

Dealing with loss in Zoroastrianism

A conversation between Dr. Lucinda and Dr. Kersey Antia, 2006.¹

L: As a priest, what are some of your experiences of helping a Zoroastrian family plan a funeral or deal with illness?

Dr. Antia: We do it all the time. Even yesterday, one lady asked me. Sometimes they don't know the prayer—if they are too Westernized. So I tell them what to pray. If they don't have the prayers, I have to copy them and mail them. We do that all the time, especially when somebody is sick in the family.

L: How large is Chicago's Zoroastrian community?

Dr. Antia: About 400 or 500, with children.

L: Do you have a Darbe Mehr?

Dr. Antia: Yes. We meet there monthly for a group. This is really an innovation. Traditionally, we didn't have group prayers, but I have started that. Every second Sunday at noon we have that prayer, and everybody participates. Then every Sunday, about noon for a couple of hours, we have a priest available there for any prayers. If somebody is sick, someone will come and have the priest pray for the sick person.

L: I would think that is much appreciated. Are funerals conducted at the Darbe Mehr?

Dr. Antia: No. We cannot have any funeral at the Darbe Mehr because of our conviction that when the person dies, the body disintegrates. It is not ritually pure, and it should not come in touch with anything that is ritually pure. So temples are not used for anything related to burial, but they are used for anything after that – where the body is not there.

L: You could have a memorial service at the Darbe Mehr.

Dr. Antia: We have many, many services. We have some services on the night of the disposal of the body. Then we have ceremony on the third evening, and a ceremony on the fourth dawn (just before dawn) – when we believe the soul is passing over a bridge called Chinvat Bridge. 'Chin' means 'choice'. Whatever choice you made comes back to haunt you or reflect you at that time. So, the soul passes over the Chinvat Bridge. If it is a good soul, and the Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds out-balance the bad thoughts, bad words, and bad deeds, then the soul passes the bridge; if not, the bridge

1 First published in Mosher, Lucinda. *Loss*. New York: Seabury Books, 2007.

becomes narrower and narrower, and they slip off into the ‘other side’.

L: Is that in the Gathas?

Dr. Antia: There is a mention of the Chinvat Bridge, very specifically mentioned by Zarathushtra himself. I think this idea even predates Zoroastrianism. I think the Indian Aryans had some such belief. When I used to talk to the Baptist Church in North Carolina, they used to say that such a belief is even in the Bible...

L: It’s a wonderful image.

Dr. Antia: Yes! Your own conscience is reflected. If you had a nice life and nice deeds, you see a young, beautiful maiden greeting you and taking you to heaven; or, you see an old hag!

L: What do the women see? Do they see a handsome man or an ugly man?

Dr. Antia: I think it is the same for them; I guess! There is no sexual connotation here. It is just that you are welcomed by somebody.

L: Do you actually officiate at funerals?

Dr. Antia: When I was the only priest, I conducted them all. But now we have many priests, so it depends on our convenience and people’s choice. If I don’t officiate, someone else will. We have trained all of our priests to do that.

L: Since a funeral cannot happen at a Darbe Mehr, does this happen at a funeral home?

Dr. Antia: We have made arrangements with a funeral home to give us the facility. Like the Jews, we give a bath to the dead body. We put on the sudreh and kusthi. We keep some candle near the body through the night. We have to have light. We pray the same ceremony that we do back home. It takes an hour or more.

L: Is that similar to the Jashan?

Dr. Antia: Not at all. It consists of the words of Zarathushtra in the Gathas. It is the first Gatha, which is the longest. I have recited all of the five Gathas. I have them on tape, but my son and somebody else are putting them on a CD so that anybody can have it. I don’t want to sell them; I just want people to be able to use them. I don’t know when it will be finished.²

L: That will be a wonderful gift to the community. At the funeral home, do you have the urn of fire, too?

Dr. Antia: No, they don’t allow that.

L: So, just a candle. How often do you get called to a hospital to pray with someone?

2 These are now available at http://avesta.org/antia_gathas/.

Dr. Antia: That's not our practice.

L: What would happen instead? Would people just ask for the prayers to read themselves?

Dr. Antia: They could; and we could tell them what they could pray. A hospital is not a ritually pure place, and we are so over-conscious of purity that if a priest goes to a hospital, he has to take a bath.

L: He defiles himself by going to the hospital.

Dr. Antia: Because of the possibility of death, they are strict that if you go to a hospital, you have to take a bath. I guess that is why they don't call the priest to the hospital. But then again, if somebody wants, they could; but it hasn't come up.

L: What is the implication for you as a priest? If you become ill and have to be in the hospital, once you recover, do you just have to take a bath and then it is OK to return to your duties?

Dr. Antia: Good question. I never thought of it in that way, but we should have. Even when I was young, it was practiced, and now it is not practiced. I have to explain a little bit. A priest has always to remain in a state of purity; and that purity is obtained by going through a Bareshnum or Nahn for nine nights in a segregated area in a temple. It is nine nights of going through ritual, and nine days of segregation. Other things make him ritually pure. (God knows whether that's true or not, but that's the way we believe!) I think one of the reasons this practice must have started was that the priests always accompanied the Iranian Zoroastrian kings to the battles. If you read Herodotus and other books on Greeks and Persians, they say that first there was the chariot of Ahura Mazda; then there was the chariot of the king. There were always priests present. So I think that when they went to all those different places, they were all made to go through segregation for nine nights, so that if they brought any viruses or infections from that area, they would be prevented from spreading it around.

L: It was like a quarantine.

Dr. Antia: Yes. That, I think, is one of the reasons behind it.

L: Now, the only place you could obtain this ritual purity would be in India.

Dr. Antia: Once you have gone through this nine-night process of purification, then you can do the big prayers, the higher rituals. In those days, the priests couldn't eat outside. They could not touch a non-Zoroastrian. They were very strict about travel. If they traveled, they would have to repeat this Nahn – this nine nights of separation. So, going to hospital would break their Nahn, I am sure. This practice has been discontinued so much by the inevitable pressure of westernization and modern life. In Bombay, you cannot go anywhere without being in a bus or a taxi. So it is not observed. If a priest went

out of town by bus or train, they definitely had to take this Nahn when I was young, but no more. Things have changed in my own generation.

L: So, now, if you had to be hospitalized, you would not go through that nine-day separation after you recovered.

Dr. Antia: No, no more. It has become difficult even to have a place where you can have this nine-night separation, because you have to first go through the ritual bath, and take out all the clothes, and go through the nine stages of spiritual development. There are not many places where you could take out all the clothes and not been seen from some high-rise building! Even in my own home town, next to my neighbor's house is a temple. My neighbor sold his house, and now there is a high-rise next to the temple. They can look right into that area where we used to have Nahn! It has become very difficult. We cannot have this custom here; we cannot have any higher rituals here anyway, because we cannot meet all of the requirements. So, the higher rituals are just out. If we can have Jashan and the outer rituals. Do you know about Muktd? The journal article explains this...

L: I read in the New York Times about a 12-year-old boy becoming a priest.

Dr. Antia: We have many boys who do this. It may have been my own boy. They have to go through that ceremony at a young age, but that does not mean that they have any sense of commitment one usually would have among Christian clergy. It is just that it is hereditary. Even if others had the call, they couldn't be priests. Now we make assistant priests, and we call them mobedyar. That is possible now in certain areas, even in India where there are no other priests. Nowadays, we have mobedyar, but in the old days we had only hereditary priests. That was only if they had maintained the priesthood at least once in three or four generations or so. If there was no priest in recent generations, you could not become a priest; the line is broken. Navjote and priestly ceremony... I think that, because of Hindu influence, we wanted to catch the boys young. So, the Navjote should be done by the time they are seven, nine, or eleven. In Iran, they wait until they are adults. In the Avesta it says they should wait until they are adult so they can choose it. Everything in our religion is about choice. They have to choose. Iranians become priests later on. I know of one case where a man became a priest later on in his life. Actually, he was a professor already. The Indian Zoroastrians are guided by some Hindu beliefs. When we go through that nine nights of separation, we have to be living in a state of ritual purity, but if we have any nocturnal discharge, then the ritual purity is lost. They have to start the Nahn all over again. So, maybe they wanted not to take a chance, and have the Nahn before they had reached an age where they started emitting any nocturnal discharges. That's what we were told. That's why boys take it when they are young, as a precaution. In the old days, when only the son of a priest did priestly duties, it was good to make him a priest as early as possible, so he can start his practice

early. In those days, they had to memorize everything. Nowadays they don't have to. No 12-year-old I know from here has had to memorize everything. I had to memorize everything, but I was put in a seminary.

L: When did you come here?

Dr. Antia: 1965, as a graduate student.

L: So you had already been a priest for a while.

Dr. Antia: Yes. I was made a priest in January 1950.

L: What is a 'person', a 'human being', from a Zoroastrian perspective?

Dr. Antia: A human being, in Zoroastrianism, is an essence of God which we call *fravashi*. I translate it as a proactive choice; a person taking the lead and making the right choice. He is an agent of Ahura Mazda on this earth. He is supposed to do everything that God is supposed to do. There is a paragraph in the Gathas – Yasna 34, first paragraph – I can translate it in my sleep! It says: Let us give in full measure; let us do in full measure whatever deeds, saying, and blessings are reflected in God himself. Whichever way God has made himself wise and righteous ruler, let us emulate that within our own self and give it back in full measure. So we are here as an agent and essence of God, which is called *fravashi*. We are here in three different forms. One is *fravashi*, which is the essence of God, and always stays with God, and joins God in heaven after death. Then there is *urvan*, which is the soul, which can be tempted. So *fravashi* guides it. But *urvan* has the choice, with the *fravashi*'s guidance. Then there is *tanu*, which means 'body'. It is very much similar: I think Freud took it from Zarathushtra: Id, Ego, and Super-Ego. The *tan* always is like the Id: 'Eat, eat, eat; want, want want!'—all the pleasure, and all that. Ego is the socialized *tan*; and Super-Ego is like *fravashi*.

L: This is great!

Dr. Antia: A person is an agent who has to bring *Frashokereti*, which means 'renovation of the world'. That is in Yasna 30.9. The exact translation is this: May we be those who carry out the *Frashokereti* for you, O Ahura Mazda.

L: That is beautiful.

Dr. Antia: Two or three days ago, I happened to hear Oprah Winfrey saying, 'Before I die, I want to do this; I want to do that.' And I said, 'Here goes a Zoroastrian!'

L: Oprah Winfrey as an 'anonymous Zoroastrian'!

Dr. Antia: Yes. She is trying to do whatever good, and bring whatever good she can in this world. Not that she is doing it all; that is up to everybody else to judge. But that is the spirit of Zoroastrianism.

L: I have been asking what Zoroastrians think happens when we die. We

have talked about that a bit, and I will read about it in your article.

Dr. Antia: That will be more systematic and detailed.

L: Thinking back to purity regarding hospitalization and health-care. If a Zoroastrian were hospitalized, what would you like the staff to know? One thing chaplaincy guidebooks always mention is Zoroastrian discomfort with having fingernail clippings and such in the room.

Dr. Antia: Right; any hair, any part of the body that has departed from the body.

L: I have talked about food issues, hair issues, cross-gender touching issues. Food: Zoroastrians don't have dietary restrictions.

Dr. Antia: We don't have dietary restrictions, but certain days of the month are given to Vohumana (Good Mind, one of the Amesha Spentas). On those days given to Vohumana, we don't eat meat. There are four days when we don't eat meat. Every month there are four days that belong to Vohumana, who also presides over cattle. Cattle are supposed to have Good Mind. These days are scattered through the month – like once a week.

L: Hair brushings, you'd want that removed from the room as quickly as possible.

Dr. Antia: Nowadays, most people don't care, but in my day – Boy! We were very strict! They always wore a cap.

L: Now you only wear the cap during prayers.

Dr. Antia: I went to Australia this year (2006) and saw my 93-year-old uncle. He was wearing the cap. His daughter said, "Daddy, why don't you take off the cap?" He said, "If I take it off, Satan will grab me!" That's what they used to believe.

L: So there is the possibility of an elderly patient who might believe that.

Dr. Antia: If they were wearing the cap before, which I doubt they do here.

L: Are there devotional objects people might want to have with them in the hospital?

Dr. Antia: We prefer incense – sandalwood.

L: What about the sudreh and kushti.

Dr. Antia: That should be always on. In India, they know that this is a Zoroastrian body if it has a sudreh and kushti on it. It helps to identify them.

L: Here, if a devout person who wears the sudreh and kusthi goes into the hospital, he or she will want to keep them on.

Dr. Antia: The staff should be told to honor that practice, if the patient wants. It becomes difficult if you have a surgery over your abdomen. I had a

back surgery. I can't remember whether I had the sudreh and kusthi on. Probably not.

L: If you had to remove them, perhaps you could keep them nearby on your pillow.

Dr. Antia: It's not necessary. If surgery prevents you from wearing them, you just wait until you have recovered and then start doing it again when you get out of the hospital.

L: Has there been discussion of organ transplants?

Dr. Antia: There are various opinions, and it is a controversial subject. Orthodox people think that we should not disturb the body. They also believe that, not only should we not disturb our own body, we should take anything from another dead body because, as soon as the body is dead, it becomes impure, and we don't want to carry something impure in our system. That's a view that only the Orthodox and only a limited number of people believe. An old friend who is now a High Priest came here, and somebody asked him the same question. He said, "no, we shouldn't give anything from our body; but if we want to take from somebody to make ourselves do better, then it's OK." There are all kinds of opinions, but I think this way. We are supposed to dispose of our body, and give it over to nature or to vultures, or whatever. So it is the best practice nowadays, instead of placing it on the Tower of Silence, to donate the whole body to research. I myself have signed myself up for organ donation. If they can use the whole body, that's the best way to meet our religious principles. Twice I have taken cornea transplants. One was just last year. According to our religion, whichever way you can help Ahura Mazda by being more proficient and healthy yourself is good. Health is also regarded as a spiritual thing. If you don't have good health, you cannot work for *Frashokereti*. So, you should try anything that will increase your goodness. Nothing is barred from that. However, there are some people who go out of their way to oppose organ donation. Nowadays, everyone makes their own choice; and more and more people are going for organ donation. There is no contradiction between organ donation and Zoroastrianism.

L: There is also the question of use of life-extending technology. How might Zoroastrianism help?

Dr. Antia: There is no unanimous opinion about that. I was taught that the dead have no right over the living. That's why, when we die, we have no right to occupy any land, and why no wood should be burned for us. Land belongs to the living. Similarly, once there is no chance of getting life back, just to sustain ourselves on respirators is not in conformity with Zoroastrian principles. There could be an exception. If the son or daughter cannot make it, and you want to keep him alive for a day or two, I guess that could be worthwhile. You have to consider the outcome with regard to wasting things for the living people. If, on

the whole, there is no chance that the person will recover, his soul is just confused between the two worlds. If God has deemed that the person has only that much life, and no more, then we should succumb to that and should not rebel against God by prolonging death. We can use or abuse the modern methods of surviving.

L: The last chapter deals with occasions when grief and remembrance is multi-religious.

Dr. Antia: Whenever there is any kind of plague or flood or earthquake, we have been the first to come to help. Even in the 19th century, we were among the first to donate money for Ireland, and problems in Europe and Japan, too. Charities are one of our main principles. Whenever there is a need, we are there. We may not be as affluent as we were in the 19th century, when we had enough funds to distribute to everybody. Even so, we have gathered funds for the Tsunami. We had prayers for 9/11. For Katrina, too.

L: How would you explain why bad things happen?

Dr. Antia: I don't know if Zoroastrians would be aware of our principles to rely on them for answers. To this question, as I see it, there are many, many bad things that are not really bad things brought on by God. They are brought on by man and his greediness, his ignorance, or his not caring for other people. Take the Tsunami. The Tsunami would have been prevented very easily and effectively if the rich nations had tried to help the poorer nations by alerting them of the oncoming waves, and by setting up a system in Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, and poorer countries whereby they could detect them. The Japanese were warned right away, but they didn't warn the other countries, and they didn't install that system elsewhere. In Zoroastrianism, the emphasis is on man, and doing things for man. We have to give in full measure what God gives us. But we fail at that. We fail our God; we fail our godly duties. So, what you think is bad, and is God's wrath, is really not so. Katrina – one thing that comes to my mind right away is that people wanted Bush to spend millions on the levees. He refused to spend money on levees. It was a failure also of proper engineering. Man has to find out all the laws of science and study so as to make the world fresh, as it was before. That is my take on this. 9/11 also is a failure of the politicians to act on early warnings, etc. In our seminary we were encouraged to read the newspaper, to keep in touch with what goes on in the world. Many things that are disasters could have been prevented....Often it is our own folly, the human failure to look at all the aspects before doing anything. Man plays a big role, but blames God!