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## DEATH: SILENCE, SPEAKING, LISTENING

The water in a vessel is sparkling;  
the water in the sea is dark.

The small truth has words that are clear;  
the great truth has great silence.

— Tagore, from *Stray Birds*,  
CLXXVI

Of all of the great truths of human experience which seem to escape most persistently the glittering grasp of language, death is the most ineffable. Confronted with death we most frequently revert to the inarticulate state of weeping, or to the simple language of action, sending flowers or extending a warm hand. When we do succeed in speaking about death, to the dying, to the bereaved or to our own mortal hearts, we seem to find only the most banal words. These words seem to return upon us and shame us into further silence.

As Tagore's words indicate, this silence is not altogether inappropriate. When thinking and speaking deploy themselves in our daily life, they lay hold of the diverse and manipulable world of things to be done and persons to be encountered in the tasks of the work-a-day projects of existence. Rarely are we really at a loss for words in regard to the small truths of everyday experience. When, however, consciousness reverts toward confrontation with its own situation of being in the world questing meaning and destined to die, the speaker and that which is spoken about, thinking and that about which we would think suddenly coincide and we are expelled from the domain of objectifiable problems into the dark realm of the living mysteries of man himself.

The great truths of the human realm have a great silence, and we are inclined to accept the advice of Wittgenstein in regard to these great mysteries. "What can be said at all can be said clearly: and whereof one

cannot speak thereof one must be silent." (*Tractatus*, p. 27)

Yet this silence is unsatisfactory to man. Many different phrases have been invented over the ages to try to capture the distinctive characteristic of the human animal. Rational animal, man the worker or man the playful one are examples of these definitions of the human phenomenon. I think however that one of the most comprehensive and yet profound characterizations of human experience is that of the philosopher, Cassirer. He describes man as the *animal symbolicum*, as the symbol-making animal. It seems to be absolutely fundamental to us in our effort to sustain ourselves in a meaningful cultural universe to render the chaotic flux of our sensory and emotional experience into some sort of distinct and comprehensive symbols. This activity is in evidence everywhere in the human dimension from the paintings of our early ancestors found in the caves of Lascaux to the mathematical patterns which cover the blackboards in the physicist's classroom. We stand under an inner exigency to render our experience into some symbolic framework. The darker the experience, the more intimately it encroaches upon us as experiencing and symbolizing animals, the more intense becomes the inner compulsion to articulate that experience into some communicable, preservable and manipulable symbols. Silence is our primordial condition but not our natural state. All silence reaches out toward some kind of language whether that language be actual words or the more fundamental languages of ritual and the dance, of music, of numbers, of images painted and sculpted.

All silence strains toward language. All experience requires symbolic articulation. Dark as the great truths which are wrapped in silence might be, they seek the clear and sparkling light of the word.

It is these principles which we must keep in mind when we return to the mystery of death to which I alluded at the beginning of this essay. Death is a tremendous, terrifying and yet fascinating mystery. It reveals to us something which is at the very heart of our nature and destiny. Like all great mysteries it silences us, bringing to a momentary halt the endless babble which usually fills the empty corridors of our minds. But death also requires of us some word. Because death is so terrifying and silencing it is usually, as Rilke put it, "the side of life that is averted from us, unilluminated by us." It is the shadow dimension of the self, always there, in some way acknowledged but never confronted, never known face to face.

At the time of one's dying, however, the situation changes. What has been through most of the stages of life simply a shadow, ever following, but always unencountered, requiring articulation but never enverbalized, enters the foreground of consciousness and becomes an all-encompassing preoccupation. Suddenly the possibility which is not to be out-stripped appears before us as the possibility of no longer being able to be here any more. We can no longer walk away into the small truths of our daily chatter because death is precisely the closing-off of our accessibility to that realm. Dying is having to leave the familiar domain of experiencing and speaking. Suddenly we really cannot go home any more.

Thus it is that at the time of dying it becomes the major life task of the sufferer to speak, to draw the inarticulate shadow of mortality out into the clear light of language. In adolescence, through the rites of initiation, however they be organized, it is sexuality and adult responsibility which must be articulated into the conscious structure of linguistic existence. In the rite of passage which is the ultimate meaning of dying, it is mortality which must be met and integrated into the self-understanding of the dying person.

Speaking is not easy, nor is it a simple process. In a schematic way we might say that the symbolic process of enverbalizing has at least three stages. First of all the confused terrors of the heart's appreciation of its being in the world must be cast into some imaginative story. Non-verbal, pictorial representation seems to be the most primordial form of representation. This form of thinking and symbolizing remains at the root of our speaking process. We call this dreaming. In dreaming we communicate with ourselves, revealing to our more conscious dimension that hidden shadow self which we often call the unconscious. Dreaming is a symbolic process. It usually consists of a series of images and actions organized into some sort of scenario or story. These dramas played out within the mind, opened by sleep to their power, are not simply a worthless flux of clutter left over from the day. Rather dreams are some of the most honest and significant expressions of our deepest humanity. In the dream we remember who we are, and we express that identity in dramas of self-definition which have or at least can have profound effects upon the authenticity of our life in the world. The imaginative scenarios of the dream are, then, the first symbolic articulation of experience. If the dream is primordial it is not

final. The dream gives birth to and requires verbal articulation. The language which is closest to the dream, which is the true heir of the dream, is poetry. Poetry is images rendered into words. It is full of the veiled indirection of the dream. Nothing is said, 'straight out'. Substitution, paradox, and contradiction seem to surround the poetic utterance, and this is as it should be for in the image-songs of the poem the symbolic process is in transition from the rich spiritual humus of the dream to the schematic clarity of conceptual symbols. The poem, the veiled, paradoxical and often indirect image, expressed in words, is important in the symbolic process. For the dream image is fluid, and since it is newly-emerged from the shadow side of the mind it can easily slip back into the dark of total silence. The poetic image expressed in some verbal formula is more graspable. It remains, can be remembered and worked upon.

The poetic process is transitional, however. The human mind in its modern situation seems always to require some form of interpretation in order to satisfy its inner élan. Following upon the heels of every theatrical drama or film dream, we have the critics who tell us what it means. Gathered around the poetic products of all forms of literature we have the literary critics and professors who explain to us. So also in regard to our own dreams expressed in our own poetic images and indirections. We need to become for ourselves critics and self-interpreters. We need to tell ourselves in plain English what has been revealed to us in the metaphors of dream and poetry.

Speaking, then, reaches from the dream through the poetic utterance toward the clear and distinct utterances of plain language. The dying person is confronted with the task of speaking to himself the reality of death. In the authentic accomplishment of that task the dying one will begin with dream material. Often the dying person spends the day drifting back and forth between wakefulness and sleep. We often neglect to appreciate the possible significance of those moments absorbed in sleep. It is then, often enough, that strange dreams appear, dreams which are a primordial laying hold of the terror of death, a first effort to handle in a human way the final stage of human existence. Of course it is impossible to know the dreams of another. It is possible, however, to hear and understand the poetic utterances of the dying. How often do dying persons begin to try to communicate to themselves their dream apprehensions in words which lack the clarity and

directness of ordinary prose. They are not understood and appear to be saying foolish things so we laugh it away and turn to other themes of discussion. Doctor Elizabeth Kubler-Ross tells the story of a little girl who was dying. One night she called the nurse and said to her, "What will happen if the hospital catches on fire while I am in this oxygen tent?" The obvious answer which was promptly given was that there would be no fire there, that no one around there smoked, etc. Let that be the end of such a fear. But in actuality that question was a kind of poetic speaking in which the child was putting into words her fears about death. It is only by understanding and accepting the indirect and veiled speaking of poetry that we can help the sufferer make the transition to the full awareness of prose, help them concretize their fears in full confrontation with what is in reality troubling them, namely the moment of ultimate separation.

The preeminent existential task of the dying is to speak. By telling themselves in some symbolic medium what is happening to them and what it means, they gain mastery over their experience and can ultimately die in a dignified and accepting manner.

What is the task of the persons who surround the dying, of the helping professions and of the family? It seems to me that the most basic service we can render to the dying is that of listening.

Speaking requires a listener. For the most part the symbolic process of self-articulation takes place within the interpersonal situation. We require the presence of another in order to become present to ourselves. Communication with ourselves and communication with others are not two processes which can be totally distinguished. They are rather two sides of one living phenomenon. As Berger and Luckmann put it in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*,

It can be said that language makes "more real" my subjectivity not only to my conversation partner but also to myself. . . . This very important characteristic of language is well caught in the saying that men must talk about themselves until they know themselves.

The dying require, then, in order that they might be able to accomplish this last task of life, the presence of someone who will listen to them and by listening help them literally realize their dreams by realizing in clear language the inchoate messages of their dream images and their poetic indirections.

It is here, of course, that most of us fail to be able to serve the dying. We want to do things for them in an exterior and physical way, to make them comfortable. This is good and necessary, of course. We want to talk to them and to thus turn their minds away from the narrow and sad world of their present experience limited as it is to the small room of a hospital or nursing home. We might even want to console them by telling them what we think about death and dying or we may chatter on in unconscious fear that they might begin to bring into our midst a shadow which we ourselves are actively engaged in fleeing. We would be good and loving and helpful to the dying, but we won't listen. This is the sad aspect of a situation in which our giving is not synchronized with the need of the dying. They need someone who will listen.

To listen is difficult, as difficult and complex as speaking. In order to be able to listen we must be free. We must be free from the inner compulsion to judge the other, free from the inner compulsion to project upon them our own state of mind and symbolic frameworks. We must be able to solicit from the dying person efforts at self-articulation while not imposing upon them our own ideas. Listening is not just not talking. Listening is a permissive presence which lets the other be as he is and become as he must become. In listening we must sometimes speak. But this speaking must itself be a kind of listening in which we express not so much our judgments and our prejudices as our acceptance and understanding.

Most of us, most of the time, are so busy trying to articulate our own experiences into symbolic systems that we cannot truly permit the other to take up our time with his speaking. We want to communicate with ourselves and impose our viewpoint on the world and thus lack the peace, patience and freedom to be true listeners. In order, then, to become listeners, we do not need so much to resolve not to open our lips. Rather we need to free ourselves from the task of our own speaking by accomplishing it. In other words, in order to be able to listen to the dying we must have first spoken to ourselves about death and come to some measure of acceptance of it in our own symbolic terms. Then, having finished our own business, we can be free to help others in their symbolic task. This means of course that we must try to illuminate that shadow side of life which is our own mortality by consulting our ownmost dreams about death and then try to bring that dream into our own poetry, to finally interpret that poetry into our

own basic philosophy about death. Having done that authentically for ourselves and having experienced directly the necessity of working this through for oneself in one's own most intimate way, we will have learned by experience what it is to die and we will have, I think, become free enough to listen to the dying as they speak.

On the river of tears man travels back into silence, the silence of the great dark truths. On the river of words, man travels forth into the light of self-transcendence. On the river of tears we are engulfed by death but on the river of linguistic utterance we transcend death so that we can say in the end — death where is thy victory.