

Musings on Death

“Forever? You mean he’s dead forever?”

“Yes, my love.” Her tearful mother replies, clutching the little girl to her chest. “It’s just the two of us now.”

“But where has Daddy gone?”

I can answer this one. He’s gone to the underworld, Daphne. As we speak he’s among the shapeless hordes of the dead, who roam the fields of Asphodel, passing eternity in the land below. I did not know Daphne’s shepherd father so I cannot grieve for him, but I empathise with her horror of infinity. It is terrifying. Luckily for her, she has her whole mortal life ahead of her before she must confront the infinity of what comes next. I never had such preparation.

You may wonder what I, an immortal being, am doing here. Surely I don’t personally attend the death of each lowly shepherd? No, but I am more present than you might expect. I force myself to come, confusing and troubling as it is, because I have to remind myself who I am. There could be no Lord of the Dead without the dead. So I owe the dead, and by extension the living who mourn them, just as much as they owe me. Humans imagine that I never leave the underworld, that I sit on my bleak obsidian throne and chuckle at the futility of mortal life. How can I preside over a kingdom of people I don’t really understand?

It is a common misconception among humans that once you’re dead, everything is over. You are released into a blissful nothingness, and the only pain left in the world is among the living. To an extent, they are right: the dead have no bodily sensations and cannot feel pain. But the dead in fact suffer more than their living counter-parts. When you’re alive, time progresses linearly: you are born, you grow older, you die. There is an order that must be followed, and there is meaning to be found in that order. But once you’re dead, time is infinite. Infinite time plays tricks upon the mind: how can infinity exist? Surely if the universe is infinitely old, the amount of time before this moment is infinite, so we would never arrive at the present. I’m afraid I can’t give you an explanation for the numerous paradoxes of infinity. But for what it’s worth, I can tell you something about my never-ending life.

Exiled from Olympus, spurned by my brothers and sisters, I made a life for myself in the caverns of the underworld. The tedious bureaucracy of judging souls and determining punishments filled my days, as did the training of my guard dog Cerberus. But once I had developed a system as efficient and humane as I thought possible, there was little left to do. Infinitely many days left to while away, and no one to share them with. Having been scorned by the other gods for my “morbid” attitude, I kept myself apart. Retreating further and further into my cave, I grew desperately lonely. What was the point of all this? Why have immortal life if I had nothing to do in it? The dead weren’t much company and I was ashamed to interact with them. How could I, when it was my fault that they were here, not at home with their friends and family.

Tormented thoughts ran crazed circles through my mind without end. Why couldn’t I be more like my brothers, so confident, so brave? So excited by the prospect of an immortal life. I agonised over the differences between them and me, why they could block out the terror of infinity while I was its helpless victim. I thought about what they did. They captured pretty girls and took them by

force. Perhaps only by thrusting themselves on others could they be comfortable in their own skin. Unable to see a way out of my spiralling depths, I determined to try it. With a goddess, who would have eternity to learn to forgive me. I am not yet forgiven.

My affair with Persephone was the worst decision of my life. Even now, I shrink with shame. The way Demeter looks at me, gaze full of hatred at my betrayal, cuts me every time. What I took from her, from Persephone, no eternity can return. Even more abhorrent to me were the looks I got from my brothers, who viewed me with a new respect. If this, this cruel atrocity, was what earned their respect, I decided at that moment that I no longer wanted it. I couldn't be like them.

I retreated to the cave. Persephone came every winter, but upon seeing my tear-stained face and hangdog expression, she beat a hasty retreat. Only after eons of mourning and self-hatred did I find a way to try again. I threw myself into my work. If I couldn't be happy, perhaps I could learn to harness my sadness productively. I started talking to the dead. Learning about their lives, what it felt like to be mortal. They framed their lives in terms of human love and the beauty of nature, culminating in the moment of peace upon their deathbeds.

An old man approached me first, eager to talk. Hard labour was etched into the creases of his weathered face, but his toothless smile was full of charm. He told me how since his death, what he missed most was feeling the warm sun on his back and having dinner with his wife at the end of a long day. His description of such a simple life charmed me. His happiness came not from material wealth or physical beauty, but from his gentle, nurturing love of the people and nature around him.

Another encounter I remember clearly was with an imperious queen, memorable for her haughty attitude and melancholy tale. She approached me early one day, ghostly neck dripping with shadowy jewels. She spoke in a harsh rasping voice, her eyes mournful. She had won her kingdom after a bitter struggle, and kept control through her personal charisma and iron will. But to maintain power, she had never married, never had children, never made a friend who was anything but a political tool. She had nothing to cling to, nothing to savour. In the afterlife, she was lost. She haunted me.

I was eating a ripe pomegranate, juice dripping down my chin, desperately trying not to think of Persephone, when I was approached by a tall woman with elegant cheekbones. She was once a princess, but after the capture of her city, she was sold into slavery. She spent her days working in the infirmary, healing men with the most horrific of injuries. After her enslavement, she had been in deep despair, close to suicide; but helping the wounded saved her. These men who clung so passionately to life, men she could help and heal, made her believe that her own life was worth living.

After these conversations, I decided to visit the mortal realm. Under my cap of invisibility, I visited deathbeds and battlefields. The grief visible on the faces of those left behind; the acceptance etched into the expressions of the newly deceased. I forced myself to forget where the dead were headed, and to focus on the moment of their passing. Returning to the underworld after months of travelling, I felt relieved not to be surrounded by all that life, with its complexity and creativity and bubbling emotion. Death was simpler.

But death was meaningless. Infinity is meaningless. Speak to enough dead souls, and you'll soon find out that all they want to do is talk about their lives. That's what matters. Not the infinity that comes after, not the drifting about without physical sensations to mark the passage of time. It's the pain, struggle and sheer difficulty of life that makes it memorable. That makes it meaningful. The knowledge that one day your life will be over is what allows you to live.

I don't have that privilege. The privilege of finite numbers, or the chance to experience life. But as the God of Death, I do have a unique opportunity. I visit humans at the most meaningful moment of their lives: the moment at which they go, and their family remain. Witnessing death reminds me of why it is important. Why I need to drag myself out of the cave each morning to oversee the new souls.

Daphne needs me. And though I dare not show myself to her, I wrap my invisible arms around her thin frame, and take her up onto my knee, as her father used to do.

"Daddy?" That childish hope. It melts my heart. I wish I could reply, but to do so would be to deny her the truth. Her father is gone. She will never see him again. But she will get over that, and her life will be more complete because she understands that it will one day be over. First though, she has to grieve.

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