

# Life is not a Dress Rehearsal: Some Atheist Views on Death and Dying

Citizen Folklorists Terryl Mack and Karen Metcalf  
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Our team decided to explore atheists and their beliefs and needs around death and dying. We wondered if there was a commonality in their perceptions of death, and if they had rituals, beliefs or specific preferences regarding the care given to them before dying. With the help of the informants who were generous with their time and their very personal narratives, we hope to make this culture more intelligible to the broader Tucson community.

We began the process of exploration by defining what atheism is and what atheists believe. We watched several movies and videos, read numerous articles and book excerpts, and wandered around the web.

We conducted four interviews and discussed what it means to be an atheist, their considerations, fears and preparation about reaching end of life, and what dying means to them. The informants included Gil, 67, a podiatrist and member of the board of Freethought Arizona; Tom, 72, a retired professor and musician; Penelope, 69, a writer, artist and founder of Odyssey Storytelling; and Kristine, a certified Life Cycle Celebrant, Hospice Chaplain, and member of the Tucson Threshold Choir.

Kristine is not an atheist, but was interviewed because we felt her work as a resource guide to people during the dying and after death process and her observations on end of life atheist ceremonies were complementary to our topic. When she was asked, "What do you see as a common factor in the ceremonies you have performed for atheists?" She said, "Simplicity. I experience a deepening of the wonder of death because of the atheist reverence for life and the simplicity with which they accept mortality."

## Atheism: the basic idea

**Definitions:** Several descriptive terms apply to atheism that emphasize a different aspect or different degree of detail as defined in the *Merriam Webster* dictionary:

- **Atheist:** A person who's of the opinion that no supernatural god or gods exist
- **Agnostic:** A person who does not have a definite belief about whether God exists or not
- **Freethinker:** A person who forms opinions on the basis of reason independently of authority or tradition; especially one who doubts or denies religious dogma
- **Humanist:** A person with values and beliefs based on the idea that people are basically good and that problems can be solved using reason instead of religion
- **Secular Humanist:** A humanist with beliefs and values opposed to traditional religion and asserts disbelief in the existence of a supernatural god

### What do atheists believe?

Atheists have no gods, no rules, and no afterlife. There are no proscribed rituals, no prayers, and no secret handshakes. They believe this life is *it*.

In his book, *A Short History of Everything*, Bill Bryson says that “...every atom in your body has almost certainly gone through stars and millions of other creatures on its way to becoming part of you. You’re kind of wonderful that way.”

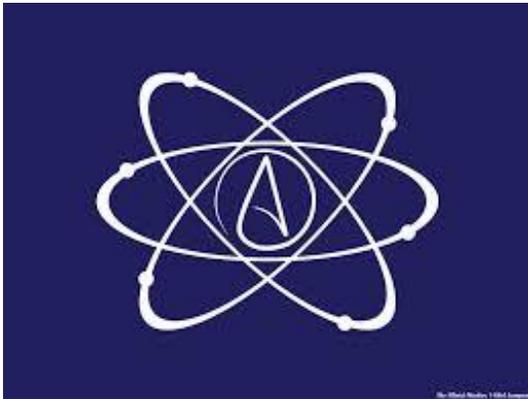
**Gil:** “Atheism gives me a sense of peace. It gives me a sense of feeling that I’m an actual human being, that I’m not dependent on something that is imaginary. And it makes me cherish this life more because as far as I know, it’s the only go ‘round; this is not a dress rehearsal for something else. Any time I feel something outside of myself I just chalk it up to a heightened human awareness or heightened understanding.”

**Penelope:** “What makes me feel comfort is that we don’t know—and that isn’t a horrible thought—to me that is not a scary thought. I think it’s just that we have this energy and the energy joins the rest of the energy and that’s the end of that. I think we’re kind of electrical beings. In science we are part of something else, we are part of something else in community, so there are all different ways we connect with each other.”

*“I am a piece of the universe that woke up. Every atom in my body has been around since the beginning of time, and because matter can’t be destroyed, every bit will continue to be here until the end of the universe.” Dale McGowan, author of *Voices of Unbelief**

**Tom:** “I believe life got started a few seconds after the ‘Big Bang’, and I’m okay with that. It’s called the universe. Our individual lives on this planet are just a small part of the universe. This is all there is to it, do the best you can in this life. We should do well for each other.”

**Kristine:** “Generally, I think that as an atheist once you come to a certain phase (first rejection of whatever you were doing) then you come to announcing what you are, and then you get more comfortable with what you are and realize ipso facto, this is what I believe, and today’s pretty important. I think it comes to a realization and appreciation of now. It’s like the ultimate mindfulness. Impossible to do 24/7 but I think it gets to the point where you no longer need to tell anybody. It’s the idea that this really is it. “



***We’re all just part of a universe that has been here a long time, and will go on for a long time.***

*“I believe that accepting one’s own mortality is the root of all wisdom. Likewise, it is only because our time is short that anything we do in our lives truly matters. Without the understanding that we are mortal, we cannot appropriately value our own lives. Until we understand that we must die, we cannot begin to live.” Janet Factor, founder of the Springfield Area Freethinkers.*

**Gil:** “It’s very important to understand the atheist viewpoint on life and living, because unless you know where you’re coming from, then the attitudes towards death and dying don’t quite make as much sense.”

**Tom:** “I’m very comfortable intellectually being an atheist. Why? Because I see so much nonsense being generated by Christianity: legal, political, end of life, abortions, blue laws and more.”

*A question posed to many atheists in conversation and debate is that of the basis of morality. After all, what is to stop you from running amok and creating chaos?*

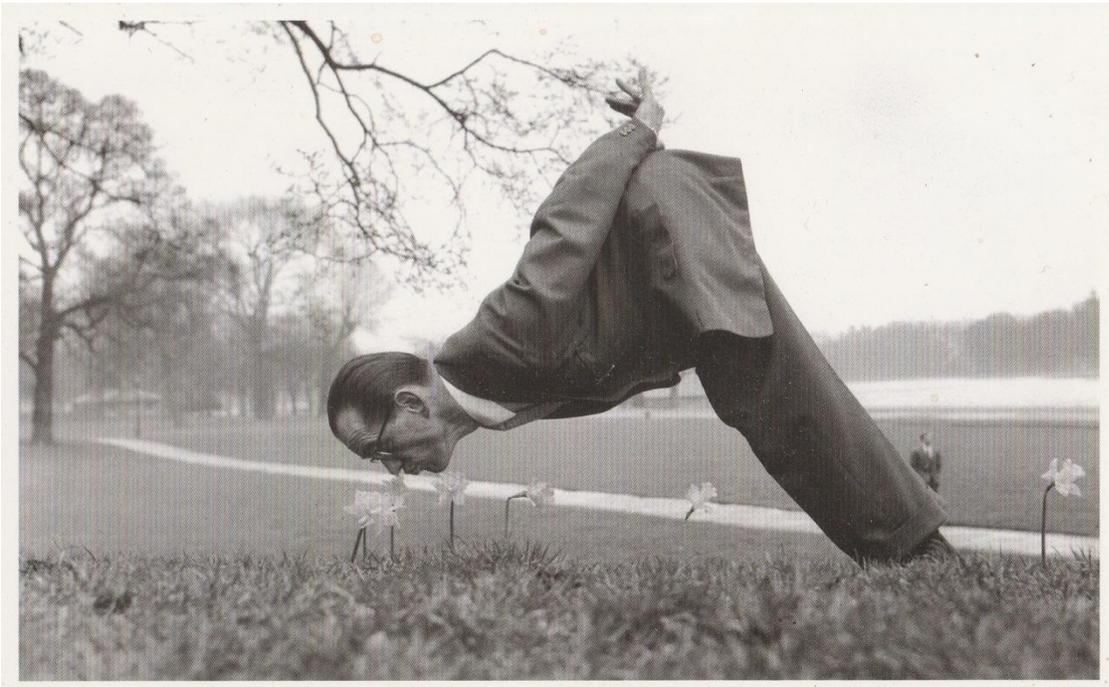
**Gil:** “Our own sense of responsibility to others, our own feelings of justice, fairness, and the sense that this is all we have, knowing we are here for a relatively short time, we have to create our own meaning and purpose. This is all we have and we have to make the best of it, opposed to religious people who feel that this is more of just a transition, and the main goal is to ensure eternity. In my view, that takes away the importance of what we do in this life. “It’s kind of the golden rule plus (a philosophical decision attributed to Confucius, not religion). The morality code is based primarily on what enhances human well-being. It’s part of a moral continuum that is not so black and white.”

**Penelope:** “I think calling myself an atheist is kind of a political statement in a way. It’s kind of saying that I reject all of these systems that have been created in order to answer the unanswerable. I try to find meaning in my life every single day. And you do what you think is right, and enjoy life while you have it, and then when you go, it’s gone. “

***This is all we have; we should just take care of each other.***

## **Death and Dying**

The Greek philosopher Epicurus said people are mostly afraid of death because they don’t really grasp nonexistence. He offered the *symmetry argument*: you’re living between two bookends of nonexistence. You didn’t exist for millions of years before you were born. If your nonexistence before birth wasn’t such a terrible thing, your future nonexistence shouldn’t be either. It’s literally the same thing, except for your ability to anticipate the next one.



*“The greatest dignity to be found in death is the dignity of the life that preceded it. This is a form of hope that we can all achieve, and it is the most abiding of all. Hope resides in the meaning of what our lives have been.” Sherwin B. Nuland, MD – How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*

**Gil:** The atheist view on life and living is unlike that of religious people. We do not feel we are here divinely for an ultimate purpose; non believers look at existence as tremendously lucky, quite mysterious, and very difficult to explain. It’s a profound question as why we are here now. Therefore, in terms of needing a purpose in life and knowing that we are here for a relatively short time, we have to create our own meaning and purpose. I feel that dying would be similar to having anesthesia, a sense of slipping away; over the years of evolution it’s something the body allows to happen that smoothes the transition. When you die, you no longer exist; when you die there is no active brain. And by definition, you are what you were before you were born: nothing.

**Penelope:** My father was a role model for how to die. When he was dying, I asked him what do you think is going to happen to you when you die? And he said, “Nothing. It’s a conscious end. Not only will I just end, but you will too, because you only exist in my thoughts.” None of the people I’m close to

have belief systems they'd try to impose on me. Just let me die my own way; we don't get too many things we can determine in our lives, so at least we should be able to determine our own death.

**Tom:** I am not afraid of becoming a dead person. When I die, I hope to be entirely surprised, and get it over within seconds, maybe a minute. I believe one finally just goes dark, the light goes out. I hope to have comfort, freedom from pain, privacy, the shortest route out. You have every right to end your life anytime you want with whatever means you choose, and I don't think you need to qualify for that right.



*Laurence Krauss, author of "A Universe from Nothing"*

## **End of life options**

Currently, there are few options regarding how and when a person dies. The discussion ranges from living wills, advance directives, and suicide because of terminal illness (Humphrey, *The Final Exit*), and the consideration of euthanasia for those with severe dementia (Editorial *Tucson Daily Star*, October 30, 2014). Our informants were comfortable discussing physician-assisted suicide, or hastening death when it becomes obvious there are no other options.

**Gil:** "To ask, are you comfortable, is there anything I can do to / for you to make you feel better? Certainly not any pain. Just be attentive to fulfill any modest requests I may have to make my situation more comfortable. "

**Penelope:** “Of course nobody likes to suffer, and that’s the part I want to avoid. I’ve told everyone close to me that I don’t want to be in a hospital if I’m ill. I would consider physician-assisted suicide if necessary.”

**Tom:** “If you cannot read, hear, follow a film or a book, walk around, enjoy a meal, carry on a conversation, is tomorrow so precious? Terminal illness and being old and losing the ability to live an independent life are motivators for suicide. It may be difficult to choose the right time or have the ability to commit suicide on one’s own. I absolutely prefer and hope not being kept artificially alive in a hospital with tubes and all that.”

**Kristine:** “My primary role as a Life Cycle Celebrant is to talk to a dying person and /or the family about the end of life and after death options: medical power of attorney, living will, disposition of the body and memorial ceremonies—all the wishes leading up to and after death. I meet with families in their homes, hospice, hospital, or care facility. I provide the families resources, names and contact information to arrange the options and to help empower their considerations that are sometimes outside the norm.”

## **Memorials**

**Gil:** “If I die before my father, it would be a burial, because it means more that he’s comfortable because I’ll be gone. And to me it’s really not something that’s important. I want to be remembered as someone who tried to help others in my role as a podiatrist. That I did good work and made people comfortable in their lives. A good family, husband and father. The beautiful stuff that everyone loves—the great accomplishments that are special—a life well lived.”

**Penelope:** “I definitely don’t want to be embalmed in a stone room crypt. It’s up to my family to make the choice about my body and a memorial. I think it’d be great to have a big party. I’m going to be 70 next year, and I think how much time do I have left? What do I get to do before I’m dead?”

**Tom:** “I have no preference for disposition of my body or a memorial. Just keep it simple. My family knows my thoughts and will do what they need for public civility, but I don’t care, and they know it. I am satisfied that I will be remembered positively for the usual short period of time, maybe a generation, likely less. I’d prefer they say, “Well done” instead of “Thank God,” but really it’s not a vote that I need to watch.”

*“It doesn’t take a lot of strength to hang on... it takes a lot of strength to let go.”*

*J.C. Watts*

**Kristine:** “The most important thing is that with families and communities who hold atheist and secular humanist beliefs, there’s no less reverence for life. I think there may even be a deeper sense of reverence for life, in a way that you can’t readily attach language to. Something I notice is silence is welcome and silence is not awkward; silence is valued during or as part of a ceremony. “

“In my experience with atheist families, their end of life and after death considerations are very simple. Oftentimes it can be as simple as death at home; the family does the washing of the body and the transport of the body and witnesses the cremation and that is it. That is the ceremony. It’s simple. There are so many times people want to ask why. There is no why. People who are talking to some kind of divine often say, “God, why did you let this happen, I thought you were a merciful God.” I notice a real absence of that question among atheists. To be honest, it’s kind of taken my breath away. Atheists must take death at more of a face value.”

*We die so that the world may continue to live. We have been given the miracle of life because trillions upon trillions of living things have prepared the way for us and then have died – in a sense, for us. We die, in turn, so that others may live. The tragedy of a single individual becomes, in the balance of natural things, the triumph of ongoing life.*

*The dignity that we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives. The honesty and grace of the years of life that are ending, is the real measure of how we die. It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them. Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity. Sherwin B. Nuland, MD – How We Die: Reflections of Life’s Final Chapter*

The needs of Gil, Penelope, and Tom in the process of dying are similar: to decrease suffering, minimize pain, hopefully to die quickly, and removal of religious icons if they are receiving care in a public space. Their end of life concerns are also similar: that they are remembered for the good in their lives, that their work and influence on their loved ones and others has been meaningful, and for a life well lived.

***Make me comfortable, acknowledge my life, and let me go. Death is the end of the story.***

## Summary of experience

**Karen:** I was surprised at the generosity and willingness of Gil, Penelope, and Tom to discuss such a personal and difficult topic. They were open and honest to a fault. As an atheist myself, and not being part of a “group”, I was amazed that my own feelings were reflected in others. It was affirming to me. I also appreciated the work of others to eloquently express what I felt, but was unable to say so precisely. I definitely feel more ‘educated’. It has caused me to do more introspection than I expected. The only regret I have is to see tears in the eyes of my interviewees (ok, me too). It underlines to me how deeply, well thought out, and sincere these people are in trying to be understood, clarify, and share very intimate thoughts. This has been a memorable experience, very valuable to me, and I hope valuable to others in a way that lends a bit more clarity to dealing with atheists, not only in death and dying, but in a way that leads to less confusion, increased understanding, and general acceptance in a society, a community, where everybody is just trying to do the best they can with what they have.

**Terry:** Working on the project has been one of constant surprise. It was a joy to experience the candor, sincerity, and willingness of the informants to share the very tough and intimate thoughts around death and dying. It takes courage to talk about losing a loved one, suicide, fears about end of life care, and the ultimate finality of life. I am grateful and deeply moved to have been witness to the grace and elegance of their personal narratives. My perspective was broadened, and I was prompted to clarify my own feelings about death and dying. Before the project, I had very little knowledge about atheism, and it was revelatory to realize that I share many of their beliefs, particularly their reverence for life in the here and now. However, I was intrigued with the belief that we are just body and mind, and once they cease, that is the end. I think we are more than biology, and I believe in body, mind and spirit. I love thinking about the glory of God, or a force, or an energy that undergirds our existence. To me, that is the mystery and beauty of life. Working on this project also reinforced the feeling of appreciating each moment. I hope this initial work with atheists on death and dying will also be of interest and value to others in the community.

## Resources / supporting materials

### Informant Interview Transcripts

#### MOVIES

~ Letting Go of God , Julia Sweeney

~ Departures (Japanese with subtitles)

~ How to Die in Oregon, 2011

#### VIDEOS

The Meaning of Death, Stephen Jenkinson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zjm8gWY3etg>

Matthew O'Reilly: "Am I dying?" The honest answer. | Talk Video | TED.com

[http://www.ted.com/talks/mattheworeillyami\\_dying\\_the\\_honest\\_answer?utm\\_source=newsletterweekly\\_2014-09-27&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_weekly&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=talk\\_of\\_the\\_week\\_button](http://www.ted.com/talks/mattheworeillyami_dying_the_honest_answer?utm_source=newsletterweekly_2014-09-27&utm_campaign=newsletter_weekly&utm_medium=email&utm_content=talk_of_the_week_button)

#### WEBSITES

Freedom from Religion <https://ffrf.org/>

Center for Inquiry <http://www.centerforinquiry.net/about>

Freethought Arizona <http://www.meetup.com/freethoughtaz/>

Goodbye and Good Luck web page, Gillian Bennett <http://deadatnoon.com/page4.html>

#### BOOKS

A Short History of Everything, Bill Bryson

The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins

Atheism for Dummies, Dale McGowan, PhD

Mortality, Christopher Hitchens

God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything. Christopher Hitchens

the end, Anders Nilsen

How We Die: Reflections of Life's Final Chapter, Sherwin B. Nuland, MD

Why I am not a Christian, Bertrand Russell

## ARTICLES

Why I Hope to Die at 75, Ezekiel J. Emanuel, MD, September 17, 2014

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014>

In Defense of Rites of Passage, Paul Kurtz. Editor in chief of Free Inquiry, professor emeritus of philosophy at State University of NY at Buffalo, chair of the Center of Inquiry

Advocatus Diaboli, Does Secular Humanism Equip Us to Deal With Death? Tom Flynn, Secular Humanist Bulletin, Vol. 11 No. 3, (Fall 1995)

What do Atheists Think of Death? By The Daily Dish [www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/05/what-do-atheists-think-of-death/187003/](http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/05/what-do-atheists-think-of-death/187003/) The Atlantic Monthly Group

The Gift of a Wise Man, Janet L. Factor, (founder of Springfield, Illinois Area Freethinkers)

Why Bother? Tom Flynn, article drawn from his contribution to the entry "Ritual, Ceremonial, and Unbelief" in the New Encyclopedia of Unbelief, Prometheus, 2007

Secular Humanism Defined, Tom Flynn, brochure from the Council for Secular Humanism

Euthanasia for severe dementia: a subject worth talking about. Gil Shapiro, *Arizona Daily Star*, editorial, Oct. 30, 2014

## IMAGES

"Me and the Universe" Anders Nilsen

[http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/25/opinion/private-lives-me-and-the-niverse.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/25/opinion/private-lives-me-and-the-niverse.html?_r=1)