

Walking the Razor's Edge

*I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?*

(Rilke 1905 translated by Macy & Burrows 2005)

When confronted by the ecological politics of the world today, we walk the razor's edge of how to respond. We are often taught, even by our most well-intentioned teachers, that down one side one falls into the crevice of pessimism, despair, lethargy—often encompassed by a general existential crisis (as can be expected by the overwhelm of being alive today, though which should be avoided), or down the other, to fall into a place of fighting for life, 'changing the world,' optimism, and struggling against the current of ecological transformation that is wrapping itself around the Earth, which is encouraged. In this sense, we are a culture of dichotomies, dependent upon the locating of ourselves by the practice of polarity; 'I am this, but not that'. I would suggest, however, that dichotomies tend to do just the opposite in that they dis-locate the self from its infinite and paradoxical nature, and would rather inquire to the possibility that we may inhabit hope and despair both at once. I would further suggest that at the heart of our tending towards both dichotomization and ecological crisis (the correlation of which I will later explain), is our understanding of life and death, as encompassed by the living, or non-living material

body. Therefore, at the heart of this essay is an exploration of death, as something extending beyond the individual living body in ever-widening circles. This giving of oneself, as Rilke says, to “. . . a falcon, a storm, or a great song,” is what his translator, Joanna Macy, would call the ecological self (Rilke 1905 translated by Macy & Burrows 2005).¹ Here I will briefly investigate the implications of an expanded concept of death beyond its designation as the antithesis of life. It is an inquiry into walking the razor’s edge, of integrating death into life—or perhaps more accurately—dying into living.

As an Odawa elder and mentor, Paul Raphael would say, ‘you must not walk backwards into death’ (Rafael 2016, pers. comm.). His words follow me, haunting and yet also grounding in the sureness of what resides in the circular nature of my human experience. Its meaning doesn’t come swiftly, nor should it, but rather lends one’s mind to the mysterious quality of choice, and what it is to walk forward, accepting, and available to death. Walking forward into death calls it into presence, not as one alien and hostile, but as something to be with, to awaken to. It disarms the field of conflict on which modernity has waged war with mortality. Michael Kearl suggests that the premise of this war is based upon the foundation that in many modern societies, “death poses the fundamental threat to the order and meaning that social systems erect to shield their members from the anomic terrors of chaos” (1989). Phillip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling expand on this hostility through the recognition that “the presence of death appears especially disturbing in this context of reflexively constructed self-narratives which have at their centre a concern with the body” (1993). These are subtle conflicts, employed via the widespread definition of self as something constrained to the individual body, something that will reach an

¹ Macy defines the ecological self as “...a spontaneous process of self-realization, where the self-to-be-realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of the phenomenal world.” (2009)

eventual terminus—however removed that terminus may be via the exportation of death to the margins of our social-consciousness.

Before going any further however, it is pertinent to acknowledge the multifold of various orientations to death currently alive in the world today among different cultures and religions. And so in this essay, who is the ‘we’ I refer to when speaking of ‘our’ relationship to death? I don’t here call it Western society, despite the commonality of that descriptor, for it would seem to propel us into yet another dichotomy of East vs. West (and what about North and South? And who’s West and who’s East are we referring to? And where does Native America fit into ‘Western’ society?). ‘Western’ as a signifier is problematic in that it relies upon the association of the East with the old ways, spirituality, the feminine, indigeneity, gurus, the oppressed, etc., while conversely, the West has come to represent development, technology, the future, separation from nature, whiteness, individualism, the masculine, the oppressor, etc. While associations and archetypes do serve a purpose in making sense of and mapping out the world, they also tend to be riddled with fallacies and inadequacies of precision when referring to the complex, global, multi-directional facets of humans today, in that many ‘Eastern’ societies have become dependent upon ‘Western’ ideas of socio-economic development, while many ‘Western’ cultures have become dependent upon ‘Eastern’ ideas of personal and spiritual development. What Matthew Fox would call the “age of weddings,” I might call the age of fuzzy lines (Sewall 1995). In using this classification method, there is always the underlying risk of fetishizing the East and whitewashing the West. For this reason, I prefer in this paper to use the term ‘hyper-individualism’ to describe the overarching status of a society, uncontained by geography, that has come to view ‘the self’ as an insulated and private experience, independent from the pool of life and relationships that sustain it.

‘Hyper-individualism’ is a way to express that individualisation is, within our own evolutionary context, a socio-psychological transition of immense proportion. For example, even within European and modern societies, death has not always been the awkward subject, nor the non-reality that it is experienced as in today’s hyper-individuated society. Some would attribute this to the disappearance of religion and the rise of secularization, that “. . . the death of God has left us literally and culturally naked” (Turner 1991). That is to say, underlying any particular systems of belief, organized religion provides a social context by which people can make contact with death. French philosopher, Philippe Ariès, speaks similarly to how “. . . death, until recently, has always been a social phenomenon, an event which produced communal responses and which was contained by collective signs and rituals” (1974 cited in Mellor & Shilling 1993).

The communal identity provides a framework by which the death may exist within a shared reality. When experienced through this context, “Its significance denoted a disruption to the *social body* more that it did the passing of an *individual body*. When identity is rooted more in the group than it is in the individual, death does not threaten the individual as it does in the modern world” (Elias 1939 translated by Jephcott 1982). The communal body is naturally in a state of constant decomposition, birth, and transformation. The sense of living does not rest upon any one facet of the group, and so the death of one being can be processed and held through the perseverance of the wider, communal self. That isn’t to say that death does not impact—in fact, quite the contrary. It is the structure of a larger self (i.e. community), which through the realizing of itself as an ever-changing process, creates a context by which the death of one member may be integrated, grieved, and experienced, publicly and fully itself (Berger 1967). With the move towards individualisation, and away from the collective, we begin to not only lose sense of the aspects of our life that can only be experienced through the sensorial purpose of community; we lose sense of our life itself, as an experience of community. “In the

past, personal extinction did not hold the terror that it does today, as that which was of central importance, namely one's tribe or clan, continued to survive" (Mellor & Shilling 1993). Death takes on a new shape and meaning when experienced in the solitude of hyper-individualism. For without the identity of self as something beyond the individual, our death comes to signify a more complete extinction of the meaning of life. Insulated from greater cycles, it takes on the quality of terminus, as the end of the world, and so comes with all the fears associated with such an annihilation.

The 'problem of death' ripples even beyond our relationship to our own lives, to the way in which we construct institutions, collaborate together, and approach ideas. There is no sense, among modernity, for things to end in their own time. Rather, if something ends, the only way in which we know to conceptualize of its ending is through the lens of failure. That within the folds of modernized constructs of value, there are no cyclical methods of engaging closure. If it ends, then it was inherently flawed, or the people involved were careless or unproductive; it must have failed. As Giddens would describe, "... the prospect of death cannot be contained easily within such a context because it represents no future in a culture oriented to futures" (1990 cited in Mellor and Shilling 1993). This can be seen clearly through cultural valuations of romantic relationship; if two lovers choose to separate, the only cultural interpretation available for that transition is that the relationship failed; that love lost, or even worse, that the couple failed love. Ultimately, it implies that within any type of death, there is inherent trauma. Stephen Jenkinson asks the timely question in his book *Die Wise*, "... what if it is this insistence on *dying being a trauma* that is the traumatizing thing about dying in our time and place?" (2015).

The question that naturally comes next might then be: how would a society navigate the living world, if death were an accepted and ever-present aspect of one's communication with the world around them? To begin to answer this question, I find it helpful to look towards cultures

existing today who still have a clearly integrated interface with death in the day-to-day of people's lives; namely, Mexico (is Mexico in the 'West?'). In the words of anthropologist Luis Alberto Vargas:

the Mexican of today continues to be anguished by the prospect of death . . . but in contrast to other peoples, he does not hide behind death, but rather lives with it, makes it the object of jokes and tries to forget it by transforming it into something familiar

(Brandes 2003)

Though Mexico shares many aspects of self with Europe through its colonization by Spain, and to a less spoken level, through its colonization by the U.S., Mexico has still somehow managed to retain its own unique honesty with the presence of death. Mexico does not glorify death, or go out of its way to quietly meet it in the private corridors of any holy place. Rather, in Mexico, one simply allows for death to be with them, to rise to the surface of celebrations and daily life, unhidden, public, and even at times, flamboyant. While it still holds reverence and fear, it also holds familiarity, playfulness, teasing, and delight. Death is given a place at the table, and so when it does come to retrieve a member of the community, those affected have a shared language and understanding by which the death can then be processed.

A more dramatic version of this familiarity can be seen in the recent and rapid popularization of Santa Muerte, known more fondly as La Flaquita (the skinny lady), or La Huesita (the bony lady). "Santa Muerte is first and foremost an unofficial saint who heals, protects, and delivers devotees to their destinations in the afterlife" (Chesnut 2012). What most interests me about Santa Muerte is her overwhelming presence in prison cells, especially around the Mexico-U.S. border. One prison guard in Morelia in 2009 reported that "of roughly 150 cells in the prison . . . approximately forty inmates had erected makeshift altars..." (Chesnut 2012). Though there are many reasons attributed to the rise of this saint in the prison system, one can see clearly that given the overwhelming presence of death in the lives of inmates, there comes a

certain urgency for contextualizing and making sense of death. There is no possibility of hiding from it as one can in the safer and more insulated conditions of Europe or the United States. Santa Muerte is a form by which her followers can find language for the shadow of death in their own lives—by giving her a place on the altar, for nowhere else could hold such an overarching aspect of one's experience of the world. It is for the sake of continuing to live, that death must be given form.

No aspect of life is separate from the process of dying, from the most personal release of one's attachment to a belief, to the great coral reef die-offs of the Pacific Ocean. Some of the deaths are so massive that there simply isn't the capacity by which the individual can fully conceive of it, let alone begin to actually experience it. This is perhaps most true when attempting to engage climate change on both an emotional and physical level. And so consistent with the views already expressed, I suggest that the impossibility of truly making contact with and responding to the Earth's transitioning and dying-off is due to the way in which we conceptualize dying as the antithesis of living, and contextualize the fight for climate justice within a win/lose framework. This positioning of Earth-death into the future as some adversarial entity, of whom we must fight at all costs, renders ourselves unavailable to tend to the process of cyclical dying which is happening to the Earth, every single day. As Jenkinson writes, "*...you wont change what dying means by fighting it. It will always mean 'loss'*" (2015). So I propose that one of the most essential aspects of the self that we can now cultivate in this time of tremendous change, is the ability to die as a practice, rather than as a terminus. That we must relearn cycle, in our own bodies, in our creations, and in the seasonality of the world around us. This will require a different language and meaning for death than the one we've been handed.

I think of my Grandmother, who has dementia, has forgotten the names and the places of her life, and yet who continues to wake each morning, and go to sleep each night. When the day came that she no longer knew my name, or recognized my face, I didn't have the personal framework to make sense of the loss, because she was standing there before me, alive and vibrant, and to me, someone could only be alive or dead. But someone did die there, in that moment of releasing recognition; it was the part of me who was only known through her eyes, and the part of herself who was only illuminated by the love of a grandson. The only framework through which I could understand death however, was that grieving must wait until her body dies, for the 'final' end. It was far too disorienting and somehow taboo to acknowledge the death that happened in that moment, and continues to happen each day as she lets more of herself go. Now in my own deepening of understanding her process, I can be present to her in a way I never could have before. The Earth is perhaps not so different, in that it is calling for us to embrace the paradox of living and dying all at once, to adorn ourselves in that tension, and to nevertheless continue to stand in resistance to the structures that undo us. There is nothing passive in acknowledging what has been lost, and no time wasted in returning to ritual. We must slough off the costume of the hyper-individual, our own little death, and give back to ourselves the consent that dying, in all of its pain, can still be beautiful. It is both a maturity and a return to childness, a state of wonder as we accompany the dying to the threshold, gifting our awe to that which is so much bigger, who lives on the other side of departure. By knowing this wonder, and knowing this grief, we know more of our whole selves, that we may be on the Earth in full attendance to that which is ours to do in the short lives that have been granted us.

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