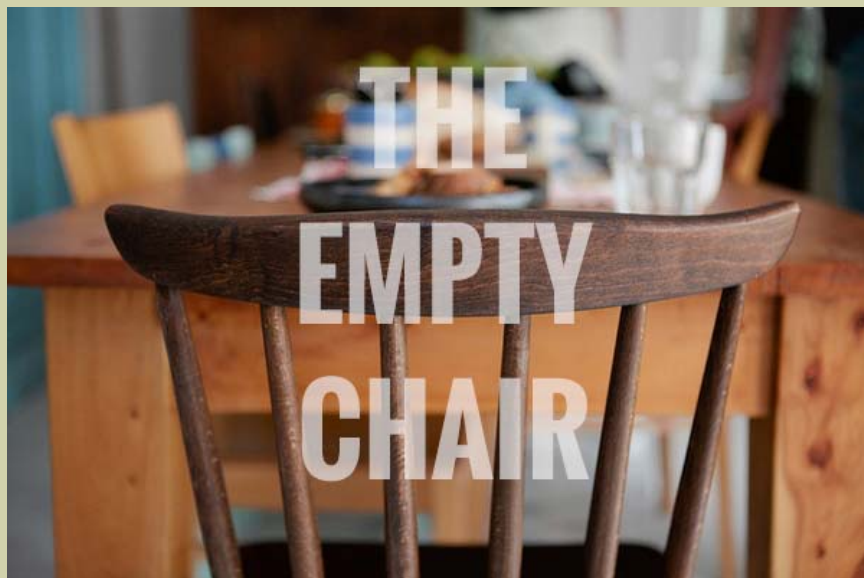


Death does not respect age; any death is a loss whether it be an 18-month old infant, an 18-year old youth, or an 81 year old matron. They are all significant losses to someone and each instance has its own pattern of grief responses and challenges to overcome. Regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status or any other feature, each death is unique and special, like no other death ever or anywhere, because with each death we lose an entire world, an entire package of experiences that may have just been in the process of unwrapping.



We hardly ever speak of a beforelife but tend to be overly concerned with the afterlife. It may be comforting for some of us to reflect on who and where we were before we became who we are when we were born. It's interesting to ponder that question because we can either trust that we were in fact somewhere, existing, before we were physically conceived. But where was that? The alternative is to believe that once a random sperm entered a waiting egg, a cascade of events was triggered that became the infant *you* and over time developed into the you, who you are today. Quite honestly, neither of the two hypotheses can really be resolved, because we have no real idea what constitutes "you." Perhaps that's why we prefer to occupy ourselves with an afterlife, since in that discussion we at least have a tangible quantity to work with: a physical person with all sorts of attributes has died, there's a tangible, recountable narrative in their wake, and we ask the many questions associated with a death, most often *Why?* and *Where?*

We are terribly uncomfortable with being so vulnerably human and can't bear to think that we will someday, somewhere, somehow *die*. We will physically stop working and some rather disgusting changes will take place in our physical bodies. Like the proverbial ostrich with its head deep in the sand, oblivious, most of us wander aimlessly and with minimum purpose along the myriad possible paths through the time and space we call life. We greedily seek one diversion or entertainment after the other, never getting enough, and yet demanding and getting more and more distraction from the reality of ourselves and the world around us. We become a mere husk of what we potentially can be.



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When death finally arrives to claim a loved one or a friend, we are shocked, confused, angry, and demanding. How could this have happened? Why did it have to happen? If only...! It's all magical thinking, *What if?* Reality is more often than not really hard to accept, and when you are so arrogant that you think you can handle all the answers or can control what happens, reality gets even harder on you. You attempt to quench your anxiety with denial but it doesn't seem to work for you – or anyone else. Death visits and seldom knocks. Death rarely makes an appointment to come around when it's convenient. Death just drops by and takes what is his.

When a death occurs it almost always ushers in a psychospiritual process we commonly refer to as grief, and a psychosocial process we generally refer to as mourning. Both grief and mourning have their sociocultural patterns we call *ritual* on the "micro" level and *ceremony* on the "macro" or public arena. Within these we have social norms,



including how grief is politicized, acknowledged, and cultural dictates, bundled together into what we call *practice* or on a more substantial scale, *tradition*. Religion /spirituality of one form or another, or one of the philosophies seeking religion, frequently provide a foundation upon which these behaviors can establish and legitimize themselves. The psychospiritual and the psychosocial environments provide the contexts, in which the bereaved engage in their grief work, find meaning in their loss, incorporate the transformed deceased into their lives, continue their bonds with the

deceased, and transcend the bereavement experience as transfigured persons. It's a complex process that requires time and permission to proceed. Although the social / public process of mourning may have temporal waypoints, and a particular culture may set an end time for the public display of bereavement, grief does not have such an amenity. In fact, grief may be experienced for many years after a loss even without being classified as "pathological," or complicated, and grief is unique to each griever, it's a personal experience and must be accommodated by each griever in his or her own way. Grief cannot be rushed nor can it be stereotyped.

Today, in the early 21st century, we are deluged with information and stimuli of indescribable variety and in asphyxiating volumes. Some of the deluge tends to shape our very physiology and repattern our nervous systems, especially our brains and the way we think. The information and stimuli enveloping us at every instant of every day is insidiously evil in that it is directed at transforming human beings endowed with free will into means to unhealthy ends. The media bombarding every single human being today is dehumanizing us and transforming our very existence from *beings* to *doers*. We are no longer mindful of the gift of the moment we are living in and we are unable to enjoy the moment in



silent reflection. We have no peace. Television, radio, emails invade every moment of our lives with commands to “Hurry!” “Don’t wait!” “Do it now!” “Last Chance.” Twitter, Facebook, instant messaging have all replaced real personal relationships with virtual personal relationships. The once sentient being we called human has become a mere distorted reflection in a smartphone screen. We don’t even take the opportunity to speed dial a significant other and would rather spend the time texting rather than talking. Even “chatting” which was once a form of informal oral communication and stimulus sharing has become realtime texting and responding but there’s nothing real about it.

We are now concerned with a digital afterlife! How pitiful can it get?

All of these intrusions and incursions into our humanity and their tragic effects on who and what we are can be seen in our death practices. Digital death is a term that once described online practices centering on death-related communications; today, digital death is the counterpart of a person’s physical death. Our dehumanization is almost complete now because we have moved away from metaphysical, spiritual trust in an afterlife and are now even concerned about what happens to our Facebook page or our Twitter account after we physically die; we are now concerned with a digital afterlife! How pitiful can it get?

Materialist consumerism has decided that your death-related experience, your bereavement, your grief should be limited to three days and then you need to get back to work, get over your loss, and become productive again. It’s called bereavement leave. But it’s not leave to grieve; it’s merely time to get the necessary paperwork done to dispose of whoever it was who died. Three days, people! You’ve lived with an individual for decades, sharing almost every moment and you have three days to get over his death. You’ve raised a child to young man- or womanhood, watched a helpless infant, wholly dependent on its parents, become a strapping, self-conscious, happy young adult— and you have 3 days to get over the car crash that killed him. What have we become?



Tom Heffernan Sr.

On April 25, 2017, at 9:20 a.m. two young men, Logan Penzabene and Matthew Hamilton, each 18 years old, were traveling down a main road near their homes, a road they had probably traveled dozens if not hundreds of times on their way to school or once they qualified for their drivers licenses. But today was going to be different, very different. Today was going to be so different that at about 9:20, one would be dead Logan Penzabene, and the other, Matthew Hamilton, in a coma, and hundreds of lives would be forever changed. One would be *dead*, Logan Penzabene, and the other in a *coma*. Repeat after me: *dead, coma*. Get it? Two families would be plunged into the darkness of despairing grief; a whole community would be plunged into disbelief. An entire school district would be offered grief counseling. Why?

Well, on that fateful morning, the two young men were driving along and for some reason we may never know – perhaps they were texting, perhaps making a call, perhaps responding to some electronic notification, or just horsing around; we'll never really know – the driver crossed into the oncoming lane of traffic and hit a flatbed tractor trailer head-on, killing the young driver and causing critical head injuries to his passenger. Were they texting, making a call, responding to an electronic notification? Does it really matter? Yes, it does matter! One young man is **DEAD**, another is in a **COMA**, a whole community is thrown into disarray. Yes! It does matter!

The appalling part of the story is *not* that the event was “preventable” – I cannot support the belief that anything is truly preventable, and I must dispose of that notion of preventability as just more arrogance believing that we can control events. Unlike New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, one of those arrogant, self-important political figures who believes that if he announces a so-called campaign, not even a program with tangible goals and actual funding

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for implementation, "No Empty Chair", Teen Safe Driving Campaign, which is heralded on the Campaign website in lofty rhetoric: "Governor Andrew M. Cuomo today launched the "No Empty Chair" teen driving safety education and enforcement campaign to raise awareness of highway dangers during prom and graduation season." Why just "during the prom and graduation season?" Apparently, Cuomo believes that if he announces a campaign the problem is solved. But what about the rest of the year? I guess there wouldn't be any danger any other time.

Cuomo's campaign was announced on April 15, 2017, the fatal accident occurred on April 25, 2017.

What we have to come to understand is that inflated programs and bombastic political rhetoric or police efforts during a so-called "campaign" do little or nothing to fundamentally change what government and corporations have worked so hard to create: *producers* to produce goods and services, *consumers* to consume goods and services, and *sheeple* to hear and obey (and to consume). The hypocrisy is conspicuous, it's glaring, but if you're constantly gazing into your smartphone screen, constantly receiving the indoctrination (in the past called "*brainwashing*") and loving every digital minute of it, you won't notice. You'll just be a line item in some funeral home's financial statement.

The churches and deathcare providers are elated. The churches, because you may never have set foot in church for Sunday worship but they'll wheel you in one last time and the church and pastor can get 30 minutes of exposure and a check. The deathcare industry doesn't care one way or the other; the funeral director will get each and every one of us sooner or later, but sooner is better for the bottom line, and even better if it's a sensational death that will attract multitudes of mourners! Visibility for both. Revenues for both. Rescue and paramedical personnel get to flaunt themselves and their equipment, which is good stuff for budget negotiations. Local political hacks, including everyone from the coroner / medical examiner, to law enforcement and first responders, to local elected stumpers ever eager for that special moment to appear and look devastated and share their *pro forma* "Our prayers are with you today" – To whom do the godless idolaters pray, anyway? Everybody has the canned expressions for the cameras. Even the public mourners and their makeshift shrines erected at the accident site. Everyone wants to be seen meditatively and reflectively, even prayerfully standing at the roadside memorial, "paying their respects," showing solidarity for the momentary grief of a community. It's really difficult to tell the real from the virtual.



But the bottom-line, naked reality is that one young man is dead; another is critically injured. The bottom-line, naked reality is that one family is grieving the loss of a vibrant and vital part of that unit called family; a limb has been amputated and just like in the case of amputation of a physical limb, it is acutely painful, and there will be phantom pain even when the limb is no longer there.

Three days of bereavement leave is not going to work. Empty political actions like "No Empty Chair" or whatever they're calling that stupidity is not going to work. Law enforcement "efforts" – as yet ineffectual and unrevealed – don't seem to be doing very much. People are still killing each other, and people are getting dead regardless of whether the killing is intentional or unintentional. Sorry but dead is dead.

We can't change what has happened and there's no way we can justify any attempt to rationalize what has happened. That's what makes Gov. Cuomo's "No Empty Chair" campaign so political and so scurrilous. That's what makes Bethlehem Police Commander Hornick's statements like "it's a tragic loss" and "our feelings to out to the families" so *pro forma*, so spineless, so vacuous and pabulum. Incidents like this one are not "tragic" and they're probably not "preventable" by inaugurating campaigns with political undertones like "No Empty Chair," so stupidly reminiscent of failed programs like "No Student Left Behind." Most people would probably disagree with what I just wrote. *Not tragic!?! How heartless! Not preventable!?! How fatalistic, how pessimistic!* But those people would be wrong and misguided, victims of their own delusions, denial, and despair.

What I will say is that incidents like these, while *not* tragic and *not* preventable, are important teaching moments. These are important opportunities for everyone concerned to re-evaluate themselves and decide what they have

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become. It's a time to become reflective and a time for self-examination. It's a time to honestly admit that we are all contributing to our own psychospiritual demise, some of you willingly others inadvertently, but the vast majority is all part of the "preventable tragedies" of our post-modern, post-Christian, dehumanized world.

So what's the final take-home message? *Dead is dead. Loss is loss.* Grief is unavoidable. The living will bury their dead and go on living. But is it that simple? Not *really*.

In my thinking, grief is a unique opportunity for personal and community growth. It's a time for finding and making meaning. It's a time for change of heart and mind. But all of that is internal. It's the external that you have little influence on, and what you can't change you have to take good advantage of. We do this by extending ourselves in compassion and love. We have to allow ourselves to stop for a moment so that we can catch up with ourselves. In other words, we have to take a moment and sit on a rock and become lost in time watching the brook flow around the obstacles; we have to reclaim fluidity in our lives. We need to shut out the white noise in our lives, and listen to the music of the brook and the birds. We need to raise our eyes from the illuminated screen and allow our souls to be illuminated by the sunlight playing off the ripples and the leaves. We need to stop feeling guilty about caring for ourselves and for others. We need to take time off from being busy to being just *be-ing*. This is essential to reclaiming our humanness, our spirituality.

Where there is no time for *be-ing* there's no time for seeing or for listening



I recall when, as a child, I observed the silent dying of a favorite apple tree. Of course, as a child I had the time for *be-ing and for listening, for seeing*; now, many years later, I realize that where there is no time for *be-ing* there's no time for seeing or for listening. If we slow down we can hear what the Spirit is telling us about the dying of trees, the dying of a planet, of people dying, and what these deaths mean to us as beings capable of creating meaning and reflecting on love and how all of these things came into being, how a Spirit of love brought us *and* them into being, and then, at the appropriate time, draws them back to herself. It's the perichoretic dance, the circumincidental dance of cyclical time, not the two dimensional bland, autocataclysmic linear time of the materialist rationalist. It's the cosmic net of Indra, in which each being in their *be-ing* reflects the other being in their *be-ing* in an infinite array of interconnected gems, each in infinite relationship with the others. The ordered chaos of the cosmos.

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The questions that we ask about death and dying are basically questions about the meaning of being, of *being*. These are the questions that go into the stories once told around tribal campfires, and which now become part of the narratives that are told about our dead. These stories were the subject matter of the drawings on cave walls long ago, of the poetry of love and loss, and the *pathos*, the emotions associated with the death of green in Autumn, its tomblike slumber during the Winter, and its rebirth in Spring. The Spirit is very generous in using

any opportunity or event to make a point to us arrogant, uncertain, hesitant creatures, and adept at humbling us.

We as educators, spiritual care providers, thanatologists, human beings, need to get back to basics and enter the world of the deep soul.

No condolences, no campaigns, no law enforcement efforts, no roadside memorials, no funeralization service will ever have the desired, the needed salvific effect unless we learn to appreciate silence. Note well that our word salvation comes from the Latin word *salvus*, which means safe. Salvation derives from the Latin *salvus + facere*, to make safe. Our society's established institutions were originally intended to do just that, to make us safe. But our institutions from the family to church to government have taken a wrong turn. We live in an "increasingly mechanistic, fragmented, decontextualized world, marked by unwarranted optimism mixed with paranoia and a feeling of emptiness..." [McGilchrist, p. 6]

Our institutions cannot help but have a stake in blunting our maturity even if it means they must destroy the original versions and insights on which those very institutions were founded. We can easily identify that fragmentation in our education system, our government, our churches, and even in our families. [Aside: Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* is a fascinating work of literature in many ways, but the story about the Grand Inquisitor is probably the best illustration of the perverse change in institution over time. Here's a link to a brilliant portrayal by Sir John Gielgud. [The Grand Inquisitor](#)]

I'll close with a quote taken from Maggie Ross' fascinating book, *Silence: A User's Guide*, in which she cites a passage from Richard Holloway's *Leaving Alexandria*, noting that Holloway's use of "religion" should be thought of in broad terms, in the sense of any pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance



"All institutions overclaim for themselves and end up believing more in their own existence than in the vision that propelled them into existence in the first place. This is particularly true of religions. Religions may begin as vehicles of longing for mysteries beyond description, but they end up claiming exclusive descriptive rights in them. They seque from the ardour and uncertainty of seeking to the confidence and complacency of possession. They shift from poetry to packaging." [italics mine]



Pale Death with impartial tread beats at the poor man's cottage door and at the palaces of kings.

(Horace)

Death is by nature impartial. Death has no agenda or axe to grind. Death can be either a wall or a window; we choose which. When we enter into the conversation of death it's important that we do so with authenticity, admitting to ourselves, at least, how we really feel and what we really think. This requires a dual type of thinking, an ego-driven self-conscious mode and a deep-soul mode, the one cooperating with the other, sometimes paradoxically and even contradictingly, but somehow mysteriously in harmony. It's only by entering into the paradoxical interiority of silence that we can emerge transfigured, and at one with the cyclical pattern of the cosmos, safe from the two-dimensional linear single mode thinking of the rational materialist humanist.

Amen

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

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