

Death, Killing and Beatitude

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The death by natural causes that we see in movies has little to do with the quiet nature of how death actually is. We prefer *le morte du jour* dramatic, perhaps raw and bloody. Such is the way of the movies but I have been at the side of many deaths and I can say emphatically that its generally a much quieter affair

I've noticed an uncanny silent awareness in people whose souls are getting ready for death. Days of being lost, quiet, in some far interior but also a knowingness. It's that knowingness that I call uncanny.

I noticed it with Mrs. Codrescu who was the first person who ever died in my presence.

I met Mrs. Codrescu three years before she died at 90. I was an incompetent nurses aide in a dingy little nursing home before I began my nurses training. Our conversations were always the same: halved.

The first half:

"I want to die. Kill me please. Please kill me. I can't live here. This is horrible. Can't you kill me?"

"It is horrible," I responded. "I am so sorry that your life's come to this. But I can't kill you, dear. I really can't though I know it'd make you very happy. I'd lose my job for sure."

Every day we'd laugh at that one and I'd try to shift to our shared passion. Romanian music! I'd recently gotten quite fanatic about the cimbalom and what Gheorghe Zamfir does on the pan pipes. Not to mention the gypsy music.

"Gypsy music?"

She was intrigued. The Gypsies were despised when she was a girl but so alive for her. Sometimes she'd get a little flirtatious when we talked about their music.

And so it was day after day.

I never did say goodbye to Mrs. Codrescu when I left that job to prepare for nursing school.

Mrs. Codrescu was admitted from the convalescent home to the small community hospital where I did my second semester of nursing school.

She'd had a silent heart attack and was unresponsive on arrival. I was the nursing student assigned her, a mass of awkwardness under the gaze of my professor.

I came to visit her one evening after my school week ended, sat at her bedside and said, "Mrs. Codrescu? It's Michael. Do you remember me? It's been a long time since we've talked like we used to. Remember? We talked music, Gypsy music. The violin, Mrs. Codrescu, do you remember the violin?"

I talked this way for perhaps twenty minutes. It had been a week and a half since she had said a word or opened her eyes. Just laying on her back and breathing. But she did open her eyes and said "I remember you" closed her eyes and returned to just breathing.

Back to the hospital after the weekend. I wasn't assigned Mrs. Cordrescu by my professor so I quietly entered her room to see how she was.

An uncanny silent awareness in people who are getting ready to die. A knowingness even at the very threshold. I was in the room not a minute when she expired her last breath. It was clear – as it had been with Robert in chapter seven – that she had waited for me or perhaps merely felt my presence enter the room. She knew it was time to let go.

Her death fell lighter than a feather. I'd not seen the face of the death until that moment and I saw it in its most benevolent form, its beatitude.

I was surprised and moved to see such a death in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*.

Jacks' (Daniel Day-Lewis) an old hippie who lives off the Maine coast with his teenage daughter, He has an extreme heart condition and as he prepares to die he tries to free his child from the paternal embrace that she find a life off the island.

The time comes when its his to let go and he does so with the recognizable lack of drama that those who work with the dying know.

"Clinically" carbon dioxide builds up in the blood and slowly shuts down the regulation center of respiration in the brain stem.

Ram Dass once asked a spirit ally, "what shall I tell people about death?"

"Tell them its completely safe."

And death by unnatural causes?

The unmoved heart of the heroic or unheroic killer that is the staple of the movies has little relationship to the actual act of killing.

There is a wound to taking another human life as any veteran will tell you if we would take the time to listen. During this desperate moment, when the Bush administration has attempted to make war (and God help us, empire) respectable this is no time to mindlessly consume these lies.

And so I find myself pondering five simple words of Clint “Dirty Harry” Eastwood as he responds to the young Hmong kid in Gran Torino. The kid asked the essential question of a boy who longs for revenging bloodshed with bloodshed: “What does it feel like to kill somebody?”

“You don’t want to know,” says the Eastwood figure, a Korean veteran who doesn’t care much for “gooks” but nonetheless protects the young man from his impulse to kill.

"I wish I had never acquired the knowledge of my capacity to kill," said Lance Dickeson to me when we were in Vietnam.

Eastwood made “make my day” the lingo of every twelve year old trying to look menacing in a dangerous world. America doesn’t in fact want to know what it is to kill and so we kill freely. John Kerry among others testified to the killing of civilians in Vietnam in the first Winter Soldiers conference over thirty years ago and last March a second Winter Soldiers gathering convened.

A generation of Iraq vets are joining their grandfathers in the army of the homeless because America *never did want to know*.

In cinema we consume death hungrily and endlessly. I watch a lot of movies – a lot – and I've spent over half my life working with the dying and befriending those who have killed.

Strange amalgam. To consume death and killing but a fundamental taboo on telling the truth about death and killing.

What is it about this systematic falsifying of something so basic?

And in what way does it falsify us in our very soul?