

Death & Deadening

Even in our final moments, the machine and the market reign

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2014

Modern modes of handling concerns in the death and dying spheres seem emblematic of disturbing trends found throughout mass culture.

Due to regrettable circumstances, I have had recent exposures to a body kept fresh on a mechanical ventilation machine in an intensive care unit; some aspects of the evaluation of the worth of a life lost in an accident; and services offered to the terminally ill and their families.

The matter-of-fact and detached tone that accompanied the management of these affairs was conspicuous, and came as little surprise, as icy and indifferent tendencies pervade dominant society, with its course of turning every nook and cranny (no matter how personal) into commerce, of dividing up what was once whole, of excess clamor and bustle, of instinctual blunting, of overcalculating, and machine invading.

Impossible-to-miss effects of these deadening trends are the roboticization and serialization of major parts of the populace, as people attempt to adapt to an increasingly hurly-burly and mechanical arrangement. Modern contractualized, manualized, and computationalized societal processes require an ever greater subordination of instinct and impulse, as well as a proliferation of bosses, specialists, and manuals.

In these processes, the bulk of individuals get condensed into one-dimensional badge wearing organisms with safe, subtle, and sublimated fascinations and aversions. These mainstream roboticized organisms end up distrustful of the rhythmical and the impulsive, and tend to prohibit expressions of natural inner pulses.

Too much independently determined demonstration of instinctual inclinations overwhelms and brings discomfort to the substantially mechanized creature. These characters, after enough time has been spent adapting to the cybernetic society, tend to see something definitive in the barren, and pursue their drudgery duties ardently. For them, it is usually much preferred to surveil, document, diagram, represent, and systematize (everything).

Not long ago, I attempted to say goodbye to a family member with whom I had grown up. She had been declared brain dead, after suffering extreme head trauma. Her body was being kept alive on a mechanical ventilation apparatus in preparation for the removal of organs the following morning. As far as I know, I was her last visitor.

Initially, I noticed her extra long breaths (induced by the contraption), and the faint background music frequently superseded by bleeps and buzzing. In fact, abrupt super-session became the theme of my hour long ICU visit, as only nominal alone time was possible between the frequent inspections and assessments by the clinicians.

During my stay, bodily tubes were removed and inserted, bags of fluid emptied, various inspections performed, beeping machines poked at, and sheets bloodied and then changed (exposing a bloated body underneath). An excessive amount of fuss went on almost incessantly as the dispassionate clinical schedule subjugated all else.

This seemed inane to me, and even though I may be naive in this assessment, the absence of even short-lived solitude was awfully upsetting. Eventually I gave up hope for a calm juncture, and resigned myself to the reality that there could not, or would not, be an uninterrupted moment.

I had hoped to be able to quietly say goodbye and to remember her nature and spirit, but it seemed like any sacred or affective possibility was altogether eclipsed by the turbulent clinical protocol. I am not sure if this frequency

of attention and engagement is standard, or possibly imperative in order to keep the organs in good shape. Or, if perhaps I arrived at a time when extra attention was scheduled (or even if the raw intensity of the encounter, and frustration about not having a final goodbye in the way that I had hoped for, has led me to overstatement or over-reaction). Whatever the case, an all too typical institutional atmosphere of anonymity and deprivation permeated.

In a not dissimilar vein, a family friend lost her close companion in a traumatic mishap, and a wrongful death lawsuit ensued, requiring a quantification of the significance of the lost life. Close family members were expected to contribute the necessary information to allow the callous computations to be made.

The enumeration and measuring involved left few stones unturned in the dissection and classification of the objective/ legal aspects of the life of the deceased. How much education/training was received, what type of relationship(s) was being engaged in at time of death (casual, marital), how much income was being generated by current occupation, was a professional license held, which medical treatments had been undertaken over the past years, the amount of dependence on others for assistance, assets owned or debt owed, and regularly occurring monthly/annual expenses, etc. were considered in this analysis.

These vile attempts to figure out the importance of the lost life make explicit the dismal and sorrowful ranking, numericizing, and categorizing obsessions that comprise the dominant social arrangement; fixations which disallow recognition of, or reflection upon, our nature, or the nature of our assemblages.

And, when acute terminal illness has been diagnosed, out come those guidebooks and flow-charts, as the medical professional swiftly steps in to elucidate the mortality processes while intuition and instinct are relegated to the status of irrelevant when compared with the articulations and explications of the professional. In this process, the sacred becomes disregarded and co-opted, in favor of verbose scientific description.

As the air, heat and liquid essentials ultimately leave the body, a new transitional focus ensues, not as a new journey or voyage for the deceased, but as new interactions with more distinguished specialists for the relatives of the deceased; specialists that confirm that there is no pulse, and authorities who remove the body and transport it to another set of professionals with other specific skills. After this, it may be on to the memorialization experts, and then perhaps on to those with proficiencies in legal and accounting matters.

These terse snapshots of my experiences involving the death/dying sphere are akin to miniature shards of a societal looking glass, and illustrate a frightening trajectory that seems to be steadily rotting out), a course without value for small scale or psychic wholeness, or for basic living and dying senses.

At this juncture, fine tuning one's outlook to match the prevailing paradigm doesn't get one much while perceiving the decaying current order's apathetic and recycled pretense has become harder to avoid. It seems like those with technocratic partialities who love to fill out surveys, poke at buttons on machines, and crunch numbers will soon be passé (at least I hope this is the case!).

The prevailing cold and quantifying procedures that turn even the most meaningful occurrences into industrial opportunities bother everyone with occasions or inclinations to feel and make breaking free of the cybernetic dictates seem very sensible.

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Fifth Estate #392, Fall/Winter 2014 — Art & Anarchy

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