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# Death: Some Reflections In The Modern World

by

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Death is a favorite topic today. Perhaps because it is so mysterious and final. It is *mystery* because it is the last stage of human existence into which we all must enter without fail and without exception. It is *final* because none of the dead we have known have ever come back to us in any rational sense.

At the same time, our whole society, it seems, is bound in a massive denial of this reality of death. Its vocabulary is evasive of this central reality ("gone", "demise", "deceased"); cemeteries are no longer part of any urban landscape and even the sight of a dead body is repulsive to many (thus the attractiveness of cremation). Cemeteries used to be the place of solemnity and meditation where people would go from time to time to meditate on the reality of their own demise so that they could come back into themselves and decide what is truly important in their lives as well as to begin living it while they as yet have time.

No more. The only time people see or think about cemeteries is Halloween and horror films which make fun of what secular society is nervous about: death and burial. Since death has been separated from lived life (hospitals, nursing homes), the dead are out of sight and therefore out of mind. Burial service is never that (they are usually cremated) but a few weeks later there is a "memorial service".

There is even a whole science about death called thanatology. This branch of care purports to help dying people face their ultimate demise and the stages they go through when dying. This should be clearly distinguished from active euthanasia where doctors help, directly or indirectly, a requesting terminal patient, to kill himself. This is a wholly different species of animal not examined here.

Death has become more and more secularized. That, is the vast majority of people die in institutions surrounded by machines and non-family personnel (hospitals, nursing homes, rest homes, etc.). Very few people today die at home surrounded by loved ones to whom they can bid good-bye or reconcile.

Because death is so final and inevitable, there is a deep fear of death. We enter a dimension of reality of which we have no experience or hope of recall. From the death of others, we realize that it is final and complete. Its finality for most people is profoundly disturbing because it is totally unknown: Do we return to the nothing from which we came? Do we enter consciously into another dimension

of reality? Do we become one with the unconscious universe? Do we return in other forms or in other people? These are questions which only philosophers and theologians can answer and finally, only the individual can answer for himself-herself. But there are a few things which we can acknowledge in human death.

First of all, man is the only animal who anticipates death. Only he can project himself into the future and know that he is a being for death. No other animal suffers any anxiety in this respect and as long as they are fed and free of pain, they exhibit no anxiety or anguish about impending death. In this respect, man is essentially different from the rest of the animal kingdom. Death is the conscious or unconscious horizon against which we live our lives.

Secondly, 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.). 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.

Thirdly, 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 the 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 to? 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 in 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.

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.

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