How ANGELS BECOME REAL

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT OF DEATH BY A
FIVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL

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1.0 Introduction. This is an account of the experience of death by Toto, my daughter, who lived through her father's illness from just before her fifth birthday to his death of brain cancer just before her sixth birthday.

Toto had always a very good relationship with her father. The first day of her life, her daddy sat her on his lap, facing him, and called her TOTO, meaning in toto (our everything). From that day on, he would change her nappies at least once a day and dress her in the mornings. When she was only a few weeks old, he would let her "choose" her socks by holding up two pairs. The one she reached in kicking her feet was the pair she would wear for the day. At three years, Toto would select vegetables on Saturdays at the market and her daddy would cook a meal around her choice. When her daddy had to leave to go to the University in the mornings, Toto, even when she could not talk, through her vocalizations and gestures would keep up a conversation with him that made him arrive late for his lectures. After the birth of her brother Christopher (Toto two/too), father and daughter became even closer. Daddy could understand very well that a little baby brother was sometimes a bit of a nuisance, and would then read to her "The Giraffe, the Pele and Me," and they would have fun cooking chocolate souffles.

1.1 Hospitalization. Sunday, the 16th of April, Daddy is feeling unwell. Toto, 4:11 years, and her brother Christopher, 1:6 years, are excited because we all go to hospital. There Daddy is diagnosed as having an inoperable brain tumor. Daddy has to stay in hospital. We go home and bring him pajamas and toothbrush, help him to get undressed, share his dinner, and go home. No evening read. Daddy is in hospital. The next morning Toto is told by her mother that Daddy is going to die.

1.2 Denial of the Coming Death. The progression of the cancer is rapid; and with his double vision and beginning aphasia, Daddy cannot read anymore to Toto. Toto comments: "Daddy can't read anymore to me, so I read to him." She lies beside him on the hospital bed and "reads" her story books by heart. Daddy is lying in hospital as a
private patient, but the nurses don't have any time to help him wash or shave. Christopher, Mummy, and Toto help Daddy to get into the shower, undress; and while the children wash his feet with lots of soap, Mummy washes the rest of his body. We all get wet. It is good fun to help Daddy. Toto draws a picture for Daddy which we stick to the hospital wall, opposite his bed. It shows Daddy at home. Daddy fills the space of the house, smiling. Only the house door is black. Toto is hopeful that he will get better. Although there is in the back of her mind the worry that he might not and that we will have to live without Daddy. Another picture she draws for the hospital wall depicts only three people, Mummy, Christopher, and Toto under the rainbow.

1.3 Toto's Realization of Her Powerlessness in the Face of Death. During the following months, Toto attempts again and again to deny the illness. Radiation treatment begins and after one week Daddy comes back home for a weekend. He cannot walk anymore and his speech and voice are impaired. Toto insists: "My Daddy is not here."

Later we all (a number of friends have come) sit around the dining room table and eat. Daddy eats with his left hand because the right one is increasingly paralysed. Toto sits on her daddy's lap. Both are happy. He is home, after all. In the coming weeks, Toto "helps" her daddy by feeding him when he cannot hold his fork anymore, or by moving his limbs when they get more and more paralysed. She thinks that no matter what she will always be able to move his limbs for him. When he sits in the wheelchair and cannot hold his feet up so that they get stuck under the wheels, she carries the feet while I move the chair. When her father cannot open his eyes anymore, she lifts his eyelids with her fingertips, asking him to look at her. When she wants to cuddle him, she places his arm around her waist. She even translates for him when he cannot make himself understood. For example, when he throws on the floor some flowers which are arranged on the windowsill beside his bed and I angrily tell him that I won't buy any flowers for him anymore, Toto says: "But Mummy, he doesn't like the colour!"

At about that same time, she draws a picture of Mummy and Christopher standing outside our house and comments: "I am inside the house taking care of Daddy." Another day on which there is nobody who can take care of Daddy while I go shopping, I ask Toto whether she might watch him while I quickly run out with Christopher to do some errands. When I come back, Toto says: "I fed Daddy a whole banana." Mother: "Are you sure, Toto—he can't swallow anymore and might choke." At the time of his complete paralysis, she walks unasked into his room and comes out saying, "He ate an apple"—she even asks me eventually to buy her a "magician's stick," a baton she saw in a shop window; it had small stars floating in a viscous liquid inside. Toto said: "I need it to make Daddy healthy again." She stands beside the bed with the stick and doesn't know anymore what to say. She slowly seems to grasp the fact that even she cannot make Daddy healthy again. She starts to draw pictures of Daddy as an angel. In November she draws herself and Daddy in heaven, and Mummy and Christopher
are on earth. Heaven and earth are connected through steps and framed by a rainbow. Toto walks up the steps and "visits Daddy in heaven."

As the effect of the brain tumor spreads through his body, Daddy seems to become more detached from earth. One of her pictures shows him floating in a coffinlike shape in the air while Toto, Christopher, and Mummy stand outside our house, smiling. Another shows him as a black figure floating among flowers.

1.4 How Toto Explains Death and Life-After-Death to Her Daddy, After three weeks of radiation therapy Daddy comes home, permanently. Toto sits on his bed showing him "Mary and Baby Jesus" and telling him about paradise: "It is very nice there. And we can fly up in the plane and open the window and speak to you. During Christmas you will come down to us with the angels and then we'll live again together as a family and then we'll all die together, Mummy, you, Christopher, and I."

After having lived with the progression of the illness, in which his right side becomes completely paralysed and his eyes are rarely open and only small pieces of food can be swallowed (which Toto gives to him) and the pain increases (which Toto tries to control by massaging his legs, arms, and forehead with oil), her ideas about death change. Dead people, according to her, are different from angels: "Angels open in the mornings the eyes of the dead people and so they [the dead] are awake. And angels cook for the dead people."

Also her idea of how we will be able to communicate with Daddy, who cannot see anymore and is completely paralysed and is being nourished through a tube, changes. In order to talk to Daddy, now, one has to go to church: "We'll go to church and then we can talk to Daddy."

2.1 Death. The illness progresses, with more sleepiness and more epileptic seizures and in the end complete stillness. At the time of his death, Toto lies beside her Daddy in bed, Christopher sits on his bed, and I hold his hand. His last breath and he is dead. Toto wants to help to get him dressed. "His trousers are so loose." "The socks are difficult to pull over his feet." "And what about shoes." Toto is told her daddy is dead. But she insists: "Daddy is only half dead."

"Daddy is cold." Toto touches him before he is carried out of our house.

We will have a last feast for Daddy, in which children are the main guests and coloured balloons filled with gas float up to heaven where Daddy now lives. We give him a few last gifts before the coffin lid is sealed, including chocolate from Christopher, a boat folded out of golden paper from Toto, and two little toy monkeys to play with. "Will they throw him in this hole?" No, the men are careful. The children stick colourful bouquets of flowers all around the grave and throw some in the grave so that "it's nice down there for Daddy." We sing a song of the rainbow which is depicted in many of Toto's drawings.
At that stage, Toto tries to understand death. "Daddy is dead." And again and again the question: "Why did our Daddy have to die?" Answer from Toto: "He ate something bad and then he did not go to the doctor when he had headaches." Despite her rationalization, that Daddy had omitted something, such as going to the doctor, she is afraid that her mummy is also going to die. She doesn't want me to leave the house and if I have to leave she stays in by the telephone just in case something happens to me.

2.2 Daddy's Passage to Heaven. One Sunday morning when her father was still alive, Toto talks about Daddy's passage to heaven. "Daddy's heart goes up first to heaven in the sky and then his body is going up and then heart and body are going together again. After body and heart are together again he gets small white bits coming out of the arms, but his arms are still there. Angels are very nice. Angels and Daddy are going to wait till another person dies and then this person is getting as well an angel. In heaven Daddy is friends with the angels. Daddy looks down onto me and he is still my Daddy. I come as well soon to heaven after I have lived because I must die as well."

Ten days after his death Toto makes up the following poem in German:

*Daddy liegt im Sarg schon fein
ist auch bald ein Engelein.*

*Daddy ist bestreut mit gelb, blau, rosa und grünen B lumen
und Tannenzweigen.*

*Kommen allefein in Pracht durch
die finstere schwarze Nacht.*

(Daddy lies in the coffin nice and fine, will be soon a little angel. Daddy is sprinkled with yellow, blue, rose, and green flowers and with fir branches. Everybody is coming in splendour through the gloomy black night.)

One evening, after her father has been dead for eight months, Toto talks again about the road to heaven. But now she sees it in a more detached way. She does not talk about other peoples' or her own death anymore. Sitting in the bathtub Toto explains: "He was first in a glass cage. Once he reached heaven his wings began to grow. They are not fully grown yet." Mother: "How long will it be until they are fully grown?" Toto: "Perhaps a week or two."

2.3 Life in Heaven. Two days after Daddy's death, Toto draws a picture showing "Daddy and his angel friend and God." Angels have angel friends so that they are not lonely.
Daddy is depicted without spectacles because "angels have no spectacles." In heaven one finds colourful houses, windows with curtains and swings or hammocks. It snows in heaven, black snowflakes (another picture) and one celebrates feasts like Christmas and Easter, as a dancing Easter bunny in heaven illustrates (yet another picture). One morning Toto recounts: "Daddy is taking care of angel children, playing with them." However, life in heaven is not only colourful like the rainbow. Another morning Toto tells us: "The angel children were fighting and Daddy made peace between them."

2.4 Toto's Changing Ideas About Life After Death. Toto says at the dinner table after her father has been dead four months: "God is air." Mother: "Why?" Toto: "Because He lives in heaven." Mother: "Angels are then also air?" Toto: "No, they were people before, and after they died they flew up to Him." "God is air"—in other words, "not really existing." Angels, specifically Daddy, are real—they do exist, because they were people before. In her pictures Toto draws us all the same. For example, in her picture "Angels on Earth Having a Party in the Woods by a Stone," she depicts all of us with wings and no arms. Christopher, not Daddy, is depicted walking down the steps from heaven. Two months later, Daddy is distinguished from us: he is now an angel with wings, whereas Toto, Christopher, and Mummy are drawn with small wings as well as arms.

2.5 14th September: Daddy's Birthday. It is Daddy's birthday. Toto recounts when I wake her up in the morning of the 14th: "Daddy was on a bicycle with only one wheel and he was cycling on water. I had a string which was attached to the wheel and I could pull him with that string back to me when I wanted to." Mother: "Did you do it?" Toto: "Yes." Toto is thinking of our puppy dog Muni, whose leash extends to eight meters but she can be pulled back when necessary.

At the breakfast table Christopher wants to give Daddy chocolate, "no, a cake, a birthday cake!" Mother: "Why don't you sing a song for Daddy?" Toto starts to sing: "Happy Birthday," but then stops after two words. She says: "We have to know how old he is." M: "He will be 51 in heaven." But Toto doesn't sing anymore. She says: "We have to have a surprise for him." It is time to leave for school. Toto, on the way: "Mummy, are you going to buy a surprise for us today, a small one?" Toto wants to celebrate Daddy's birthday, not by eating birthday cake but by her and her brother receiving a surprise, not her father. In the evening we bake a chocolate cake, light a candle for Daddy, and eat the cake with some friends.

2.6 Visits to the Grave. Toto asks one day why we should go to the graveyard to see Daddy. "We could sit him in a corner of the garden, then we would always see him." When Toto leaves the grave, she always says: "Goodbye Daddy," bowing in front of the grave, "see you next week."

After another month Toto's ideas about Daddy change from Daddy as a person who
is living in heaven to Daddy as a "person" living in Toto's heart. Toto says: "You see," reaching in the air around her, "Daddy is always with us; you just cannot see him. He is always in my heart."

We still go to Daddy's grave every week. But now we plant new plants, water them and rip out the dead ones. The children do not say "goodbye" anymore. They comment: "They are nice colourful flowers for Daddy's grave."

Toto's first school day arrives. She cries a little and says that she is sad that Daddy isn't with us. The day after her first school day we go to visit Daddy's grave. Mother: "Did you tell Daddy about your first day in school?" Toto: "I do not have to tell him, he saw it!" In one picture of her coming home from school, she expresses her slow detachment from her father—one sees only his hand. Toto explains: "Daddy is waving from the roof. We pretend he is still alive."

3.1 Ten Months Later. Now after ten months have passed since his death, we still talk about Daddy, but he is, at least in Toto's mind, not with us anymore. She only occasionally recounts dreams about us all, including the dog Muni-Spot, sitting in heaven and enjoying each other's company. In her pictures she now more often depicts three figures. For example, there is a picture of Mummy-mouse, Toto-mouse, and Christopher-mouse eating cheese with holes. Toto is getting accustomed to a life without Daddy. Only sometimes she dreams it isn't true and then she draws a picture of "Mummy-clown and Daddy-clown."

4.1 A Tentative Conclusion. Death is the mother of abstraction and also why we don't believe in our abstractions.