And Death Shall Have Its Dominion

by Theodore Dalrymple (December 2015)

For the first time in my life I feel the approach of death not as a certainty in the abstract but (if I may be allowed a seeming paradox) as a lived reality. My hands are increasingly deformed by osteoarthritis, the joints being both enlarged and inflamed; and I can no longer disguise from myself an accelerating decline in energy. Only a short time ago, or so it seems (the foreshortening of time being also a sign of age), I could work all day as a doctor, be on call at night, and still, when the occasion required, write three articles a day.

No longer. I can do only a fraction of what I once did if not with ease, then at least with very quick recovery from any tiredness. Nowadays I always take a siesta, for the hour after sleep is my best time for work and a siesta gives me two such hours a day rather than only one. In any case, I can hardly keep my eyes open after lunch.

For a short time after waking, however, I feel a deep sense of regret, almost of despair, at having woken. I must again face the world, with all its petty impositions which I find increasingly tiresome. Logan Pearsall Smith, I think it was (an American litterateur living in England, once famous but now largely forgotten), who said that he once knew a man who committed suicide because he could no longer face the boredom of having to tie his shoelaces every day. Most people would consider this absurd, no doubt, but I have a similar feeling, if to a lesser degree. The smallest task – washing a plate, say, preparing a drink or changing my shirt because I have stained the one I am wearing, necessitating a trip all the way upstairs – seems a terrible waste of such little energy as I have left, my irritation only adding to the sapping effect of the little task. And when I look into the future, I see these burdens of boring necessity weighing ever more heavily on me, until nothing else but they remains to me. I saw this in my own parents as they aged: their entire life was taken up by the process of continuing to live, an endless round (endless, that is, until stopped by death) of trivial tasks, each taking an unconscionable time and concentration to perform. Living perforce became an end in itself for them; and while we all

need an end in itself, for me at least mere living cannot be it. The process of living has always bored me, from the earliest days that I can remember.

The sleep from which I regret having woken is not just oblivion, though in retrospect I enjoyed the oblivion too. There is an oneiric period between sleeping and waking in which a stream of interesting images effortlessly passes before me, not always pleasant but never dull, which I am reluctant to lose, shorten or interrupt: so reluctant, in fact, that by an effort of will I can refuse to wake fully and thereby keep it going. Eventually, however, full consciousness makes its claims and cannot be denied. I wake and, much to my regret, resume my life.

It is not that my life is miserable, or without pleasures and interests. But, for the reasons cited above, they are bought at an increasing cost, at a cost that I know can only increase further. And anticipation is three quarters of dysphoria.

By contrast, my oneiric state is delicious, even when the images that come to me on what seems very much like a cinema screen are mildly disturbing. The mind – or at least *my* mind – seeks interest much more than it seeks pleasure: or rather interest *is* its pleasure, so that the disturbing does not truly disturb me. And all this for free, not only in the financial sense but free of the expenditure of energy.

Perhaps this explains the peculiar grip that screens have on our lives nowadays. My oneiric state can now be enjoyed not merely in the quarter or half hour between waking and sleeping, but for much of the day. The burdens of consciousness are too great to be borne, certainly all the time. We all need to escape them from time to time, some of us much of the time. The half-sleep dream state relieves us of the necessity to decide, to choose, to be responsible. I think it is a great mistake to make of choice, or the extension of choice, the desideratum of all desiderata. With no choice at all, life it is true becomes a monotonous track; with nothing but choice life becomes a fever of anxiety, for along with choice comes the responsibility for making the right choice. One needs an occasional break from responsibility, and some people, by no means a small number, would like a life free of it altogether. It is the greatest freedom.

This explains the attraction of distraction in the modern world: the search for the oneiric state, that state of absorption without the need for effort and free of all responsibility. Drugs are the same as screens in this respect. The business of America (as elsewhere in the western world) is not so much business any longer, as distraction. Of course, distraction *is* a business, and a very large one too; but there are far more consumers than producers of it. The virtual world, indeed, is much more dramatic than the real because of the ease of making it so; the real world is the dull one of putting on your socks or tying your shoelaces every day, that is to say a grind of small things, none of them intrinsically interesting except to the most enquiring of minds, which might just find compensatory sustenance in the question of why socks are now so cheap (I remember my mother darning socks and fixing a label with my name in red lettering to them, so valuable were they), or how the miracle of the necessary coordination to tie shoelaces came into being.

Most minds are not very enquiring, however, and accept as given the world in which they find themselves. The more exciting the distraction, the more banal and uninteresting the real world: to whose disenchantment the solution is either more distraction or an attempt to make the real world as exciting as the virtual. I suspect that many people do the most transparently self-destructive things in an attempt to make the real world resemble the virtual world more closely. Self-destruction, alas, is seldom destructive of the self alone: it usually takes other people down with it, for even the anchorite in the Syrian desert, subsisting on wild honey and bitter herbs, may have relatives living who care for him.

In Ibiza, a Balearic island much favoured by European youth (not the least privileged) as a holiday destination, the two largest nightclubs, vast as stadiums, were called *Amnesia* and *Manumission*, both names implying the desire for release into a prolonged oneiric state. The slavery implied by the name *Manumission* is the slavery of consciousness, not that of whips and scourges. As for the desired amnesia of *Amnesia*, it is not just for a few selected events from the past, but a state in which one moment is completely disconnected from the next, for only thus can consciousness be escaped, with its nagging insistence on cause and effect, good and bad, beauty and ugliness, happiness and misery.

I have no solution to any of this (if, indeed, it there a problem to be solved).

Nor can I claim to be completely different myself from the mass of humanity, with my regret that I emerge from my oneiric state into the world of socks and tied shoelaces. Indeed, much of my conscious activity is an attempt at distraction, to lose myself so that I am no longer aware of the sock and shoelace world. Man is not so much a problem-solving animal as a problem-creating one. He creates problems in order to distract himself from the boredom of ordinary existence where the continuation of that existence is no longer dependent upon his own efforts. The Haitian peasants (who know whereof they speak) say that behind mountains are more mountains: in other words, behind problems there are more problems, and this is as well for creatures such as we. The problemlessness of a problemless world would itself be a problem (perhaps the largest of all): therefore there can be no problemless world. Heaven is therefore impossible to imagine for earthbound creatures – at best it would be a realm of endless distraction, boring in the end – whereas Hell is all too easy to imagine in a thousand different incarnations. (An anthology of people's imagined Hells would make a very interesting and, I have little doubt, amusing book.)

Death will, of course, release us all of the obligation to fill our time somehow or other. But the notion of oblivion is a difficult one. Some philosophers have argued that there should be nothing difficult about it because future oblivion will only be the same as that before we were born (or had some semblance of continuous memory), and with that we have no problem. But I do not think this is quite right. The fact that we *have* existed and *do* still exist alters everything for us. The only oblivion of which we have actual experience is that of sleep, and we have experience of it only because we wake afterwards: in other words, all our oblivions hitherto have been temporary and capable of being experienced.

When I try to think of my future non-existence, I am nevertheless aware, Descartes-like, that I am thinking about it: therefore I have not imagined my non-existence. I know that to be non-existent is not like *being* anything, but so long as I imagine oblivion, I am, I exist. The analogy of sleep, death's counterfeit, is false. The oblivion of sleep is not comparable to that of death because it is temporary (which is why Shakespeare calls sleep a counterfeit of death and not a copy, or an analogy, or a pale imitation of it). Religious people believe that death is not final, perhaps, but the proof of this is lacking. If we were sure, to mourn the dead (at least those whom we believe to

have merited the Kingdom of Heaven) would be selfish and mean-spirited, in so far as it would be to lament their future happiness and to count it of less importance than our own loss. No doubt some have believed strongly enough not to mourn the death of their loved ones but not, I suspect, very many as a proportion of the whole.

I cannot imagine my permanent oblivion, but that does not mean to say that it is not coming. As to the process of dying, I admit to a rather strange attitude towards it: I look forward to it with a certain clinical interest. My only regret is that I shall not be able to make use of the experience or to describe it in writing, for death is the country from which no foreign correspondent files (unless you are Spiritualist). It is true that I have on more than one occasion been nigh unto death, but a miss is as good as a nigh. Where death is concerned, we must accept no substitutes as genuine or authentic. A near death experience is not the experience of actually dying.

Of course I don't want a lingering, painful death. Rather I want a good death, a kind of graceful decline that gives me time to wind up my affairs and say my farewells to a few people. The sudden death, the dropping dead that is unexpected in the individual case but statistically likely, is another good way to go, though not perhaps so good for the friends and what the Victorians on their tombstones called the relict.

A few years ago (actually, thirteen), I saw an exhibition of deathbed photographs at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, called *Le Dernier portrait*, the Last Portrait. It was moving, not morbid. Men and women, famous or unknown, lay on their deathbeds either clutching a bouquet of flowers, or with flowers strewn on their immaculate white linen. They were pictures of peace and dignity. I should like to die like that, but in all probability I will die attached to machines and with tubes stuck in me, after which the screens will be drawn round so that I do not upset the others. I will die when the beep stops.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.

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