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Varying Death Perceptions and Their Implications

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Item: The television screen nightly presents the tally of death counts in the Indo-China War—the American dead war dead; the enemy body count. There is no listing of civilian deaths or injuries.

Item: “The Pentagon Documents” convey the impression that American officials, in plotting the expansionist U.S. strategy, did not concern themselves with the cost in Vietnamese civilian suffering and deaths.

Item: President Kennedy is assassinated and the TV drones on for hours and days, giving the viewer little choice but to experience the emotional mournful drama.

Item: Three Americans die in a fire in their grounded spacecraft and fill their countrymen with grief. Several years later, this scene is replayed across the globe in the Soviet Union; the bodies lie in state. Soviet Party Chief Brezhnev is seen openly in tears.

Item: Two New York City policemen are gunned down; the acts are seen as part of an increasing pattern of wanton violence upon the police. As policemen ride in their patrol cars, the deaths—and with them, fear, anger, and hate—become part of their unconscious being.

Item: The National Safety Council performs its yearly ritual of forecasting the July 4th death toll, as millions take to the road. The victims are identified in 2-line newspaper columns.

Item: Thousands die in Peruvian earthquakes; a Pakistani civil war takes a large toll; starvation menaces in scattered places on earth as Americans busily plan their summer vacations.

Item: Four students are shot by National Guardsmen at Kent State University; the tragedy burns an impression deep in the minds of their college brothers; it becomes a symbol of government repression of dissent; it comes to epitomize the chasm dividing generational cultures.

Item: The multitude of “faceless” American dead—brought down by cancer, heart attack, “old age,” unknown medical cause, traffic or home accident, job hazard—are mourned only by family and close friends. The government takes little notice.

These items suggest that humans have varying perceptions and reactions to death, depending upon the factors of (1) awareness and (2) translation. That is, does the individual know about a specific death, its accompanying suffering, how the fatality fits into a particular pattern of deaths and if so, how does he translate the message? Given his level of awareness, what does the death or its pattern mean to or for the perceiver? Will
he identify with the victim or the one who inflicted the fatal blow? Will it increase his fear? Will he experience emotional wellbeing?

No doubt, awareness and translation are a function of human needs, socialization, communication systems, and visibility. Perceptions and reactions to death surely are based, in part, upon the nature of humans. Societies must meet their inhabitants’ biological needs. Likewise, demands for security, identity, privacy, union, and release stem from the emotional character of humans and musts be fulfilled as well.

At the same time, there is a cultural framework within which we are born, live, and die. The human is socialized. He is taught to identify his society’s enemies and their state of humanness. He learns much about death—when it is to be justified, excused, and ignored. He learns about the circumstances under which he is to be concerned with alleviating suffering.

Where is the line dividing innate human nature, on the one hand, and learned response, on the other? Regrettably, there is no certainty. Ethnologists and sociologists are locked in “battle.”

Humans receive information about concrete events and persons and get symbolic messages. The data are transmitted through communication systems. The means of communicating can be oral, written, mechanical, electronic, and visual. The networks range from the simplest spoken dialogue between two persons, to small group communication, to larger channels, to written rules (and informal deviations) in bureaucracies, to mass media broadcasts from distant stations.

These networks link up the perceiver, the sender, the incident and its translation. The networks, together with their coloration, have an impact upon the visibility of a death or its larger pattern. Thus a particular death may linger in the “mind’s eye” because the dead person was a member of the perceiver’s family or a close friend, or perhaps, owing to repeated TV broadcasts.

But humans don’t merely perceive; they react too. Their reactions can extend from disbelief or disregard to emotional warmth and security, to fear or hate, to commitment to a specific act or pattern of action.

How humans perceive and react to deaths would seem to fly in the face of moral imperatives. A fundamental moral assumption should be that human life is precious. From the vantage point of the society as a collective, each life should be considered of equal worth and death an equal loss. Selective concern about death cheapens life. It leads to more deaths and more unalleviated suffering. The destruction of life is easier when the plight of certain groups is unknown or ignored, or when some people are judged as less than human—as “animals,” “monsters,” “Huns.”

“Troublesome” exceptions to the moral assumption of equal loss are readily apparent: Doubtless, members of a family will place the loss of one of their own in larger focus.
And from that family’s perspective, and ours, such a concern is surely moral. In addition, there would seem to be moral validity in dwelling longer upon the death of an innocent victim than upon his aggressor. Prolonging a fair and democratic society for the good of its great majority inevitably poses the most difficult moral choices. Thus some lives justifiably might be viewed as expendable—for example, young soldiers. Other lives might be deemed uniquely precious—the president, his cabinet, and members of Congress. Yet, using such a scale of the value of X, Y, Z, lives etc. carries with it the heaviest burden to engage in exhaustive efforts to find alternatives to making such God-like decisions.

Our basic moral imperative of equality, then, must stand. It flows from the essence of humankind. Human society descends to the depths of barbarism with any permanent attachment to any scale of expendability.

Given the perceptions and reactions to differing categories of death and the dead, and given our moral assumptions, what is to be done? First, we must have better collective understanding about the nature of “human life, death, and suffering.” What, for example, is “death”? When does it occur? Even medical doctors are not agreed upon the matter. Some would take out healthy organs for transplant within minutes after termination of a heart and pulse beat; others feel compelled to wait out a longer term. Controversy, too, rages about how to categorize abortion? Is it the “taking of a human life” or the “terminating of a pre-human embryo form”? Thus we must strive for some basis of common agreement on these questions, and on other issues surrounding human life.

Secondly, educational and cultural reform should move our society closer to the moral imperative of the value of each life. The loss of policemen in action, death by accident, loss by cancer, the drowning victim—each loss should be viewed as a substantial one. Measures for prevention of each should be accorded equal consideration. Admittedly, human nature may prevent or retard such changed socialization. But wisdom would seem to lie in positing the evolving character of the learned response rather than in assuming innate traits that resist reform in death perception.

Thirdly, the communications networks must play their role. The 2-person dialogue, the small social group, the bureaucracy, the mass electronic media—all these levels are obliged to join in communicating changing patterns of death awareness and translation, as well as our moral imperatives. Means must be found for providing balanced information about human deaths, their dimensions, their settings, and their causes. The varying categories of death and the dead should be transmitted, reflected upon, and made to share an equal amount of visibility and attention.

Finally, public policy must be based upon our moral concern about the value of life, and alleviation of suffering, and equal loss in death. Governmental action should not be in response to particular selective, or isolated suffering or deaths—whether of astronauts, college students, American soldiers, trapped miners, and New York City policemen. Nor should policy accept, unless upon the most temporary of bases, any notion of “expendable lives.”
These steps are not easy. Skeptical strategists, other-occupied citizens, “national “patriots,” and others somehow must be moved to understand the moral and strategic sense of these proposals. Yet our approach is a beginning. It forces us to reexamine our selective perceptions and reactions to life and death. And in the judgment of this writer, such reflection makes us more human and humane.