

DEATH, OR SOMETHING MORE OUTLANDISH

by Michael Ventura

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Other eras accepted death as a fate. Ours spends much of its time, effort, and money pretending death can be predicted and controlled. Insurance, health food, gyms, every form of medical care, smoking bans--statistically, these mostly amount to an argument about whether you'll die in your late 60s or early 70s. Too much money is being made in these industries, and too many people are having fun emoting about things like smoking, for most to admit that to be elderly in this culture usually means to be terribly ineffectual and lonely, so what's all the fuss about whether I die at 68 or 73?

True, the average American life span has gone up in this century, from age 47 in 1900 to roughly 74 in 1995. It's not often mentioned that this is mostly due to advances in antibiotics. Now we're being told that antibiotics are far less effective than they were only 10 years ago. The bugs that kill us have suddenly evolved to protect themselves against our drugs. (Ironically, this is partly because of all the antibiotics we give the elderly. Old-age homes have become petri dishes for new strains of the old bugs.) Many medical authorities expect this situation to get much worse. If that's true, life spans will go down again. Perhaps drastically. Which means we're going to have to start thinking differently about death--either that, or live in even more fear than we do now.

In a culture that has come to define virtually any intensity as trauma, events that were once looked at as the essences of life--events that were once faced as things to be lived, and lived with--are now looked upon as problems to be solved, dilemmas to be deciphered, wounds to be healed. In some ways this seems to have been an advance, in some ways not. In terms of death, we've tried to deal with our own fears by the process of "healing" the loss of loved ones. To do this, some have concocted a new rhetoric that's appropriated an old and honorable word: "grief."

The "New Grief," let's call it, is based on a peculiarly American mythology of "growth"--a kind of consumer's attitude toward experience that holds that everything, even death, should help one "grow as a person." Some cultures would find this unnatural and would counsel instead a surrender to the inevitable, an acceptance that nothing--not grief, not growth, not even memory--can make up for what's lost. They would say that by such acceptance (of the death of loved ones, for instance) we learn to face our own fate. But Americans have always considered fate an outdated device that they surely can reinvent to their own specifications.

In terms of death, we attempt to do this partly through technology and partly by the New Grief. The truism now is that it's best to cry and speak and share one's grief, or else one is not really grieving. Certainly, this makes for a more dramatic experience: Something concrete and emotional happens, and in this there is supposedly a relief and release that makes grief easier to bear. But it's fair to ask: Does the expression of grief actually mitigate the pain of our loss? Or is it often an artificially induced drama that substitutes for and hides (or drives further into the unconscious) death's pain? When the drama's done, is not the hole left by the dead still there? Are not all the unresolved issues, that now can never hope to be resolved, still present, still gnawing? Are we, with our new rhetoric of grief, simply trying to bring death to life? To, in effect, wake the dead? To

transmute our loss, our fear, our guilt, into something we can consume and use? When the most useful posture, in the long run, may be not to make something of death--which is all the New Grief really does--but simply to honor death? What if we say, instead:

Life is movement. Death is stillness.

For one of the things we know about life is that it's always moving, never still. In fact, the medical definition of death amounts to nothing more than just how still a body gets in terms of heartbeat, brainwaves, etc. If you're still enough, you're legally dead.

If we say that life is movement and death is stillness, then what we feel about our dead is a part of the movement of life. The dance of life. Death, then, becomes the inevitable and final motion of the dance--the step after which there can be no more movement, only stillness. And the dancer disappears.

In this vision, the appropriate response is applause.

Tearful applause, yes--applause filled with pain at the loss of the dancer, applause that recognizes without flinching that the dancer has gone, but the dance has not. For what is applause but our continuation of the dance now that the dancer is still?

Or does that seem like rhetoric too? Oh, well. (When words try to approach death, they, too, die.)

Trying to accept fate on its own terms leads one inevitably into the labyrinth.

Our civilization likes to think it's all grown up and prides itself on its knowledge, but actually we understand very little about the basic building blocks of existence. We can measure, to some extent, what gravity and light do, and we certainly know their importance, but nobody can say what they are. Theories about how the universe began change every decade. When did human beings first walk this planet? A new bone shows up somewhere, and the whole story changes. There are even great gaps in the geological record: Layers of sediment in Arizona and Nevada, for instance, skip more than a billion years (one-fourth of the earth's history) and no geologist alive can tell you why--10 will tell you why, but they say 10 different things. That's not knowledge.

And if you try to follow the state-of-the-heart savvy on the relation of exercise and cholesterol to the heart, it can be a dizzying pastime, because the major studies contradict each other right and left. And in case we're not dizzy enough, the physicists tell us that we perceive only three or four of at least 10 dimensions. They even tell us that time does not exist--that our linear sense of life is purely a function of our limited sensory capacity. So what are we supposed to believe when science speaks of something it really knows nothing about: death. Airy rhetoric, indeed.

Isn't grief too feeble and confining a way to feel these mysteries? I'd rather insist on death's wildness, and on how death reveals the limitless paradoxes at the heart of life. I weep, I tremble, I scream, I go into a silence not unlike the grave, but I feel lit inside by eerie lights that are more than pain and that run after grief with joy.

So.... given that nobody knows anything more about it than anybody else, I've found myself asking what at first seemed an odd question: Does death, too, die?

Say that life is movement and death is stillness. Say that the dialectic of the universe, if you like, is between movement and stillness, back and forth--then isn't some movement always bound to occur after the stillness, and does this mean that death too dies? Even death?

Which is a way of saying what some sages have always said: There is no death.

Even what we think of as death may be helpless before a still greater mystery: that something will always move; that movement is continual; that existence itself cannot stop moving. This isn't an abstract thought. Everywhere science looks, it has found everything but emptiness that remains empty and stillness that stops forever.

When a human being dies, there are obvious movements: the movement of memory among the living, the movement of the body as it decomposes. But since, as we have seen, science is still young, its measurements still crude, its reference points still unfixed, we are not mystic to assume movements we cannot yet measure or imagine. Ten dimensions, remember? Some physicists say there are 26! Those are scientists talking, not mystics. Ten, maybe 25, so far--and each just as real as the other, and all apparently connected.

So that finally, amid all the things we do not know, we do not really know that there is such a thing as death. We know that it is fated for our loved ones to become very still, and we know that we too one day will be very, very still. In this dimension.

And that's all we know.

Insurance, diet, exercise, holistic medicine, AMA medicine, they serve their functions, they make some aspects of life easier, or at least less messy. And if there's a chance that some treatment will save my life, sooner or later I'll probably try it--as long as it doesn't include quitting smoking. (And, no, I'm not in much more immediate danger, than, uh, you are.) But one way to increase fear is to invest in fear. One way to solidify illusion is to buy into illusion--a literal metaphor, in America. For myself, I prefer to trust one of the few things I am certain of, which is that everything in the universe is always moving. I will move too, beyond my will and beyond any belief I may have. You can call that "dead" if you want to.

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