

SECTION 6: BROADER HORIZONS

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In his poignant article on what science and nature teach about life and death, University of Pittsburgh professor Samer Zaky makes a strong case for letting go of what no longer serves us toward gaining greater life. Within his field of oral and craniofacial sciences, he notes that a cell's function doesn't end at maturation; rather, its final task happens in dying. What he calls "programmed cell death" is a planned, organized dismantling of components, not sudden devastation. He likens this to disassembling a complicated Lego creation, when pieces are removed carefully to be used in another build.

In the life of a cell, such a programmed "ending" is referred to as *apoptosis* (from the Greek "apo," meaning off or away, and "ptosis," meaning dropping, like falling leaves). When leaves dry out and drop off every autumn, nature is ensuring the trees can survive a windy, cloudy winter. Fewer leaves means less wind resistance and more light exposure, which translates into more energy to bloom again in the spring. Here, the death of a part (the leaf) contributes to life of the whole (the tree). If the leaves didn't fall off, the tree would die.

Similarly, in other areas of biology—in bones and cells and teeth—a balance between living and dying must be maintained. Too much cell death leads to loss of mass; too much cell growth leads to tumors. Zaky explains here how "giving up" here actually promotes life.

*"The apoptosis of a cell is a necessary sacrifice to preserve the life of the whole body... On different scales—the leaf for a tree, the cell for the body, the individual for the society—what we perceive as death is actually an act of carrying on life."*ⁱ

When our comfortable lives and beautiful plans are disturbed through seasons of suffering, both God and the Church can invite us to give up what was and turn toward a different life. In Reverend Groff's "Disturb Us, O Lord" prayer, he addresses our God as pushing back the horizons of our hopes and inviting the brave to follow. Indeed, it requires great courage to follow Him: We're invited to die to self, to leave our idols behind, to let go of what doesn't support growth, and to sail into a wild and unknown future. Consider Zaky's analogy above: When we mature to a certain point, when we outgrow what no longer sustains, propels, or serves us, the old must fall away. Our internal Lego pieces—our hearts, memories, wisdom, gifts, and souls—remain to be used in another manner, toward another endeavor. The timing of such turnover, however, is of God. Thus, for every heart-wrenching loss and setback, He bestows gifts that help ensure life will continue—fuller, wiser, more generous. For believers, we take these lessons into the deepest parts of us and put them to use toward growing the Body.

We're to take what feels like death and use it to carry on life.

ⁱ Samer Zaky, "What the Season of Fall—and Science—Teaches Us About Life and Death," The Conversation, September 19, 2018; <https://theconversation.com/what-the-season-of-fall-and-science-teaches-us-about-life-and-death-102016>.