Event Review: Afterlife by Sai Vadnerkar

After listening to the *After Life* podcast by Radiolab, I was expecting the event to be extremely different from the other events and, to be completely honest, I was a little bit skeptical on the legitimacy of the podcast. I have never considered myself an extremely spiritual person. I do find comfort in hoping there is more to life than an ultimate, meaningless death, but I have never spent too much time reflecting upon that. This discussion opened my eyes to an entire new perspective on death.

The discussion began with co-facilitator Jocelyn Booker-Ohl, Project Humanities, posing a few questions to her co-facilitator, Dr. Joan Clingan: “What leaves when we die? What changes between life and death?” I sat with these questions for a moment and realized that I have never really spent much time thinking about them because they frustrate me. I feel as though there is no way I can truly know the answer to these questions while living, so I’d much rather not think about them.

In response to these questions, Dr. Clingan shared a touching story about her mother’s passing. She told us how her mother woke up the night before she died and told Joanie that she was seeing her husband. I was completely taken aback by this story and it made me think what about death is real and what are just myths.

Soon after Dr. Clingan’s story, Jocelyn mentioned that “we are so quick to dismiss and judge those experiences but sometimes, when you lose somebody, you want that to be true.” This stuck with me because, though I have complete respect for other people’s experiences and feelings, I don’t always believe it in that sense. However, when Jocelyn said this, it made me realize that it doesn’t really matter whether I believe it or not, what matters is that these are true emotions and experiences that people feel.

The conversation then segued from what happens post-death into the idea of death itself. “It’s healthy to want to survive and have some fear of death, but we have to acknowledge it is a part of life,” Jocelyn said. I can’t speak for everyone, but I know I have an extreme fear of death because the idea of this life I have worked hard on, and will continue to work hard on, just
ending is scary. But, similar to what Jocelyn said, you really can’t have life without death, so the sooner we acknowledge that, the easier living will be.

Dr. Clingan then mentioned something that made me think about my last statement a bit more: “With COVID and what’s happening with police brutality, all of a sudden we are realising whose lives are more at risk. What does it mean when your body (life) is on the line, but it isn’t your choice?” We can hope that we will have a long life, but truly we don’t really know when that life will come to an end. Dr. Clingan then mentioned how she went out to protest against police brutality and for Black lives earlier that month, and she had a moment where she realized she was putting her life on the line for this. However, what struck me about this was when she then said, “but that was my choice, what happens when it isn’t your choice?” People around us are losing their lives, and it is not their choice. Sometimes there are situations in which we choose to put our life on the line if it means people won’t have to lose their lives with no choice.

This podcast discussion brought up a great deal of impactful topics from spirituality, to different coping mechanisms, to confronting death, to losing your life against your will. It was definitely not the discussion I expected when I joined the call, and I left the conversation with a new viewpoint and possible understanding of death. There are still so many unanswerable questions when it comes to life, death, and what happens after it all that I do not understand, but I now understand that there is no one right answer. Death is a powerful word because everyone has different feelings and experiences attached to it, and I learned that we should all be respectful towards others emotions when dealing with it.