

New Philosopher Writers' Award

- **Award XIX:** LIFE
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Still Life

Despite my many years of sport and physical activity, I have never before been asked to 'do a corpse pose'. It's not every day an adult is asked to play dead. It is a late Monday evening, dark and raining heavily outside. As a Melburnian, it seems I am even partial to writing about the weather. I find myself towards the end of my first beginners' class in Iyengar yoga, a type of yoga perfectly suited to people like me. At thirty-two and riddled with a myriad of ancient and more recent sporting injuries, I carry the physical hangovers of an adolescence devoted to sport, but not stretching. I feel old before my time amidst the lean and limber bodies. This is confirmed to me by the supply of folded blankets, props and bolsters I have accumulated over the course of the class, brought to me by the instructor, to aide my poses. By the end of the 90 minute class, I am surrounded by what appears to be a small pillow fort.

The corpse pose, or 'shavasana', is a pose of total relaxation and, precisely for this reason, is the one I find most challenging. I think to myself, if I can master any pose it is the one that involves lying down. To 'do' the corpse pose strikes me as an odd turn of phrase, and, neglecting the instruction to *relax*, my thoughts trail off into thoughts of death as I lay in the darkened studio. I think of Camus' line from the *Myth of Sisyphus* and one of the twentieth century's famous existentialist pronouncements, 'there is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.' I think of the Stoics and their invocation to 'memento mori' - remember you are mortal. I think of the artistic technique of the *vanitas*, the practise of randomly placing skulls through artwork, designed to evoke the transience of life, the futility of pleasure and wealth, and the certainty of death. Parades of cartoonish skeletons dance through my mind, inspired from the *Danse Macabre* artworks. A call to us to recognise the universality of death, and to appreciate that no matter what one's lot in life might be, the *danse macabre* unites all. Cheery thoughts, to be sure, for Monday night yoga.

Yet death is a curiosity in the modern world, completely strange and removed from view. Death is to be treated, sterilised and contained...almost as if it were infectious. Best kept out of sight, it seems. But, as Benjamin Franklin famously quipped, death is the only certainty. Along with taxes, of course. Perhaps less concerned with taxes was the French Renaissance statesman, author and philosopher, Michel Montaigne, who entreated us: 'let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death...we do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere'.

In his aptly named book the *Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker argued that we seek to transcend our mortality by focussing on our symbolic selves rather than our mortal selves in an attempt to imbue our lives with meaning. If we were to fully consider and appreciate our humanness, that we are all fated to die on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam inside a meaningless universe, the gravitas of such a revelation would be unbearable. Whichever way we may choose to look at it, we are all inevitably food for worms. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that. As Becker rather poetically remarked, we are gods with anuses, capable of pondering the infinite yet afflicted by our own mortality. Our response to this human quandary, Becker claims, is to focus on something bigger than ourselves – an ‘immortality project’ - in an attempt to make our lives meaningful, to render us part of something eternal. It is up to us individually to do this, to choose our project, our path, and to find our meaning.

At this point in my shavasana musings, it seems I arrive at an impasse of circular logic, the stuff of Instagram posts and mountain-climbing motivational posters. That the meaning of life is to give life meaning. But whose meaning? Is there any objective and universal human meaning, or are we bound by and to our subjective experiences in such a way that we can only realise meaning at the level of the individual? Is the colour red I see exactly the same colour red that you see? How can we know? I recall Wittgenstein had something to say on this dilemma. He concluded that although we can never objectively know what someone else’s experiences entail to arrive at any absolute, objective meaning, it does not prevent us from meaningfully discussing the *concept* of red, of a beetle, or even of the meaning of life.

Buddhism claims that there is one overarching common experience that unites humanity, as well as all sentient beings. The experience of suffering. Irrespective of its type or degree, suffering is universal. On the surface, this appears a nihilistic assessment of our prospects. A prospect that no doubt prompted Camus’ suicide pronouncement. Nevertheless, might a shared experience in suffering be something we can all objectively hold on to? Buddhism cautions us against this type of holding or grasping, whether it be for status, immortality projects, or even happiness. It is the transience of life that renders these things fleeting, and therefore it is precisely this attachment to pursuing these ends that causes suffering. But it is not all doom and gloom. By recognising our common suffering, we may realise a sense of compassion and loving-kindness toward all sentient beings. After all, we are all similarly fated. Paradoxically, to fully *grasp* this realisation, to feel it in the marrow of our bones, appears to be a precondition of enlightenment.

In their book *Catching Fire*, Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal argue that what is fundamental to the human condition is to seek the subliminal, peak states of consciousness and self-transcendence, whether through art, substances, sport, meditation, religion, music or any plethora of means or methods. As proof, they point to the trillions of dollars we spend in pursuit of these experiences, something they call the ‘altered states economy’. Similarly, Maslow’s famous hierarchy has ‘transcendence’ atop his pyramid of human needs, whilst for Nietzsche the pursuit of self-overcoming is the highest aspiration of humanity. Nietzsche embraced the idea of *amor fati*, a sort of nihilistic embrace and love of the futility of existence. A love of fate. To that end, he stated, ‘my formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it... but love it.’ So whether the meaning of life is to seek transcendence, self-overcoming or

enlightenment – it seems that life itself is given meaning by our very mortality, our humanness. That we die defines life, and therefore must inform any meaning we seek to give to it.

As I lay on my yoga mat, my thoughts meander to a Zen koan, ‘what face did you have before your parents were born?’ prompting me to contemplate what it may have been like before I was born. This does not strike me as scary or frightening but rather elicits in me a deep curiosity, as I muse upon whether death is simply a return to that state before birth, to a state of un-knowing-ness. We are dead a long time, for far longer than we will ever be alive. Life is given its meaning, irrespective of whether it can be objectively or subjectively knowable, through the process of death. Without death, life is something different.

Perhaps then, the meaning of life is, conversely, the preparation for death. A good death. And a good death necessitates embracing life. A necessary first step toward this preparation, as Montaigne encourages, is in depriving death of its strangeness so that we may be willing to meet it wherever it shall find us.

Far from being a nihilistic or macabre realisation, it feels life-affirming and exciting. Maybe there is something in this corpse pose after all. Not simply to meditate on death, but to practice death. The phrase ‘do the corpse pose’ now seems far less odd. As we finish the class and I move to deconstruct my pillow fort of blankets, bolsters and blocks, I feel a deep sense of solace and calm. I feel like I have nailed corpse pose. Lying down has always been one of my strong suits. Though let’s leave the nail out of the coffin a little while longer yet.
