

Matters of Life and Death

Salman Akhtar

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Anyone familiar with the many books that Salman Akhtar has written, edited as well as contributed to knows the calm clarity and insightful observations they contain. This short and excellent text stands in that tradition. Dr Akhtar's years of teaching, his familiarity with the psychoanalytic corpus and his poetic sensibilities come together as he address some fundamental human experiences.

The book is divided into three main categories, 1. *Life*, 2. *Death* and 3. *Life and Death*. In each of these chapters Akhtar addresses such topics as goodness, happiness, playfulness; on death, he studies mortality, graves and orphans and his final chapter is a summary reflection. His focus is on helping, particularly the student and beginning practitioner, address some topics they are not likely to have studied in class but which they will encounter in their treatment of individuals. How many lectures has one heard on "Graves and Orphans" in psychoanalytic training? Yet the importance of ritual, of the role of grave sites in focusing grief, both recognized as well as denied, play a normative role in human experience and must play a role in any effective treatment. The great Indian poet Tagore reminds us "*Death belongs to life as birth does. The walk is in the raising of the foot as in the laying of it down*"¹. The profound wisdom of these simple lines transcends much psychoanalytic complexity as reflected, for example, in our convoluted discussions of a "death instinct". Akhtar avoids, as much as possible, technical jargon and endless theoretical discussion. The same informed common sense approach is followed when Akhtar reflects on accepting gifts from patients, the use of a chair vs. a couch, the issue of breaks in treatment and such everyday issues that analysts meet.

Throughout the text the author states his thesis, offers references that address the topic, frequently gives a clinical example and then summarizes what he has done; a helpful basic pedagogical format.

¹ Tagore, R. (1949). Pp257.

There is an everyday clinical wisdom in these pages that clinicians will greatly benefit from. Dr. Akhtar is a psychoanalytic scholar as well as a recognized poet. The reader reaps the rewards of such a combination. Given the broad range of topics the text address as well as its length and audience, some works are unfortunately absent. For example, I would have been interested in Dr. Akhtar's reading of Becker's *The Denial of Death*. This, however, is more a desire than a critique. The final paragraph sings a sober praise to the interpenetration of memory, historical reality and physicality as life weaves its way from generation to generation. This text is deceptively easy to read but it can help widen the range of what therapist hears and responds to in the clinical encounter.

References

Tagore, R. (1949). *Collected poems and plays*, New York. Macmillan.