Give Death Its Due

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2014)

Ever since I was born about half a million people a year have died in Britain alone, making more than thirty million of them in my lifetime; yet until quite recently I hardly noticed this holocaust around me. Death played no more than a very minor part in the jejune drama of my life; I lived as if exclusively among immortals, where death, if it occurred at all, seemed almost a moral judgment on the lives of the departed rather than a purely natural event in those lives. They must have done something wrong to die.

Now all that is changing; I have reached an age at which even the deaths of those I have known but slightly affect me more deeply than the deaths of those I knew well affected me, when life without death seemed to be the norm.

It is partly a matter of numbers, of course; as one grows older, so the number of one's acquaintances who die grows larger. It is hardly an original thought that age increases the reality of death in one's thoughts; it is a sad fact of human psychology that what touches one nearest touches one most. (But is it really so sad? Imagine a life in which this was not so. It would be intolerable.)

The other day I received by e-mail a note that once upon a time might have arrived on thick-wove black-edged notepaper, informing me of the death of a woman who had worked in an administrative capacity in the hospital in which I had worked until my retirement eight years ago. To say that she had not been universally loved by the staff of the hospital would be to put it kindly; most people who had dealings with her, and who were not inhibited by the decent injunction that one should not speak ill of the (recently) dead, would attest to her difficult manner and general obstructiveness. I had little to do with her personally; that little did not encourage me to seek a deeper acquaintance, but rather to avoid her wherever possible. Words such as 'bad-tempered' or 'impossible' came unbidden to practically everyone's lips when speaking of her. In short, she was a dragon.

Oddly enough I met her in another capacity after her retirement. She worked as a volunteer in the courts where I sometimes still appeared as an expert witness, shepherding witnesses in the right direction (literal, not metaphorical). She was all sweetness and light, and I learned, somewhat late in life I must admit (but better late than never), that one should not always judge a person's character by one's brief acquaintance with it at work. I suspect now that the 'dragon' was such because she had been asked to work at a level beyond her natural capacity,

and she sought to disguise her feeling of inadequacy by an artificial fierceness.

The message that I received was very sad. She had been found at home dead in a chair, after her neighbour had become alarmed by the fact that she had not opened the curtains of her front room. Dragon she might once have been, but she was not the kind of paranoid person who normally left her curtains closed to prevent her persecutors from looking in. She had died in her chair, presumably the night before, probably of a heart attack, though as yet the cause of death was not known.

Her husband had died before her, as had her brother and sister. There were no children, and no other known relatives. Though no doubt her death was swift, and let us hope painless, its utter loneliness was such as to cause one pain to imagine; and a former colleague of mine pointed out that there was no one to whom we could express our condolences. After a death we need to express such condolences, and it occurred to me then that often the person we are condoling after a death is ourselves as much as those who have lost someone. We try to comfort ourselves knowing that the fate of the departed is our own ultimate fate.

Another recent death that affected me disproportionately to the depth of my acquaintance with the dead person was that of an elderly woman who worked as a volunteer in a library where I spent three months conducting some historical research. She was there about twice a week and was so self-effacing that I exchanged no more than a few polite words with her at any one time. She was helpful and devoted to the work of the library, and she induced in me a slight sense of guilt that I was by comparison with her brash and self-seeking.

I asked after her when I returned to the library a few months later to give a talk on the results of my research, to be told that she had died suddenly of a fulminant cancer. I was saddened by the news, much more deeply than my superficial contact with this person, however worthy she might have been, would normally have justified or led me to expect. I genuinely mourned her loss for her own sake, but also for the decay of the memory of a time when I had been very happy and which I had hoped to preserve in my mind uncontaminated by change.

As a result of these deaths I began to do what I had never done before, to compile a list in my mind of all the people known to me personally who had died. My paternal grandparents died before I really understood that death was not just a temporary disappearance behind a stage curtain, the dead reappearing some time later when they want or are wanted. I was not taken to see them in their last illnesses as (I suppose) deathbed scenes were not deemed suitable for so young a child. As for my maternal grandparents, they died before I was born.

The first death, then, of which I have some recollection was that of the mother of my then

best friend, from whom I was inseparable, when we were about nine. She seemed very old to us then, but I suppose she could not have been much more than forty or forty-five at the most: tragically young from my present point of view. She had a cancer of the breast for which she refused to seek medical attention, having converted to Christian Science some time before; I do not know whether her failure to do so hastened her death or affected the outcome in any way. But I remember her deathbed: the room blacked out by heavy dark red plush curtains that absorbed the sound as effectively as they excluded the light. It was like a death from another age, which I suppose it was, for bourgeois propriety had not yet been quite mocked out of existence.

Then there was the death of a close friend of mine. He was a year older than I – sixteen. He suffered terribly from intractable asthma which had deformed his chest; in those days, treatment by inhaler had just come into being and he took a drug called isoprenaline which relieved the symptoms but whose dangerous toxic effects were not fully understood. He was a brilliant linguist and I have little doubt that he would have made a mark as an academic despite his inherent modesty which at that time was not yet a severe disadvantage to those pursuing a career. His mother was a widow with another son as different from my friend as possible: he was extremely handsome but something of a waster and it was easy to predict that he would come to a sticky end (unless, that is, he succeeded brilliantly, probably in some activity not entirely respectable).

I had been away for a couple of weeks and went round to my friend’s house to see him. His mother opened the door. She told me that he had died a few days before of an asthma attack while waiting for an ambulance to arrive (the ambulance telephonist had made all kind of bureaucratic difficulties lasting several minutes before sending the ambulance, which arrived just as my friend died). He had said to his mother, ‘I’m dying, I’m dying!’ to which she had tried to reply with emollient and comforting words. His last words were, ‘Don’t you understand, I’m dying!’

This was terrible enough, but then my friend’s mother said something that shook me even more deeply.

‘Why couldn’t it have been the other one?’ she said, meaning her other son who would never amount to much or be a support to her.

I was too young to know what to reply to so terrible an exclamation. Did it mean that she believed that there was a providence that demanded the sacrifice of one of her sons, and that it was impossible that both should have survived? Or did it mean, even worse, that she would

actually like to be rid of her elder son? Do things said in the extremity of emotion uncover what we ‘really’ think or wish, as psychoanalysts might say? I fled, my mind in a whirl, never to return, too cowardly to face the emotional awkwardness of another encounter. I feel guilty now that I did not go back, for I might have provided some kind of comfort, and also that I so soon got on with my life as if nothing had happened.

The next death in my life, and the only one for many years, was in my first year at medical school. One of my fellows, much more academically gifted than I, contracted acute leukaemia and died three months later, for in those days treatment was rudimentary and survival very short. I see him now in my mind’s eye, before he was ill, sitting in front of me in a lecture, his straw-coloured hair a bit of a bird’s nest. When he was dying we shied away from him, not knowing what to say and thoroughly embarrassed by the situation. Whether he died alone I do not know. Perhaps he would have had a brilliant career before him had he survived; but at least, like Rupert Brooke in cultural memory, he is eternally young in my memory. Not, of course, much of a compensation for dying so young.

When I think of these deaths, as I do surprisingly often though without any additional insight into their meaning or significance, I am aware of a gnawing unease. Why was it they, not I, who died aged 35, 16 and 19? Why was it granted to me to live so many years more than they, without having done anything at all to deserve it? Why do I not thank my lucky stars (if that is what they are)? Why, instead, do I complain all the time, of such matters as that the internet connection is a bit slow today? I suppose the answer is that it is because what human beings are like, and must be like if they are to live their lives.

Though death had until recently had played so little part in my life considering its prevalence, I have always had a fondness for cemeteries, and this has lasted the whole of my life. I happen to write this not more than a hundred yards from what is probably the most celebrated cemetery in the world, *Père-Lachaise* in Paris.

Yesterday, being Sunday, I took a walk in it. I did not search for the tombs of the famous, though I was pleased to have spotted that of Alphonse Bertillon, the inventor of the system of *Bertillonage*, the system of multiple anthropometric recording that enabled a person to be distinguished with almost absolute certainty from every other human being in the world, used by the police until fingerprinting made it redundant. I noted that his tomb was neglected and overgrown with moss, unlike Oscar Wilde’s, which was covered in lipstick kisses.

The tomb that most moved me was that of a man born in 1933 who was ‘cowardly murdered’ in 1979. (He was a security guard who carried money into and out of banks.) There was a

photograph of him in a ceramic medallion, and a fresh plant placed at the tomb's foot, that meant he was not forgotten. His widow had put her name under his, with her date of birth, also 1933, but with no date of death. She was waiting, thirty-six years later, to be interred beside him.

What a wealth of suffering this tomb indicated, but also what nobility!

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.