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10. Putting the ‘Fun’ Back in ‘Funeral’

Abstract

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius writes in his notebooks: “You are a little soul carrying a corpse,” quoting the Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus. As he was likely writing these notes to himself as a form of mental discipline in the throes of a military campaign, he obviously meant that observation to be comforting. To most it is far from that, of course—but the reason why this is so is worthy of some attention. [*excerpt*]

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Putting the 'Fun' Back in 'Funeral'

Tom Brommage

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius writes in his notebooks: “You are a little soul carrying a corpse,” quoting the Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus. As he was likely writing these notes to himself as a form of mental discipline in the throes of a military campaign, he obviously meant that observation to be comforting. To most it is far from that, of course—but the reason why this is so is worthy of some attention.

For Marcus, the reality of death was manifest on the battlefield. The purpose of this stoic sense of detachment from events which we can't control becomes apparent in times like these: to remove the anxiety associated with one's own unavoidable demise. But to many in contemporary American society—filling their emptiness with consumer commodities and HOA regulations—they don't like being reminded of death. That sense of morbidity—or (as I will suggest, a sense of honesty about death) is poor manners. The sense of 'fleeing' from death into the overwhelming variety of 'pre-fab' identities is a banality amongst the existentialist philosophers. But regardless: both perspectives occupy on an opposite place in distinction between what I might call a 'common-sense attitude' and a 'philosophical attitude' towards death.

By the 'philosophical attitude,' I mean nothing more than: being unafraid to think about uncomfortable topics. We can sum it up under William James' reflection on philosophy, that it "sees the familiar as if it were *strange*, and the *strange* as if it were familiar." Reflections on death—characteristic of a sense of depression and anxiety—is one of the more uncomfortable and strange realities there is (those being capable of reflecting on it never having experienced it, of course—); the purpose of the philosophical attitude therefore is to make it familiar. As Plato tells us in *The Phaedo*, philosophers are always preparing for death.

Of course: there are other types of outlooks towards death. A 'scientific outlook,' for example—understanding it as a cessation of metabolic processes—does have the same tendency to nullify the anxiety regarding the 'end of the tour.' Through this lens, by reductionist fantasy, we can safely dodge the reality by obfuscating it in polysyllabic jargon. The scientific attitude towards death, while it fills the same role as the philosophical attitude, has the side effect of reducing death to the ontic and not the ontological, as Heidegger puts it. Death is more than one's corporeal existence as a corpse—it's always "one's own."

The first time I met Richard about a decade ago, he was wearing a T-Shirt for his own funeral. "Putting the 'fun' back in funeral" it said,

emblazoned across the front. You see: several years prior Richard had held his own funeral. When queried on the oddity, he responded dryly: “Well, one never gets to enjoy it . . .” The simple truth of that reason was unavoidable.

This is often the first story I tell people about him, for two reasons. First, I just think it’s cool. One’s mind immediately turns to Twain’s Tom Sawyer, hiding in the church rafters, listening to the wails of those below at his own funeral. But unlike Sawyer, Richard’s intent was not cloaked in deceitful or malicious intent. It was rooted in a more fundamental honesty about one’s demise.

But secondly, I also tell this story because I think it captures something important about having a sense of humor about death. While there are perhaps many different perspectives towards death that one might hold which might be called ‘philosophical’ in the sense I mean above—humor is one of those genuinely philosophical attitudes towards it. Dark and morbid humor has the effect of ‘taming’ the inevitable. And it is for this reason that it is truly needed: to knock one out of the malaise of denial. It allows us to be honest about our own finitude, instead of denying its looming, icy grip.

For this reason, I totally intend to rip off that joke and hold my own funeral. But I’m admitting it, because I follow Richard’s example with his honesty, if not his creativity.