



Dancing Around Death

'Death Is Not the End' at the Rubin Museum

Xiao Situ

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Situ's review of the exhibit, she notes the artistic, cross-cultural similarities between Christianity and Buddhism. Specifically, "both make ample use of the circle, a shape that symbolizes continuity and connection." How can we benefit from understanding death as a circle—part of a cycle, rather than just an ending?

2. The Confucian holiday of Tomb Sweeping is a "joyous, festive occasion" where family and friends gather to clean the gravestones and reminisce on the lives of their loved ones. For many Western cultures, grave visitations are somber and mournful events. What has been your experience of visiting cemeteries? What can we learn from holidays like Tomb Sweeping? How does your understanding of death change when it is called a celebration?

3. Situ writes, "ignorance, anger, and desire [are] what Buddhism understands as the three root causes of suffering." Do you agree with this? If so, why? If not, what do you think are the roots of suffering?

4. Situ states, "the never-ending extension and maximization of life for its own sake actually leaves us with a much poorer version of human life." How does our society and culture promote the maximization of life? Furthermore, how does this resistance to death negatively affect us?

5. Consider Situ's discussion of "the Human Condition, which emphasizes the inevitability of mortality that awaits all living beings." Does accepting our limitations augment or lessen our anxiety about the future? In what ways?

6. Reread Situ's description of Pieter van der Heyden's 1561 engraving of *The Descent of Christ Into Limbo* and take a moment to gaze at the image. What stands out to you? Do you see Limbo this way? What other ideas or images of "States In-Between" resonate with you, if any?

7. Prompts in the museum invite visitors to reconsider death after having spent time in the exhibit. How would you respond to those questions: *What is rebirth to you? How does believing—or not believing—in the afterlife impact how you live?* Do you think art—making it, analyzing it, or simply viewing it—helps us reckon with death and mortality?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Sheila Cavanaugh, "What Death Has Taught Me," June 2023: <https://commonwealmagazine.org/what-death-has-taught-me>

Meghan Sullivan, "The Limits of 'Longtermism,'" February 2023: <https://commonwealmagazine.org/limits-longtermism-effective-altruism-bankman-fried>

Paul J. Griffiths, "The Philosophy of Mourning" January 2023 <https://commonwealmagazine.org/mourning-lament-jonathan-lear-paul-griffiths>

Jerry Ryan, "A Second Death," March 2020: <https://commonwealmagazine.org/second-death>

Griffin Oleynick, "Old Motifs Made New," June 2023: <https://commonwealmagazine.org/old-motifs-made-new>

John Garvey, "Out of Control," March 14, 2008: <https://commonwealmagazine.org/out-control>