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Counting up my dead (for Sandra Burr)

Biographical note:

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Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are.
(Daniel Dennett 1991: 418)

We tell stories about ourselves, writes Daniel Dennett. The stories are designed to set up a protective barrier, to help us blend into the environment, to give us a sense of control over the environment and over ourselves. Storytelling is a *fundamental tactic of self-protection*. But each story that is told contains, in shadowy form, a counter-narrative, a resistive alterity that works against the possibility of control that the original telling promised. I tell my story; in that story I shape the conditions for being and relating as they seem right to me – as they suit me. It becomes my truth. And then I hear someone else's story, and it knocks mine out of the ring. I am disrupted, disturbed, outraged, or astonished. Or worse than that: I hear someone else's story, and it seems to be story no longer, but rather truth, something that cannot be reconciled because it is not narrative but ugly, concrete fact, 'too cruel anywhere'.¹

Someone has died. This is not a story. This is ugly; it is concrete fact. It cannot be edited or revised. But I cannot accept that this is all the meaning it can have. There must be some other tactic of self-preservation.

I am counting up my dead. Fifty-five years of living, and what I have here is a stack of names, dates, details, of those I loved: of what I called them; when they died and where; why they died. Year by year, the losses mount up. As they do for all of us; and yet we continue to connect with others; to find love; to pretend there will not be loss, or that if there is loss, we can recover our position.

It was 2003. I was teaching creative writing to a class of graduates, and Sandra Burr was among that cohort. Over the course of that first semester, as I listened to her speaking in tutorial sessions, as I read drafts of her work and graded assessments, I came to recognise in her something very unusual. She had an internal mechanism that most of us lack. Later I understood what the mechanism was: it was the ability to listen, as few of us do. To listen, and attend more generally to what was being said. Her sharp intellect meant that little got by her, but she only rose to the bait if a particularly putrid morsel was dangled in front of her. And even then, she was more inclined to bat foolishnesses out of the way than to attack the baiter.

This is the approach she had learned in her dealings with non-human animals, and particularly with horses, those edgy, inquisitive, easily panicked prey animals with whom she had spent her life. With whom, she told me, she had learned how to be a person. Sandra was a horse whisperer; and, it transpired, she was a people-whisperer too. When I was in her company my anxieties and rages faded to grey. The world seemed a kinder, happier, calmer place.

Sandra continued with her studies, completing a doctorate and building a reputation as someone with deep scholarly and phenomenological knowledge about the ethics of relationships between human and non-human animals. People sought her out – scientists as well as cultural theorists and artists – because she had remarkable

insights, remarkable instincts. She remained on intimate terms with her horses, and when she died – too soon, too soon – they attended her wake, grieving like the rest of us, confused and full of yearning.

There is no consolation attendant on the death of those we love. There is only a great absence that fills the world. There is only a long cold path that leads to an unwelcome future. We begin walking down that path; we wait for that great gap in being to knit itself up again. Death has come into our small local worlds, turned them upside, goes away again. It will return another day. Death always moves among us, armed with a thuggish intensity. It has taken those we love. It will take us too, no matter how fat our bank accounts, how strong our bones, how fine our minds: ‘Being brave / Lets no one off the grave / Death is no different whined at than withstood’ (Larkin 1977: 92–3).

I am not brave; I do more whining than withstanding. I grieve for Sandra, and for the others, for all my dead dears,² those who have gone with no forwarding address, with no promises to return. I don’t complain though, because to whom would I address that angry letter? The matter of human being is death as well as life; being is always equivocal, always ambivalent. We tell stories, says South African poet Antjie Krog, in order ‘not to die of life’ (1999: 72). And some of those stories – perhaps the thorniest ones of all – are the stories about death. They are so difficult because death is so utterly, materially real, and yet so utterly ineffable. What does it mean – where do we draw the line between the living and the dead? Is a tree alive, is an ocean? Both are, in their particular ways. Are Martin Heidegger or Pierre Bourdieu alive, since both continue to emerge in print years after their formal death? How about that baby Paul Virilio writes about, the one from the Lumière brothers’ film who ‘has gone on guzzling his food just as hungrily since the beginning of the twentieth century, even though he long ago died of old age’ (Virilio 2000: 34-35)? Baudrillard seems to think so; he writes:³

Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear by proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary mode of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal (1993: 4).

Language, discourse, technology: they make a permanent-present available to us.

It’s not enough. Faced with the actual tangible *for-ever-ness* of the death of those we love, it’s not enough.

Death is the big silence that continually shouts, the gap that can’t be sutured, the knowledge that can be neither known nor forgotten. It is what seems to undo or overcome language, what undoes the possibility of being, what disturbs the living and problematises the value of truth, or time, or space. It can’t happen. It will happen. It can’t be escaped, whether *whined at* or *withstood*. It can’t be true. But it is.

Despite what we know about the space between life and death, the headstones at any cemetery are reminders that we humans deny death: *He is not dead, but sleeping. Absent from the body, but face to face with the Lord. Rest in peace.* Death may be the absolute and definite obverse of life, but it is also an impossibility, and most of us are

able to have these irreconcilable beliefs co-exist comfortably in our heads. I may die, I tell myself, but I'll come back: resurrection, transmigration of souls, reincarnation, glorious eternity.

And besides, how can we tell when death is, where it is? Doctors and ethicists spend considerable energy trying to determine the moment of transition, not always with certainty. Was the American woman Terri Schiavo dead or alive? Both. Neither. She was in a nowhere place, somewhere in-between. In this sense, death is rather like statistics: where, for instance, does *two* end and *three* begin: is it at 2.5? Is it at 2.95? 2.99? 2.995? There is no universally satisfying answer. There is only the knowledge that at some point, probably when you momentarily glanced away, *two* became manifestly and undeniably *three*; that at some point, probably as the nurse looked away, life became death. The heart falls silent, the EKG flatlines, living flesh begins to decay, and the person who looked out at us through the eyes in the skull has gone.

Death, says Michel de Certeau, is 'the problem of the subject', 'a wound on reason' (1984: 192). It is, in everything, a paradox, at once the great inevitability and the great uncertainty. 'No one is sure of dying', writes Maurice Blanchot. 'No one doubts death, but no one can think of certain death except doubtfully' (1982: 95): *it won't – it can't – happen to me*. But even while I cling to this thought, I know that *unresting death* (Larkin 1977) will indeed come for me because it has come for everyone else throughout history; because it is metonymically part of life, and simultaneously life's Other. As Other, death constitutes the limit and the boundary of both life and meaning: the limit because it marks the end of self-awareness; the boundary because it removes the human subject from the symbolic order, and returns it to the Real. We are born into the Real: inarticulate, not quite human, and certainly not social. With the acquisition and appreciation of language and its rules, and of discourse and its rules, we become truly human. And yet this human status is contingent and temporary, dependent on death's delay; that inarticulate infant is still lurking somewhere in our being or our subconscious as a continual reminder that we once were, and will inevitably again be, neither human nor social. Death dissolves meaning because it is itself beyond language, beyond signification, and beyond the symbolic order.

But if language is predicated on difference, and not identity, and if meaning is reliant on meaninglessness, then the assertion of an unbridgeable divide between life and death, of *absolute* life, or *certain* death, can't be sustained either. The dead, by being life's Other, provide for the living that difference which names and confirms *my being*. But the slipperiness of signification means that in the process of providing the guarantee of my life – my *aliveness* – the dead simultaneously call me to, and recall to me, my own death; and the various signifiers I hold up as talismans to keep death in exile simply call it back into social life by naming it and focusing on it. Death as signifier slides across life, infecting and problematising it. Similarly, the attempt to bracket death off as the Other simply reminds me that self and Other, death and life, are always imbricated within one another, and depend on each other.

An effect of the paradoxical uncertainty/certainty of death is that for most of us death is both there and not-there, a *small unfocused blur*. This blur must be blotted out because it is a stain on consciousness, a remainder of the Real, and a reminder of our own disintegration and expulsion from the world of meaning that spoils the present

and makes it difficult to concentrate on being-in-the-world. And despite our denials, we know we will die; as Heidegger tells us in *Being and Time*, being human is ‘being-toward-death’, and this we can’t escape. In the interests of asserting our own being – not a ‘being-toward-death’ but a visceral vitality – we avow life and disavow death, but we know in a certainly-uncertain way that at the end we will fall back to the pre-linguistic, asocial state, and further back, into the state that is no state, where we are unable to say or even think: ‘I am, and I am dead’.

‘I think you’re making this all too complicated’: that’s Sandra’s voice, Sandra’s words. She continually called me to account, reminding me that beyond all the clatter of words, all the ‘shimmering’ of discourse (Foucault 1972: 228), there is living, and being, and the making of art, poems, coffee, love. There is the quiet recognition that we are, finally, bodies and not mere discourse; that we are closer to our non-human relatives in our state of material embodiment than we are to the abstractions of subjectivity we dream up, in our brief lives.

But although Sandra often teased me, gently, about the way I turn myself inside out over concepts, she too was driven by the need to make creative works; works that rely on observation and humour and aesthetic judgment. In this she was entirely aligned with Ronald Schleifer, who identified in the materialities of creative practice ‘a revelation of the other in the same’ that is ‘the secret melody of death and materialisms’ (1990: 49–50). Art, for Schleifer, and for me, and perhaps for Sandra (although I won’t presume to speak for her), offers ways of addressing death, of acknowledging the other in the same and, in the process, making it possible to go on. Sandra went on; the week of her death we were plotting and planning work we would each submit to next year’s staff exhibition—her photographs of animal representations in Canberra, of all that quirky and often ludicrous graffiti and public art and commercial signage that bring into discourse the animal selves of the human, our own materiality. It is what artists do: make work right up to the moment when the hand can no longer hold a pen, the moment when the light fails. Perhaps it is because art allows us to deflect our knowledge of the certainty of our own death; but perhaps it is because in the making of art we acknowledge our own materiality, and hence that certainty, and find in those acts a small but fundamental ‘tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition’.

Maurice Blanchot insists that ‘you cannot write unless you remain your own master before death; you must have established with death a relation of sovereign equals’ (1982: 91). That relation must, surely, be predicated on a familiarity, on an enduring conversation. On this exchange of thought and meaning we can build a (creative) life: we can write, or dance, or draw because we know that this expression is going to cease, finally and irrevocably; and with this assurance of death, comes the assurance that we really do have that material being of which symbolic being is a correlative. It is death, and its promise, that makes us human.

(I don’t really believe this: I know only that the wound on reason that Sandra’s death has inflicted is best treated by the application of theory; and then, the healing starts, with the return to creative expression. I write, therefore I am. She has written, therefore she is.)

Endnotes

1. This is Banquo, responding to Lady Macbeth's attempt to present a face of innocence on the discovery of the murdered King Duncan, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene III.
2. This phrase comes from Captain Cat in Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*.
3. I can't help observing that I write of Baudrillard in the present tense, although he died in 2007.

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Research statement

Research background

At the heart of philosophical investigation is the question of what it means to be a human being (to name just a few, see Althusser; Aristotle; Nietzsche; Schleifer; Voltaire). This is not simply a matter of ontology, but a matter of definitions, language, ethics, relationships and responsibilities. What it means to be, how to live according to sound epistemological and axiological frameworks, and how to articulate this, are questions that perhaps will never be answered in a satisfactory manner. However, the shock attendant on the death of loved one, and the consequent reflection on one's own mortality, continue to drive the attempt to understand this most fundamental aspect of being.

Research contribution

While there is a substantial literature on death and dying, much of it relies on metaphysical foundations, or deploys purely discursive formulations. This short essay draws directly on phenomenological questions, exploring the material nature of being, and locates the discussion in a particular instance of death, one that is not at all abstract but real, present and painful. This provides me the opportunity to use language both to pay tribute to my friend, and to think 'out loud' about that great 'problem of the subject' (Certeau 1984): what it is to live, and to die.

Research significance

I cannot offer any argument about research significance; to do so would be, I feel, to exploit Sandra's life and death, and indeed my own grief, for a scholarly outcome. What I can say is that the direct gaze into that terrible 'wound on reason' has this significance: that it drives me, and others (e.g., Blanchot, Derrida, Didion) back to creative practice, which for those of us who are artists is perhaps the only final way to articulate things of final and devastating significance.

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