

Dining with the Dead:
Tales from the Crypt in Celebration of Easter
By Guy Newland

After a lull, waves
Rush up and whiten the shore.
Where has our friend gone?

Guy Newland

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
--But who is that on the other side of you?

from "The Wasteland" by T.S. Eliot

For as long as we have been a species that understands our mortality, the relationship between the living and the dead has been our intimate concern. To wonder about how the living relate to the dead is to wonder about who we are, what it means to live, where our life comes from, and—of course--what will happen when we die. In this talk I will suggest that we cannot escape these questions--that we turn from them at our peril. To find ourselves, the fullness of our life, we must first acknowledge that it is woven from so many threads, so many stories, that flow from lives now past through us into the future. Then we can choose, in full awareness, what stitch to pick up; we can find the syllable that only we can add to the epic.

On the surface, at least, the dominant secular narrative denies that we can talk about any kind of relationship between the living and the dead—because only the living are real. The dead are dead and gone and therefore cannot be in any relationship with the living. Equally, at present in America the dominant orthodox religious narrative denies a relationship between the living and the dead. The living and the dead are each dealt with by God according to “His” plan--in separate realms. The dead cannot help or harm the living; the living cannot help or harm the dead.

But the relationship between the living and the dead is ancient, irrepressible and undeniable. When a person we love, who has been a powerful presence in our lives, dies—he does *not* just disappear. He definitely will haunt us because he still lives in us, his laugh echoing in our ears. We expect to see him where he should be even when we know it is now impossible.

And it can seem that, with death, in his absence, our friend paradoxically becomes, because of that excruciating absence, even more vivid to us than ever. He is weirdly more present than ever by virtue of being gone. Perhaps we even find ourselves, for a time, unable to stop thinking of him. Perhaps we glimpse in passing someone who looks, from a certain angle, very strangely like him. We hold his image in our hearts. Perhaps we meet him in our dreams; we certainly see him vividly in our daydreams. When something new occurs, we may feel our internalized version of him reacting to it--with his sense of taste, his sense of humor, his sense of integrity.

When we live through the loss of a loved one, we get some body-wisdom to use when re-reading the Christian Easter stories. For these are indeed the stories of people who have been deeply traumatized and newly bereaved. John 20:11-16: ----But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain . . . They said, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said, “Because they have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why

are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him . . .” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned, and answered him, “Teacher!”-----

On one reading, Jesus—who has just been tortured to death-- appears to Mary Magdalene and what happens? She mistakes him for the gardener! Or—just perhaps, on another reading--the gardener appears to Mary and she mistakes him for Jesus.

Compare Luke 24.17: “That very day (the day after the sabbath) two of them (=two disciples) were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem and talking about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Stories of gods who rise from the dead are common and powerful. They have probably been around since people began telling stories around their winter fires. More than a century ago, in his famous work *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer made the still controversial argument that almost all ancient religions are at root fertility cults centering on the worship of, and periodic sacrifice of, a sacred king. This king embodies a dying and reviving god, a god who dies at the harvest and who is reborn in the spring.¹

This theme might be absent in the Hebrew Bible, but it flourished in the broader Hellenistic culture of Jesus’ time. Mystery cults of dying and rising gods were popular throughout the Mediterranean world. In this light, what is remarkable in the Gospel accounts is not that his disciples are said to have encountered Jesus in a vivid and powerful way after his death. What is remarkable is that when they encounter him, they really *do not recognize him*. He at once is and is not the same old Jesus. He is represented as having to go to great lengths—even allowing people to probe his wounds—in order to prove his identity to people who saw him every day for years, and who last saw him a day or two before. These are the people who know him better than any others-- his most intimate friends. What can this mean?

To begin, let's return to the existential situation. When a person we love deeply dies, his corpse itself is the very riddle of what it means to be human. It is his form, his body, but not he. How can this be? Where has our friend gone? That is to ask: what is a person, after all? A person is not, it seems, the shapes and colors we recognize as his body—for those are still here but the person is not. In this sense, we are all like Mary Magdalene: Every tomb is empty of the one whom we, the bereaved, seek there. Some have speculated that this problem—that a corpse looks very much like a human, but somehow is not—may be the origin of belief in a soul, an invisible essence of the person that is present in the living and absent in the dead.

Others have suggested that our fear of death leads more directly to the idea of a soul as an immortal, invisible essence that will protect us from extinction upon biological death. But according to Robert J. Lifton, belief in souls is just one example of symbolic immortality, the process of coping with the fear of death by identifying oneself with something that does not die when one's body dies.²

How do the dead live on now? There are many ways. Just as our grandparents, in some sense, live on in us now, we will live on in our children and their descendants. This is a deep and ancient feeling that explains a great deal, including the resurgent popularity of genealogical research in a time when most of us live far from the homelands of our ancestors. By extension from family identification, humans come to identify with larger social groups--their tribe, culture, or nation. When Nathan Hale said, "My only regret is that I have but one life to give for my country," he expressed the sense that his deepest self was not to be found in flesh that could be hanged, but in his contributions to our great social union. In fact, we live on in everyone whose lives we have touched, and in the people they touch, and so forth.

We also survive death in nature. We live today in a culture that attempts to isolate us from the raw cycles of nature via central heating and air, via cellophane-wrapped, factory-farm food, and so forth. Some of us react to this situation by working to re-establish a connection to the natural world. In fact, the earth really is the source of our

life. Perhaps because our spirituality does not center on that value, our technology may soon destroy us. But we work in offices and shop in stores, so we don't have day-to-day lived experience that the animals and plants around us really are our very lifeblood, our food, clothes, and shelter.

We really are *of* nature, bits of a big life-system--perhaps we could say, cells in Gaia's nervous system. Insofar as we think of ourselves not as individuals, stand-alone and separate, but instead understand our participatory identity with all of the natural forces around and within us, we survive the death of bodies. That is, at death we do not go into nothingness, but return to our source. We go out into the world of nature from which we have only seemed for a brief while, a period called "our lives," to be separate. We are, at a deep level, expressions of and manifestations of the earth, the sun, the water, and the air. As individuals we pass away, but the deepest sources of our self remain, reabsorbing our energy and continuing to manifest in new ways. In this way of representing ourselves, we are part of everything the natural world is doing.

This cyclic regeneration of life—but not isolated, individual life-forms—fails to preserve what is cultural, creative and unique about us as human persons. As individuals, we have the power to create something unique and distinctive. Richard Dawkins argues that there is more potential for survival in cultural genius than there is in biological reproduction: "As each generation passes, the contribution of one's unique genes is halved But if you contribute to the world's culture, if you have a good idea, compose a tune, invent a spark plug, write a poem, it may live on, [perhaps even] intact, long after your genes have dissolved in the common pool." (*Dawkins 1990, p. 214*) But cultural contributions need not lie only in great works of genius. Inasmuch as humans are symbolic creatures, an argument can be made that our essence resides not in our bodies but rather in the impression we leave in the minds and lives of other humans. We not only make babies, we also make pyramids, books, schools, businesses, art, etc. We put ourselves into our art, or our science, and then we put our work out into the

world, perhaps daring to hope that when our bodies are gone, something vital of ourselves will remain.

Raised a Catholic, when I was 17 I happened to attend a Unitarian Universalist service. It was in a large church featuring a powerful sound system. The service began with a Bach fugue blasting out, flooding the room. The minister spoke about how we had done nothing to deserve or earn the incredible beauty we had just experienced. Bach had created it and we inherited it from him. This, he said, is grace—an amazing, creative gift, freely given and undeserved. The service then ended rather abruptly and people crowded into the room next door, drinking coffee and chatting intensely.

I was shocked to hear the minister's comments on grace; they seemed antithetical to religion as I understood it. But now his point of view is mine. We all receive, absorb, and consume so much culture from the dead, all of it freely given. We embody them. And this is mostly—but not always--a good thing. These are often irresistible graces—we are compelled to accept this history, this culture, this language, this music, as a starting point. We are born to them, as to a certain family or body.

But as a Catholic, I was even more shocked that the core of the morning's events seemed really to be social communion over sacramental coffee. Superficially, this seemed to me then so unlike the Catholic eucharist, a richly symbolic meal that reenacts not only Jesus's last supper, but also his crucifixion and resurrection.

Let's spell this out: I was raised as a cannibal. I was taught to believe-- and in the same way other Catholics do, I did believe--that during communion we were eating the body of Christ. NOT something that represents that flesh, but something that somehow, mysteriously and miraculously, IS that flesh. And since Christ is, for all orthodox Christians, both fully God and fully human, that entails that we were eating what we regarded as *living* human flesh.

Cannibalism was one of the charges against the early Christians by their Roman persecutors. But of course, despite the implications of our theology, I was just as innocent as the early Christians were. All of this is a perfectly normal---a common and

natural human way of doing things. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner--also a Catholic--explains it this way: Rituals are “culturally intended” to arouse a mass of emotion--even illicit feelings—and then attach this energy to positive goals and values, thus reenergizing, reinvigorating our engagement with these values. Religious symbols tend to polarize between physiological phenomena such as blood, sex, death, cannibalism, on the one hand, and moral values, such as kindness, reciprocity, generosity, respect for elders. The drama of a ritual action such as the communion eucharist allows an exchange between the poles in which biological referents (eating the body of human Christ) are ennobled or redeemed while moral values (living with love in my heart) are charged up with visceral energy.³

For Christians, Easter is the culmination of the greatest sacrifice. The communion reenactment of this sacrifice is a sacrificial ritual, which always involves some degree of identification of the victim with both the sacrificer and the divinity to whom the sacrifice is being offered. Because Jesus is human, and the bread that we offer as his flesh is the bread of our life, he represents us. But he is also the God whom we worship by reenacting the sacrifice. And he is, of course, the priest who presides over his own last supper, breaking the bread that represents his own body

By eating the bread that is both human flesh and God, we ingest, absorb, and assimilate the virtue or grace of our divine Creator; we are thus re-created. It may seem strange, but it is not uniquely Christian. Archaic religions around the world involve killing god and eating him, or her, thereby renewing one’s life.

The shimmering food-web is the scary, beautiful condition of the biosphere. Today we are rare in that our distance from our food enables us to be superficially more comfortable, but distinctly more ignorant of its holiness. When you know that without the buffalo you and your children will starve, you know that it is *wakan*, full of the life-giving power. It is hunted, sacrificed, harvested, so you may live. Most of humanity has always understood the play of the world, with all its pain, not as disgusting predation but as a big potlatch celebration. Everyone at the table will eventually be part

of the meal. Understanding this is not just being realistic, it is also accepting the sacramental aspect of our brief and shaky lives.⁴

Snyder sings about dining as a path to mutual embodiment in his

Song of Taste:

Eating the living germs of grasses

Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed

around the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and thighs of

soft-voiced cows

the bounce in the lamb's leap

the swish in the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll

inside the soil

Drawing on life of living

clustered points of light spun

out of space

Hidden in the grape.

Eating each other's seed

eating

ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread:

lip to lip.

With passion, in bliss or agony, we eat each other to become each other, to live with the energy of each other in our bodies. Likewise, we devour, we consume the books and the art of our ancestors, we becoming inhabited in mind by their spirits, by their ideas and inspirations. In being consumed, they are resurrected in us and through us.

In this dance, who eats whom--who ingests and comes to embody whom--is very important. It is the living who should eat the dead, coming to be inhabited by the living spirit from the dead. When the living sacrifice a victim (representing both the god and their own lives) and then eat him, this is good and holy, renewing the wholeness of their persons and community, breathing new life into us.

But when the dead eat the living, the effect is the opposite. That dead can eat others is already monstrous, as the dead are supposed to have passed beyond physical need. In our popular horror films and also in world folklore, the dead rise up and attack the living because they have been neglected. Their values have been ignored, their contributions forgotten, their legacies trampled. They come back in revenge, starving for our flesh because we have not been attending to them--we have not been incorporating, incarnating, their spirits into our lives.

When the dead rise up and feed, their living victims become like those who eat them, the living dead; they become ghouls or vampires. The ghoulish undead are both like and unlike the living. Unlike corpses they move and speak, but they are hollow inside, missing the living spirit. They go through the motions of living, robotically. The undead are our horrified images of people who have become slaves to the dead, slaves to the past. These are people who are not making their own choices, not creating anything new; they are blindly controlled by the world they have inherited from the past.

The basic message is that we find our life in right relation to the dead. To live well we have to see and accept that people now long past have risen to new life in us. They have given us the world, so we give them their due. But when we know this, then we can choose what to eat, which ancestors to emulate as heroes, what books to read. This is what it means to consume the dead: to appropriate with gratitude their energy and turn it to our purposes. We cannot ignore the fact that we have come into a story, a world, that is already running. But we can decide which themes to pick up and we decide which way we want to take the story in the moments of life we have left.

In the Gospel of Luke, a man rises from the dead and seeks out his nearest friends, but he comes to feed them, not to feed on them. Two disciples--Cleopas and most likely his wife-- walked seven miles from Jeruslaem to Emmaus without ever recognizing the third person on the road with them. They invited him into their house as it grew late. Then (Luke:24.30) it was time to eat: “When he was at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.” Only *then*, sharing food together, were their eyes at last opened—they suddenly recognized him as Jesus.

It is fascinating that the Gospels record multiple stories of misrecognition, delayed recognition, and reluctant recognition of the resurrected Christ. The spiritual message I take from these Easter stories is this: The divine is still with us, the source of our life is still alive, but he now appears in a transfigured way. He is incognito, in disguise; sometimes—as Mother Teresa said—most distressing disguises. The person who gives our lives meaning is right here with us, but he is easy to miss. Pay close attention!

In J.D. Salinger’s novel “Franny and Zooey,” Zooey Glass helps his sister Franny through a spiritual crisis—she won’t get up off the couch, she just sits there praying. Zooey reminds her of an incident from their childhood. Their brother Seymour, now deceased, had made them shine their shoes every day before they appeared on a radio show for precociously smart little kids. Even though they felt that the show intruded upon them and exhibited them like freaks, Seymour (his name is a pun: See More) insisted that they should make every effort to be funny. And why should they trouble to entertain? And why shine their shoes for a RADIO show? “Do it for the fat lady,” Seymour said. Franny and Zooey imagined the fat lady sitting on her porch in the heat, swatting flies all day, and listening to the radio alone as she was dying of cancer. They somehow knew that it was right to shine their shoes and to be funny. This is WHY the show must go on. But now, to help his sister Franny, Zooey spells it out, “Don’t you know—there isn’t anyone out there who isn’t Seymour’s Fat Lady?”

Don't you know that secret by now? And don't you know—don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? It's Christ himself. Don't you know that?"

Consider the story about Mary Magdalene and the gardener in this way. An orthodox reading is that she mistook Christ for the gardener; a skeptical reading is that she mistook the gardener for Christ. But one could also say that she saw Christ in the gardener, that he is both the gardener and the divine. In this way, the gospel teaches us to see the living god, our reason for living and in truth the very source of our life, in or through the very ordinary and limited people around us right now.

Who is that third person always beside you, the one I see as though through a glass darkly, as we walk home on the road to Emmaus, the road of life? When I count, there is only you and I---but there seems to be something more. What shall I call the one half-seen on the other side of you---Gaia, or Nature, or Christ, or Truth? Shall I call out the names of all of my ancestors, the dead people without whom I would not exist? Can I recognize Shiva Nataraj, Lord of the Dance of life and death? Or shall I just say that it is the source, the mystery, the way that the power of the whole world flows through us even in this moment?

There is no end to this. And that there is no end is how I read the very last verse of the very last Gospel: John 21:25 “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

Sources

The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version

Franny and Zooey by J.D. Salinger

The Golden Bough by James Frazer

The Practice of the Wild by Gary Snyder

Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors by Victor Turner

The Broken Connection by Robert J. Lifton

? (1990) by Richard Dawkins

? (?) Mother Teresa

“The Collected Poems of TS Eliot”

Thanks also to Elaine Newland, Valerie Stephens, and William Reader for comments that have improved this.

¹ Paraphrased from Wikipedia

² Lifton’s ideas in this section and what follows are from *The Broken Connection*.

³ Paraphrasing two quotes on ritual from Victor Turner's *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*

[C]ertain key symbols and central symbolic actions . . . [are] 'culturally intended' to arouse a gross quantity of affect--even illicit affect--only to attach this . . . in a later phase of a great ritual, to licit and legitimate goals and values, with consequent restoration of moral quality . . . p. 257

Ritual systems are "multivocal," susceptible of many meanings, but their referents tend to polarize between physiological phenomena (blood, sexual organs, coitus, birth, death, cannibalism, etc.) and normative values of moral facts (kindness to children, reciprocity, generosity to kinsmen, respect for elders, obedience to authority, and the like). . . . The drama of ritual action--the singing, dancing, feasting, wearing of bizarre dress, body painting, use of alcohol or hallucinogens, and so on, causes an exchange between the poles in which biological referents are ennobled and the normative referents are charged with emotional significance.

["grounded"] p. 55

⁴ reworking Gary Snyder’s *Practice of the Wild*, pages 19 and 184.