

Facing a Good Death

The face of the clock serves as a reminder that as time is passing so are we. Each tick echoes a beat of the heart closer to death; your death and my death in the arms of community. It is the wage due us all, a wage common to us all. This is the ultimate statistic, everyone one dies sadly at least once and even more sadly sometimes twice.

The meaning, the value, and the morality of dying and death vary. I submit that the divergence is due to differing *stories* to which we have attached to our moral visions. These stories are what humans, storied people, use to give us meaning and which as a consequence results in competing moral visions.

The following reflection intends to use three stories for the purpose of attaching meanings to the idea of “good” in a “good death” in the hope of describing my ultimate point which is a ‘Christian vision of a good death.’ I will do this by placing ‘faces’ on a good death from (1) stories of the subject facing their death, (2) from stories of onlookers who ‘face’ others who are dying, and (3) finally from stories that ‘face’ illusions of a good death.

These stories all serve my ultimate point: “a good death is one that ‘presses out’ the Christ-like habits of virtue cultivated throughout an individual’s life story in community. This becomes a final witness to all of how to die well in community. When faced with the helplessly incapacitated, a good death is one where the hearts of the community open a space to intentionally and sacrificially care for the incurably, irreparably helpless ones unto death.

A Prolegomena

Before embarking upon my reflection two comments are made regarding my approach. The first concerns the apogee to which I seek to attain. My defense of the pro-life position will not be from the usual viewpoints of politics or social policy but rather from the Christian idea of respect for life. I wish to be very clear at the outset. I consider a radical sanctity-of-life approach, one that insists on biological sustenance of physical life with all effort and at all costs-idolatrous. I have never nor do I now support that position. When disease is irreversible, irreparable, and death is imminent the community is called to face the dying one as one worthy of agapeic (loving) care.

A second comment concerns my use of a narrative approach. Akin to Emanuel Levinas, stories from “Western philosophy are not the places where meaning begins for me.”¹ For some it may be and that may well depend on where the individual chooses to attach

¹Levinas, Emanuel: *Ethics and Infinity*. pp. 24-25.

their personal story. For me, thought is emerged and the mind constructs meaning from my stories, from life/death stories of others that have pulled me out of my web of monotony. Ultimately these stories are sourced in the Book of Stories “*par excellence*”, the Bible.²

Stream of thought

In the following excursus, I will provide you reflections to draw you out of the horizons of self, to enrich, and to inform your constructions of life, dying, and death. I bring you three stories from the Sacred Scriptures and three stories that frame my understanding of a good death. These stories also provide foundations and facings that sustain my unshakable opposition to the application of medical practice for terminating the human life to achieve that goodness of death. The first story will place a ‘face’ on a good death from stories of the subject facing his death. The second is from stories of onlookers who ‘face’ the dying of another. Finally, I draw from stories that ‘faces’ a self-illusion of a good death.

Facing a good death as a final witness (S)

A hastening of one’s own death considered from the Christian believer’s perspective is not without weight or merit even from a Biblical witness. The apostle Paul, once known as Saul of Tarsus, for example, suffers mental anguish over his probable beheading. Some New Testament scholars like John Dennis, consider his letter to the Church of Philippi as revealing suicidal ideation, a death wish. In it St. Paul lauds the surpassing reward that comes after death, that is, the fullness of a perfected afterlife (cf. Philippians 1:21).

Putting it in investment terms, St. Paul estimates that the reception of his eternal reward for a life invested in living to reflect the virtues of Christ far exceeds the principle of his invested work with its interest as experienced in his earthly life. St. Paul certainly recognizes that life on this earth is not the ultimate value of any human being. Death from him is but a quick release to an eternal glorified body in bliss. St. Paul fully expects to reflect and actualize the full potential for which he was made by God as he presences the image and divine character of the One Who made him, Jesus Christ. St. Paul concludes that such a wish to be with Christ would be of no advantage to those of whom he witnesses to a life lived reflecting the virtues of Christ. The story of that witness is not without suffering; however, suffering is not an end to which he glorifies.

How that witness is faced in a QoL/ SoL meditation. The story of Errol Templer

²IBID. The title of Roger Burggraeve’s *De Bijbel Geeft te Denken*. Leuven, Acco, 1995. The literal translation “the Bible gives me to thinking” describes the process of emergent thought detailed as this book unfolds.

Facing a good death of the (o)ther

Facing the dying other entails the story of sin's victim 'beaten, nearly dead, and naked before the eyes that face him in passing. It is a story that transcends the hardness religion to transformation of redemption – The Good Samaritan – Give account of the story. How that story is faced i.e. Mary Vargovic

Facing good death's (o)ther – self deception

Facing the tragedy and suffering of a dying One from arguably the first Story of the Tanakh, Job.

The story begins with a narrative extolling the rectitude of a moral man named Job. He was prosperous in family, friends, community, and material goods. In the unseen spiritual realm God provokes Satan to test Job's piety man. And the test ensues first with the removal of Job's family and wealth and then his personal health. Satan answers that Job is pious only because he is prosperous. His wife in despair calls for him to "curse God, and kill himself" but Job answers, "You speak as one of the foolish speaks. Moreover, shall we receive good from God and shall not receive evil?" In all this, Job did not sin in his lips. The story goes on at length recounting accusations from Job's friends that he has hidden sin followed by a like remonstrance from Job on each account. Job's sin is laid bare eventually as he, elohi of elohiim accuses God of wrongdoing "being righteous in his own eyes" that is beyond God's righteousness, even as God Himself. After God's cross examination Job repents declaring his lack of capacity to think, judge, act, or exist as God, hence, Job's act and lesson of redemption. For us it looks like this:

Why Job's termination is not an act of beneficence removing human suffering – possibility of suffering in the after-life : temporary @ bema seat of Christ or eternally the pains of self-constructed 2nd death following the last judgment of the White Throne
Why Job's termination is not a right of self determination – die in the arms of or at the hands of another – "is an illusion" Orentlichter & Koenig

Why Job's termination is not an act to be trusted to community justice for the common good –

- can't trust you my neighbor (proponent) Ten Boom, trust those who might govern in the future as we face the past (criteria-Belgium, Netherlands, Serbia, Cambodia, Eastern Block – Mao, Stalin, WWII Europe, Largus' Rome, Pythagoreans of Greece) quote Merton, Mayer,
- cannot trust yourself either quote Mayer, Ten Boom (even ourselves-Nazi in each one of us) – radical woundedness argument; Nevi'im of Tanakh (Jeremiah 17:9 cp John 2:24-25 cp Romans 3:10ff) let us face one ...

How that story is faced i.e. Joy Anderson

Conclusion

Ultimately death stings each of us as part of our stories. It is a sting that if allowed can searingly penetrate to the deepest hidden chambers in each of our hearts. Our coming to death faced with the memory and mystery of others either sacralizes or de-sacralizes the meaning of our own last gasps through the dying stories of others gone before us.

For you who choose to efface the mystery and make short the memory by the dying at-hand of another, I leave the warnings of Leo Alexander's masterpiece of 60 years prior in the NEJM.

When we face 'good' as what is useful, health planning will be reduced rational principles and economic need and human compassion and divine law will dis-appear. Apollyon will be released from within our hearts. His destructiveness will again bring us to face our own impending self destruction. Yes, first it may be the physically useless because we will not be among them, then the socially useless, perhaps even the likes of me because surely we will not be among them, ye know "destructive urges and destructive concepts cannot remain limited or focused upon one subject or several subjects alone, but must inevitably spread and be directed against one's entire surrounding world, including one's own group and ultimately the self."

For you who choose to face the mystery and the memory of the dying in-your-arms, I leave the consolations of the stories of the Paul, the good Samaritan, and Job of the Bible.

Appealed to 3 points and 3 stories to put a 'face' on their Ultimacy

The eternal golden braid that binds all three: (1) for the first face it was a transformed response by grace and of grace to rightly reflect the image of God in which Paul/Errol was created, (2) for the second face it was a response to grace that pled for grace to rightly reflect the image of God for which Mary's community (children, Church) was created, and finally the third face, for the third face, it is the face of us all in need of the transformation of grace that by grace we do not become the monster that our broken image would deceive us into being.

Alternative: Started with ultimate point, state it: a good death is one that 'presses out' the Christ-like habits of virtue cultivated throughout an individual's entire life story in community as a final witness of how to die well in community. For the helplessly incapacitated, a good death is one where the hearts of the community are so spiritually transformed that their hearts are opened to be grasped by the dying. The hearts of community are progressively changed by the habits of virtue that only such experiences can emerge. Habits of virtue become habits of the community life story as each called intentionally and sacrificially care for the incurably helpless unto death, perhaps softer perhaps harder than any of the community wish to face.

My last statement:

It is not that we are to respect the other for sake of the other; rather, we are to respect the other ultimately for the intrinsic value of who they re-present in facing this dying life and the life to come.

Conclude on a humorous note as recorded in Scripture but in the Phaedo purportedly by Socrates when offered the cup of poison Hemlock to end his life to those bringing the draught to him. This reflects my sentiments toward “the spirit” behind the philosophies promoting euthanasia that would reduce the dying one to an “it” instead of a person and is most appropriate for this Forum: “What do you say about making a drink offering of this cup to any of these gods?” In a modern paraphrase: “How about if the spirit behind the philosophy that has led to offering such a poisonous cup as euthanasia, take the first drink?”