

ONE



HERE (?) WE ARE

A book concerned with how we move through life and death might usefully begin with who and where we are at this moment in the co-biography of ourselves and the universe. Scientists tell us that the universe started with a Big Bang, or that maybe it didn't. Life evolved to fulfill a cosmic plan, or maybe it popped up as a fleeting aberration. In our tiny zone of the universe, life will perish in some millions of years, but, then again, it might become a casualty of "Doom Soon," as others have calculated.¹ From a more poetic and spiritual perspective, it has been said that there is profound meaning in the fall of a sparrow—yet others hold that the stupendous surges, flame-outs, dark collapses, and vast scatterings of all that exists mean precisely nothing. And nothing itself is either a prime condition for everything or simply the product of overactive imaginings by scientists and mathematicians at play.² But more to the point: What's for dinner? Who's pitching for our team tonight? Is last night's fortune cookie reliable in its promise that love, success, honor, and enlightenment will be ours within the next phase of the teasing moon? We have our moments of contemplation about what all of this means and where we're going. More often, though, we are likely to be engrossed in the scrimmage of everyday life. There's been a past, and there will be a future. But here we are now. This is our life pulsing in the moment, and it commands our full attention. Just when we are most secure in our assumptions, though, the alarm sounds. Everything familiar and comforting threatens to give way. Our next step might spill us into the void. What comfort,

what rules, what guidelines, what meanings then? Some people in some societies seem to have developed firm answers to these questions; other people, including many in our own times, find themselves with shards of traditional beliefs and remnants of redeeming rituals. And so we preface our journey with a brief reflection on how matters stand with us before time and circumstance have further say.

RITUAL, ROUTINE, OR OBSESSION?

Is it ritual or just routine to start the day with a cup of coffee? Routines are sequences that we have gone through before and most likely will go through again. A familiar routine is so well practiced that it hardly needs us at all. We can daydream or sing a television jingle as we dress in the morning (always slipping a foot into the left shoe first—or is it the right?). These routines can be solitary or interactive. Two individuals, each enacting personal routines, exchange the expected greetings as they meet once more in the workplace. The power of routines is in their unobtrusiveness. Like sophisticated engines, they perform their services smoothly and quietly, permitting us to conserve our vital energies for more challenging events or opportunities.

Fortunately, society does not consist entirely of routines. We are saved from so monotonous an existence by the creative energies released through the collision of differing routines, by generational change, and by a genial perversity in the human spirit that thrives on mocking and rocking its own established order. Nevertheless, routinization is among the processes that bind together individual and society. One of the first tasks of the new employee, student, or rookie member of the team is to “learn the ropes,” a phrase that pays tribute to the crucial skills that were required in the days of tall ships. A novice who fails to master the ropes can sink the ship in a storm. Further, we must demonstrate not only our mastery of the relevant skills but also our acceptance of the reigning styles and beliefs. We can retain a smidgen of our own charming or snarling personality, but in the main we must act like everybody else and thereby keep the good ship *Society* true to its course, with sails puffed by a favoring wind. Routines make the journey of life seem safe and predictable, and it is a nasty whelp indeed who does not buy into this game and insists on reminding us otherwise.

Routines also do much to make a home a home. My family's first dog was all eyes and ears when he joined us from a stressful residence in the animal-control facility. He studied our routines and soon knew more about them than we did. Toby wanted to know who was supposed to be where when and doing what. Shortly thereafter, Toby created for himself the role of enforcer, providing cues and corrections when we strayed too much from the Way Things Are Supposed to Be. Honey and then Angel proved equally adept when their turns came, becoming custodians of our routines, hounding us for infractions and rejoicing in the comforting rightness when we met their expectations. When Toby, Honey, or Angel sighed peacefully after their hard work, it was a signal that things were as they were supposed to be. My family's cats, of course, have always been masters of their own routines. We hesitate to do anything that might interfere with the cats' intricate passages, settlings, and demands for attention on their own terms. We suffer their scorn when the daily performance of our interactive routines is occasionally interrupted by events or caprice.

Rituals, like routines, also involve repeated sequences. But there is good reason to distinguish between them in theory, even though this is sometimes difficult in practice. We apply the term *ritual* most often to formal sequences that have names (such as *graduation*, *wedding*, *funeral*, or *human sacrifice*) and that require the cooperation of many people who have well-defined roles in the process. As a rough guide, I am observing a ritual if at least one of the participants is considered to have become different by the time the sequence has concluded. That core participant might have become elevated to a status of higher privilege and responsibility or sent off properly on the next step of life's journey.³ It helps if the events occur within a space made special for that purpose and if the participants are wearing special clothes, intoning traditional texts, making symbolic gestures, singing or chanting, and engaging in physical actions that affirm the ritualistic transformation. Let's scatter a handful of rice or dirt on the loving couple or the shrouded corpse. Let's add another star to the shoulder of the newly promoted general or the bedpost of the intrepid child who has graduated from diapers. Rituals can also make themselves special with wine or blood spilled or sipped; clothes cut and torn; faces smeared with mud or tints; participants swooning in ecstasy or despair or dancing until exhaustion . . . all of which just might be followed by tasty little cakes, serious drinks, and memorable partying.

Even a solemn ritual can have its festive overtones. The very fact that people have been able to enact a powerful ritual can evoke a sense of triumph and release, even though the occasion itself might have been gloomy. Similarly, the ritual might be festive yet have solemn overtones. People have been reminded of their loyalties and obligations. The graduate, for example, might as well enjoy the moment, because soon enough the bubble might be pierced by the challenges of student loan payments, the job market, and the need to test one's career hopes and fantasies against reality.

The ritual can be brief or extended over days. Noisy or subdued. Loaded with performance tests (e.g., memorized arcane phrases, feats of physical agility or endurance) or pretty much a done deal in which the participants need only to be there. It may be understood that all who have made it this far will become successfully transformed through the ritual, or there might be a daunting possibility of failure, humiliation, and even worse. Whatever the scope, difficulty level, and texture, the ritual will still be ritual because it has the purpose of achieving an action through the strength of communal belief and the implicit or explicit connection of that belief to a higher power.

SOMEBODY OR SOMETHING IS WATCHING

Sacred magic buzzes like a high-tension wire. Doing the right ritual right can persuade potent forces to rescue, renew, protect, and bless us. Doing it wrong exposes us to the whirlwinds of fate or the fiery rage of the gods. The closer to its primal sources that a ritual is, and the more life that is inherent in it, the more risk there is for catastrophe and the more hope there is for survival.

There are also individual actions that have something of the ritual spirit. These generally draw upon established religious and ethnic traditions even though they are conducted in privacy. A solitary prayer on behalf of the dead might use words and cadences from an ancient tradition. One might also pause to improvise a prayer before entering a challenging situation. Hospice volunteers, for example, have said that they often pray, not with terminally ill patients and families, but in their own hearts. For example:

I ask my Lord for the strength and wisdom to comfort them, to be at my best for them. I don't ask for miracle cures. I ask for only what is within my own limited reach, you know, let me be able to help somebody today and then, if I can, somebody tomorrow.

People of all religious faiths may perform small ritual actions as part of their daily lives. I see these as maintenance rituals. They keep the faith. They ask the Almighty to protect them from harm. Although performed individually, each small act of worship affirms the bond with other believers throughout the world as well as demonstrating love and respect for God. Observant Jews, for example, touch their fingers to their lips and then to the mezuzah when they enter or leave their home. This small, oblong metal box is fastened near the door. It contains a devotional passage from Deuteronomy ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one . . .," 6:4) that places the house and its people under divine protection.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE SEQUENCES

But what of obsessive-compulsive actions? Some people devise idiosyncratic sequences intended to protect them from harm. A bit of obsessive-compulsive behavior and a privately performed religious ritual could be hard to distinguish were we unfamiliar with the particular traditions involved. But personal performances of prayer and other established rituals do differ significantly from obsessive-compulsive reactions. Prayer is a communicative action empowered within a belief system that has served many people over many years. The obsessive-compulsive is engaged in a lone struggle to enforce order within a personal life that is threatened with collapse. The hospice volunteer who improvises a prayer and the Jew who symbolically kisses the mezuzah may otherwise live in a confident and spontaneous manner. They are not hobbled by the need to restrict their lives and invest their energies in complex routines.

There is a point of commonality, though. Both the performer of ritual acts and the obsessive-compulsive are believers in the possible efficacy of their actions. Things will get better (or, at least, not get worse) as a result. These favorable outcomes will not be achieved by ordinary cause-and-effect mechanisms. For example, even if the prayer-sayer enhances

the offering by lighting a votive candle, there is no way of demonstrating that this act has actually provided illumination and comfort to the deceased spirit. Ritual usually—or, as Émile Durkheim insisted, *always*—involves a combination of magic and faith.⁴ The obsessive-compulsive also would find it difficult to demonstrate that the forces of destruction are foiled by putting laundry away inside out; this is a magical trick discovered through personal desperation. The faith component is not clearly articulated, but by implication there is a demigod of inside-outness with the power to perform miracles when invoked by this apparently senseless action. Through ritual we convert our beliefs into outcomes through magic. Or something like that.

A religious person can be afflicted with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and a person with obsessive-compulsive disorder can seize upon religious practice for the wealth of thought and behavior sequences that might serve to control personal anxiety and rage. It would be careless of us, though, to equate religiosity with an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

LARGER AND GREATER THAN OURSELVES

The borderline between routine and ritual is permeable and shifting. For example, a patriotic occasion that was once imbued with deep meaning might become an empty routine, sustained only by faltering habit, as generations and circumstances change. And then perhaps something happens, something that shakes us to our foundations. Our secular routines and devices no longer seem adequate. We need something more—and so we open our lives again to the power of ritual.

How can we know when we are in ritual? We are engaged in a ritual event when we feel ourselves to be part of something larger and greater than ourselves. It is no longer you, and it is no longer me: it is *us*. We are a superorganism for the moment, an entity with innumerable voices to chant or shout and innumerable hands to open in supplication or close in fists. The clan and the god that has possessed them are now capable of so much more than any of the clan's individuals. If this gathering has a sense of direction, if it seems to be following rules, if we have become inflamed with feelings and beliefs long neglected, and, especially, if it appears somehow to be reenacting a momentous occasion that is remem-

bered in the deepest fibers of our being, then we are indeed involved in a ritual.

A CUP OF COFFEE TO START THE DAY

So here is an office worker starting another day with a comforting routine in a familiar setting. There is none of the fear, intensity, and urgency that would call for invocation of sacred powers. Such manifestations would seem inappropriate, even bizarre. Routine, then, not ritual.

A sip or two of coffee, and now a telephone chat with a friend as the day's work lies just ahead. An unusual sound. The worker's eyes turn toward a window. "Look," he says, "a plane!"

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York City and Washington, D.C., stunned the survivors and much of the world. Even those in the immediate vicinity of the World Trade Center had difficulty believing their eyes. Many firsthand observers seemed to experience two contradictory but coexisting responses: "This can't be happening; this *is* happening."

There is a rational basis for the existence of these apparently discordant responses. Like other creatures, we are equipped with psychobiological response systems intended to improve our chances of survival. Perceiving a possible threat, we immediately go on full alert. Failure to switch to an emergency footing can be fatal.⁵ On the other hand, we would become exhausted if we interpret ourselves as being continuously at risk. As Hans Selye demonstrated through years of research, our physiological response to stress can itself become a severe source of stress.⁶ Faced with a possible threat, then, we might reduce our chances of survival by ignoring or trivializing it, or we might lock ourselves into such an intense and enduring state of alarm that the clarity and flexibility of our thoughts, the effectiveness of our interpersonal relationships, and the functioning of vital organ systems all become compromised. Long-term survival requires an adept balancing act between two states of being: the normalizing and the emergency.

Those endangered by the World Trade Center attack had to deal with the sudden and the unexpected. People had to make judgments about reality and meaning before individual and group emergency response potentials could be activated. They would have recognized other types of

threat immediately—but *this*? Bad things can happen in the world. Everybody knows that. Here, though, was something catastrophic happening *to* the world as we understood it. The familiar frame of reference crumpled in an instant.⁷

The terrorist attacks produced many casualties and deprived many families of their loved ones. Additionally, though, a great many people expressed the feeling that the world itself had changed. Things would never be the same again. How *would* things be? That question could not be answered immediately and is still a long way from being answered today.

Emergency and Routine

Front-line professionals such as police, firefighters, and paramedics have honed their capacity for immediate recognition and response. The rest of us tend to display a robust dedication to the predictable ongoingness of life. Things should continue to be the way they are because that's the way they are. *We* should continue as we are. There is an indirect survival link to this mode of functioning as well, even though it can be detrimental in emergency situations. We develop the skills necessary to thrive in our niche of the world. These skills are demonstrated in many small ways: for example, by learning the best and second-best ways of commuting between home and office and what to say and not to say at staff meetings. We master the routines and chart the highways and byways of our home territory.

Alternative and often competing ideas about the world are associated with each of these response sets. Our built-in emergency response system is rationalized by the Proceed at Your Own Risk model: “The world is a dangerous place. Bad things can happen. Don’t get too comfortable; don’t be too trusting. Stay on guard!” By contrast, our immersion in the routine and familiar is in keeping with the Now and Forever model: “Things must continue as they are because things are not different from what they are and cannot be imagined otherwise. We can surely trust the sun to rise, the birds to sing, and the coffee to brew.”

Ideally we should be able to call upon the frame of reference and response set that are most appropriate for the occasion. The sun has risen as it should, in an innocent blue sky. What a nervous and gloomy wretch I would be to command those damn birds to cease their twittering so I

could listen for sounds of danger. And I am the village paranoid if I keep a loaded shotgun at home and have nearly blasted away one of my neighbors when I thought I saw somebody suspicious. To expect the worst all the time not only makes us unpleasant to live with but also undermines our ability to detect and respond to actual threat. Similarly, we reduce our survivability prospects if we enrobe ourselves in the belief that no harm can come to us in this well-ordered and well-mannered universe.

We know something of how people perceived and responded to the September 11 terrorist attacks from the voices of the survivors and from phone calls made by passengers during the hijackings. Danger awareness had to pierce the enactment of routines and the assumption of Now and Forever ongoingness. The office worker who saw the plane incredibly approach his building had only enough time to convey his surprise to his friend on the telephone. Those who had a little more time to respond did recognize their peril and the need for rapid and intelligent action. There were several reports, for example, of people descending many flights of smoke-filled staircases without panic and then exploring alternative escape routes when the primary escape passage was blocked. Panic did not seem to be the most common response, despite the real and present danger.

Improvisation took the place of either routine or ritual. The passengers who rebelled against their hijackers had no script to follow. They forged themselves into an instant strike force. During the desperate moments in the air and on the ground, many people did all that could be done, not only as individuals but also as hastily coordinated groups. By contrast, the emergency personnel rushed to the scene with well-practiced sequences of action to perform. It is not oxymoronic to speak of their actions as “emergency routines.” The events were chaotic, but preparation and training had instilled a coherent and functional approach. Emergency was routine—up to a point. A major disaster challenged all their skills and stamina but—up to a point—not their worldview.

Furthermore, their actions were not ritualistic, although they were carefully coordinated and well prepared by disciplined practice. The outcome they sought—rescue—could not be achieved through magic or divine intervention, but only through their own expert and determined efforts. The magic, the spirit, was *within* the people.

Later. A day or two, or even just an hour or two later. The horrific events have occurred. The situation now requires a variety of new intensive efforts: search and rescue; treatment of survivors; organization

of human and physical resources; isolation of the disaster sites; vigorous actions to protect against other possible attacks; investigation and pursuit of perpetrators. Soon another concern will become salient: informing and comforting those whose family members and friends might have been killed or injured. Those involved are no longer strangers, only people trying to help one another.

Real-ization

We focus here on a response that started to emerge just after the first impact of the disaster was felt. There were other responses no less powerful, including grief, fear, and rage. But it is the quieter response that most concerns us here, a response that arises from sound and competent minds that have become for the moment dazed and uncomprehending. What is happening? What, what, *what?*

That such a catastrophic event could occur—literally out of a clear blue sky—confounds our expectations, shakes our belief in a coherent and predictable world. Is this real? What kind of life in what kind of a world had we been imagining all this time? What are we to believe from this moment forward?

It was difficult to integrate both the everyday frame of reference and the interruption that witnesses described as surrealistic. “It was like a movie!” was a common response. Some witnesses were even more specific, identifying disaster scenes in various popular films. The rules had been broken, though—the rules that separate fantasy from reality. Terror had leaked into “real life” from the silver screen. Americans had long enjoyed the option of entering the alternative world of cinema. There also had been many interpenetrations between the two realms. These horrifying episodes were different. Disaster had escaped its cinematic bounds. Bizarre special effects seemed to have replaced the world we thought we knew.

Smooth television commentators, seldom at a loss for words, were swept up by the wave of disbelief. “I can’t put it into words,” a reporter would admit, standing at ground zero, the extensive ruins of the World Trade Center. Witnesses and visitors to the site could not make sense of what had happened: “It’s beyond anything.” “There is nothing I can com-

pare it to.” “I could never have imagined anything like this. Even being here, I can’t really believe it.”

Avery D. Weisman, M.D., started his medical career as a pathologist. He quickly observed that many people—including fellow physicians—shied away from touching or even looking at a dead person. He transformed himself into a pioneering existential psychoanalyst who had become convinced that

every question affecting mankind involves death. Our cultural heritage has largely given us only methods to deny, romanticize, and placate death. . . . The very facts that have brought healing into being—facts of life and death—have prevented the healing professions from responding to deep yearning to know more about death and deadliness in human nature.⁸

He identified *realization* as a subtle but critical process in our efforts to understand “death and deadliness”:

Realization has two meanings: to perceive a reality, and to make it real. . . . Most people concede that death is inevitable, a fact of nature. But they are not prepared to realize. We postpone, put aside, disavow, and deny its relevance to us.⁹

There was little difficulty in realizing the destructive consequences of the attack. Acknowledgment of the events was often embedded within a haze of shock and confusion, but the events themselves were nevertheless acknowledged. There was little outright denial. A massive and unexpected catastrophe would seem to be an ideal occasion to arouse the desperation response of denial. Disaster researchers have often reported survivors who were dissociated and disoriented: for example, the woman industriously sweeping the floor of her home, which no longer had roof or walls, in the wake of a tornado.

Few World Trade Center survivors, witnesses, or bereaved family members entered into full denial, however. Instead there was a groping toward realization. For example, one early responder to the attack knew precisely what had happened and why she was there. In a TV news interview, she explained that perhaps there were still people to be rescued, lives to be saved, within the vast rubble of twisted metal and concrete fragments. She was literally in touch with reality and engrossed in her

difficult work. And then she turned for another look at a small object that had come into her hand. It was a hand.

There was a wedding ring on her hand. She was a person. She was a person who loved somebody and whom somebody loved. This was a real person who was—no more.

Realization would come at various times and in various ways for the people on the scene. They quickly recognized that something momentous had happened and that their lives would never again be the same. But this was not yet full acceptance. It would take time and emotional effort to integrate these events into their preexisting view of the world. The *making-real* of the deaths and the terrorist danger would, in fact, require significant revisions to their worldview and its familiar routines. These revisions would include such new rules as

- we are vulnerable—all the time;
- even our powerful society cannot protect us completely;
- the solid and the enduring are not actually so: even the landmark World Trade Center towers were perishable;
- we cannot assume that life will just go on as it has been; secure expectations must be replaced by heightened alertness;
- we need to feel a greater sense of community in everyday life, to be appreciative of and helpful to each other.

At the same time, family and friends of the terrorist victims also had to contend with incompleteness. Was my friend perhaps one of the fortunate survivors? When will I know? How long should I keep hope alive? Few bodies had been recovered. Identification was often difficult even with some of the shattered bodies that were recovered. Both the person and the body were absent. This imposed an extended period of uncertainty on family and friends. The stress of grief was already upon them, but the long process of working through loss could not begin while doubt remained. A person did not have to be “in denial.” One could simply exercise the right to remain hopeful. Emotional reality was the tension between clinging to the remote possibility of a loved one’s survival and beginning the painful but essential process of getting on with one’s own life.

For many families the turning point was a bureaucratic function: the certification of death. New York officials waived the usual extended waiting period to certify terrorist attack deaths in the absence of identified bodies. The certification enabled families to apply for needed insurance benefits and make other financial and legal adjustments. In approving the issuance of a death certificate, the next of kin also relinquished all but a very stubborn and private sense of hope.

Resonating Violence

Another unsettling element was still largely unrecognized months after the attacks. We are, most of us, a peaceable people. Violent acts usually are committed by sociopathic criminals, confused youths, the drug-buzzed, or the deranged. These exceptions only underscore the generally pacific nature of our lifestyles. We walk our dogs, contribute to charitable causes, and devote ourselves to self-improvement endeavors. We have plenty of outlets for frustration that stop short of murder. We can squawk about our politicians, write letters to the utility companies, emit bloody roars at sporting events, and, of course, sue each other, to the delight of the lawyers we also enjoy deriding. Furthermore, we try to keep our children not only safe from harm but also safe from developing a taste for violence.

And yet—violence is what fills the seats in movie theaters and the television screens at home. Our appetite for vicarious killing has demonstrated itself in childhood games (the cops-and-robbers shoot-outs of my dead-end-street Bronx neighborhood and today's computer simulations) and in the popular transformation of ruthless gangsters into romantic icons. Disasters have been equally popular, especially with cinematic special effects to heighten the impact. The ideal movie would give us homicides by a variety of methods, all lovingly presented through inventive camera and postproduction techniques—and capped with a lot of stuff exploding and bursting into flame.

The assault on our collective sense of reality includes this leaking of violence and terror from one realm to the other, the resonations of brutal death-from-a-distance with our own subdued, murky, but unvanquished impulses toward violence. In the old days we might have spoken of mythical spirits and monsters taking on flesh or of nightmares

invading daily life. These images still hold some power, but more salient today are the realer-than-real cinematic disasters and killings that escape their boundaries. The common element is as uncomfortable as it is difficult to ignore: *there is something about the killing fields of the human mind that has shaped both realms.*

The abrupt and tragic events of September 11 stimulated a renewed quest for comprehension and meaning, as well as the reconfiguration of practical coping efforts. This was an extreme case, though. By contrast, let's take one example of the journey of life when it is completed more or less as expected and well within a shared framework of meaning and ritual.

A VIEW FROM THE END ZONE

Willkommen! Alt Wien (Old Vienna) radiates in every direction with its visible and invisible history. St. Stephansdom looms before and above us. If we were to clamber five hundred steps and then some to its ornate roof, we could see much of Vienna's life and architecture. That twisted, rather tortured-looking tower thrusting from one of the plazas is a hymn of praise set in stone: "Thanks be to God, who in His infinite mercy banished the plague from our ravaged and repentant city." This inscription appears on the ornate baroque column erected to praise God for ending a visitation from the plague in 1679 and to memorialize the estimated hundred thousand victims. It became the model for other plague memorial columns throughout the Habsburg Empire. The monument rises within a prime shopping district in the old city, close by the Kohlmarkt on a cobbled street called Graben (grave).

Inside the great cathedral we experience a vaulted space as long as a football field, end zones and all. Mere humans look overmatched within this soaring architecture, but their voices, when raised in song, can surely be heard in heaven. For a moment at least we all become acutely religious.

Now we descend a flight of steps into the actual end zones. We move through what could serve as the passage to an ancient underworld. Perhaps we shiver involuntarily. (I did.) There is not the slightest amenity to gloss the transition from all the life above to all the death below. Bones

there are, though, and in abundance. These catacombs are not as old or as extensive as some others. Christians appropriated the catacombs of Rome in the third century, and those are said to have eventually extended approximately 750 miles and 80 feet deep. Less ancient but even more populated are the gypsum quarries of Paris that became the final residence of an estimated six million people.

The remains beneath St. Stephansdom were removed from Vienna's thirty scattered graveyards night after night, starting in 1786.¹⁰ Here there is not only a sufficiency of dry bones but also the strong impression that they have no prospects for strolling again in the sun to enjoy a Sacher torte and a small cup of intense coffee.

We visit without knowing quite how to behave. What is the proper way to show our respect, give no offense, and yet satisfy the curiosity that brought us here? Perhaps the residents can provide us with subtle cues.

A few hooded skeletons are sufficiently intact to evoke the image of a pious monk or compassionate priest who moved his lips in silent prayer as the last moment approached. Try as we might, though, we cannot read faith, expectations, transcendence, or even disappointment in these barren skulls. The silence. The emptiness. Above all: the *absence*. Here we are beyond sadness and beyond either doubt or certainty. And yet we wait patiently for a resonation, a quiver, a message. Nothing.

Most of the bones lack any semblance of connection with a person, let alone with one another. They lie in untidy stacks or scattered about, pieces of a construction toy in which the child has lost interest. Like some other catacombs throughout the world, this one fits the description of an *ossuary*—a place for bones, not necessarily for the honored or venerated remains of a person. A tourist guidebook reports that the bones of more than fifteen thousand are stacked like kindling wood. Actually, though, kindling wood is usually stacked with greater care and has a brighter future.

The guidebook neglects to mention that these abandoned bones are actually among the more favored: they are mostly the remains of men. Women were less likely to be accorded even the humble status of kindling wood in the church basement.

Like the other visitors, we discipline ourselves not to break into a gallop as we head toward the light at the beginning of the tunnel. In fact,

THE
GRAVE
A Poem.

Illustrated by twelve Etchings

Executed

BY

LOUIS SCHIAVONETTI,

From the Original

Inventions

OF

WILLIAM BLAKE.

1808.

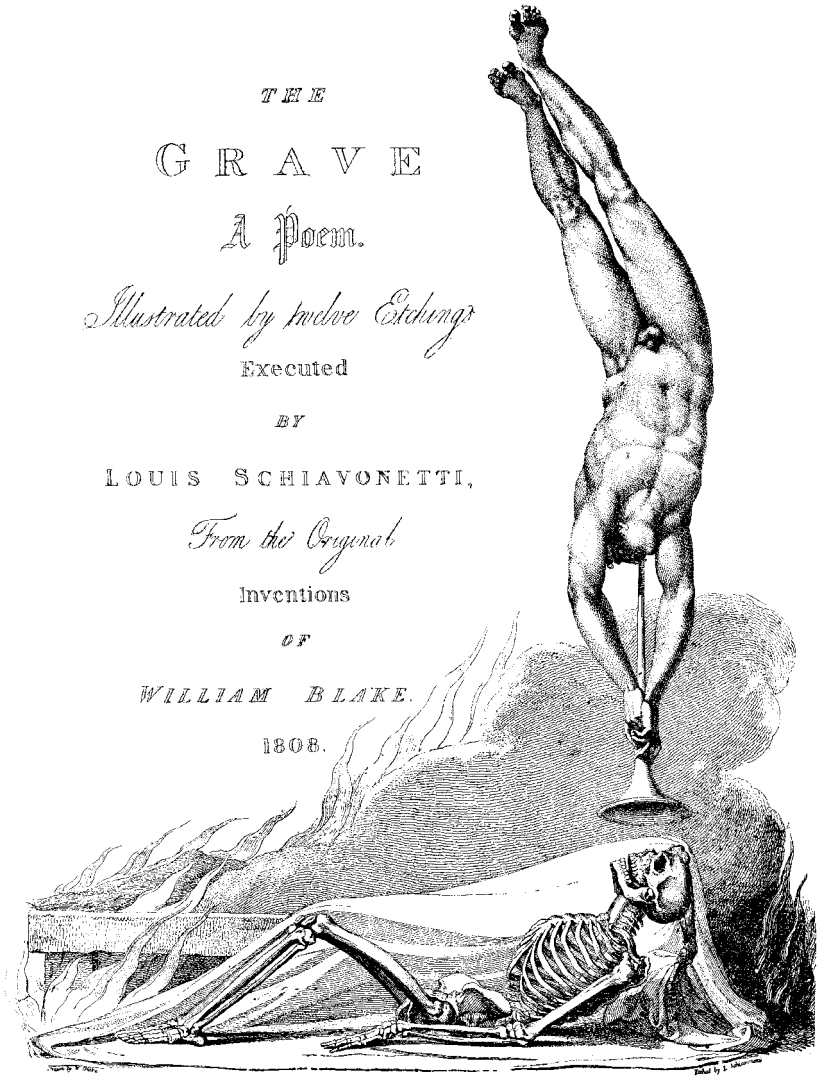


Figure 1 Allegoric representation of resurrection: the skeleton arises from the grave. Engraved by Louis Schiavonetti after William Blake. From Robert Blair, *The Grave* (London: printed by T. Bensley).

we are impelled to pause for a moment with one of the monks who seemed—almost—to communicate something. We wonder: “What did the moment of death engrave deep into your bones? And what is it you’ve been feeling all this time?”

A response does filter through the musty air, across the tenuous distance between the living and the dead: “*Stunned*. I was and I am—*stunned*.” Fixed in death was the experience of terminal astonishment. Words form themselves within the silence: “So, this is death! Not what it was said to be. Not what was written. Not what we had decided to believe. Not what I would ever have allowed myself to imagine. Not what *you* imagine. Death is nobody’s idea of it. I am as stunned as I was the moment I died.”

The thousands whose bones lie beneath the feet of cathedral visitors in Vienna had names that are mostly forgotten, even to the keepers of records. Along with their names has perished the texture of their lives. What about the significance of their lives? No doubt many were active in the tumultuous events of their times. Some distinguished themselves and were mourned by those who cherished them and who then took these memories with them as their own lives came to an end. We also have no difficulty in supposing that, like most other good Christians, they believed that respect for the body they left behind was part of the process that would assure passage to the promised spiritual estate. So much of their lives had been given meaning and direction through this belief. Gathered unto the bosom of the magnificent cathedral, they would wait patiently until the moment of transfiguration. The sacred words and music rising above the vaulted ceilings were eternity’s own soundtrack.

But experience taught otherwise. Below the inspiring cathedral was but a charnel house where they would lie exposed and abandoned. Their names, pious thoughts, and deeds would be forgotten even by the church they had served. Would God also forget? Or could one even remember God? All of this would take some getting used to. Was the spirit to be left stunned and confused, kin to all the uneasy ghosts who have made uneasy the people of numerous world cultures? How safe can a society feel when its ancestors are troubled and discontent? The attenuated bone-spirits beneath St. Stephansdom, though, do not seem to pose a direct threat to the living. They are still trying to keep the faith, and they are, in fact, secure within sacred space. It’s just not what was expected.

There is also that touchy theological matter to consider: the true life was beyond flesh and bone, beyond the grave. The corruptible body in a flawed world was of little worth when compared with eternal spiritual blessing. And yet! Respect and care for the corpse was also of great concern. For example, the church and many of the laity, both Catholic and Protestant, long opposed with horror the emerging practice of post-mortem examinations. Could the soul really complete its journey if the body had been defiled? And would consignment to a grim bone house free or dishonor the spirit seeking redemption and its share of the sacred estate? One couldn't be too sure, one way or another. Taking one more fleeting look at the catacombs and inhaling one more breath, though, I found it difficult to feel optimistic.

We have explored two situations that were not part of our own everyday experience, with the exception of those who lost loved ones or were otherwise directly affected by the September 11 events. The first situation confronted us with a rupture in our received view of the world. This was not the way that either life or death was supposed to go. The second situation, by contrast, represented the completion of a life's journey within the rules and protection of the religious establishment. One floor above the catacombs the establishment continues to offer itself in all its physical and historical grandeur. Downstairs are "the remains of the day," a scene of morbid disorder after the ceremonies have been performed and the participants forgotten.

We would be phlegmatic folk for sure if we did not sense some connection to who we are now and to where we expect to go for the rest of our way. The people high up in a WTC tower had no time for consoling ritual or reflection on meaning. The dead in the catacombs have had more time than they need to wonder why their lives of faith have left their earthly remains in such a dismal state. We probably expect a different path through lives for ourselves and for those we hold most dear.

"WHO I AM"

Here is a simple thought exercise. Identify on paper or in conversation a set of specifications for who you are. There are no confining rules. Any statement you consider true and significant about yourself belongs on this list. Here is just one obvious example from my list: grandfather.

I am a grandfather here and now. But I could not have become a grandfather without first becoming a father, and that would not have happened without a certain degree of cooperation with a woman, and that arrangement would not have occurred without courtship, and so on. A descriptor of myself in the present tense implies and evokes a rich, complex, and only partly comprehended skein of past events, relationships, and experiences. So, too, with the future. As father and grandfather I have a stake in the future. Being a grandparent, spouse, sibling, child, or friend is not a static position. All these relationships have altered with time and circumstance and will continue to do so. Who—and where in my life—I am now is framed by memories and expectations.

Work this out for yourself if you'd like. See if any of your here-and-now self-descriptors can be deprived of their temporal context. See if even the most constant descriptors are not, for that very reason, possessive of time past and future. "I am a person whose beliefs have always been constant and will never waver," for example, draws its power for the present from its time-bridging structure.

The end of our days is therefore an influence on who and where we suppose ourselves to be now. I'm not speaking of the actual end of our days here, of course, but of attitudes, expectations, and behaviors that could influence the manner and timing of our deaths. When pressed to define *thanatology*, I have suggested it be regarded as the study of life—with death left in. This might also be a useful guide in contemplating our own biographies. To understand the shape and direction of our lives, we might be well advised to include not only the next fork in the road but also the distant mist in which finitude awaits. Similarly, fascination with funerals and other rituals can be only a diversion if we fail to consider their connections to the heartbeat of daily life.

And where do thanatologists come from? During World War II, Herman Feifel was assigned to the island of Tinian, where he watched the *Enola Gay* depart for Hiroshima with the first atomic bomb. This experience continued to resonate within him while he conducted pioneering studies in the psychology of death and made the forceful case that America is a death-denying society. I know another man who, as a teenager, opened the apartment door one day when his father returned from work. Just barely inside the room, his father collapsed and died in his arms. This young man would also become a psychologist, and one of the first to offer therapy to people with a life-threatening illness. Noth-

IN THE BLEACHERS

By Steve Moore

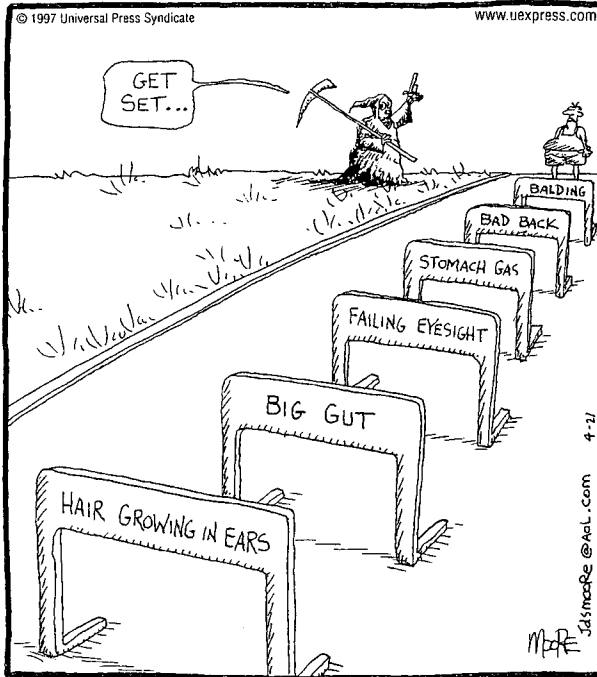
**The 120-meter midlife hurdles.**

Figure 2 IN THE BLEACHERS © 1997 Steve Moore. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

ing like this happened in my own early experiences as I played stickball in a dead-end street in the South Bronx and wondered early in the morning and late at night what it is all about. The story of my thanatologizing has been told elsewhere.¹¹ Essentially, I have felt that life cannot be fully appreciated or understood without somehow taking death and loss into account. Along the way, I have worked as a psychologist with people who were terminally ill, grieving, and suicidal; I have engaged in both empirical and scholarly research; I have taught death seminars for—what’s it been? forty years?—and have served first as a psychologist, then as director of a geriatric hospital. Over the years some of the people most dear to me have ceased to be, and their absence remains a kind of presence.

THE MORTAL JOURNEY

Life has often been envisioned as a journey. We move through time, or time moves through us. In Western society it has often been agreeable to tell one another that this is an orderly procession, as in a seventeenth-century German depiction of the Ten Steps of Life.¹² An infant cradled in its mother's arms occupies the first of the ascending steps. At the apex stand a couple enjoying the physical prime of life. Now the steps start to descend, until we see an aged and feeble couple tapping along companionably with their walking sticks. A social and moral sequence accompanies the physical. Different role obligations and privileges are associated with each step of the procession. In many world societies there is also a less visible but perhaps even more significant journey in progress—the quest for spiritual discovery, purification, and renewal.

The beauty of the spiritual concept is displayed in several ways. People know who they are, who they were, and who they will be. They also have a guide for interacting with those who are younger (“I was like that once”) and those who are older (“I’ll be like that some day if I make it that far”). Further, it serves to bind anxiety. Life as raw experience can seem chaotic and vulnerable. But there’s a plan. There’s a way things should go. This sublime progression is under the general direction of a Supreme Being who cares about the creatures made in his likeness.

The beginning of the journey has allowed for a variety of interpretations. Life starts at conception or birth, or souls preexist, awaiting the opportunity to be born or reborn. The idea of one life and one death has long had to contend with the rival conception of lives recycled through death. The journey may seem to be a linear progression only because of our limited perspective and dichotomizing habit of thought.

Where and how does the journey end? It makes a difference if we focus on the individual or the people. We might believe that *the people* continue on their journey through time, like waves that roll across the sea even though composed of ever-changing drops of briny water. History has been both kind and unkind to this belief. Some peoples appear to have vanished from the earth both in ancient and more recent times; but, then again, a scientific case has been made for the possibility that we all carry forth a genetic inheritance passed along by a few remote and common ancestors.



Figure 3 The Angel of Death, in the form of a child, taking the soul from a dying man. From Reiter, *Mortilogus* (Augsburg: printed by Oegeling and Nadler, 1508).

By contrast, the individual's journey seems to come to an end sooner or (not all that much) later. Confine ourselves to a moderate time scale and we might find comfort in the assumption that people have always found a way to go on and always will. Share the worldview of specialists on human extinction and the question becomes not if but when both we and our mortal coil will shuffle off (us first). Life will have become an improbable little episode in a history of the universe that will have neither author nor reader and, therefore, not so much of a history either.

It is the death of individuals that most concerns us here. Even the most elaborate theories and beguiling fantasies have not been able to overcome the fact that life's journey on earth does come to an end. What individual passion and societal construction have added are glosses on life and death, meanings whispered in the lonely wind or proclaimed in proud temples. Death is the natural outcome of life. But what we call death might also be much more, according to many belief systems. Our journey continues not only through life but also through death. There is destination as well as outcome.

And so the shape of our lives cannot be fully known until the entire

journey has run its course—assuming we share the tenets of a traditional belief system. This system also gives us shelter along the way: the intergenerational flow of stories and memories, the symbols, the daily practices and the grand rituals, all working hard to hold back the anxieties, the doubts, and, of course, the irrational forces that seize and destroy even our finest achievements, even our most innocent or gifted comrades. The belief system. The ritual. The passion for order and meaning. These creations of the human mind have proven more durable than any individual or society.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 brought sudden death to thousands and grief and a heightened sense of vulnerability to many others. The expected, the assumed, journey through life had been ambushed. What is life if it can be destroyed so brutally, spilled so wantonly? What is death if it comes so prematurely, allows no opportunity for preparation, even for a farewell word and touch? The perspective from the end zone can also be demoralizing. What was it all about? Was it a fatal flaw in our belief systems or the eruptions and dislocations so pervasive throughout history that failed the employees of the World Trade Center towers and the priests of Vienna? And is it still reasonable, still useful, to believe in an orderly life within an orderly universe?

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book provides a fresh opportunity to consider what it means to journey through life and possibly through death. Perhaps we might emerge with a heightened appreciation of who and where we are now. We draw upon the thoughts, passions, and actions of many people who took on the challenges of life within a variety of sociohistorical contexts. Anthropology, psychology, and sociology come to our aid, as do history, the arts, and the life sciences.

I begin with what is most familiar to us: our own daily lives. “Practicing Death” offers the opportunity to explore some rituals of everyday life. A pair of broad-ranging chapters, “Good Death, Bad Death” (I and II), examines death, first in other times and places and then in our own. What is the relationship between how we live, how we die, and how we fare after death? And what, if anything, can be regarded as a “good death”?

The passage from life to death is a spiritual mystery, a biological event, and a societal transaction with many implications for the survivors. In “Corpsed Persons” I explore some of the ways in which a person is transformed into a corpse. “Abusing and Eating the Dead” is perhaps not for the faint of heart. World societies have often given high priority to respectful treatment of the dead. Nevertheless, we have sometimes been on our worst behavior as well. This visit to the dark side of corpse management has its own lessons to offer. “Too Many Dead” is an apt follow-up. What happens when there are so many dead that the living are hard-pressed to perform the traditional caregiving practices and rituals? And what is it like to live within a once-familiar environment that has been turned into a necroscape?

We now follow the person beyond the point of death, identifying some of the major pathways into whatever might be waiting on the other side. “Down to Earth and Up in Flames” explores the options of earth burial and cremation within a historical framework. We are reminded once again that our hopes, fears, fantasies, and status distinctions all influence the way in which we carry out our obligations to the dead. “Journey of the Dead” takes us even further. With all due trepidation, we accompany the soul on its mysterious after-journey as it has been envisioned throughout history. Finally, in “Living Through,” we come to terms with the mortal journey in our own glittering, tawdry, powerful, and vulnerable times. What can we rescue from the past and bring through us to future generations, and what might we more wisely let go? And what comfort and what joys can mortals offer to one another in a universe whose strangeness exceeds our most extravagant imaginings?