

D2-- "ACCEPTING THE UNACCEPTABLE: DEATH CAN TAKE OUR BODIES. IT CANNOT CRUSH OUR SOULS, " SALON, 8/5/96

This must be said about death: It is unacceptable. Who of us would design a world in which we spend our whole lives learning to live well only to die before fully experiencing our lives? Who of us, if we truly searched our heart of hearts, would really choose to die if we could live indefinitely in good health, able to learn and grow, in loving and meaningful relationships, doing work useful to our species, other living beings and the cosmos?

And even if, as a friend suggests, we might eventually want to die because we had sufficiently tasted all of life's pleasures, who of us truly reaches that point after just 70 or 80 years? Who of us would design a species that is hardwired by its own evolution to want to live while spending so much of its unconscious energy coping with its death?

And what about the way it happens? This business of growing old, losing function and dignity, suffering, and pain? Why not design it so that if one has to die, it is in full health, without suffering or pain? Why add insult to injury by designing so painful a process? No!

Death, not simply absurd. A horror. Monstrous. A crime against our very nature. Simply unacceptable.

And yet.

Here we are. Born into a world not of our making or design. Learning at an early age that we must die and having to deny it lest we go insane. Creating whole cultures designed to keep it as far away as possible.

And, finally, being able to deny no longer. Experiencing the slow death of a parent in a nursing home or the quick death of a friend or acquaintance shot out of the sky or by a burglar in the night. Finding ourselves, almost out of nowhere, suddenly aging, growing ill and facing our own demise. Death by accident, death by suicide, death by illness, death by violence, death by terror, death by war, death by old age. A holocaust which will eventually claim the lives of every single person we have known, met, seen or heard, every loved one, every friend, every family member, every person

who has lived before us and all who will follow us. Every one. Even us. Especially us.

Here we are.

And, sooner or later, we ask with Tolstoy, "How?" How, indeed, shall we live in the face of this knowledge, this outrage, this negation of everything we seek to be? Is there an alternative to denial on the one hand, and anger, bitterness, depression on the other?

There is.

Choosing to accept the unacceptable.

Looking death in the eye, and saying, with courage or humility, deference or defiance: "Okay, my friend, come on! I don't like you. In fact, I find you an abomination. Left to my own devices, I would not have even imagined you in a million lifetimes. But you are here, you are inevitable, and I have no real choice but one: to accept you, to choose to surrender, to face you consciously and clearly, to live in the light of life which only exists because of your darkness, with the awe and wonder that your mystery demands. Come on! I am here."

The key word is choice. We cannot choose whether or not we will die. We can choose how we will respond to it.

Choosing to accept the acceptable is very different from resignation, passive submission. Resignation is life-denying, a deadening, numbing reaction to life in which we die before dying. Choosing to accept is vital, life-affirming, an embrace of life.

Our strategies for doing so are infinite. We may choose to accept death by believing that though the body dies the spirit lives on, perhaps even being reborn in another time and place. We may believe we will go to heaven, or otherwise take refuge in the existence of a merciful God who will not simply abandon us. We may find meaning in the children or good works we leave behind. We may take comfort in our role in the natural cycles of life, experiencing that it is through our death that others may live, just as we have lived through the demise of all who preceded us. We may find meaning in a belief in science, in the ability of humans to ultimately

understand and control life on this planet. Or we may simply bow before the Mystery, in awe and wonder, without any understanding whether it has meaning at all.

One thing seems clear: It is in this acceptance of the unacceptable that we most fully express the human condition, that we reach the fullest potential of our humanity. We are distinguished from other living beings not so much by our ability to think or even, as Ernest Becker suggests, by our knowledge that we will die while wishing to live.

No, it is our sweet, poignant and unique fate to alone have the ability to achieve genuine inner peace by choosing to accept what we know is unacceptable, reaching the outer limits of the creative tension between life and death, pain and bliss, love and fear.

It is as true as when Gautama Buddha articulated the Third Noble Truth 2500 years ago: It is possible to be happy in this world, through non-clinging, by experiencing life as we appreciate a sublime painting that we would not even think of trying to own, possess or control.

We are given many opportunities to learn this lesson as we progress through life learning, one by one, that the pleasures of the world -- sex, romance, money, power, fame, even family and friends -- are not quite all there is.

And if we still have not learned this lesson, if we are still searching for peace near the end of our lives, we are given one final gift, one final chance at discovering the deep inner peace which is our birthright: death.

And we discover this peace not by romanticizing death, not by prettifying it or turning it into something it is not. There is neither glory nor meaning in accepting the acceptable, in turning death into a idea that comforts us -- and keeps us from feeling the power of the wind, the ecstasy of a moonlit desert night, or the deep soulfulness of truly engaging the meaning of the murder of six million Jews or the death of a child.

No. It is precisely because death is so unspeakable, so horrible, so unacceptable, that choosing to accept it can become our liberation, our pathway to the deepest set of experiences of which the human soul is capable.

Death is our curse. But it is also our blessing; our horror and our deliverance; our shame and our glory.

Death, be not proud. And may you never take pride from visiting this holocaust upon us. But we, puny, cursed and blessed humans that we are, in all our sweetness and evil, brilliance and foolishness, may be forgiven for taking a bit of comfort from our ability to accept you. You may take our bodies. You cannot crush our souls.

As the Arc De Triomphe is most magnificent not in the light of day but illumined against the dark of night, we humans reach our fullest humanity when, in peace, we humbly hold up our light against the darkness of your impending doom. It is our birthright, our unique gift, our final contribution to a cosmos which, indifferent or not, is warmed by our ability to love, cry and give thanks despite it all.

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