

Studying faith and hope in the face of death

by [David Briggs](#) in the [April 1, 2015](#) issue

After the recent death of 26-year-old aid worker Kayla Mueller of Prescott, Arizona, who was held captive for months by the so-called Islamic State, her parents released a brief, handwritten letter she had sent to her family.

“I remember Mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God,” Kayla Mueller wrote. “I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator. . . . by God [and] by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in free fall.”

Her words resonate with what a developing body of research is finding: religion can be a critical resource in reducing anxiety about death.

Not all will benefit equally, and some may suffer greater worries if they believe they will be found wanting by a judgmental divinity. But the research opens windows of understanding for caregivers, family, and friends.

American belief in eternal life has remained relatively unchanged in recent decades despite a rise in secularism. In the 1976 General Social Survey, nearly three-quarters of respondents said they believed in a life after death. The percentage holding that belief was unchanged in the 2012 survey.

A number of studies indicate a strong faith and a deeply held belief in the afterlife allows individuals to better cope with their fears of mortality. Consider these findings from research since 2011:

- A study of nearly 1,000 members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) found that more frequent church attendance, involvement in church activities outside of worship, and belief in life after death were all associated with less fear of the unknown beyond this life. More frequent prayer and Bible reading were related to lesser fear of dying in pain.
- Religion and spirituality were important sources of support and comfort to most participants in a study of parents of children facing life-threatening conditions. Parents reported belief in an afterlife was “reassuring,” providing “peace” and

“acceptance,” and helped parents to be “not afraid” of their children’s deaths and to “trust in God to take care of [our child].”

- Reading religious texts was related to lower anxiety about death among individuals who were highly religious, according to a study of college students and church members.

What the study findings also reveal, however, is that individual responses to death anxiety vary widely across a spectrum of beliefs.

For example, in the study of parents with ill children, some parents found it helpful to express their anger toward God, but others moved away from their faith. And in the study of students and church members, those with low degrees of religiousness reported greater anxiety after reading a religious text.

“Religion may be one human response to being alive and having to die, but unless it is your response, it may be a poor one,” the authors said.

The findings are a reminder of how belief in an afterlife is the way many members find meaning in their lives amid the reality of death.

The studies also illustrate that individuals find different resources in the face of death. Rather than press their own views, professional caregivers, friends, and family might do better to listen to those struggling with their feelings and beliefs. — theARDA.com

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