

Connect Corner: Pixar's *Soul*: Discussing Life and Death with Children

Liana Lau, MD, Megan Lin, DO, Steven Sust, MD

The acclaimed Pixar movie *Soul* boldly addresses existential questions about life, death, personality, and purpose. Delivered through a child-friendly medium, the film explores mature concepts that, for young audiences, may be their first acknowledgement of mortality. It may be daunting for parents to address their children's questions of spirituality and death directly after the film. For parents who may be unsure themselves about what awaits them after death, these issues may be particularly confusing to navigate. Drawing from child psychiatry perspectives, we hope to provide some initial age-appropriate guidance for these difficult questions.

THE GREAT BEYOND

Joe, the protagonist, is an aspiring musician whose life suddenly ends after landing a position in a coveted jazz band. After his life ends, he enters The Great Beyond, a place where souls await judgment.

Why Do We Die?

Joe's sudden death in light of his imminent success can be very confusing to a young child, who may associate death with old age. Joe's death can be a good opportunity for parents to attempt to see into their children's inner world and explore their current conceptualization of life and death.

Children process death differently¹ depending on their developmental stages. Toddlers (0-3 years old) have a more concrete, egocentric view of the world. For them, death or loss may be seen as a punishment. Preschool aged children (3-6 years old) may have difficulty understanding that death is irreversible, as they tend to create magical explanations rather than follow logical sequential reasoning. Elementary school aged children (7-11 years old) are capable of more abstract thinking and able

to understand that death is permanent. Adolescents (12 years and up) have well established abstract thinking and are capable of a more sophisticated discussion.

Parents should tailor their conversations to their child's developmental stage as their understanding of death varies.² For younger children, it may be necessary to gently explain that death can be expected or sudden, but it is not a punishment for who we are or what we do. Because their thinking is more concrete, it would be helpful to avoid euphemisms that may confuse them further. Elementary school aged children would be able to start engaging in simple discussions of spirituality and religion. Adolescents are able to fully engage in discussions of death, though they are not likely to fully grasp their own mortality due to an inherent sense of invincibility commonly seen in adolescence. Regardless of age, reassurance that there will be a dependable loving presence in their lives is essential.

What Happens When We Die?

In the movie, Joe enters The Great Beyond. For young viewers who may not have had any discussions of death prior to watching the film, this concept may prompt them to innocently ask their parents about life after death. We encourage parents to research the child's theories alongside them. Depending on the child's spiritual upbringing, this answer may be based in existing religious practices, or it can be an entirely new and mystifying concept. We encourage parents to maintain a non-judgmental, respectful approach and teach their children that there are many different faith systems which offer ideas about what happens after death. Examples include the parallel concepts of heaven and hell from Christianity, Sheol from Judaism, Jahannam and Jannah from Islam, and reincarnation from Hinduism and Buddhism.³ Providing exposure to various religious perspectives promotes the

child's own religious agency⁴ while also allowing for a better understanding of their peers' spiritualities.

THE GREAT BEFORE

The film depicts The Great Before as a place where new souls get their personalities, quirks, and interests before they go to earth.

Where Did I Come From?

Although this question can be answered literally by explaining biological conception, The Great Before introduces the idea that there may be a "life" before life on earth. Children may wonder if their personalities were developed before they were born, and whether some of their personality traits are fixed. We encourage parents to nurture a "growth mindset" as described by psychology researcher Carol Dweck.⁵ With the growth mindset, parents can teach their children that some intrinsic qualities can be changed through their own concerted efforts so that desired abilities can be developed. We suggest parents challenge the idea that we are born with rigid personality traits which cannot or will not change over time.

Do I Have a Soul?

In the film, Joe has a soul that remains constant before, during, and after life. Children may wonder if their souls continue to exist. The concept of having a soul varies among individuals. Depending on the religion, the soul may move on to a different body or a different form. The idea of a soul (with a personality, values, and likes/dislikes) as distinct from the body exists in many cultures. At the same time, it is acceptable to share that some questions, like this one, may not have an answer we can offer with absolute certainty.

EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Joe mentors a young soul on how to spark inspiration for life. He guides her to appreciate many aspects of life, from the most mundane to deeper ones, such as the importance of pursuing his life's passion for music. Joe's lifelong obsession with music and fame serves as a double-edged sword that not only drives his *raison*

d'être, but also blinds Joe to the other parts of his life that render balance and also make life worth living.

What is the Purpose of Life? If We Don't Know What Happens After Death, Does What We Do Have any Meaning?

Young children are not likely to ask this question, but young and late adolescents may want to discuss this with their parents as they are navigating school and potential career choices. Joe's purpose in life initially centers on his success in his career and then shifts to focus on relationships with others. In a psychological study comparing the views of theists and atheists regarding their views on what gives life meaning, both groups mentioned interpersonal relationships more than any other source of meaning.⁶ In child and adolescent psychiatry, we often promote personal wellness as a whole including physical, intellectual, social, emotional, financial, environmental, and spiritual aspects.⁷ Youth can be counseled that the wellness we strive for is actually a balance of these multiple factors. Instead of focusing on just one area, it is important for parents to encourage balanced living and foster personal wellness in many dimensions.

References

1. How to talk to kids about death. Child Development Institute. <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/how-to-be-a-parent/communication/talk-to-kids-death/#gs.ux8346>. Published July 23, 2019. Accessed July 7, 2022.
2. Stuber ML. "What do we tell the children?": Understanding childhood grief. *Western Journal of Medicine*. 2001;174(3):187-191. doi:10.1136/ewjm.174.3.187
3. Puchalski CM, O'Donnell E. Religious and spiritual beliefs in end of life care: How major religions view death and dying. *Techniques in Regional Anesthesia and Pain Management*. 2005;9(3):114-121. doi:10.1053/j.trap.2005.06.003
4. Barrow BH, Dollahite DC, Marks LD. How parents balance desire for religious continuity with honoring children's religious agency. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. 2021;13(2):222-234. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000307>
5. Dweck CS. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine Books; 2016.
6. Nelson TA, Abeyta AA, Routledge C. What makes life meaningful for Theists and atheists? *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. 2021;13(1):111-118. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000282>

7. Pennsylvania Western University. Wellness wheel. <https://www.clarion.edu/student-life/health-fitness-and-wellness/office-of-health-promotions/wellness-wheel.html>. Accessed July 7, 2022.

About the Authors

Liana Lau, MD, is a fourth-year psychiatry resident at Metropolitan Hospital in New York. She is interested in child and adolescent psychiatry, global health, behavioral health integration in primary care settings, and the effects of adverse childhood experiences on mental health.

Megan Lin, DO, is a second-year child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at Icahn School of Medicine Mount Sinai in New York. She is interested in media's impact on youth, cultural psychiatry, and psychotherapy.

Steven Sust, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Stanford University. He is interested in cultural psychiatry, behavioral health integration in schools and/or primary care clinics, and media's effects on mental health.

Disclosure: Drs. Lau, Lin, and Sust have reported no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

Correspondence to Megan Lin, DO; e-mail: megantlin@gmail.com

This article was edited by Paula Wadell, MD.