The Christian CENTURY

Nothing More Beautiful than Death?

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And I will show that nothing can happen
more beautiful than death.
[Walt Whitman]

THE DEATH and dying movement is well established. Throughout the country, mental-health professionals, physicians and nurses, educators, youth workers, members of the clergy and other community leaders have adopted the popular testament of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Macmillan, 1970), as their Bible. In a culture which has been reputed to deny death and dying with a passion—this was one of the celebrated conclusions of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (Simon & Schuster, 1963)—"thanatology" has now become, 13 years after the Kübler-Ross book first appeared, a household word for thousands of people in the helping professions. As a result, concerns such as caring for the terminally ill and ministering to the bereaved, and the charged issues of euthanasia and the right to death with dignity, have become common topics of conversation.

Few will disagree that the older American habit of dealing with death by denial was itself moribund. Still, the death and dying movement merits careful scrutiny. Ironically, perhaps, this movement seems to be symptomatic of a pervasive pathology in our whole culture, with roots deep in our national past.

In the Old World, America had been idealized as the land of the peaceable kingdom, where the lamb would lie down with the lion in an untainted garden. The early settlers quickly discovered that the wilderness was a harsh world, full of death and destruction. That perception of an alien wilderness was still very much alive in the first half of the 19th century in writers such as Henry David Thoreau. Although Thoreau found a certain heavenly quiet in Walden, he self-consciously viewed that soothing, spiritual home as a middle ground between the decadence of society and the ravages of the uncultivated wilderness.

Later in the 19th century, however, as nature came to be more and more tamed and as people's daily experience tended to be increasingly remote from actual contact with the wilderness, alienation from the ravages of nature began to be less typical of the American mind. In its place, a domesticated perception of the peaceable kingdom began again to come to the fore. By the end of the century nature had become a convenient place of repose for affluent city-dwellers, a place to pursue their avocations of bird-watching and moralizing.

FUNERAL AND burial practices in the 19th century seem to have followed a parallel course. They moved from a mood of alienation to a spirit of idealization or beautification. For a long time cemeteries in America were unkempt, even ugly places, full of weeds. But as the nation carved out its life in the new land, and wealth and social stability came to be taken for granted, a trend toward a certain unalienated appreciation of death began to appear. Symbolically, the cemetery came to be a kind of peaceable kingdom, and the dead themselves were less and less regarded as aliens and strangers, but instead as fellow travelers in an idealized world of peace and bliss in nature.

The founders of the rural cemetery movement in America would probably have been delighted with Walt Whitman's confession that "nothing can happen more beautiful than death." Among the first of these great institutions was Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, dedicated in 1831. Its hallmark was a carefully designed rolling landscape of variegated beauty, which it retains to this day.

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In the second half of the century, a new emphasis emerged, as protective embalming and cosmetic treatment of the dead became increasingly popular. Stylized displays of grief in public were still common, yet there was a tendency to emphasize the gracious and the beautiful rather than the somber and the frightful.

In a sense, the state of the dead itself was domesticated through the spiritualist movements that peaked in the 1850s and 1870s. The implication of communication with the dead seemed to be that passing on was merely a change of status, rather than some terrible moment of destruction with an uncertain outcome. This motif was confirmed in the popular writings of the era, especially in the works of the widely read novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. "Casting off the traditional images of heaven," historian Charles O. Jackson explains, "her detailed depiction of the afterlife reduced the once awesome mystery of the spiritual world into a state much like a splendid, though quite familiar, middle-class American community" (*Passing: The Vision of Death in America*, Greenwood, 1977, p. 63).

Now, this is by no means to suggest that death as a brutal, destructive power was unknown in 19th century America. After all, this was the century during which thousands of native people were gradually driven into a state of cultural and physical marginality, or slaughtered outright. It was the century in which a burgeoning national economy was created with the indispensable help of the death-wielding violence of slavery. It was the century during which the ruling masters of the land, having eliminated the Indians and trod down the Africans, then turned viciously on each other, North and South. It was the century, in its waning years, which witnessed the emergence of an industrial economy which featured oppressive institutions such as child labor, which consigned countless workers to early deaths, and which began a rape of the land itself which still has not subsided. The century that came to beautify death was the century that also waged death on an enormous scale.

ATTITUDES TOWARD death in our time show a remarkable continuity with those 19th century trends, with the same kind of cultural schizophrenia very much in evidence. And still more ominous trends seem to have emerged. The pathology of our culture seems to be deepening rather than moving in some remedial direction.

On the one hand, we see the affluent classes in America compulsively at work in our great urban-technological centers, aspiring to the life of elegance symbolized by the watering places they frequent at the top of the World Trade Center and in other pinnacles of the modern industrial spirit. But most of their daily work—the bulk of their time, in fact—is lived in the trenches, dedicated to the economic realities of productivity, efficiency and financial success, and predicated on an ethic of survival of the fittest. This daily experience is understandably debilitating. Thus, it is no surprise to see the same people focusing much of their spiritual energies on the prospect of escape: to the green beltsaround the city where they bed down, to romantic mountain ski retreats, or to the sensual allurements of the Bahamas. In these escape fantasies, the beleaguered servants of our industrial civilization think of themselves as children of nature, sometimes with self-conscious reference to Thoreau's Walden.

However, the actual workings of this affluent civilization are vast, dominating bureaucracies and powerful, globe-circling corporate structures. In this mass society the individual has become increasingly isolated and enervated, with little or no viable access to "mediating institutions" which would offer protection and an effective voice, together with a sense of cultural and personal significance.

The most fearsome aspect of the mass society as we know it today is undoubtedly its perceived potential for unleashing instant thermonuclear holocaust on the whole world. A coming day of mass annihilation now seems inevitable to many in the United States. Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton has described this kind of trauma as "psychic numbing," an expression he first employed to refer to the psychic state of the Hiroshima survivors. Numbing, it seems, is the final step of withdrawal that the isolated individual takes in the continued process of disengagement from the anonymous, person-obliterating institutions of the mass society.

Reducing death's meaning is one form of psychic numbing.

It is no wonder, then, that individuals should become more and more attracted, subconsciously if not consciously, by the prospect of suicide. The suicide rate among today's youth, in particular, is strikingly high.

WHAT BECOMES of funeral and burial practices in such a world? On the one hand, we meet some of the same practices we noted in the 19th century, various expressions of the beautification of death: rooms overflowing with memorial flowers, the often incredibly lifelike corpses in funeral parlors, burials in settings of great natural beauty, such as Mt. Auburn Cemetery. But on the other hand, the beautification of death has more and more become the etherealization of death, or the reduction of death to next to nothing of significance. This seems to be one social expression of the psychic numbing Lifton has described.

Witness the emergence of "memorial parks," which offer "perpetual care," thereby ensuring that the bereaved will never have to visit the grave again. Witness the removal of the dying from their own family environments (if they have any) to hospitals, where they are invisible as far as the larger community is concerned, perhaps even as far as their own family is concerned (the hospice movement is attempting to reverse this trend). Even the increased popularity of cremation seems to point in this direction. Gone are the times of pilgrimage of family, friends and neighbors to the graveside where the

body was laid. Now the body is turned to ashes, which are "deposited" somewhere. In the same spirit of isolation, the familiar social gatherings for the bereaved and their friends following the burial appear to be increasingly infrequent. Most people go right back to work, as if nothing unusual had happened that would require any special kind of human bonding.

Although death is either beautified or etherealized in these ways, the social significance of dying is reduced to almost nothing, and the individual is left very much alone to bear his or her grief in private when a loved one dies. It is nevertheless striking to note how much the daily business of U.S. society has to do with death or the prospect of death—reminiscent of trends in 19th century America. This is the nation that gave the world Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden, with scarcely a ripple of troubled national conscience. This is the nation whose best and brightest sent enormous arsenals of death to Vietnam, and that drinks up the world's petroleum resources gluttonously, while the vast majority of the world's people need those resources for irrigation pumps and for fertilizer, lest they face starvation. This is the nation that exports billions of dollars' worth of arms to the world, including nuclear technology. This is a society in which millions of black teen-agers are unemployed, with no hope for tomorrow, experiencing a kind of rape of their selfhood every day as they stand around doing nothing, feeling worthless and unwanted. At the apex of all these programs and prospects of death stands the most fearsome specter of all, global nuclear catastrophe—at which, until very recently, the great majority of our citizens have simply blinked, as if it were not there at all.

This schizoid American approach to death—its domestication and the reduction of its significance on the one hand, and the waging or the threat of deadly violence on an immense scale on the other hand—is not a desirable psychosocial pattern. Our society would be much better off if most Americans were able to confront death directly as a destructive reality, to be conscious of death as something less than beautiful and more than ethereal. Then we would begin to curtail the nation's systematic, if often unknowing, allegiance to the principalities and powers of death all over the globe.

THE DEVELOPMENT of the death and dying movement in this country during the past two decades would therefore appear to be an event of major positive cultural significance. It would seem to offer American society a remedy for a deeply seated pathological condition. But, on close analysis, that movement seems to be more an expression of the pathology than a cure. Perhaps the best way to illuminate this situation is to turn to the aforementioned study by Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. This enormously popular work has come to function as the Holy Writ, as it were, of the death and dying movement.

Rooted in impressive clinical concerns, Kübler-Ross's efforts also emerge out of a more global set of interests. At the outset she refers to the mass destruction of our era, to the bomb at Hiroshima and to wars in general. Taking a cue from Freud, she asks: "Is war perhaps nothing else but a need to face death, to conquer and master it, to come out of it alive—a peculiar form of denial of our own mortality?" She then suggests that if all of us would make an all-out effort to contemplate our own deaths, to deal with our attendant anxieties, and to familiarize others with our discoveries, "perhaps there could be less destruction among us."

The bulk of her study focuses on the now familiar idea of five stages of grieving through which, she believes, dying patients typically pass: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The validity of this stage theory has been challenged. In response, Kübler-Ross has argued that by stages of experience she means *types* of experience, that her analysis is intended not to be prescriptive, but descriptive. It seems, nevertheless, that she does want to be on both sides of the question at the same time, as the normative nuances of the word "stage" suggest.

Roy Branson of the Kennedy Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction and Bioethics at Georgetown University has argued convincingly (in "Is Acceptance a Denial of Death: Another Look at Kübler-Ross," Christian Century, May 7, 1975, p. 464) that Kübler-Ross does in fact advocate acceptance as the normative resolution of our anxieties about death. This, in other words, is where our feelings about death *should* come to rest, if they are allowed or encouraged to unfold naturally, and not inhibited or blocked by immature needs of the dying person or those who are close to or seeking to help that person. Kübler-Ross is not distressed, Bran-

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Joseph

There was so much
I didn't understand.

I was glad of the beasts,
their familiar sounds,
mellow eyes.

When the kings came
I retreated into rooms
behind my bones.

(Birth was always a miracle:
the dropped foal,
the bewildered chick
from the silken shell)

After they left
swishing brocade
against satin, shimmering
down a lane of star,
I moved close to the byre.

In my arms he was light
as a butterfly.

We laughed together
sharing our immense secret.

Geraldine C. Little.

son points out, if a dying patient moves back and forth from one emotional response to another, from one stage to another, *except* in the case in which the patient has reached acceptance. She thinks of the one who leaves the stage of acceptance as regressing. Acceptance, indeed, as she says often in so many ways, is the resolution of the grieving process. Most patients would reach this stage, she suggests repeatedly, if only the health professionals or the family of the dying would not hang on so long.

What is this final stage like? According to Kübler-Ross, it is a state of peace and tranquillity, "almost void of feelings." It is a time of sleep and a need to withdraw. The patient's circle of interests diminishes, she explains. "He wishes to be left alone. . . . Visitors are not often desired, and if they come, the patient is no longer in a talkative mood. . . . Moments of silence may be the most meaningful communication" (*On Death and Dying*, p. 100).

Thus the end of life is like the beginning. Death is like birth, a natural event in the life cycle. the primary narcissism of the infant's experience, when the self is experienced as encompassing everything, is recapitulated in the experience of the dying person (*On Death and Dying*, p. 106). As death draws near, according to Kübler-Ross, the eternal rhythms of nature now speak their quietly beautiful truth. "Watching a peaceful death of a human being," she writes, "reminds us of a falling star; one of the million lights in a vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night forever" (*On Death and Dying*, pp. 246 ff.).

One can sympathize with Kübler-Ross's motives and welcome her attempt to humanize the experience of dying. Nevertheless we are obligated to evaluate her work critically, since it deals with such an enormously significant subject, with such wide-ranging implications, as she herself recognizes.

Ironically, perhaps, whatever Kübler-Ross's intentions might be, some of her themes are uncannily familiar. It is not far, for example, from the external peace and tranquillity of a Mt. Auburn Cemetery to the internal peace of acceptance as Kübler-Ross depicts it. Is she presenting us, then, with a spiritual beautification of death? Her references to the eternal rhythms of nature are reminiscent of 19th century themes. Her more recent interest in the survival-world after death is also reminiscent of the 19th century interest in spiritualism, and its attempt to integrate the world of the dead into the world of ordinary experience.

Similarly, Kübler-Ross's image of acceptance as the ideal and her picture of the accepting person as one who withdraws, leaving significant ties behind, might be taken as an indirect expression of the contemporary American trend to privatize death. She wants professionals and relatives to be supportive of the dying, but for her that support is ideally rendered not by holding on to relationships with the dying person, but by letting go at the very end, so that the dying person can be truly alone with his or her death experience.

Is acceptance the highest response to death? Is it not dangerous, indeed, to champion such an idea in a historical situation in which people already have been socially programmed to think of death as something with little or no significance, the same people who systematically blink at, or otherwise avoid seeing, the death-wielding powers of our mass society?

It might be said that Kübler-Ross is dealing only with the terminally ill in hospitals, and that in this context acceptance is surely an appropriate response to be encouraged. But what if the patient who has cancer is one of the people who grew up next to Love Canal? Is not anger a much more appropriate response to his or her impending death than acceptance? Does not anger affirm such a person's human worth in a way that acceptance never could?

Kübler-Ross observes that the last two stages of the grieving process are depression and acceptance. Could it not be that depression is a sign of repressed anger, and should be dealt with as such? Could it not also be that acceptance—*however peaceful it looks to the attending friend or counselor*—might in fact be a sign of internal resignation to meaninglessness, a kind of entry into a state of psychic numbness, and that it should be treated as such?

Questions can also be raised concerning Kübler-Ross's normative image of the dying person as one who should increasingly be allowed to be alone, so that he or she can be in solitude with the immediate prospect of dying. In given situations, one can readily imagine that this strategy would be appropriate. But as a general principle, as a guideline for practice, can we really accept the idea of letting go of the dying and still hold on to our common humanity? Are not human beings existentially constituted, as Martin Buber, Karl Barth and others have maintained, not as isolated individuals but as selves in relation to others? Therefore it is a deeply legitimate human instinct to hold on to that world of relationships which constitute our identity. To do otherwise would be to suffer a diminishment of our humanity.

If we consider the stages of the maturation process depicted by Erik Erikson, the last three stages—intimacy, generativity and integrity—all require relationships with others. Should we encourage the dying to let go of the solidarity of human companionship, to jettison, as it were, half of one's identity? Is the infantile, undifferentiating, oceanic feeling Freud spoke of to be the final expression of human growth? Or is some communal reality, such as that suggested by the biblical image of the New Jerusalem, more appropriate as a goal for the end of life? Perhaps the traditional scene of the dying one calling others to his or her bedside for the deathwatch should be cherished as the kind of metaphor we need as we think about death and dying. It seems far more adequate than the image of a narcissistic infant drifting off to sleep in a blissful state of universalized egoism.

In terms of our essential "co-humanity" (Barth), we should instead consider *resistance* the highest form of a meaningful death. This motif cannot be allowed to stand alone; if it were, it might lead to futile and dehumanizing attempts to prolong biological existence, an occurrence well documented by those interested in death with

dignity. The metaphor of resistance also would be problematic were it to be taken abstractly, apart from the matrix of human interconnectedness. To resist death in a humanly authentic way, one must always think and act in the name of human wholeness and human solidarity.

To suggest resistance in this way is not to encourage the denial of death. On the contrary, it may well signal the most radical kind of facing up to death and its destructive powers. Indeed, the person who wills to give his or her life in love for a brother or a sister, or for the sake of many, is resisting death in the highest way—by accepting it. In this sense, resistance may be viewed as the most authentic form of acceptance.

> The death and dying movement is a symptom of the disease rather than a cure.

All these considerations point us toward a much more social construct of death, and away from the quasi-biological idea that death is natural. Therefore it will not be sufficient for us to focus our efforts mainly on the problem of training professionals to be more understanding of death and dying. Particularly in view of our isolation as individuals, facing the gargantuan, often destructive powers of the mass society, we will have to focus large amounts of creative energy on the challenge of inventing new communal structures: in hospitals, religious institutions, neighborhoods, unions, professional associations, universities, civic organizations, geopolitical regions—everywhere. We will have to invent new rituals that will help us to express our solidarity with each other and with the dying, so that we all might better join together in resisting the principalities and powers of death, to our last human breath.

A FEW YEARS ago, C. F. Shatan published a study in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, July 1976, p. 648, concerning the grief work of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. These were his conclusions:

> To men who have been steeped in death and evil beyond imagination, a "talking cure" alone is worthless. And merely sharing their grief and outrage with comrades in the same dilemma is similarly unsatisfying. Active participation in the public arena, active opposition to the very war policies they helped to carry out, was essential. By throwing onto the steps of Congress the medals with which they were rewarded for murder in a war they had come to abhor, the veterans symbolically shed some of their guilt. In addition to their dramatic political impact, these demonstrations have profound therapeutic meaning. Instead of acting under orders, the vets originated actions on their own behalf to regain control over events—over their lives—that was wrested from them in Vietnam.

This is a much more fruitful model for the kind of response to death that we need in America today, given the dehumanizing fragmentation and atomization of our culture, than the model of a single individual on a journey alone, looking ahead toward the time when he or she can drift blissfully off to another world, like a sleeping baby.

The fast developing nuclear freeze movement seems to offer numerous psychosocial possibilities for overcoming the schizoid approach to death which has been so dominant in the past two centuries in our culture—many more possibilities, indeed, than the more privatized and professionalized death and dying movement. People who are committed to the freeze—including many from the helping professions, it should be noted—are rising up in the village square, as it were, to resist the principalities and powers of death. They are not simply bowing down before them and going to the beyond as quietly and as painlessly as possible. They are joining together on behalf of life, against death. They are not disengaging themselves from the body politic, in favor of some private experience of resignation to the inevitable.

The Markan and the Matthean Christ struggled with death. For Mark and Matthew, the cross was an absolute ending, a *finis*. So the Crucified Christ cries in anguish, in these Gospels: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, Matt. 27:46). From this angle of vision, only the resurrected Lord offers the final fulfillment, the *telos* of human life, as *Christus Victor*. The Lukan and the Johannine Christ, in contrast, is finally at peace with death. Death appears to be both the *finis* and, in some measure, the *telos* of his life. Accordingly, he says on the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), and "It is finished" (John 19:30).

The mystery of death as it is portrayed in the New Testament requires us to hold on to both images, the struggle and the peace. We are not permitted by the New Testament witness to take some kind of romantic, sentimental or stoic detour around the anguish of death in order to arrive, by whatever stages, at the moment of final peace in this world. The New Testament will not have us beautifying or etherealizing death at any stage. Death always remains "the last enemy" in the life, as Paul says (I Cor. 15:26). Peace in the death experience, according to the New Testament, comes only through trust in the faithfulness of the God who has power over death, not through any direct contemplation of death itself.

Given our cultural situation today, deeply rooted in our nation's past, it would seem that we are obligated to struggle against death perhaps more than ever before, and to reject any hint of the pacification of death in this world. Self-conscious struggle with death, resistance against death in the name of human solidarity, would seem to be much more beautiful to behold than death itself. ■