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Death As Cultural Event

by

Peter J. Riga

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Death in our society has now become controlled to the point where we are seriously considering euthanasia for those who request it. Washington State and California almost passed such a measure a short time ago, and it is bound to be passed in most jurisdictions in the next decade.

This is clearly an indication that our culture no longer has a transcendent or religious view of death. We have a medicalized and legalized death; we have not been able to give death a broader cultural meaning. In this respect, our culture is hopelessly divided on the meaning of human death; purely secular or purely religious. There seems to be no dialogue possible between these two opposing positions. Frankly, death without transcendence will always be human tragedy. That is why, ultimately, religious transcendence is the only satisfactory answer to the conundrum of human death.

But we do — each of us, whether secular or religious — have an obligation to take up the cultural challenge of death since there are fewer and fewer believers in death as religious transcendence. For purposes of common dialogue, I would add three considerations:

First, without death, there would be no finality to our actions, our decisions, our responsibility, our freedom. Death acts as that final determination against which we can live serious lives. If there was no death, we could postpone the important determinant decisions of our lives forever. Our lives simply would not be serious; only an interminable postponing of freedom and responsibility — which really makes us human — forever. Without death, our lives would be banal, forcing us into nothing serious, deep, important or committed. Only the realization of death gives our actions human importance and human meaning. Otherwise we would face the eternal boredom of unending repetition of unserious human actions (fun, games, sex, travel, eating, study, sleep, etc.). Without death there would be no edge, no determination of our being in freedom.

We can commit our freedom and responsibility only when we realize that we

are beings for death. Only then are we forced to commit ourselves to what is truly important in life before it is too late. The time-bound nature of our existence before death gives us the opportunity to become serious people or the freedom to become unserious people. We must commit our freedom one way or the other because the hour will come when we shall no longer have the opportunity to do so.

Secondly, if this is true, then death is both an end — clearly that is true — but also a perfection wherein and whereby we sum up the actions of our lives into being we have made ourselves to be, action by action, free choice by free choice. Death is that seal which solidifies what we have become in life by our concrete actions, good, bad or indifferent. What values have we lived by and for? What commitments have we made? What causes have we served? To whom or what have we given ourselves? In fine, what we have done with our lives receives its perfection and finality in death.

Lastly, unless we consider the mere prolongation of physical life with its enjoyments the sum total of human existence, then there are peak moments in life which give meaning to biological life itself. Such are the moments of birth and death, living out of conscience and goodness in the face of great adversity; being responsible even if it costs or even if no one else knows; to be compassionate and kind even to those who can do nothing for us in return; to remain faithful to commitments and solemn promises even when it is not our interest to do so; to do justice to the powerful and to the weak; to continue to love and do good in the face of a world of dishonesty, self interest and cynicism — these and many such acts give meaning to our lives beyond physical biological endurance.

That is why we honor the martyr of conscience, the soldier who dies in defense of his country, the faithful husband and wife, the just judge, the honest politician, the compassionate and caring doctor, the dedicated teacher, the holy preacher, the doer of good and compassionate works. It is these qualities which make human life worth living and which seem to be removed from death itself. For a moment, these actions introduce us into the infinite where no matter how much we do them, they cannot be exhausted. An act of eating ends there; an act of justice and compassion demands more of itself and feeds upon itself. That is, the more we do them, the more there is to be done; they are inexhaustible. They are our opening to transcendence.

In the exercise of these profound acts not only does life become meaningful; in a sense, they transcend death itself. They open us to another dimension of reality. This reality is hidden and mysterious, is greater than life and swallows up death. For them, we are willing to die, if need be, because they are worth more than mere physical existence.

So death remains that feared unknown whose mystery can be penetrated only by faith and religion. But death may also be seen as friend. St. Francis called her “Sister Death”. Not because death is not awesome. Only because it is. It is a terrible event in our lives. Our being is bound by time from birth to death. But it is death which gives meaning to the in-between, to this interval by forcing us to make a choice in freedom of the values we will or will not live by. It is death alone which makes human life serious and worthwhile at all.
