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THE DANCE OF DEATH

The medieval parish church of Saint Mary Magdalene in the town of Newark in Nottinghamshire, England, is a huge building, so you have to look carefully for one of its most interesting features. When it was built in the fifteenth century, England was a Catholic country obsessed with what happened to people after death. It was believed that where you went when you died depended on the kind of life you had lived on earth. For the perfect, for the saint who had lived a life of heroic virtue, there was the prospect of eternal life in heaven. For the wicked, there was the prospect of eternal damnation in hell. It was a dramatic choice between endless joy and unending torment. But the Church has always been good at finding ways to soften its harshest teaching. And that's what happened here.

In the thirteenth century, the Church invented a half-way house between heaven and hell called purgatory, from the Latin for 'place of cleansing'. Purgatory was a moral laundromat, where sinners who had soiled their souls on earth were slowly bleached of their stains and restored to purity. It was painful for them, but unlike the souls in hell, for whom there was never any hope of escape, the souls in

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purgatory had the prospect of release to cheer them on. And the assistance of the living was another source of encouragement. It was believed that the prayers of those still alive on earth could hasten the cleansing of those in purgatory. The best way to speed them on was to have masses said for them in special chapels called ‘chantries’, from the French for chanting. Chantry priests were recruited by wealthy families to pray their relatives through purgatory, much the way a lawyer for a guilty defendant might enter a plea of mitigation on their behalf in order to reduce their sentence.

In 1505, the prosperous Nottinghamshire Markham family built a chantry chapel inside Saint Mary Magdalene and hired a priest to say mass there. On the outside of the stone panels of the little chapel, they painted a favourite subject of medieval artists called the Dance of Death. One panel showed a dancing skeleton holding a carnation, a symbol of mortality. On the other panel there was a richly dressed young man clutching a purse. The skeleton’s message to the young man was clear. As I am today, you will be tomorrow. And the money in your purse won’t help you. It was a *memento mori*, a prompt to observers – remember you must die – to make them think about and prepare for their end.

It’s a far cry from how we do things today. Now we spend a lot of time and effort *not* thinking about death. To face our own death is, quite literally, the last thing most of us will do – if we’re conscious enough at the time to do it even then. Even if we wanted to, the chances are we won’t have much control over how we leave the scene. Death and dying have been taken over by the medical

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profession; and there's a lot of evidence to suggest that it sees death not as a friend we might learn to welcome but as an enemy to be resisted to the bitter end. And the end often is experienced as bitter, as a fight we lost rather than as the coming down of the curtain on our moment on the stage, something we always knew was in the script.

People in the Middle Ages didn't have that luxury, if luxury it is. For them, life-threatening illness was as unpredictable and unavoidable as the weather, and they never knew when the lightning might strike. And, considering what came after, it made sense to be prepared for death. In contrast to health professionals today, who advise us to remember the dos and don'ts of healthy living in order to delay death as long as possible, the medieval Church was an advocate of healthy dying. It produced a guide on how to do it called *Ars moriendi* (*The Art of Dying*), a handbook for making a good end. Repenting and confessing your sins was the most important advice they gave the dying. And the reason why is captured by Hamlet in Shakespeare's most famous play. The young prince finds his hated stepfather at prayer and decides to kill him:

Now I might do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do it: – and so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged: – that would be scanned:
A villain kills my father; and, for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge . . .

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Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage;
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in it, –
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven;
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.²

The message was clear. If you die before you've had time to examine your conscience, own your guilt and confess your sins, you'll go straight to hell. And since you never know when the bell will summon you, the safest course is to be ready at all times, with your bags packed and your soul scrubbed clean. The other big piece of advice in *The Art of Dying* was about money. There are no pockets in a shroud, so you can't take your money with you when you die. But disposing of it wisely while you are alive will help you secure decent lodgings on the other side. And there was a saying of Jesus that confirmed the message: 'Use your worldly wealth to win friends for yourself, so that when money is a thing of the past you may be received into an eternal home.'³ Those were the important messages packed into that little cartoon on the wall of the chantry chapel in Newark's parish church.

I had travelled to Newark on a golden September day to visit Kelham Hall, a few miles away on the banks of the River Trent. And I was wondering if it might be my last visit. I had been returning insistently over the years to prowl the grounds and remember my life there more than sixty years ago, then a young monk trying and failing to

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give his life away to God in a grand gesture of self-sacrifice. I knew this constant returning was an unhealthy obsession, but I couldn't shake it. The Victorian parson poet Charles Tennyson Turner had already warned me of the dangers of trying to recover lost time:

In the dark twilight of an autumn morn,
I stood within a little country town
Wherefrom a long acquainted path went down . . .

The low of oxen on the rainy wind,
Death and the Past, came up the well-known road
And bathed my heart with tears, but stirred my mind
. . .

But I was warn'd, 'Regrets which are not thrust
Upon thee, seek not . . . thou art bold to trust
Thy woe-worn thoughts among these roaring trees . . .
Is't no crime
To rush by night into the arms of Time?'⁴

These long-acquainted paths had witnessed great changes since I had lived there in the middle of the last century. Kelham Hall was no longer the home of a religious order that trained poor boys for the ministry of the Anglican Church. Now it was a stately hotel, and on the day of my visit it was hosting a large British Asian wedding. For the ceremony, the massive, domed chapel that had dominated my boyhood and haunted my dreams had been converted into a shrine to the Hindu God Ganesh. And it was filled with hundreds of joyful and colourfully dressed wedding

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guests. Did they catch the vibration of the hundreds of black-robed young men who had once tried to sacrifice themselves to God in this haunted space, now dominated by the friendly presence of the Elephant God? It certainly did not feel like it to me, but to my surprise this did not deepen my 'woe-worn thoughts'. It banished them. I was touched by the cheerful indifference of the wedding guests to the ghosts that whispered in my ear. Suddenly, something lifted in me. And I knew I wouldn't have to come back here again. What had been, had been. Now it was no more. I remembered Binyon's 'The Burning of the Leaves':

Now is the time for stripping the spirit bare,
Time for the burning of days ended and done,
Idle solace of things that have gone before:
Rootless hopes and fruitless desire are there;
Let them go to the fire, with never a look behind.
The world that was ours is a world that is ours no
more.⁵

I decided to let the past go and turn to what was left of my future. I left Kelham happier than when I arrived. But the day's surprises weren't over.

The great tower of St Mary Magdalene dominated the flat Nottinghamshire landscape. I had been noticing it for most of my life, most recently from the train window on trips between Edinburgh and London. But I had never entered it, never seen what it was like inside. If my compulsive visits to Kelham were over, this was my last chance. So on my way to the station in Newark, I went in to look around and found that skeleton doing his dance of death.

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It had an interesting effect on me when I saw it. It did not compel me to rush off to confession to purge my conscience of its sin, but it did remind me that I was speeding towards the final curtain. It made me think.

I had been taught to treat skeletons with respect while I was a curate in 1960s Glasgow by my Rector's son, a medical student who went on to become a distinguished physician in Africa. He had invited me to a student party and was disappointed when he discovered that one of his fellow medics had borrowed a skeleton from the anatomy lab and laid it in the bath to surprise visitors to the lavatory. I was amused by the prank till he reminded me that the skeleton had once been a pulsing, laughing human being. Someone had once known and loved this object of fun now lying in a bath in a student flat on Byres Road. Skeletons remind us that devouring time will get us all in the end. It has been reckoned that since we appeared on the planet there have been 107 billion human beings, 7 billion of whom are alive today. That means that the skeletons of 100 billion of us have faded into the earth. Occasionally we come across one that has been buried for thousands of years, and we wonder about the life it had, its joys, its sorrows and what it made of the world it found itself in.

I remember thinking about this when I first saw the famous photograph of human skulls at the Nyamata Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. In 1994, a million Tutsis were massacred by the forces of the Hutu-led government of Rwanda. Taken in 2007, the photograph shows a tray of some of the human skulls recovered from the killing fields, relics of one of the worst crimes of the twentieth

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century. It is the empty-yet-staring eye sockets that haunt the viewer. Vivid lives cut short; and the knowledge that, one way or another, we'll all come to this. We'll end as skeletons or as the ash of skeletons. 'As I am today, you will be tomorrow.'

And the process starts well before we die. It wouldn't be so wrenching if we never aged and didn't see death coming for us, with or without a machete in its hand. We'd run and laugh and climb mountains and dive into the sea with undiminished energy our whole life long. Then, at an unexpected moment when we were in the middle of our song, we'd be taken by death in the glory of our being – and it would be over in a second. That is not how our dance towards death usually goes. If we live long enough, we become witnesses to our own slow dying and the revelation of the skull beneath the skin. Psalm 90 says:

The days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years; yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow; so soon passeth it away and we are gone.⁶

I have reached fourscore years, and though my life is not yet 'but labour and sorrow', I am aware that the shutting down of my body has begun. I am well into the last swing of the dance, and I can feel the beat quickening. That's what has prompted these reflections on being old and facing death.

I remember when I noticed that coloured patches like stains on old stone had started to appear on my face and body. When you get old, the garbage-disposal mechanisms

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designed to clear out waste in your skin cells start to break down. Instead of clearing the rubbish away, like lazy bin men they leave it lying around in the street, your skin. And it clots into those yellow-brown patches called '*lipofuscin*', better known as age spots. A few years ago at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, the press team photographed the writers with a special camera that subjected their skin to a ruthless high-definition exposure of every flaw and wrinkle. When my picture went up in Charlotte Square a few days later, it revealed a face blotched and stained with patches of *lipofuscin* even I hadn't noticed before. The bin men of my epidermis had obviously gone on permanent strike. That was when I realised that the wind-down of my body was well advanced and there would be more to come. Mind you, for me the process had started in my twenties, when I started going bald.

Baldness is not a terminal disease, of course, but it is a permanent condition. And I hated it when it started. I fought it in all the usual hopeless ways. I even bought pills advertised in a church magazine. The manufacturers probably thought the readers of *Church Illustrated* would have a stronger gift of faith than other baldies. Their pitch worked on me. I sent off for the pills. Nowadays the law would require an accurate description of the chemistry of the product that came through my letterbox a few days later, but none of that was required in 1958.

They looked like little brown Smarties. And like Smarties they were probably made of sugar. I started swallowing one a day. My hair continued to recede. Hopelessly, I flushed the remaining pills down the toilet and started combing what was left on top to the front, trying to look

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like Marlon Brando as Mark Antony in the movie *Julius Caesar* that was out at the time. It was a vain response to a disagreeable reality. It may delude the owner for a moment, but the comb-over is an embarrassment that takes no one in. Depressed yet defiant, one day I cropped the whole thing off and that's what I've done ever since. It was an early lesson in accepting things about myself I did not like but could not change. I see now that losing my hair was a good preparation for ageing and death, the skeleton being the ultimate baldy. Maybe I've been lucky to have had an early rehearsal.

My unsuccessful struggle with baldness taught me something about the human condition. Humans are afflicted with a tragic self-consciousness that does not seem to bother the other animals. All animals feel pain, but the one pain that seems to be unique to humans is an awareness of our bodies that is so keen it can lure us into depression and self-hatred. We are not only aware of our own bodies; we are aware of others' awareness of them. We are conscious of looking at others and being looked at by them. And we wonder what they make of what they see when they see us.

How did this obsession with our appearance start? Was it there before mirrors and cameras were invented? Would we be bothered by what we looked like if we couldn't see ourselves as others see us? However it started, our self-image seems to have obsessed us for centuries. The first-century Roman poet Ovid adapted an old Greek myth to explore the subject. Narcissus, the son of a river god and a local nymph, was famous for his beauty. The blind seer Tiresias warned his mother that Narcissus would have

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a long and happy life only if he never saw himself. Unfortunately, he caught sight of his own reflection in the waters of a spring, fell in love with what he saw and died of unrequited love.

If an experience has been developed into a myth like that, it is because its theme is universal. It expresses a reality that troubles the human community. This one suggests that we'd be better blind than obsessed with how we look, because it's a compulsion that can never be fully satisfied or appeased. Freud took the story further and coined the term *narcissism* for anyone suffering from an overpowering degree of self-esteem, a condition he diagnosed as a form of emotional immaturity. It is captured in the caricature of the egotist, usually a dominant male, who pauses in his narrative of self-glorification only long enough to say to his listener: 'But enough from me; tell me how you rate my accomplishments?' Narcissism in both its classic and Freudian forms has become a prevalent disease in late-modern societies obsessed with image and the screen technologies that promote it. It supplies the energy for one of the main enterprises of modern capitalism, the Anti-Ageing and Postponement of Death industry, what we might call the AAPD complex. We spend fortunes delaying death and the physical dissolution that precedes it.

And it starts early, with our revolt against the reality of the bodies we were born with. Had I been born sixty years later, would I have saved up for hair-transplant surgery rather than wasting my money on those wee sweeties advertised in *Church Illustrated*? And would I have missed learning one of the best lessons life teaches: that it is better

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to accept reality rather than deny it, including the reality of our own bodies and the death that is their only end? Throughout most of history, humans had no alternative but to accept these certainties. In our advanced technological society, that is no longer the case. We spend fortunes trying to refashion our bodies and postpone our deaths. And it is easy to understand why. Anguish is a hard thing to bear, even if it is only the anguish of not liking the way we look. The anguish of dying is harder still, especially if it comes before we are ready for it, and we feel cheated of the time we thought we had left.

But there is no escape from anguish. It comes with the human condition and the self-awareness that is its key component. The secret is to learn how to live with it. Accepting the reality of the way we look and the certainty of our death, maybe one day soon, won't make us happy, but it might save us from the greater unhappiness of trying to ignore or hide from these realities. The fleeting pain of admitting our situation is preferable to the constant pain of denying it. It takes fortitude, the most useful of the old virtues. Fortitude is one of the most important lessons life teaches, and ageing may be our last chance to learn it. It is the ability to endure the reality of our condition without flinching. It was defined by the gay cowboy in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*: 'If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it.' And there's a lot you gotta stand when you get old.

Such as going deaf! It hasn't happened to me yet, but it has to my wife. What distresses me is that I find it irritating. Much of the time I have to shout to be heard by her, a small price to pay for close contact with someone I love. Yet it constantly annoys me. That says something

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to me about larger society as well as my own impatience. If we are not careful, we can start resenting the presence of the elderly in our midst and the minor irritations they impose upon the rest of us. Their deafness may annoy me, but the glacial way they move can induce bouts of sidewalk rage in me. The day will come when I'll walk more slowly too, but I'm still fleet of foot, so I get angered by those who hold up my progress along the street or through the aisles of the supermarket. I mutter to myself that they shouldn't be allowed out after the age of seventy unless they can pass a minimum-speed mobility test. For God's sake, why can't they get a move on? If I can have those terrible thoughts about the old in my eighties, I wonder how the millennial generation feels.

Worse than losing your hearing or your mobility is losing your short-term memory. Those moments when you can't find a name or forget what you were just about to say to someone. My wife and I joke that we have one good memory between the two of us. That's the best way to handle the ageing business – with a sense of humour, the blacker the better. In his nineties, my father-in-law stopped buying green bananas, because he didn't think he'd live to see them ripen.

Apart from humour, another source of consolation in old age is that vanity and self-consciousness fade away. In his memoir, the American novelist John Updike mused on how embarrassed he used to be by the hats his father wore when he was old. Then when he reached that time of life himself, he found himself wearing the same battered monstrosities. I too have a shelf full of embarrassing lids that I fancy give me a jaunty glamour. My wife tells me

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they just look daft. Well, daft it is. I shall embrace my inner scarecrow and agree with the Irish poet W.B. Yeats that:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing . . . ⁷

It is possible to say a rueful ‘Yes’ to our fading energies and begin to appreciate the humour and understanding that old age can bring.

Much more difficult is giving up the prospect of the future. Not so much my own as that of my children and grandchildren. Not to be there to see them make their way through life. And not just to see them. To be beside them when they hit sorrow, as they will, for no one misses it. To be someone they talk *about*, no longer someone they talk *to*. That’s what the English poet Philip Larkin most hated about death. He described it as:

. . . the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.⁸

Nothing more true, certainly, but why should it be so terrible? After all, we won’t be there to know we’re not there. When you’re extinct you don’t realise it, so it can’t

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hurt. The Greek philosopher Epicurus said that fearing the not-being-there that follows death is as silly as regretting that we weren't here before we were born.

But it is not the thought of being dead that troubles us; it is the prospect of leaving and losing those we love that grabs us by the throat. And we already know something of what that feels like. Life has given us many anticipations of our dying. We only have to recall the memory of other separations to realise how wrenching the last one is going to be. The frail figure watching our car disappear round the bend before turning in at her lonely door; the moment in the station when we can't say goodbye because our heart is filling our throat, and we clutch hands and turn away.

Someone is waving a white handkerchief
from the train as it pulls out with a white
plume from the station and rumbles its way
to somewhere that does not matter. But
it will pass the white sands and the broad sea
that I have watched under the sun and moon
in the stop of time in my childhood as I am
now there again and waiting for the white
handkerchief. I shall not see her again
but the waters rise and fall and the horizon
is firm. You who have not seen that line hold the
brimming sea to the round earth cannot know this
pain and sweetness of departure.⁹

Painful as these partings are, there may be the promise of future meetings to console us. And there are ways of

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keeping in touch with people we love that can compensate us for their distance. In dying, we face the final and absolute separation not only from those we love but from ourselves. Dying not only kills our bodies, it kills our future. I look at my grandchildren now in all their vivid promise, knowing I will miss seeing where their lives take them. And a quiet sorrow touches me. It doesn't overwhelm me, but as I gaze at them with pride and wondering affection I hear a distant bell toll. And I know it tolls for me.

In old age, this kind of rumination can make us feel sad about the future we are going to miss. But that shouldn't be the primary emotion we feel at the end of a long life. It should be gratitude. We won a rare lottery ticket when we were born. There must have been something in our DNA that beat the odds against fusing the sperm with the egg that made our particular existence possible. Millions did not make it off the wasteful assembly line in the great reproduction factory of life. We got through. We made it. For that at least we should be grateful; and even more grateful for the world that received and nurtured us; for the fact that it was there to receive us. I have known people who have died in a mood of absolute gratitude for the life they'd had and the love that was given to them. They were *sad* at leaving the party earlier than they hoped, but grateful for the good time they'd had while they were there. Their last days became an act of thanksgiving for what they had received.

There's an illuminating moment at the end of Alan Hollinghurst's novel, *The Line of Beauty*, which is set during the early days of the AIDS epidemic in Britain. Nick, the hero of the novel, has just had an HIV test. He knows

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the result will be positive and he'll die soon. Hollinghurst tells us:

[Nick] . . . dawdled on rather breathless, seeing visions in the middle of the day. He tried to rationalize the fear, but its pull was too strong and original. It was inside himself, but the world around him, the parked cars, the cruising taxi, the church spire among the trees, had also been changed. They had been revealed . . . The emotion was startling . . . It was a love of the world that was shockingly unconditional. He stared back at the house, and then turned and drifted on. He looked in bewilderment at number 24, the final house with its regalia of stucco swags and bows. It wasn't just this street corner but the fact of a street corner at all that seemed, in the light of the moment, so beautiful.¹⁰

As death approaches, there will be sorrow for what it will take from us. But that is a mean and grudging way to greet it. If we let it, death will reveal the beauty of the world to us – *the fact of a street corner at all!* Maybe we have left it late. Maybe we wish we had noticed it before, paid it more attention. Push that thought aside. Don't fret. Look at it *now* – *so beautiful* – and be grateful. And maybe you can arrange your death bed looking out on a street corner you know . . .