look. I have to look and then I can find it. And then you hear about people fighting, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Muslims fight the Christians, and the Serbs fight the other guys. There's nothing but fighting and jealousy and competition. They have so much unfinished business. Kevorkian is a good example. He goes around killing people and he feels like a big hero. He doesn't know that what he is doing is totally wrong. I invited him to come to one of my workshops to get in touch with why he is doing this. Because I am absolutely sure he has some unfinished business. Probably the death of his wife which he couldn't help. That's my presumption, I don't know that for sure. I told him, I could heal him from that unfinished business. Then he doesn't have to spend the rest of his life killing people, which is a "No-No." And he said, "Yes," he would come. And I was very excited. Then the next day I got the phone call that he only comes if I agree to witness one of his killings. And I am sure he would have misused that for PR. As an advertising gimmick. And I said I can't do that, because I totally disagree. There are very few basic Universal laws. "Thou shalt not kill" is one of them. And you don't go around killing people, even if they are one month or two weeks before their actual death. Because you cheat them out of the last lessons that they have to learn in order to graduate. They are very unhappy afterwards, when they see how close they came to real graduation, then they have to come back and start over again. It will be a thousand times more difficult.

*So you would oppose what Dr. Jack Kevorkian is doing?*

Totally—one hundred percent.

*Because you feel that death is that final lesson?*

Everybody is allowed to die, even if you die in a sudden, unexpected way. Everybody is allowed to die when the time for graduation is right. It means they have learned what they came to learn, and they have taught what they learned, and they have taught what they have promised to teach. Then you are allowed to die. It's your graduation. And you make a quantum leap upwards in your spiritual evolution. If you kill somebody months before there is one more lesson to learn, you have to start from scratch. They will not be grateful.

*So the same would apply to suicide then—say, if I take my own life then, in a sense, I cheat myself.*

That's not true of all suicides, you must know. Say you have a teenager who is dreadfully depressed and kills himself, for no other reason than because he is so depressed and there is no other way out. And he says, "I am diagnosed manic-depressive." And they give him all sorts of pills and anti-depressants. And they get worse, and they do not respond to that kind of treatment. They need

Lithium, any element that takes care of that biochemical disorder. They will be evaluated like dying of cancer, because they have this organic pathology that nobody diagnosed and they will not have to pay the price for it. If the same aged teenager commits suicide as revenge, because the boyfriend went out with another girlfriend, and you really want to make your ex-girlfriend guilty and feel miserable for the rest of her life, that she dared to pick another boyfriend. If it's a revenge act, then they have to come back and learn rejection. Then they also know after the transition what could have been if they had accepted that with humility and acceptance, what wonderful voice would be waiting for them, what fantastic other friend they would have found. They would have lived happily ever after. Then all the alternatives are ready for them, but it's too late. They do have to come back to learn their lesson. You cannot return to the life that you borrowed, or whatever you call it, with dirty hands, with a nag that destroys your physical body, which is kind of a sacred shell. Then you die of natural causes, you don't need it anymore. It is discarded like a winter coat when spring comes. [Coughs].

### **Stages After Death**

*Let me ask you a little bit about your conception of what happens on the other side of death.*

I have done research on that for 15 years. To me, it is a very simple process. I have interviewed and talked to people from every conceivable religion and religious background with a special emphasis on Aboriginal, American Indians, Eskimos—all the old wise people who we call “primitive” because *we* are so primitive. We are deep down envious of them because they know so much—they do. All the human beings that I have interviewed have a common denominator: they leave the physical body at the moment of death. It's like a cocoon, then a butterfly comes out. They lose their consciousness. Consciousness is dependent upon a functioning brain. And you lose your consciousness and become a vegetable—you're in a coma state. You are not alive, you have no consciousness, you can't talk, you may have no blood pressure or respiration, but you're not dead yet. Your butterfly is still connected to the cocoon. And as long as that connection is intact, resuscitation makes sense. But there is a point where that long cord is severed.

*Sure, that's fine.*

In their physical body, people will go to beauty surgeons to make their physical body more attractive—they spend a lot of money on that thing. Because they don't look the way they see themselves in the mirror anyway. But when they die, irrespective of what they die of, it simply happens when the cocoon releases the butterfly.

*Oh my!*

This is a little child. I am very opinionated about children. No two are alike, everybody has their own identity. It will still be recognizable on the other side. See, I am talking in symbolic language now. When you are about to fly, after you leave your physical body, you'll be totally whole again. We learned that from Viet Nam. People who had lost two arms, or two legs and one arm, or whatever, at the moment they were out of their body they had all extremities. My wheelchair patients—who are in a wheelchair and have blurred vision and blurred speech—the moment they leave the body, they will be able to sing and talk again and they can walk and dance and they are happy. Then we resuscitate them and bring them back, and we can't make them happy, because they are stuck again in their damaged physical body. But in the second stage, everybody will be aware that the moment you leave your body you are whole again. And that includes plane crash victims blown into a million pieces. Their soul leaves the body at the moment the crash occurs, and what will be buried afterward is only the cocoon. And you need to know that when you work with dying children. Because these children are terribly afraid when they watch a grandpa buried on television, and they put him in a wooden box and they nail it closed, and the grandpa can't breathe any more, which they don't understand at age three. And then we make a big hole in the ground and put the casket in it. Then to make things worse, we shovel dirt on top of it. So they are really suffocating. [Coughs]. I tell children, "Don't worry, the butterfly is gone already." Nothing can damage the butterfly. What we bury is the cocoon. And we need that, because you need a place to go and say hello and to talk. That's for us, the people who live and continue to live. So when you talk to them, when they are close to death, you tell them that soon they will be a butterfly. And you have to be sure that they know that the burial or cremation is only the cocoon and not the butterfly. When you do that, you have no more problems. They understand, especially dying children, because they are very spiritual.

Now in the second stage, the first thing you learn is that you are whole again, that nobody can destroy your soul. The second thing is that nobody can die alone. God arranged for triple assurance that no human being dies alone. Number one, is when you are in the butterfly stage. Say the dying person lives in Denver and the family lives down here in California. That child, or that person, may think of their parents who may be living anywhere—in Kalamazoo, or whatever. The very second he thinks of his parents in Kalamazoo, his soul is in Kalamazoo, and they visit them. So you cannot die alone. If you think of anybody in the whole, wide world, you are there, because after that second stage there is no space and no time. So in a split second, I can go visit Peru—Zurich I always wanted to see—Guatemala and Tibet, and all the places I've never seen. I am not in a hurry, and it does not cost me any mileage.

*No frequent flyer mileage!*

So, you can go anywhere you want. It is true that you can see them and console them, but they may not hear you. But we have found a lot of men, Viet Nam Veteran victims, who woke up one morning at 12 o'clock and found the sun was there, and they said, "Oh, my God!" And they found out that they hadn't been asleep, that they had died. And if you are tuned in, you may be aware of it. But that is not the average population. That's one reason we don't die alone. The other reason is that they who preceded you in death—your grandpa—maybe you have lost a child long ago—anybody that's important to you will be waiting for you in that second stage. And there's immediate recognition—like children who have never seen their grandpa in their life—he died before they were born. It is their grandpa, they immediately know it's their grandpa. And a reunion takes place there. Californians, who have eight wives, are petrified which one of the eight wives will be there. And I am not sure why they are really nervous about it. What they need to know is that love is evaluated very differently from here. You mean, "I love you if you buy me a mink coat." That is not love. "I love you if you buy me a sable coat." That is not love. But maybe one of the eight wives really cared for this guy. She'll be the first one there. It is a quantitative differentiation and qualitative.

And then the last reason why you cannot die alone—your guides and guardian angels—children call them "playmates"—will be waiting for you. And you immediately recognize them. Like a three-year-old child who dies who still has their grandparents and siblings, he would be lost, because there is no recognizable face. Their guides, their guardian angels, they are right there and lead them all the way, and they help him to create something that symbolizes transition. This is very in touch with a bridge. My patients have very few bridges; my patients are phobic and they don't like bridges. So they create a gate. My own experience was a mountain pass with wildflowers. It was gorgeous. We go over into another land that has a different image. All this is real, but it is a different reality. All this is real, but not reality. You create it psychically. Then you see in the distant horizon this bright, bright, bright light—gorgeous. And you try to focus on that light. Then you don't get distracted. It is all a projection and your old fears may come back. About 10 of all my cases have had negative experiences. They are so certain of having a brainstorm—that's very real, but not reality. It's a projection of their fears. That is why you need to get rid of your unfinished business before you die—one more reason. [Coughs]. And in that second stage you have all awareness. And the awareness is an incredible gift. It is much more than conscious awareness. You know what everyone in a car who drives by you is thinking. If you're killed in an auto accident, you know why they don't stop to help you. In America, they're afraid of lawsuits. But you can read all their thoughts—you're totally connected with them. And in that awareness stage you can visit anybody.

You will then communicate with your guardian angel—he will help you to go over the bridge, or through the tunnel, or whatever. Then you reach the light, and you are engulfed or embraced in that light. After you have been engulfed in the light, bathed in that light, you have such a bliss—I cannot even describe. It's the most peaceful feeling of radiance, awe, love—it's just incredible. Man can only manipulate the physical and the psychic—thank God! He cannot interfere in the spiritual.

Once you make the transition into the third stage of the spiritual and focus on the light, then the barrier between the second and third stage will be close, your connection with the butterfly and the cocoon will be severed. And that is when all physical life ends—resuscitation is no longer possible, no longer worthwhile. And in that last stage, you are infused into that light, which is the most incredible feeling. In that light you will know, and everybody will know, that you were all particles of that light. We are all part of God. I would say if you have some dandruff you should shake and relieve some souls into the universe. You are like one of those dandruff flakes in terms of size, which is a very poor comparison, but you can understand it. When we return to our source where we all came from, it's such a homecoming, such a bliss. And as soon as we do that, we will all know it.

In the first stage you have consciousness, in the second you have awareness, and in the third one you have knowledge. It dawns on you that this is where it came from. And then you remember what major or minor you picked. Why you picked those parents that were horrible maybe. They abused you, they were nasty, they were this and that, and you understand why you picked them. You picked a lulu, but you're glad you did, because you didn't give up and you learned from it and you grew from it. And you picked your brothers and sisters for all reasons of learning. And you picked your wife or your husband. You may have felt many times like you were a chess figure and somebody just plays a game with you. You chose those moves. You chose what you are going to do in this world.

And the only purpose and the only question you are going to ask when you return to life is, "What kind of service have I rendered?" And the other question (it does not have to be in that order) is, "How much love have I been able to give and receive?" With emphasis on "receive." How much love have you been able to give everything. Because if you do not learn self-love, you cannot love others. You can only love others to the degree that you love and respect yourself. And in our upbringing we were raised that if you love yourself you are an egotistical maniac, certainly not a Christian. You should be ashamed of yourself! It was presented very negatively. It took me 60 years to learn, to finally dawn on me what self-love is all about. It's a very hard lesson to learn, but if you learn it, it is worthwhile. It is not an easy one. You have to learn to give and to receive. You can't just give, give, give—you will not pass the grade, and what have you.

And then in that love field, in that presence of God, you know whether you accomplished the things you promised. And if you didn't, what part did you goof up with? How many detours did you take? And what a blessing the detours were, because you learned additional stuff. As long as you finally found the main road, your main road, and everybody has their own mission, and everybody has their own gifts. And then you have the blessings to really meet your guides and talk to them. And you know them, of how much they helped you 365 days a year, every moment of your life. And you see yourself drowning in self-pity, "Poor me, I'm all alone." You're never alone. You've never been alone.

And in that presence, which is total, unconditional love, you are given the chance—you have to, you have no choice about that any more—you have to review every deed during your life. Every word spoken during your life. Every thought. And then much too late for you, you begin to be aware of how much your thoughts affected your life. How you contaminated your department where you work with your negativity. You may have never uttered a negative word, but you were full of negative thoughts and your boss became more and more arrogant and more and more nasty. And you created that with your thoughts. And you become all-knowing about those things in your life that weren't so wonderful. But because you don't have an emotional quadrant anymore, you don't suffer the way we understand it. You just have to stand at this big thing, it is already becoming a bigger and bigger thing. And if nobody spots it, you will turn into a Hitler. And sure enough, you do turn into a Hitler. I don't know if you are aware of how Hitler was raised. He was really beaten up and abused as a child. And his parents get a lot of credit for what he turned out to be. So it's not all on you, you are not alone in being the big monster. And you understand that. My total fantasy—and it is not based on fact—is that Hitler can only make up for the millions of deaths, and the millions of sufferings of people almost single-handedly—not single-handedly, but he is the one—if he would come back and be a physician, maybe come up with the AIDS cure. And cure millions of AIDS victims. Then, in a very short time, he could aid a lot of people. That's my fantasy.

### **Elder-Toddler Centers**

*That's a beautiful fantasy.*

Nobody is totally rejected or sent to Hell. Hell is when you review your life and you see all of the little negative things, nasty things, and ugly things, and how many people cried because of you. And most of the time, you were not even aware of it. That to me is Hell. It's caused by us, it's not a horrible place that God creates to punish you. God is all unconditional love with incredible compassion and understanding. And the easiest way we learn is through hardships. If you see an old

woman with a wrinkled face, you can be sure that she has gone through a lot of hardships in her life. She is the most beautiful person in the world. It's all in her face—that's what it's all about. And they spend billions to erase wrinkles, which is the biggest stupidity. They should change the horrible shameful house into ET centers. Into centers for the elderly and for toddlers. I think if you have served the community for seven or eight decades, you are entitled to a heavenly place to spend your last few weeks or months of your life. And you should have your own furniture, and hopefully, a pig. With good food and good care—and that should be free of charge. Nobody should be discriminated against because they can't pay such a fortune. But we never give anything free. To anyone. Because this raises parasites. You have to have a barter system. In my ET center, the elderly have to pick a toddler from working parents. So when they have to go to work, they don't have to hire a babysitter, or bring the child to a daycare center. They bring the toddler to the ET center. And the grandma and grandpa pick which child they like the most. They are very opinionated at that age. They pick the child and it is their child until they die. The only requirement to live there free of charge is one total from one hour every single day. I mean the parents bring them from Monday through Friday every day. And they take them on their lap. They cannot buy things, they have to give from their soul, from their heart. They take them on their lap, and they tell them about Switzerland, or Ireland, or wherever they came from, and the children will love it.

And while they do that, the children investigate the wrinkles, and they go all over their faces. The more wrinkles, the more they love them. And if they have pimples, they love them even more because they are alike. And the old people get touched again. Old people in their nursing homes don't get touched. They sit in their wheelchairs alone always, and each time you walk by they lift their arms up, "Please come near me, talk to me," and people walk by them as if they are invisible. It is a dreadful shame how we treat old people. If you go to an Eskimo village or the bush in Africa they respect, they adore their elders. They know they are good teachers. And the same elders then teach their babies, their toddlers. We have to learn that again. And what do the children give the old people? They touch them again. They feel loved, wanted, respected, needed. And nobody gets senile as fast as our people here, because they have a purpose in their lives. If they are too weak to get up, the toddlers come and climb all over you and touch you and talk to you, even if you had a stroke and can't talk anymore. It keeps you alive, literally alive. We old people teach the children unconditional love. We love them not because they bring home good grades, or they look pretty, we just love them. And the child needs to experience that before they go to first grade. That gives them a foundation and a trust in life, that things will never be that bad, because they have experienced the things. They can always fall back on that memory. We need to change a lot of things in our society. [Coughs]. That's my last project.

*Your last project is to get this ET Center?*

Yes. To get ET centers all over.

*Wow. Elisabeth, because the people who are going to be reading this will not have had the opportunity to see the light and joy in your face when you were talking about the light and the experience that you had there, which you said you simply couldn't describe, I wonder if you could speak a little bit about your experience of that afterlife realm. You spoke with such certainty and such clarity, and such sureness, and also with such a deep joy. . . .*

I don't know which one to pick. I've had more than one. And you can have those. In one case I was just totally exhausted. And I had had it. You don't have to be near death. Read a book, *Close To the Light*, you know that one from the pediatrician. And there has been even a better book that came out three months ago by a woman who had nine children. She had a hysterectomy. Do you know that?

## **Grief and Grieving**

*Yes, I saw her on Oprah. She had an interview.*

Yes, that book you have to read. That is the best description of all my 20,000 cases, because she is the only woman I know of—and I have talked to lots and lots of women—who was given the blessing to remember everything . She didn't just bring back fragments. She was allowed to remember everything and to share it. And when people read that book—it's a good example. You cannot describe it in words, it's just like falling into a waterbed of love. You really cannot describe it. And the peace—nothing bothers you—I mean, I didn't worry about my two children and who looks after them. I didn't worry about anything. All I wanted was to stay there. Naturally, I was told, you could not stay there. You are not finished yet. Go back and finish it up. But once you have been there, as a critical scientist, if you do research like I did, if a person says they have been there describes it, and it sounds very real, you check them out to see if there is any fear of death left. If they have a fear of death, then you know that they are phony-baloney. You will lose all of your fear of death.

*Yes. Since we don't have too much more time, let me shift the direction a bit and speak about grief. Let me ask you a question this way, since I am sure you have been asked so many, many questions and you've spent all your life dealing with this. If you were dying now, or about to die, and you had one thing left to say about grief, your last word, so to say, what would that be?*

Nothing. Grief is the last thing I would talk about, because if you were not able to learn as a little chap of six years old that grief is a gift from God.

With tears and time, it can heal any wound. If you didn't learn before going to first grade, you would grow into a grownup who marinates in self-pity. And so negatively with so many problems as there are problems. And one word would not cure that. You have to really experience that God looks after his children. He gives his tears. And if you lose your security blanket when you are four years old, and your mother is Swiss, then everything has to be neat and clean. And it starts looking dirty and torn up and she throws it on the compost. That is a terrible loss for a child. And if they make light of it and say, "Don't be a sissy, here is another blanket you can use as a substitute." Like when you lose your pet, and then you are lied to and they buy you another pet—it's a meager substitute. If you don't learn how to grieve when you are in first grade, you will always have trouble with grief. We have to raise a whole new generation to respect the natural emotions. And know that anger is not a curse—and it is a gift from God.

You have to be able to know man. Even if you stamp your feet. Natural anger takes 15 seconds. If you stand up for your rights, then you learn self love. If you get bashed, or burned, or punished when you dare to open your mouth, you create a Hitler. If you sit on a ledge and dangle for 50 years, you become a mass murderer. Every person in prison should be healed from their unfinished business. Because they are sentenced, especially the death penalty, you punish them for what you created; it's so paradoxical. Or life in prison, if you have no chance. I did a workshop in Scotland with all lifers and I spent a week in the prison, where I lived in a cell and ate the prison food and used cold showers. And it was a fantastic experience for us, besides what those people shared. And one half was the hierarchy of the prison, the prison director, and the others were all lifers. At the end of the workshop the president, the director of the prison, hugged the worst inmate, and with tears in his eyes said, "If I had been raised by you, I would be on the other side of the fence now." And he understood finally that we create the monsters. So my big dream is that we raise children who learn that anger and to say, "No" takes 15 seconds and is a gift, and that they should be glad to be able to express it. And if they cry, don't say, "Don't be a sissy!" Because if they don't cry when they have to cry about, they will repress all of their natural emotions. By the time they go to first grade, they become unnatural. We have to start from scratch with a whole new generation. And that is going to happen in the so-called "New Age" now. There will be a quantum leap of evolution.

*So you would say then that we have to love our grief.*

We have to love every aspect of what happens to us. Even if it is horrible at the moment, then you sit and talk before, OK, then you can see clearly. If you go on a mountain top and look down, then you can see what's happening. A good example why I am against taking your own life comes from my own experience.

My mother only had one fear: she was totally afraid of becoming a vegetable. I mean, she was petrified.

*Before dying you mean?*

Yes. And we told her, “Not you! You have been giving and loving and been active all your life. And the day she was 76, I took her to the mountains in Switzerland—we had no car—to Zermatt with the Matterhorn. A gorgeous place. And we had a week together (my two children were about four and seven, or four and eight) to teach happiness, because it dawned on me that I was going to die in one week. I had one week to live. I don’t know why that came to me. And my children don’t even know their mother. They know that I live in a nice 3,000 square foot house with a car and a driveway, and a television box in every room. But they don’t know the real me, and I wanted them to know. So I went there and I invited my 76-year-old mother, because I believe in multi-generations. And my mother reminded me every single day. And we came home with flowers every night and pockets full of rocks, and it was total heaven. And the last Friday, my children tried to ease a little bit of her under the feather bed. They were going to sleep because we were all pooped out. And they wanted to be able to climb into bed immediately. And they really tried. So the last evening, I was just happy, my mother ruined the whole week in one second. Out of the blue sky, she stood on the balcony, she looked at the mountains and the moon and the stars, and out of the blue she said, “When I become a vegetable, give me an overdose.” My instant response to her was, “A woman who goes mountain climbing at 76 drops to her death very quickly.” That is years after teaching the stages of life. I could not hear my mom. And she said, “No, you have to promise me, because you are the only physician in the family able to give me an overdose and put me out.” And I said, “No! I cannot do that.” And she begged me and pleaded with me. And I was angry, I was really angry. She spoiled the whole vacation. And later, while I washed an apple, she started again. And I said, “Don’t even bring it up, I will not do that—period. There were no “ifs” involved, it was clearly “no.” She could not hear my, “No,” and I could not hear her pleading.

Three years later she had a stroke. She had lots of other strokes. She became a vegetable. We sent her to the best hospital in the world. Nothing did it. And I flew back and I said to her, “You want to go to the equivalent of a hospice?” And she nodded. So we found her a place that just took care of patients. No prolongation of life, nothing. That thing was a drastic place, because they had no more roaming inside the hospice. She rattled for hours and hours and hours. And there was a rage and anger and nobody could hear her. And I did hear her, but I could not do it. The other hospital had horrible side rails and it took two men to put her into the bed and no chance to wrap her. It was hard as heck. When you are lying and you are paralyzed, it is like lying in a casket, because you can’t move to sit up. So she existed there. And she looked at me like putting a guilt trip on me. And

she knows me about that. And she looked at me like people who had killed people. And I put it into words, and I said, "I know what you are trying to say, but I can't do that—I don't want to do that." It was a nightmare. She existed this way for four years. And I am in America and she is in Switzerland. And I went through the stages of dying. I went through them now and that can't be.

God is not such a monster. And then I got mad at Him. I called Him every name in the book—I mean, *very* disrespectful. I said, "That can't be. This is a woman who has given, and given, and given, and loved, and loved, and loved. And that's what she gets from You. Where is your mercy and grace?" Oh, I talked to Him like you wouldn't believe. He didn't budge. There was no lightning striking me, nor was my mother ready to die. Then I went through bargaining. Like promising all sorts of things, you know that totally. I went through depression. And after she died, I had no warning when she died. But really, after her death, I had to reevaluate my opinion of this monster you call God. And it hit me like lightning! I said, "You're the most generous man in the whole, wide world." (That is the biggest compliment I can give anybody, because I am very allergic to cheap men.) "You're the most generous man in the whole wide world." There is the search from a distance of finding for yourself what happened. And it dawned on me that He allowed my mother to give and give and give for 76 years, and only asked her to learn to receive for four years. That's pretty generous. That's when it dawned on me that people who can't die—I have to help them to find out what they haven't learned. If I can figure it out, it can happen. And then they can make the transition.

*And in your mother's case, what she needed to learn most was how to receive, especially what she felt wasn't a gift. To receive what life was giving her, which she felt, first of all, was unfair, unjust; what she didn't feel capable of receiving.*

Just learn to receive with humility. If a neighbor made a cake or a pie on a Saturday, you could be sure that the following weekend she had to make a pie or a cake in return. She never allowed anybody. . . .

*She had to reciprocate.*

Yes, it is pathologic. But she learned it.

*You were speaking earlier about indigenous peoples. There is a French anthropologist named Marcel Mauss, who wrote a book called The Gift. He studied Polynesian cultures and their festival called "potlatch." In this festival, people come and bring gifts from neighboring villages. Three things always took place. First, a gift is given. Second, one has to learn how to receive the gift, because the gift contains the soul of the giver. But the third, and the most important stage is that you have to learn how to reciprocate the gift. In my own thinking, it often*

*occurs to me that grief itself is a gift. And it is a gift which I not only have to receive in the proper way, but I also have to reciprocate it.*

A slow child looks like a compassionate friend. Parents of handicapped children are such incredible gifts, because they are caught in the tragedy, and they turn it into a gift by helping others who are in the same situation.

*I know that. I hardly know what to say, other than that I want to acknowledge the fact that it has been an extraordinary moment for me, and that. . . .*

You finally caught up with me.

*It was orchestrated.*

Did you ask me all the questions?

*No, I didn't.*

What did you not ask?

*When you are with someone who is simply stuck, and let's say it's your parent. And, as with your mother, you're with your parent and they just simply do not want to confront themselves in that moment of facing death, they simply don't want to talk about it—will not.*

Unconditional love is to accept your fellow men the way they are at and not when they are not the way you want them to be. They are your teachers to finally teach you unconditional love. If you don't get it then you meet more and more people like this who teach you how to get it. That's what unconditional love is all about. Just go through your house because you are nasty. God is up there. There is a proverb—the prodigal son.

*A proverb from the Bible?*

The prodigal son. That's what you need to learn.

*The father who accepts his son back, even after the son takes his money and squanders it, and returns.*

That's what goes with you every single day. You have been nasty and He still loves you. You can't do that with parents who are stuck in the now. You need some help. And then you don't love Him. You only love Him conditionally. Tell that to your students.

*Bless you.*

## CONCLUSION

This interview contains Kübler-Ross' thought-provoking perspectives on some of the significant themes in her life's work. Because of the importance

of her work, I always included her teachings in my “Death, Dying and Religions” classes.

Aside from her comments about the three stages after death, which initially absorbed much of my attention, the heart of the interview for me has become her response to her mother’s dying. In the “Grief and Grieving” section of the interview, theory and life intersect in a way which raises a question about the relation between Kübler-Ross’ views and her life-practice. In her recounting the story of her mother’s 76th birthday, several of Kübler-Ross’ responses, or should I say the “I”-orientation of her responses, surprised me. The first surprise was her reaction to the dawning sense that she (Kübler-Ross) “was going to die in one week.” In this context, she was only concerned that her two children didn’t know her—“the real me.” But why not? This seems like a strange thing to suddenly realize, unless she meant that they were too young (4 and 7/8) to understand her views on death and dying. If so, this seems to me to reflect a self-preoccupied approach to her children. Why was she not more interested—especially if she felt that she was about to die—in getting to know her children better so that she would know how to prepare them for her death?

The next surprise concerns Kübler-Ross’ response to her mother’s request: “When I become a vegetable, give me an overdose.” With that request, the whole week’s vacation trip was ruined, for her, in a second. In response to her mother’s pleading, Kübler-Ross remarked: “I was really angry.” While this is understandable as one of many possible reactions, why just anger? Why didn’t Kübler-Ross also engage her mother in a dialogue about her mother’s fears? Why didn’t she empathize more with her mother’s concerns, even though she couldn’t legally or morally give her mother an overdose? Revealingly, she said: “I could not hear her pleading.” It seems to me that Kübler-Ross, especially in light of her work with dying patients, would be able to listen as carefully and deeply and compassionately as possible to her mother’s pleadings even though she could not finally comply with her wishes.

Then, years later, after her mother’s stroke and hospitalization, I am surprised at Kübler-Ross’ depictions of God—first as a monster, then as “the most generous man in the whole wide world.” It surprises me that she would first blame, then release God from blame, as if God personally caused her mother’s suffering. Indeed, it’s very curious that she reduced the multiplicitous mystery of an infinite God to any such idea. Even though her comments suggest it, I have a hard time accepting that Kübler-Ross would attribute her mother’s suffering to a higher purpose (i.e., that God wanted her to learn “to receive”). In fact, if you look carefully at her language in this section, you will see that she continually uses the pronoun “I” and never “we” or “you.” She doesn’t say “mother and I,” but continues to speak from her own side of the

relationship about lessons learned. One can only wonder whether, at the end of her life, Kübler-Ross' reported disgust with God, for not taking her sooner, doesn't reveal an "I"-sided approach to dying. Perhaps what is missing here is a real respect for the transforming power of relationships—with her children, with her mother, even with herself. Perhaps Kübler-Ross, finally, was more interested in relations with her spooks, or guardian angels, than with people in this life.

Direct reprint requests to:

Kenneth P. Kramer  
Professor Emeritus, SJSU  
653 Highland Ave.  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
e-mail: [kramer@cruzio.com](mailto:kramer@cruzio.com)

Copyright of Omega: Journal of Death & Dying is the property of Baywood Publishing Company, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Omega: Journal of Death & Dying is the property of Baywood Publishing Company, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.