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Cal 105-B2

5 March, 2023

Through The Windshield Of The Land Rover

On the left bank of the Ganges river, in the southeastern Uttar Pradesh state of northern India lies the city of Varanasi - the city where people come to die. On his first trip to India, American spiritual teacher Ram Dass, then known as ex-Harvard professor Richard Alpert, recounts his experience in the holy city: “I was overwhelmed by the number of people wandering the streets, waiting to die. There were lepers and people with obvious deformities and visible cancers. Each person carried just enough money to pay for the firewood needed for their cremation” (162). Later, sitting by the edge of the Ganges, he watched family members approach the burning bodies of their loved ones and crack their skulls with a stick to “liberate the dead person’s soul” (163). Finally, paddling through the river, “the corpse of a young girl, maybe four years old, bumped gently into [the] boat, bloated and discolored” (163). Ram Dass tells how he was so freaked out, he ran back to his hotel and hid under the bed. He remarks in his memoir, “I could barely look at them. I felt waves of horror. I thought they should all be in the hospital” (162). Rightfully so, Ram Dass’ reactions to a horrifying city of the dead seem entirely natural. However, for Hindus, “to die in [Varanasi] is the highest aspiration” (281). After many adventures and an incredible spiritual transformation, Ram Dass realized that he was “caught up in a bubble - exuding Western pity… viewing the culture through the windshield of the land rover” (162). From the perspective of its natives, Varanasi is not a city of the dead, but a

beautiful holy land filled with poets, philosophers, musicians, and worshippers. As Ram Dass observes, “It’s a way to go consciously to your death. When you die in [Varanasi], Shiva whispers Ram, the name of God, in your ear, and your soul is liberated. Those people knew they were in the perfect place to die. They understood the symmetry of the cycle of life and death” (281). In his book *Denial of Death*, American anthropologist Ernest Becker argues that “the fear of death is natural and present in everyone” (3). I agree with Becker that this is true for “everyone” - that is, everyone raised in Western cultures, where death provokes fear. Our fear of death is entirely natural - but it is not the only way of seeing things, and it is a fear, like all others, that can be overcome.

In his book, Ernest Becker takes the stance of the “Morbidly-Minded Argument”, which supposes that “the fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be” (3). Becker begins with recounting the history of our considerations with death, from celebrations of religious heroes who defeated death, to modern existentialists like Martin Heidegger. Becker acknowledges that we have incredible volumes of work on the subject of death, but no clear solution. His purpose is to analyze the recent “revival of interest in death,” and pave a way to making sense of what he calls religion and philosophy’s “central problem” (1). His main argument, as stated above, is that the fear of death is entirely natural and present in everyone. I disagree with his claim of the fear’s omnipotence, but I believe Becker is correct in his assumption that the fear of death is quite natural. While psychologists and cultural scientists will make their theories and postulations, I feel it is beneficial to ask the opinions of poets on such an abstract concept. Roman poet Lucretius would agree with Becker on his death fear theories, and might even add that this fear is what drives us. In “Mortality and the Soul”, he says,

“It is largely the dread - Of death on which these open wounds of life thrive and are fed, - For Vile Disgrace and Bitter Want seem so far from the state - Of a sweet, established life, they almost loiter at Death's gate” (63-66). Here, Lucretius describes the paradox of life and death. We fear death because it taints all of our perspectives: on happiness, our achievements, all things that give us purpose. But death is simultaneously the motivation behind all the meaning in our lives. Becker describes this “impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life” (4). This “obliviousness” is what allows us to live our lives with equanimity - unafflicted by the incomprehensibility of our own annihilation (4). Our fear of death is entirely natural, poets and philosophers agree, but here is where opinions start to diverge. Becker makes the bold statement that “reality and fear go together naturally” (5). But what if the psychologists are wrong - what if we didn’t have to be afraid?

An alternative perspective on death is detailed in the *Bardo Guidebook*, a clarification of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche. According to the *Bardo*, death is the ultimate chance to attain liberation from the bonds of samsaric existence, the beginningless cycle of birth and death. In this view, death is presented not as something misfortunate but as a crucial opportunity to purify the soul and melt into the primordial unity. At the time of death, worldly benefits are of no use to us. As Rinpoche explains, “Anything… that is greatly valued during this lifetime is totally useless at the moment of death… What is of real value when we arrive at the moment of death… is personal experience in Dharma practice” (96). Insight into emptiness, meditational practice, and other Dharmic experiences are all that matters when we are faced with this unique chance at total liberation. From the perspective of Vajrayana Buddhism, a spiritual belief dating back over a thousand years, death is nothing to be afraid of. In fact, our reflections

on death can be used as a spiritual tool. In the opening paragraph of the chapter "How To Die," Rinpoche implores us to "make some preparation for the moment when your life has come to an end" (95). In this view, our fears of death can be transmuted into spiritual practices. Becker may argue that this faith is "purely intellectual, verbal admission" and that "the effect of fear is repressed" (5). He would even claim that "religions like Hinduism and Buddhism perform the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn, which is a sort of negative magic: claiming not to want what you really want most" (1). The *Bardo* makes note of this discrepancy, describing in detail the endless ways in which we can trick ourselves as Becker (mockingly) observes. The *Bardo* says, "We can spend years studying whatever religion or school of thought is of interest to us… But simply studying these teachings, thinking about them and clarifying them in our mind, is not enough to be of true value at the moment of death" (96). The *Bardo* emphasizes that we can easily fool ourselves into repressing our fear of death - what Becker fails to admit is that real understanding and genuine faith is possible. It is clear that fear of death is not the only perspective, and beings who consider death as a vehicle for liberation do exist. In fact, ask any of the 400 million followers of Buddhism around the world, or one of 1.2 *billion* Hindus, many of whom believe in some branch of these ideas. But Becker makes a good point in his criticisms. Growing up with the social norms of Western civilization, with that overarching death fear as a mainstay, it is easy to see how alternative ways of thinking could be repression in disguise. The question we are presented with is one of utmost importance: How is it possible to truly overcome our fear of death, without merely conning ourselves?

To conclude, I will attempt to outline some methodologies that have aided humanity and myself in living fulfilling lives without a crippling fear of its end. Since I find an uncomfortable lack of reality to the answers found in psychological sciences, I will again turn to the poets for

help. In “Mortality and the Soul”, Lucretius says, “just as children, trembling, are afraid- Of all things in the dark, so sometimes we in broad daylight - Fear things imaginary as what babes dread in the night. - Thus we must put the shadowy terrors of the mind to flight, Not by the illumination of the sun and its bright rays, But by observing Nature's laws and looking on her face” (88-93). Lucretius compares our fear of death to that of children’s fears of the dark. It is an entirely natural fear, but one that can be resolved if only we grow up a little and look at it directly. In *Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker discusses how “most human action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death” (Terror Management Theory). But what if, as Lucretius suggests, we stopped denying death’s existence and accepted death as an inevitability of life? Perhaps it is in this open acceptance that we can truly find peace. In his memoir, Ram Dass describes the experience of openly accepting death and how it can affect “the one facing death [and] the one sitting at the bedside” (284). Ram Dass recounts a moment when he was sitting with a close friend who was dying of cancer. She was in incredible pain, literally “writhing in the bed from the intensity of it” (282). Unable to get any words through, Ram Dass just sat there, “noticing the pain and letting my emotions flow… Just noticing the laws of the universe unfold. I sat there, watching the suffering, and began to feel a vast, deep calm. The room became luminous. In that moment, my friend turned to me and whispered, ‘I feel so peaceful’” (282). By simply being aware of their predicaments - dying person, living friend - and without judging “Nature’s laws” as Lucretius puts it, the pair were able to find peace in the present moment. Echoing the *Bardo*, Ram Dass says, “The best preparation for death is to live in the present moment. If you are living in this moment, then when the moment of death comes, it is just another moment” (284). Think about that one! At the end of it all, death is just another moment. Just like this one, and just like that one, and this one too…

Works Cited

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