

Dialogue with Kishtta

A Semiotic Revelation of the Paradox of Life and Death

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Abstract: This dialogue between two “semiotic animals” explores the paradox of life and death where death is not perceived as an absolute end or an inevitable aspect of life. The reciprocal and paradoxical relationship between life and death is at the core of the semiotic process. Death is an integral part of this semiotic process, like a door opening out on another transcending world with unpredictable outcomes. Not only does the dialogue reveal an insight into the semioethics of the ritualization of life and death but it also exposes the disingenuous separation between the realms of zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics. On ontological and epistemological levels, both zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics are integrated reality that invariably cannot exist without one or the other in mutually transparent co-evolutionary processes purposefully oriented toward meaning making.

Keywords: anthroposemiotics, dialogue, life-death paradox, zoosemiotics

I. Prologue

There is a time in our lives when we question everything, seek an explanation to every riddle in life, and are determined to understand every paradoxical phenomenon we encounter. The paradox of life and death is one of the most mysterious phenomena. Like all other paradoxes, there is no answer or solution to this phenomenon. Only through intimate

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dialogue and perseverance can we develop a deep understanding, and perhaps enlightenment, about the paradox of life and death.

With some reluctance, I am sharing an intimate dialogue between two “semiotic animals” exploring the notion of life and death. The concept of *Dialogue with Kishtta* was triggered by an actual life-transforming encounter. The first voice in this dialogue is Kishtta, my insightful thirteen-year-old who experienced the transition between surviving and passing away. The second voice belongs to me struggling with that experience. The encounter took place between Kishtta and me on the evening of Friday, November 28, 2008, and has proved to be a cathartic and therapeutic experience for me.

Kishtta had been suffering with a brain tumor for more than a year. At the end of her long suffering, she was allowed to lie in bed awaiting the final step of a merciful procedure. Kishtta’s eyes looked calm and peaceful. With a flood of tears, I sat near holding her head and struggling with words.

2. Crossing the Threshold of Suffering

Kishtta: “Daddy, you look very sad.”

Me: Kishtta, I don’t know if I can go through this process. Making a decision about death is an unimaginable challenge; accepting the outcome is more grief than I can imagine.

Kishtta: “Please don’t cry, Daddy. Not only does this make me very sad to see you in this condition but it also makes my transition very difficult for both of us. I’m going to a peaceful place with no pain and no suffering.”

Me: Intuitively, I know that, but it’s very hard; the agony of separation is unbearable. I can’t imagine my life without you. I can’t imagine coming home without your playful and jovial greetings, your hugs and kisses. I can’t bear this emptiness; I don’t know how I’m going to endure this loss.

Kishtta: “Daddy, it will be quick and peaceful for me, no suffering. I’m only concerned about you. I want to be sure that you will take good care of yourself and are able to overcome your sorrow, and that eventually you will discover, or rather recover, something significant out of this cathartic experience.”

Me: Over the years, I have lost many family members and friends, but this is the first time in my life I’ve been faced with the difficulty of making such a decision and I don’t know if I can go through this process. I just don’t know how I will survive this experience.

Although I'm familiar with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model of dealing with grief and tragedy, experiencing denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance,¹ I struggle greatly with making the decision of letting you go to relieve your pain and suffering.

You see, my unbearable predicament is twofold: going through the agonizing and heartrending process of making a decision to let you go, and going through the grieving process of losing you.

Kishtta: "Oh Daddy, all I'll be doing is falling asleep.

"And you know making a decision to stop my suffering has been the purpose of 'thanatology'—the scientific study of death and dying, giving permission to die peacefully. Not only is this an unselfish act but, in fact, it's a noble deed."

Me: I know but, but, but ... I love you so much, my baby. I don't want you to go.

Kishtta: "I love you too Daddy. And this is precisely my point: because you love me, you should let me go. You know you would free me from the suffering of ongoing seizures. It's the right thing to do. You see, Daddy, letting me go is a merciful act. If you love me you also love life, and the love of life is just about what life really is. It's not about death."

Me: But I'm greatly troubled in making this decision. Who am I to make such a decision? Only the Mighty God makes decisions to end one's life.

Kishtta: "Oh Daddy, I know you very well, I know where you stand spiritually. I've always looked up to you for wisdom. And I trust that you know deep in your heart that you, others, and I are gods and goddesses; and all are the very nature of God, that which is in constant metamorphoses.

"Daddy, you've taught me that God is not the Absolute. God is in a constant transformation. I know you've been writing about the notion of the "Absolute." I've a premonition that you will not stop steering people away from believing in absoluteness and rejecting a limited understanding of God. I know you will continue writing about the metamorphoses of the Absolute; it's your indefatigable effort to liberate humans from their self-imposed limitations. It's only through this effort that you will discover the sublime quality

¹ Kübler-Ross 1969.

of sharing the responsibility of creation and recreation. And you will acquire a deep understanding of what life is really about.”

Me: But the issue of ending one’s life—whether self-inflicted or by another’s decision—is beyond my comfort zone and intellectual comprehension. I can’t bear this cross of responsibility; it’s beyond my resilient power.

Kishtta: “Pardon me Daddy. I need to recall your attention to the notion of euthanasia, which comes from the Greek word *euthanatos*, means ‘good death’ or the ‘right to die’—the right to stop the suffering from terminal illness. If I had the choice I would have committed suicide like some humans and other species do. Unfortunately, while philosophically suicide and the right to die are viewed as a personal choice, such acts are considered a sin according to Christianity.”

Me: Yes Kishhta, but euthanasia is one of the most controversial issues of our time. It has been and continues to be shrouded by confusion and an ongoing heart-rending debate among human beings.

Kishtta: “I know Daddy. Certainly, humans continually struggle with everything culturally and socially constructed. And similar to anything culturally and socially *constructed*, the idea of death also can be culturally and socially *deconstructed*. Historically, humans fear death, considering death as the end of life. But Daddy, we talked about being inseparable parts of the nature of God. The irony is that death does not exist. To say that death exists would be to say that you do not exist.² If we believe in death then we should declare with Friedrich Nietzsche that God is dead. God never dies. We will never die, Daddy. If God is in constant metamorphosis, then all living species are in constant metamorphosis too. Life is eternal.

“You seem to have forgotten your ancestors’ promises of *life-after-life*. Do you remember what the Egyptian symbol ‘ankh’ means? It’s *the key to eternal life*. Death is only a transition, a metamorphosis from one stage to the next. Indeed, life is eternal.”

Me: My predicament is that, intellectually, I understand and accept your interpretation but, emotionally, I am torn apart.

Kishtta: “This reminds me of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.³ That is, the misconception of our awareness of life occurring once and never again. But ‘if we have only one life to live, we might as well not have

² Walsh 2000: 71.

³ Kundera 1984.

lived at all.' You remember, Daddy, there is only life, not death. Death has been mistaken as finality or an end, rather than a transformation to a different form. On the contrary, death should be celebrated as a metamorphosis of life itself. *Death should be ritualized as a passage to eternal life.*"

Me: Well Kishtta, I feel a bit at ease. Maybe, after all, the distinctions between life and death are more artificial than humans want to admit or even tolerate. Tell me more.

3. Insight into the Ritualization of Life and Death

Kishtta: "Undeniably, what humans call 'death' is one illusion of many that have been created by human languages. Speaking from our ephemeral experience, we could say that every moment is a dying moment. We don't cry over a dying moment, do we? We celebrate the memory of the passing moment in order to experience more moments. In a sense, 'life' is being celebrated at the moment of birth, the moment of death, and every moment in between.

"Whether with humans or animals, at death the body decomposes into soil and dust, *signifying* the gradual integration of ancestors into the living world from which all are born. The dead journey into the invisible world where the ancestors gather carrying the life-giving elements to the visible world;⁴ just as the ancient Egyptians experienced the sun 'Ra' being swallowed by the sky 'Nut' every night and reborn again each morning. 'Out of death comes life,' do you remember?"

Me: It's a paradoxical situation, is it not?

Kishtta: "Yes Daddy, the irony is that whenever we experience death we experience life too. And persevering through this paradox of continuity is truly what we call 'serenity'—a personal equanimity and a total harmony with reality."

Me: Aha! This experience echoes Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of "synechism."

Kishtta: "Yes, life-and-death are a paradoxical continuity, synechism. As you know Daddy, the life-death phenomenon is one of the most challenging paradoxes that humans seem to have erroneously overlooked or intentionally avoided. Look around you Daddy: all more-than-

⁴ Abram 1996.

human systems seem to be comfortable with the paradox of life and death; in fact, they seem to be in harmony with and honor of the process of metamorphosis. A caterpillar experiences the death of its existing form to be transformed into a beautiful butterfly. I shall persevere through this chrysalis process and, I promise you Daddy, I will return in a different form.”

Me: But your convincing elucidation and promise of return don't make it easy for my emotions. We human beings have feelings, emotions, and understandings that other creatures don't have. In fact, 'all animals are semiotic beings, but only human beings can become semiotic animals' capable of using signs *and* knowing that there are signs.⁵

4. The Interdependence of Zoosemiotics and Anthroposemiotics

Kishtra: “Oh Daddy, this mental model is dualistic. And it seems to me like a disingenuous separation between the realms of zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics. I have to say Daddy, this is one of the biggest human misunderstandings since the Greek era, and has become even worse since the Age of Rationalism.

“Humans have erroneously differentiated themselves from other creatures by classifying others as non-humans.⁶ That is why I prefer the term *other-than-human animals* to avoid the misleading idiom 'non-human animals,' which has been commonly used in semiotic circles. It is important to move beyond the prefix 'non,' which not only has a negative connotation of separating humans from animals, but also implies human superiority. I wonder, what would other-than-human animals say about the supremacy of the human animal? I can only infer from the American science-fiction film *Avatar* what the blue-skin-tailed humanoids 'Na'vi' would have said about the crude animality of human beings who have depleted the Earth's natural resources.

“You shouldn't be surprised to see how your ancestors depicted their gods and goddesses in half-human, half-animal forms. This integration of a human body with attributes from an animal head is a unique Egyptian representation. Take a look, for instance, at the human-headed ram (god of fertility), falcon-headed human (god

⁵ Deely 2004a: 52.

⁶ Fernández-Armesto 2004.

Horus of the sky), jackal-headed human (god *Anubis* of mummification and protector of tombs), and human-headed bird *Ba* (the soul or spirit).”

Me: Many characteristics of human semiosis are also considered to be that of animal semiosis.⁷ But some semioticians tend to overlook these shared characteristics.

Kishitta: “Ironically, although the notion of ‘semiotic animal’ was conceived to overcome the human-animal dualism, still many zoosemiotics supporters still remain anthropocentrically biased. In maintaining the identity of their field, zoosemioticians tend to focus on animal behavior and communication, separating themselves from other semioticians, and consequently encourage anthropocentric tendencies.⁸

“And despite the fact that the late works of Darwin have radically changed the scientific perception and conceptualization of animal semiotics,⁹ things remain distorted toward human identity. This struggle for identity has been going on since the time of Aristotle, moving from rational animal to symbolic animal to abstract animal to semiotic animal, and so on. It’s time to put an end to this ‘human and all-other-animals dualism once and for all.’¹⁰

“You see Daddy, other creatures experience emotions and have feelings too. Look around you: creatures respond emotionally to their environments and to inanimate things just as humans do. In fact, more often than not, humans tend to be reticent about their feelings and thoughts. That being said, according to Thomas Albert Sebeok, animals are *beings* and have emotions too.¹¹ It has been observed by researchers that the processes of learning, mimicry, memory, communication, emotion, and even creativity occur within animal species.¹²

“Am I being too wordy?”

Me: Not at all. Please go on.

⁷ Nöth 1990.

⁸ Interestingly, “semiotics has always been an anthropocentric and logocentric discipline, with an exclusive emphasis on human-and language-related issues” (Martinelli 2010: 3).

⁹ For example, see Darwin 1871 and 1872.

¹⁰ Martinelli 2010: 44.

¹¹ Sebeok 1972.

¹² Martinelli 2010.

Kishtta: “The interdependence of zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics leads to significant mutual benefits concerning the issue of life-and-death. These benefits relate to the animal instinct and human perception of death; and from a semiotic perspective, they are reciprocal and together contribute to our ecological understanding and cultural practices. Let me take this a little further.”

Me: Yes, yes.

Kishtta: “When humans kill animals for food, or mere sport, they become aware of death as finality: the animal ends up in a meat grinder, confirming that life occurs once and never again. This self-imposed finality makes human beings overlook the fact that death is a transformation to a different form. Human beings seem to be confused about the right to die—euthanasia, you know—whereas animals seem to possess a kind of sensibility to stop eating and drinking in order to end their suffering from disease or life-threatening wound. Oddly enough, for humans, this personal choice and the right to die are considered by formal religions as suicide, a sinful act.”

Me: Well Kishtta, you have a point here. I recall the fieldwork by primatologist Jane Goodall, which reveals numerous previously unknown aspects of chimpanzee behavior that mimic human behaviors.¹³

However, I recall John Deely making a distinction between zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics. He considers *zoosemiosis* to cover the action of signs among animals, whereas *anthroposemiosis* covers “the human use of signs both overlapping with, but especially as species-specifically distinct from, *zoosemiosis*.”¹⁴

Kishtta: “I really believe Deely’s statement about the overlap of anthroposemiosis and zoosemiosis hints indirectly at my point. In fact, expanding on the work of Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, John Deely comes closer to what we have been talking about. Humans as semiotic animals are moving from merely being aware of their own being and action into seeing themselves accepting the burden of responsibility of becoming aware that ‘*the welfare of the human race is inseparable from the whole biosphere from which the race of semiotic animals is inseparable.*’ In this sense, not only does semiotics go globally, but it expands into the cosmos.”¹⁵

¹³ Fernández-Armesto 2004.

¹⁴ Deely 2010: 112.

¹⁵ Ibid. 117.

Me: Okay, I agree with you Kishtta, but let me go back to my quandary. How do we know that other creatures have feelings and experience emotions? For one thing, other creatures can't express themselves in languages.

Kishtta: "I'm delighted to see you agree with me. However, your question opens a can of worms. Let me explain. You see, language is the attribute of the human species, suitable only for communicating with other people. The opinion that language as a human phenomenon has nothing to do with signs and signals emitted by other animals is a fallacy.¹⁶ Only in the wake of the alphabet does language come to be experienced as an exclusive human enterprise. 'Words, as symbolic signs, are effective systems for describing life experiences and cognitive events, but they are not the experiences or events themselves.'¹⁷

"Interestingly, 'human society lived for 2,995,000 years without the benefit of writing, and there is considerable evidence that many preliterate cultures behaved in a more humane manner toward one another and toward their environment than the literacy-based cultures that followed.'¹⁸ Unjustifiably, by focusing on the alphabet, humans made language into mirrors reflecting back from one person to another in an ongoing monotonous communication."

Me: Okay, this is the case with the written language, but what about oral communication or just speaking?

Kishtta: "Daddy, speaking is something different, in the sense that human speech is really part of broader communication. And since you brought up the issue of communication, it's time to talk a bit more about the difference between communication and language.

"Language is only one modality of communication. Furthermore, if language is defined as a system of communication, then many species have languages too. In fact, following Darwin, not only the anatomy of man but also the spoken language of humans, and communication in general, must have antecedents in earlier animal species. Only a few semioticians have adopted a general semiotic perspective showing that there are features of animal communication

¹⁶ Martinelli 2010.

¹⁷ Seif 2009: 1632.

¹⁸ Shlain 1998, 414.

missing in human language and that some animal codes are superior to human language.¹⁹

“Interestingly, however, other species speak with each other and to humans, but humans seem to have developed deafness to the speech of other species.”

Me: What do you mean by humans developing deafness to the speech of other species? Needless to say, we can hear all kinds of sound and noise emanated from other creatures.

Kishtra: “More often, humans have chosen not to listen to, or to learn the art of communication with, more-than-human systems. Ironically, humans tend to acknowledge and even celebrate their own fellows who speak in an unknown language, ‘glossolalia’—you know, speaking in tongues without understanding a word! This makes me wonder about the notion of ‘understanding,’ which human beings claim as their own, but which they deny for other-than-human species.

“You see, Daddy, other species have no place in this semiotic system.²⁰ So, humans continue to involve in a kind of monologue with themselves unable to participate in a much more inspiring dialogue with other animals.”

Me: But how do humans dialogue with animals? How does dialogue take place without a common language? And what kind of language is appropriate for this dialogue?

Kishtra: “Aha ... the nature of your questions presupposes that there is a distinction between human understanding and the understanding of other animals. Well, according to Thomas Sebeok, every species exhibits ‘species-specific modalities’ of apprehension and communication; and therefore, the debate over whether human understanding differs from the cognition of other animals is not really fruitful.”²¹

Me: But again, the nagging questions are: What kind of language is appropriate for dialoguing with other-than-human animals? How does dialogue take place without a common language?

Kishtra: “Well Daddy, Native Americans and Ancient Egyptians seem to dialogue with animals through touch, smell, sound, kinetic energy, and psychic telepathy. However, the nature of these questions pre-

¹⁹ Nöth 1990: 150–155.

²⁰ Abram 2010.

²¹ Deely 2004b.

supposes that there is a distinction between human understanding and the understanding of other animals.

“Because of the limiting human monologue, it seems to me that other species may have an adequate or even a *deeper understanding* of life and death than humans do. Other species are in what appear to be a dialogical intimacy with their environment. And this dialogical intimacy is precisely the hallmark of the interaction between organisms and their Umwelt. It’s through this intimate dialogue between species and their Umwelt,²² that animals seem to find a balanced way to live effectively with their environment and with their own limitations and skills, without the resentment or malice commonly associated with human beings. We really need to learn how to create a dialogical intimacy with more-than-human systems.”

Me: Hum! I don’t know how to make connections with more-than-human systems.

Kishtta: “Oh, I’ve seen you, Daddy, listening and speaking to the land when you began the design process for our home. I watched you during the construction asking the land permission and blessing to accommodate your need and desire. I witnessed your courage standing against others who wanted to blast the land as an easy way to make space for the foundation of our home. This is how I know in my heart that you engage in this dialogue with me and with other-than-human creatures; you’ve been practicing, haven’t you?”

Me: I really believe being able and willing to engage in contemplative conversation with more-than-human species or systems has the potential to foster cultural transformation and environmental renewal in a world we as semiotic animals co-create and co-inhabit.

Kishtta: “And Daddy, this world we co-create, co-inhabit, and co-interpret is the world of both human animals and more-than-human animals.”

Me: Wait a minute Kishtta! I can understand a world where humans and animals co-create and co-inhabit, but do animals co-interpret?

Kishtta: “Certainly, Daddy. I wonder why human animals think that other animals do not think and interpret. For one thing, we don’t have conclusive evidence that other animals do or don’t think or interpret. And for another, the Cartesian ontology of “I think, therefore I am”—*cogito ergo sum*—exclusively defines the relation between

²² Uexküll 1982.

humans and reason, which is ultimately a total denial of the animal way of reasoning.²³ I find this definition to be a preposterously anthropocentric human worldview.”

Me: Returning back to the heart of our dialogue, how does interpretation relate to the notion of death?

Kishtta: “I tell you this Daddy, only human animals perceive death as an end. But death is not an absolute end for anyone or anything. For more-than-human creatures—as it should be for humans—death is not construed as an inevitable aspect of life. Rather, death is perceived as an integral part of the semiotic process, like a door opening out toward another transcending world.”

5. Toward a Semioethics Closure:

Me: I see. You remind me of the very essence of infinite semiosis.

Kishtta: “Yes indeed. In this concept of infinite semiosis, human beings as semiotic animals are capable of developing awareness, relationships, and mediation toward semiosis with more-than-human systems and over the entire earth. And in this sense, human species have unlimited ‘semioethical’ responsibility toward others—not just toward other cultures but also toward more-than-human systems. We must develop such an awareness for the full recovery of the ethical dimension of semiosis that embraces not only humans but also more-than-human forms of life.”²⁴

Me: Wow! I can see that not only does semiosis seem to be a good argument for the continuity (synechism) of life, but also for our semioethical responsibility toward our planet Earth.

Kishtta: “Yes Daddy. Do you remember when you took me for camping at the rainforest in the Olympic Peninsula? Looking at a nurse log, we appreciated how life emerges from death. One may perceive the nurse log as deadwood, but in fact, this ‘dead’ wood gives life to a new sprout. Life is eternal, and our semioethical responsibility drives us toward the celebration of death as part of this infinite semiosis of eternal life.”

Me: Ultimately, there are many issues about death we do not understand, and perhaps we will never understand. No one really knows what happens to the spirit of a being after death.

²³ Derrida 2006.

²⁴ Petrilli 2004. See also Beasley 1990.

Kishtta: “Even if we don’t know, and even if this is the greatest paradoxical myth in life, nevertheless, it’s a myth to live by. It’s the myth of *palingenesia*—‘a continuous recurrence of birth.’²⁵

“And Daddy, I’ll always be with you. Each time you touch the urn that contains my cremated body, my ashes, you will feel my presence and cherish our memories: both memory of the past and memory of the future. We will continue our dialogue.”

Me: But how can I overcome missing your physical presence in my life, your loving acts, walking with you in the woods, and enjoying your playfulness? How on earth do I continue the dialogue without you?

Kishtta: “My spirit will emerge once again, like the sun cohabits with the earth and, after a period of gestation, will emerge anew. In due time, you will also receive another daughter and celebrate her presence as the *treasure* of your life. Her name shall be *Kenzie*, which, as you know, means ‘my treasure.’ Whenever you call her name, I’ll be intoned with your voice and be with you. I’ll always be with you. My love will, *all-ways*, be with you Daddy.”

Me: I love you, Kishtta. Farewell till I join you ... !

The dialogue reached its peak when I caressed Kishtta’s head, her eye movement expressed gratitude. With a bit of reluctance and resigned acceptance of the imminent departure, I offered a final indulgence. Accepting my offer, she responded by licking my hand, and in a moment, she stopped breathing. It was 19:30 hours, Friday, November 28, 2008. Kishtta was my beloved golden retriever.²⁶

In memory of Kishtta: August 8, 1995–November 28, 2008.

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²⁵ Campbell 1949: 16.

²⁶ As it happened, on May 6, 2010, my wife and I received the gift of an English cream golden retriever; we named her Kenzie.

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