ANCIENT AND MODERN ORIENTATIONS TO DEATH: THE RESURRECTION OF MYTH IN THE TREATMENT OF THE DYING

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INTRODUCTION

The “mythical world” of the ancients differed markedly from our own. It was not a “causal” world; mythical accounts of antiquity were not meant to give rational explanations as we know them. Rather, as Cassirer states, “myth sprouts forth from deep human emotions . . . it is the expressing of emotions” (Cassirer, 1973:43). Faced with a hostile world, comprised of potentially dangerous human beings and awe inspiring natural forces, myth eased human fear and suffering. Myths allowed humans to face their fears through stories, rites and culturally accepted explanations. “In myth man begins to learn a new and strange art: the art of expressing, and that means organizing, his most deeply rooted instincts, his hopes and fears” (Cassirer, 1974:48).

As we might expect, the significance of myth is greatest when it relates to our deepest fear: the fear of death. Thus when we turn to consider human fear in the face of death, we find a profusion of mythical accounts. And here we most clearly see myth’s function as a tool we use to deal with the unknown. Through mythical images and symbolic constructions, belief in spirits, ghosts or ancestors, human beings have sought to relieve their deepest fears: this was not a logical answer to the question of death, it simply allowed us to set our lives in some relation to the mysterious fact of death and dying. Through myth, “death ceases being a hard unbearable physical fact; it becomes understandable and supportable” (Cassirer, 1973:49).
Today we have no reason to presume that death has become either more palatable, more comprehensible or less frightening than it once was. What it has become, however, is less visible. Thus, for the modern individual, weaned away from his or her deep ties with traditional religion, wandering alone through a desert of secular life, myths of universal harmony, heaven or hell, transmigration of the soul, or reincarnation, seem a bit superstitious, somehow silly. When given the choice, we seldom look at death. And if the literature documenting our contemporary orientation to life and death is even partially accurate, we may have created the first culture which has even attempted to hide from the living the inevitable fact of death itself.

As a host of reports have shown, we now ensconce our dying friends, mothers, wives and grandparents in elegant and attractive hospitals and nursing homes. In a society-wide reaction formation to this fear of death we collectively hope that science will somehow answer our individual prayers by eliminating cancer and any other threat to our immortality. In the meantime we keep death as far from our attention as possible, making it a problem for experts in the management of dying. As Rollo May sardonically comments:

Death is obscene, unmentionable, pornographic; . . . death is a nasty mistake. Death is not to be talked of in front of the children, nor talked about at all if we can help it. (May, 1969:106)

How are we to understand this view of death and dying? Is it merely a manifestation of our general estrangement from all organic processes (Roszak, 1972)? We avoid dirt by plastic coating our environment, we avoid human waste by simply flushing the bathroom bowl, we avoid garbage by merely "putting out the trash," we avoid death by sending the dying away to hospitals; thus we buffer ourselves from the biological fact of human decay and death. No doubt there is some truth in this explanation; however, there is more here than simply a reluctance on our part to face organic decay. This modern flight from death points toward a deeper crisis in modern life—a crisis that reflects the loss of contact with some satisfying structure of meaning, and erosion of the traditional ground of thought and action.

Thus our relation to death bespeaks our uncertain relation to