



The Yew Tree

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A Pagan perspective on death and dying

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Behold we arise with the dawn of time from the grey and misty sea, and with the dusk we sink in the western ocean, and the lives of a man are strung like pearls on the thread of his spirit.

from *The Sea Priestess* by Dion Fortune

The Pagan view of death is a positive one. Most Pagans believe in reincarnation, and regard death as part of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The souls of the dead rest for a while in the Summerlands (the Pagan afterlife) before returning for another reincarnation. There is no doctrine of sin and redemption, rather everyone must evolve spiritually throughout their successive incarnations. Many souls return to Earth again and again, either because they love and cherish the planet, or because they wish to help others. In Hinduism, these souls are known as *bodhisattvas*.

We fear death because it appears to be the end. The ego cannot face the prospect of its own annihilation, and fears dissolution in the ground of all being. Therefore we hide death away, and banish the dying to anonymous hospital rooms. The art of dying well has been lost, and with it, the art of living. If we face the prospect of our own death without fear, it becomes possible to live life to the full.

But death is a gateway through which we must all pass; the seeds of our death are contained in our life. One of the names of the Horned God is "The Lord of Death and Resurrection". He guides us through the gates of death and into the realms beyond. He is the lord of limitation and endings, just as the Goddess is the lady of expansion and beginnings. Without death there could be no process of change; there could be no ageing, no experience, no birth, and no rebirth.

The Pagan [Wheel of the Year](#) expresses this process. The year begins at [Samhain](#), the ancient festival of Hallowe'en. This is a time for remembering the dead and recognising the transformative powers of Nature. It is balanced by Imbolc, a spring festival of birth, dedicated to

Brigid, the goddess of healing, smithcraft, and poetry.

The Tarot card of Death is another way of looking at the different aspects of death. When it appears in a divinatory spread, it does not usually signify the actual physical death of the querent. What it actually represents is a radical transformation, the end of one phase and the beginning of another. When the Tarot was created (around the fourteenth century), death was a very visible part of life. You couldn't ignore death in the past: most people would have seen a loved one die, either in battle or of an illness.

Traditional cultures have many stories about death and dying. There are ceremonies to ease the transition into the next world, both whilst someone is dying and after they are gone. There is also space for the experience of grieving, and the possibility of giving oneself up to grief completely for a while as a cathartic and healing process. Western society has largely lost these ceremonies. We need to rediscover them, to reclaim them, and to create new ones out of our own response to death and dying.

The aim of this page is to produce a Pagan-oriented resource on death and dying. It was inspired by the meditation on death by [Sabina Becker](#).



A good death

from *The Death of AE: Irish Hero and Mystic* in ***What the Bee Knows*** by P L Travers

He was prepared. He knew exactly what he wanted done and was setting about the business of his dying as he had set about the business of his life, practical, unflustered.

"There must be a lordly way out of the body by one of those secret radiant gateways into light. If we do not find this way, I think we must return again and again to the body until we have mastered the secret of death and can take that lordly way out by our own will."

That day the nursing home seemed to be the still centre of a shining, turning world. His friends were scattered upon the lawns, laughing - nothing here for tears - waiting in the hope that one or another of them would be sent for to have a glimpse of him.

I do not think that one of us was less than happy. He had let his myth sustain him to the last and to me it was a vindication of the Iron Age that such a man could live and die in it. And it was clear to all of us that the Pilgrim, whatever his destination, was content to go towards it. There is a time for tears but this was not it.

So we sat and waited, knowing that upstairs an Event was taking place. At last, about eleven o'clock, the doctor with the pendulum came in quietly and said: "It is all but over - the death rattle has him."

And at that I cried out. I heard myself say, "No, no, it will not be like that." That was not the secret way. He had said to John Eglinton that he was not afraid of death; all he objected to was what he called 'Thrust out' of the body instead of leaving it as he chose.

"That is not the way of it. Go back!" I cried. "It is not over."

Clearly assuming that I was unhinged and with the air of one who pacifies an hysteric, he shrugged and turned away.

After twenty-five minutes, he came in again, shaken and surprised. "She was right," he said. "The rattle ceased. He has quietly breathed his life away."
At once, Con Curran, AE's lawyer, stood up and said

*Let us now praise famous men
And our fathers that begat us.*

and we departed.

And it was light - such light as there was perhaps, on the first day. Never before have I seen such a moon. It came up slowly out of the sea, full, golden, and enormous, dazzling as the sun.

AE (George Russell) was a writer, mystic, poet, journalist, and painter.

Links:

Transitions

a group of Pagans, mostly members of OBOD, who want to provide people with the resources to create meaningful and beautiful rites of passage, particularly funerals, that offer support during the process of dying, reflect the spirituality of the person who has died, and offer support to the bereaved. To further this aim, the group has devised the concept of the Pagan Pledge, where people can promise each other to make sure that they get the kind of funeral they want.

LifeRites

LifeRites was set up in April 1998 to help build on the foundation work of The Voyager Trust concerning the issues of dying and death. This remit has been extended to cover all rites of passage and life celebrations. LifeRites is dedicated to serving the needs of those individuals who ascribe to Nature based spiritualities by providing practical advice and guidance on Rites of Passage and Life Celebrations. It also acknowledges the needs of those who hold no formal religious beliefs and who seek to affirm their life and death in a personal and individual manner.

The Natural Death Centre

The Natural Death Centre is a non-profit charitable project launched in Britain in 1991, with three psychotherapists as directors. It aims to support those dying at home and their carers and to help them arrange funerals. It has as a more general aim that of helping improve 'the quality of dying'. Also has information about green burials, do-it-yourself funerals, living wills, and other related issues.

Engineers of the imagination

create secular ceremonies for rites of passage

[Heaven on Earth](#), 18 Upper Maudlin St, Bristol BS2 8DJ, tel / fax +44 (0)117 926 4999, email: heaven.earth@virgin.net web: heavenonearthbristol.co.uk Situated in the heart of Bristol's historic centre, near Christmas Steps, this award-winning celebration shop sells many unique

artefacts & gifts, suitable for all of life's important events: births, christenings, birthdays, valentines, weddings, anniversaries and funerals.

A meditation on death, by Sabina C. Becker

"Death is a piece of Life, not its opposite, not even its end, but merely one station of a larger cycle. We are born, we die, we are reborn in a different shape. Our bodies decompose and feed the flowers that feed the soil that feeds the crops that feed the livestock that feeds us. These are the facts of Life and Death: when something dies, it becomes a part of something else that lives. Biology, if not all theology, supports this view. Western funeral customs, with their habits of embalming, elaborate crypts, and even to a certain extent cremation, try to fudge over these facts. They try to prevent the dead from fully rejoining Creation. They miss the real point, I think, of what death is about: It's about getting back into that ancient cycle."

Cultural approaches to death

(links to external sites do not necessarily represent an endorsement of the views expressed in them)

- [Death & dying: Rituals, beliefs, and traditions](#) by Kathleen Jenks. A rich resource of material relating to death and dying in both eastern and western traditions.
- [Death Across Cultures and Time](#) - from Kearl's Guide to the Sociology of Death.
- [Reviews of books about death](#) - various different books from different perspectives
- [Tibetan Book of the Dead](#) - literature and artwork on prayer, ritual, and meditation from the religious traditions of Tibet, India, and Nepal.
- [The Book of Visions](#): section on death and dying
- [The Book of Visions](#): section on old age

Paganism and polytheism

Books

[The Pagan Book of Living and Dying](#) - the Reclaiming Collective. An excellent book including meditations and reflections on death and dying, funerals, supporting carers and the bereaved, poetry, and much more. Highly recommended.

[The New Book of the Dead](#) by Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki

A book of rituals and meditations for the process of dying, coming to terms with grief, and funeral rites.

[A Witch Amongst Us](#) by Lois Bourne

Includes some excellent and very interesting material on her time as a nurse, when she spent a lot of time nursing the terminally ill, and saw their deceased relatives coming to guide them on the way to the other world.

Poetry

The poems listed are a selection of poems about death which I find moving, interesting, or helpful. Some of them are closer to the Pagan worldview than others. Most are links to a Google search because poetry sites keep disappearing (presumably for copyright reasons).

- ["Funeral Blues"](#) by W H Auden
- ["Old Moon"](#) by Yvonne Aburrow
- ["Do not go gentle into that good night"](#) by Dylan Thomas
- ["And Death Shall Have No Dominion"](#) by Dylan Thomas
- ["I seem to have loved you..."](#) by Rabindranath Tagore
- [Various death poems](#) on the Life Rites web site
- ["I Have a Rendezvous With Death"](#) by Alan Seeger
- ["Because I could not stop for death"](#) by [Emily Dickinson](#) from *Time and Eternity*
- ["Life and Death, they are one"](#) by Rainer Maria Rilke
- ["Gacela of the Dark Death"](#) by Federico García Lorca
- [Futility](#) by Wilfrid Owen
- [Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep](#) (Anon)

- [Haiku death poetry](#): Some really beautiful Japanese haiku on death and dying