

# My Own Death

## by Robert F. Hobson

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Deal on, Deal on, my merry men all  
Deal on your cakes and your wine;  
For whatever is dealt at her funeral today  
Shall be dealt tomorrow at mine.

(Verse at an Irish Wake in 1810)

One day I shall be dead.

The thought came upon me suddenly, about half-way through a seemingly endless discussion of high medical politics. My mind wandered. This speculative essay is an attempt to make some general sense out of my personal relatively free association, with its clash of clever talk and chaotic emotion.

At first, the sentence 'One day I shall be dead' provided a subject for an entertaining philosophical word-game. I reflected upon the peculiar logic of the sentence—about how there could be any sense in which an experiencing 'I' is in a state of being dead. I recalled the annoyingly opaque remark of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'As in death, too, the world does not change but ceases. Death is not an event in life. Death cannot be lived through.'

Then, in this narcissistic bliss of intellectual solitude, an image flashed upon my inward eye. Two Lancastrians were taking a ritual look at George in his coffin. 'Eh, 'e looks reet content', says Fred. 'Aye', replies Joe. ' 'E's so gawmless it'll like enough tek 'im a day or two to know 'e's deead.' The serious humour of this profound statement brought with it some lines of the poet Sylvia Plath.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
  
I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.

(Lady Lazarus)

Then Sylvia committed suicide.

Hastily, I returned to philosophy, reconsidering what Wittgenstein meant by 'the world does not change but ceases' and recalling the opening sentence of his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1922): 'The world is everything that is the case.' I meditated upon how, as he grew older and approached his own death, he became the 'Lost Leader' of the Logical Positivists. In the *Tractatus* language was considered to have meaning if and only if it could be verified, words being meaningful in so far as they named some determinate object or objects. During the war I spent many months reflecting upon *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards, 1944) in relation to this gnomic saying, 'The world is everything that is the case'.

The war! Another vivid image now! Chaps drowning and

drifting into blazing oil in the freezing Arctic seas, as I stand on the quarter-deck, helpless and ashamed to be alive. Guilty. The Ancient Mariner was the stake in the game of dice won by the nightmare woman 'Life in Death' 'who thick's man's blood with cold'. He was 'all, all alone, alone on the wide, wide sea' and exposed to 'the curse in a dead man's eye'. *He* was guilty but had *I* shot the good white albatross? *The* world and *my* world changed that day.

I drew my thoughts back to Wittgenstein wondering about his 'sea-change' into the author of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) with its radically different views about language which was now an activity, or form of life—a mode of being with others. Or rather, there were a host of different language-games representing various ways of inhabiting a living milieu, continuing verbal and non-verbal conversations. I wondered, 'What is everything that constitutes the case in our psychological language-games with death?' But, I couldn't keep it up.

My fascinating play was shattered by vivid memories from early childhood in a Lancashire village. I am aged seven, in bed recovering from chicken-pox, and alone, all alone, in the house. My mother has gone out for a minute or two to buy bread. I look out of the window—terrified and yet fascinated by the sight of sleek black horses with nodding heads and long black plumes waving in the wind. Just a glint of silver in the jet-black hearse, and on the handles of the dimly visible coffin. The coffin! I am not dying, not at my age, and I am better now, I really am! But one day I will be screwed inside a box; my loved brother, too. And my mother—what has happened to her, why isn't she here, why hasn't she got back?

By now, I was oblivious of Item 12 on the Council Agenda as images piled upon images. Taking off my cap as I passed houses with drawn blinds. Pleasant Sunday walks to the cemetery on the hill—a favourite gathering place forty years ago, but not today. And the attraction and repulsion of funeral teas when we 'buried 'em with ham'!

Some weeks later, during a period of relative tranquillity, I recollected the emotional intensity of this half-hour and caught a glimpse of a pattern. Amidst the conflicting language-games of living and partly-living towards death, I dimly apprehended a developing, expanding word in the human conversation—the symbol of 'my own death'. I shall attempt to dissect out a few interweaving themes with special reference to the process of mourning and the guilt of being alive.

### *The Recognition of Death*

A careful investigation by J. M. Natterson and A. G. Knudson (1960) provides some evidence about the development of the fear of death in children and about the significance of encountering the fact of death in mourning. The authors studied thirty-three

children dying of leukaemia in hospital, who were regularly visited by their mothers. In summary, their findings were as follows:

In all the children, aged from ten months to just over twelve years, there was a *reaction to separation* from the mother characterized by irritability, withdrawal, and other regressive behaviour. These phenomena improved with time and were not related to the severity and nature of the organic disease. The fear of separation was most intense below the age of five, and under two or three there was no evidence of fears other than of separation. *The fear of painful procedures*, necessary in medical treatment, was most intense between the ages of five to ten, and since it was not relieved by the mother's presence, the findings suggest that the fear of mutilation is distinct from the fear of separation. *The fear of death itself* was strongest in children over ten. The author's findings regarding the conception of death were in accordance with the observations of Maria Nagy (1948).

Between the ages of three and five, death is recognized as some sort of change which is not permanent or regular, and there is reason to suppose that this concept is associated with the child's inability to distinguish the external world from himself. Death is linked with identity. Remarks such as 'He cries because he is dead' imply an idea of death in which a person can still feel things in a kind of sleep—a state which is *reversible* and *temporary*. It is only between about five and nine that finality is recognized but, at first, *death is conceived as a person*. It is personified as 'the death-man' or 'skeleton man'. About the age of nine there is a recognition of *death as inevitable* for all people. In the older children investigated by Natterson and Knudson, death took precedence over other fears. In the younger age groups it was vague and evanescent, whereas in older ones it became urgent, pervasive and persistent.

It seems that, contrary to the views of some psychoanalysts, fear of death cannot be reduced solely to fears of separation or bodily injury. The recognition of death brings a new meaning into 'my own life'. It involves saying 'I shall die'—but it is one thing to utter the words and quite another to be faced with the fact as, for example, by the death of someone we love.

### *Mourning, Funerals and 'My Own Death'*

The word 'death' does not refer only to a biological event. This 'bodily' death is to be distinguished from 'psychic' death—a concept, myth, construct, or symbol which is intimately associated with the way in which a person lives his life. 'My own death' is not an individual matter. I do not 'own' my death any more than I 'own' my life. I am becoming myself and creating 'my own' life and death in the context of personal relationships within a wider society. The self arises, remains and grows *between* people. That is what it means to be a human being, a person.

Since Freud's classic work *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) a considerable amount of research has been carried out on the importance of grief reactions and the vicissitudes of the mourning process. I shall give a schematic account of a basic pattern evident in this process and in associated funeral ceremonies in order to suggest that, in bereavement, one important factor, amongst many others, is a *confrontation with 'my own death'*.

Three stages can be formulated in individual mourning. An initial phase of *shock* is often accompanied by bodily symptoms and by denial of the death, with angry attempts to recover the lost person. A second phase of *disorganization* is characterized by disruption of previous patterns of behaviour, anxiety with intense expression of grief, and preoccupation with memories of the deceased. If this stage is adequately 'worked through' with personal and social support it leads on to a phase of gradual *reorganization*, partly in connection with the image of the lost person, partly in connection with a new object or objects.

Funeral ceremonies are a special instance of transitional rites ('rites of passage') practised by societies throughout the world at critical periods such as birth and puberty as well as at death. A comparative cross-cultural study of death rites reveals a sequence of three stages, *separation*, *transition* and *re-incorporation* (Van Gennep, 1908), which roughly correspond to the three phases of individual mourning.

In individual mourning there is almost always some evidence of an ambivalent attitude towards the dead person, and funeral rites express this interplay of hope and fear, of union and separation, of affection and aversion, of attraction and repulsion—although varying degrees of ambivalence and emphasis upon different aspects of it reflect differing social structures and cultural values. If the ceremonies are appropriate for a particular society (and they can be obsolete), they diminish disintegrating fear by keeping the kinsmen on the spot, by giving opportunities for grief with its associated anger, by strengthening the social bonds, and by providing a religious bridge over the gulf of separation.

The verse quoted at the beginning of this lecture was recited or sung at an Irish Wake in 1810. Ancient Irish funeral customs, which are still practised in a few remote areas today, clearly demonstrate the three phases already mentioned but I shall limit myself to a brief mention of the wake—the party spirit of 'my merry men all', who spent the night with the corpse telling stories and jokes, playing games, indulging in riotous horse-play, eating inordinately, drinking whiskey and beer, smoking, and taking snuff—activities which for centuries were vigorously, but unsuccessfully, opposed by the hierarchy of the Church. No doubt many factors were important, such as denial of anxiety or grief, promotion of group solidarity, symbolic eating of the dead, and expression of aggression. The

latter is illustrated by a story told about a funeral in northern Leinster:

After a quiet, peaceful funeral, the mourners were about to leave the graveyard when the son of the dead man shouted: 'This is a sad day, when my father is put into the clay, and not even one blow struck at his funeral!' As he ended his complaint, he delivered a blow at the man who happened to be nearest to him. In a few moments, fights were taking place all over the graveyard, each man taking on his neighbour. When the demands of the occasion had been met, the dead man's son called for a truce, and both he and everybody else went home satisfied.

*O'Suilleabhain (1961, p. 72)*

I shall suggest later that an important factor is a placation of the dead man, but at this point I wish to emphasize how bereavement can face me with 'my own death'.

For whatever is dealt at her funeral today  
Shall be dealt tomorrow at mine.

The death of another confronts me with my own mortality. Natterson and Knudson noted how, *given sufficient time* (at least four months), the mothers experienced the process of mourning, from denial to reorganization, in the period between the diagnosis of leukaemia and the child's death. Furthermore, owing to the close bond between mother and child the death of the child represented a symbolic threat of death to the mother. In a sense the latter, in her anticipatory mourning, made an acute contact with death, faced, experienced and survived it. In achieving a calm and guilt-free acceptance of the death, many mothers showed an increasing concern with wider social problems and the evidence suggests the possibility (but, owing to the design of the investigation, does not definitely demonstrate) that, for some, the experience resulted in a decrease of psychoneurotic symptoms. Other observations (e.g. in analytical psychotherapy) give reason to suppose that a bereavement *if it is adequately mourned* can be an enriching experience.

Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(John Donne. *Devotions XVII*)

The death of another, diminishing me, brings home a clearer recognition of my limitations and can convey a deeper sense of my involvement in mankind.

But, loss and separation do not always evoke a creative response, and I shall consider one inhibiting factor—envy. It is not only the young surgeon-lieutenant on the Arctic convoys, or the Ancient Mariner, who dread 'the curse in a dead man's eye'.

*Fear of the Envious Dead*

At the old Irish wake the corpse, the main guest at the fun and games, was treated with friendliness and the utmost respect. Playing cards were placed in his hands, a pipe was put in his mouth, and sometimes he was taken on the floor to dance ('wake' is derived from 'awakening of the dead'). Yet there was evidence of fear of the dead man. Everyone rallied round to gain his good will and to assuage any anger he might have toward them. Because of *his* loss, he might, out of envy, wish to take revenge on those who were still alive and who had succeeded to his property. He was made happy and then speeded on his way as firmly and effectively as possible.<sup>1</sup> In an old Prussian ceremony, the corpse was seated up holding a glass of beer, the door was then opened and the dead man was told—'Be off, you have eaten and drunk'. In many pre-literate rites, elaborate measures were taken to prevent the return of the dead by such means as mutilation of the body, elaborate sealing of tombs, and false trails to mislead the returning spirit. There is reason to suppose that the dread of contagion from, or damage by, personified Death is associated with fear of envious attacks.

Other writers have mentioned the fear of the envious dead (e.g. Freud, 1913; Celoria, 1966), but this theme has not been worked out in detail with respect to the ritual placation and banishment of the dangerous departed with the associated relief of guilt in the ambivalent mourners who still possess life, strength and material goods. A somewhat different attempt to relieve the fear is to side with the departed (or with personified Death), by a process of identification. A considerable number of the survivors of the Hiroshima disaster continue to inhabit a twilight world of death in life.

In his study *Psychological Effects of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima*, Lifton (1963, p. 16) suggests that the survivor of a nuclear disaster needs nothing less than a new identity in order to come to terms with his post-disaster world. Many have not achieved this transformation and Lifton comments upon their continued identification with the dead, not only with particular loved ones but also a 'lasting affiliation with death itself'. A deep sense of guilt about being alive takes the form of 'I almost died; I should have died; I did die, or at least am not really alive; or if I am alive it is impure of me to be so; anything I do which affirms life is also impure and an insult to the dead who alone are pure'. One survivor recollecting the scene of devastation said:

The most impressive thing was the expression in people's eyes—bodies badly injured which had turned black—their eyes looking for someone to help them. They looked at me and knew I was stronger than they. . . . It was very hard to be stared at by those eyes.

<sup>1</sup>It is not suggested that the fear of envy is the *main* feature of the wake. The importance of working through separation is evident in the 'American wake' held when friends and relatives were about to emigrate.

In Hiroshima there was an exposure to a shattering catastrophe. In infancy and childhood, deprivation of bodily care can be catastrophic. Separations are excessively painful and prevent the progress of the 'mourning process' which is necessary in early life for the achievement of a sense of identity in the face of inevitable losses and partings. Especially important is the threat of overwhelming, disintegrating rage and aggression resulting from undue frustration. Owing to the imperfect distinction between the infant and the external world the experience can be of a nameless annihilation or of an intense destructiveness, sensed either as being 'in me' or 'in' another. The most important 'other' is the mother (or some substitute for her) who is desperately needed. The intolerable situation of destroying and being destroyed, together with a longing for preservation and togetherness, is imperfectly solved by a rigid splitting and keeping apart of 'good' and 'bad'. In later life, sometimes despite an apparent 'independence', there is a clinging to people, things, groups or beliefs which are *idealized*. That is to say, these 'images' are kept 'all-good' as a bulwark against the destructive 'badness' which, at a considerable cost, is kept at bay 'out there'. Yet, there is a constant fear of attack reinforced by *envy* of the idealized 'object' ('He or she has what I long for and if I can't have it I will destroy or spoil it') with the possibility of retaliation.

A highly intellectual, apparently successful, young man, Joe, is seeing me for analytical psychotherapy. He depends desperately upon my physical presence and my 'goodness' with which he feels able to fuse, thereby maintaining a precarious identity. Yet, there have been not a few hints of a destructive envy of the good things in me—and it is to be noted that in this envy lies the possibility of a separate identity, for one cannot envy without a distinction between oneself and the other. Joe is terrified of death which, to him, means being shattered, mutilated or isolated by personified Death. At times he feels that he has cancer, and that, by himself, he is unfit to be alive. In therapy his guilt about being alive has been related to a fear of the envy of others in different social contexts ('I must remain empty or people will want to take away what I've got'). Following a prolonged period of therapy we are beginning to deal with his *persecutory anxiety*—an intense fear of an attack which is experienced, although often unconsciously, as being damaged or destroyed in a bodily sense.

One day Joe is quietly talking to me when suddenly he shrinks away with an expression of horror gazing fixedly at my eyes as if helpless and trapped. He sees my face change. Later he said, 'I actually saw you different, especially your eyes. Evil. Boring into me. The Devil. The Death Man and me going out of existence. What is living?'

What is living if one day I shall die? Death faces me with the questions: Who am I? Who shall I become?

*A Rounded Death*

On his death-bed, Woodrow Wilson said, 'I am a broken machine, I am ready to go'. In the first phrase Wilson refers to 'I' as an object. He could conceivably be described by himself and by others as a 'thing' in terms of his overt behaviour and slowing metabolic processes—'a broken machine'. But this account could never adequately represent the act of accepting his own death—'I am ready to go'. The objectified 'I' is to be distinguished from the 'I' which is always a subject, never exhausted by third-person descriptions—the self that a person experiences in his aches and pains, his complex feelings, and his freedom of choice. This sense of 'I' and the respect for the 'I' of others in reciprocal relationships, is what it means to be a person and not only a thing.

My case-history always ends in the middle of a sentence. But naming the events of my history is not playing the same language-game as that which creates and re-creates 'my own' life and death. A person 'is an interpretation of his past' in so far as 'he has rewritten his autobiography' (McCabe, 1968, pp. 25 and 28). The basic pattern of loss, relative disorganization and reorganization is repeated throughout life and growing up is largely a matter of learning how to 'mourn'. 'My own death' can become a 'living symbol' in Jung's sense of that term—a constant recombination of what is relatively known (the 'facts' of my case-history) in such a way as to intimate what is as yet unknown. This requires a symbolical attitude akin to the waiting with 'loving attentiveness' ready to receive what emerges in the unknown Dark Night of the Soul. It involves a repeated sacrifice of my limited yet grandiose 'I'. 'I am dying because I do not die' (St John of the Cross). I am repeatedly present at my own wake, with an opportunity to practise the art of dying 'so it feels like hell'.

Despite sonorous talk about Death and Rebirth the fact remains that one day my heart will stop beating. The recognition of finality is an essential ingredient of any notion of 'my own death'. Avoidance of the fact of death, with attitudes of secrecy, embarrassment and prudery, narrows the horizons of life and probably promotes psychoneurotic symptoms. 'I do nothing upon myself and yet I am mine own executioner' (John Donne). Denial of death is associated with a serious loss of psychologically important mourning rituals in our society (Gover, 1965). One of the most important consequences is an isolation of dying persons. Doctors often say that patients very seldom ask if they are dying. An investigation by Irving S. Kreeger (1970) suggests that they (and senior nursing staff) do not give them much chance. Out of between 250 and 300 first-year nurses at King's College Hospital, 22 per cent had been asked the question within their first six months of training! Maybe we do not want to know. Because we have not confronted our own death, we fear a personal dialogue with the dying. Barbara McNulty



(1969, p. 14), writing of her long experience in St Christopher's Hospice for the Dying, comments upon the needs of one patient:

She needed . . . Faith in something which would give meaning to her life and to her death and she needed help in sustaining and strengthening that faith. Ellen happened to be a Christian, but had she been anything else the same would hve been true. . . . Ellen needed to trust, to talk to someone she could trust, to frame and express her fears. She needed the truth, at the right time and in the right way. She needed love, people who would accept her prickliness, and who would understand her moods.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's final statement about life, Prospero says:

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on: and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

(*The Tempest*, IV, 1, 155-157)

The lines end Prospero's comment upon the masque (a play within a play) and recall Macbeth's analogy of life as a 'poor player' and as a tale told by an idiot'. Indeed, they are sometimes read in the tone of voice of Macbeth who sees no meaning in the trivial creeping to 'dusty death' in 'a petty pace from day to day'. However, Alan Hobson (1970) has demonstrated that the interpretation of this passage from *The Tempest* depends upon the use by Shakespeare of the word 'rounded' and the significance that he gave to dreams. By careful textual criticism, he shows that Shakespeare put a high value upon the 'stuff' of dreams and that the word 'rounded' means very much more than 'ended'—it refers to completeness represented by the perfect form of the circle, the figure of eternity. Our 'little life' is taken up in a symbol of transcendence.

Maybe it is in learning and relearning how to 'speak' the curious, expanding word 'love' that we get a sense of faith and meaning, in life and in 'my own death'. As McCabe (1968) points out, 'love' is a growing word, 'an autobiographical matter' (p. 18). But its growth can be arrested by persecutory anxiety and envy which, preventing any progressive reconciliation between 'good' and 'bad', maintains death at a childhood level and a destructive personified enemy. Prospero's acknowledgment of Caliban as his own 'thing of darkness' suggests an assimilation of 'badness' with the prospect of a new synthesis in love and forgiveness. Going into retirement, where 'Every third thought shall be my grave', he breaks his magic staff which perhaps symbolizes the omnipotent fantasies of the little 'I' that need to be diminished. It is in exploring the tangible language of love that we might catch a glimpse of the circle of eternity—not in the persecutory splitting of an idealized Heaven and a barbarous Hell which, reinforcing childhood patterns of

separation anxiety and fears of mutilation, maintains a devilish Death Man or a nightmare Life-in-Death Woman. In the words of an eminent theologian, Ninian Smart (1969),

One might say: the more the faith, the less the hope—or, if you like, those who wish to cling to future bliss themselves betray a lack of participation in eternal life. (p. 182.)

Here, we can only heed the earlier Wittgenstein and remain silent about that of which we cannot speak.

We cannot bear too much reality. Most of us never manage to resolve the self-contempt and envy arising (at least in part) from early rejection and deprivation. 'And all men kill the thing they love.' Deep down, we feel unfit to be alive and, despite attempts to justify our existence by power and good works, we require some ritual or social framework to minimize, or perhaps conceal, the damage done by our persecutory splitting. We may be favoured with an occasional glimpse of love, reconciliation and the circle of eternity in 'peak experiences' (Maslow, 1959), but there remains the guilt of partly-living in a society with the suffering and the dispossessed. 'Wholeness', 'integration' and 'self-fulfilment' are resonant words but in confronting death we recall our failure to develop our potentialities in lost opportunities, and are brought face to face with our incompleteness and the unfinished nature of things. We either die too soon or too late, whilst we are still asking questions or when we are too tired to ask any more. We never realize our full capacities to be alone and to be together. We never grow up.

Sylvia Plath tried like hell to live through death but did not achieve the 'sea change' for herself. Not unlike some of the Hiroshima survivors, she remained identified with the dead; in her case, the Jews in the gas-chambers of Nazi Germany. But in her self-destructive poetry and in her suicide, she passed on a vivid message for our persecuted world, split by escalating competition for nuclear weapons, and by an acquisitive economics in which men are treated as disposable commodities—merely as things.

My death is insignificant, perhaps sordid. Inarticulate, I am screwed inside a box and like George I am too gawmless to achieve a rounded personal death. But, if I am fortunate, in the repeated round of loss, disorganization and reorganization the trivial-tragic cross might intimate a circle. In confronting and re-creating the symbol of 'my own death', I can hope to become a little more able to listen and respond in the human conversation. For better, or for worse, the message of my life and death will be a continuing word in the language of mankind.

Deal on, deal on, my merry men all  
 Deal on your cakes and your wine;  
 For whatever is dealt at her funeral today  
 Shall be dealt tomorrow at mine.

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## Son of Calepin: The French Scene

by Louis Allen

### *Violence at Nanterre*

When I was saying goodbye to Michel Butor on the southbound platform of Durham station some months ago, I asked him if he did not feel that student activity on the violent left, in France and elsewhere, had already reached a peak, and that what students really expected from teachers was not discussion towards reform, but a reason for order. There was, he replied, nothing more repugnant to him than the teaching of order to the young (I was very much reminded of Camus's embarrassed proclamation to a group of students when asked to address them on some serious topic, 'I would rather preach passion to you') and the only valid thing to tell them was to explore and risk. I had been full of Camus and limits when I asked the question, having only a few months before