

AN ANSWER

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One evening several months ago I received a long distance telephone call. As I recognized the voice of the young man on the end of the line, I was kind of excited. This young man is very independent and proud of his manliness and so it seemed strange to hear his voice crack and to realize suddenly that Bob was almost in tears. Bob's closest friend had just died a violent death and now Bob was saying to me--"I simply cannot reconcile death with life--Help me Fran, Help me!"

Help me! Bob I couldn't --I didn't have any answers. Instead the same question kept going over and over in my mind--How do you help him--how do you reconcile death with life?

I suppose that you might say that this was the first time that I had ever been forced to face death on a personal level. No one close to me had ever died, and I had gone along living as though I were immortal--not that if you were to have asked me if I expected to die that I would have answered, "No, I am going to live forever!" No-- I'm not exactly sure how to explain it, but I am human. And each man, while he realizes on the surface of his consciousness that the lot of all humanity is death and that he, being human, will inevitably share in that lot--still, each man refuses to recognize the fact that he is going to die!

But what am I trying to say? Simply that we do not solve the problem of death by pretending that it does not exist. Whether we will or not, the problem is still there and eventually each one of us is going to have to answer the question--how do you reconcile yourself to the fact that you are going to die?--to the fact that someday the world is going to get along without you, and you will no longer be a part of it.

The great poet Longfellow once said;
"Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sand of time."

Perhaps your first reaction to this bit of poetry is (as was mine) that footprints in sand aren't very permanent. And, yet, while Longfellow's imagery may not be the best, I think he really has something when he speaks of the inspiration to be found in the lives of the man we respect and admire.

Think, for example, of the Apostle Paul--or perhaps for a moment we should forget the title "apostle" and with it our preconceptions concerning it, and speak simply of the man Paul, for indeed, he was a man with causes--that man was Paul! Everything in his personal life was completely subordinated to that which was his ultimate concern. In his efforts to help the struggling, early Christian church, he was simply tireless.

And you can imagine with me this scene--here stands Paul in the middle of his dingy Roman prison cell, awaiting his execution. And what does he say? Why he stands there and shakes his fist at death saying, "Death, where is thy sting? O, grave, where is thy victory? I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith!" These are the words of a dying man. But if death is indeed the great vanquisher than isn't there something very wrong here, for these are not the words of the vanquished but of the victor!

Certainly this is a great paradox, but let's let it stand for a moment while we move on to a second example.

In some ways this second study is very different from our first. For example, I doubt that anyone would ever classify this man as a saint! He was perhaps a little too human for that. This man was one of those extraordinary persons who could do pretty well at just about anything for a while but, then, he had to move on-- perhaps to a farm for a summer job as a farm hand--perhaps to an isolated school district for a term as a teacher. And, yet, this man was no ordinary drifter. He knew what he was about and was pretty sure where he would come out. And he came out where he had

planned--his name was, of course, Robert Frost, and he became the unofficial poet laureate of America.

Frost expressed in poetry those things which most of us felt simply as a lump in the throat. The intensity with which he lived and wrote made it seem to us that he was as indomitable as hope--and in a sense he was! Before he died, he, like Paul, wrote his own epitaph. He said: "I would have written of me on my stone, he had a lover's quarrel with the world."

We, then, have these examples--St. Paul the Apostle and Robert Frost, Poet. But, you may ask-- and I think rather legitimately--examples of what? What relationship do these men have to each other and to our basic problem of death and its relationship to life?

Well, first, each of these men had set down and thought out for himself just what he believed was really of importance to him--what was to be of ultimate significance in his life. Likewise, it is of the utmost importance that we know what we believe. Each of us needs to pause for a moment and make sure that we are not drifting through life--toward death--perhaps on the way becoming a person we don't want to be. May I ask you, as I have asked myself, what is really important to you? Popularity? Success? Perhaps security? Is there anything so important to you that you would die for it? Or perhaps more important--is there anything so important to you that you will live for it?

Of course these are questions you must answer for yourself. But once you know what you believe then it becomes time to stand on those beliefs. And this brings us to our second point in regards to our two examples, for both Paul and Robert Frost were men whose philosophies and goals were not merely words from a script but parts acted out in the drama of real life. They translated their ideals into action.

Well, this is all fine and good--we should know what we believe and, then, act as if we believe it.

But what does this have to do with death? Actually, everything! For you see death can rob us only of those things we have never done. Death's power lies in its ability to cut us off where we are at the moment. Thus, death robs us of those goals we have never reached--of those things we never accomplish--and death can rob us of life, but only if we have never lived.

I wonder how many of us will awaken one morning and looking down our hands will see the wrinkles of old age and will know that we have never really lived? Could there be any greater tragedy?

Edgar Lee Masters expressed the depth to which this tragedy reached in his poem entitled "George Grey." George Grey is dead now and he is looking back and contemplating his tombstone. Inscribed there on it is a picture--a picture of a ship, ready to sail but just resting in the harbour. And George Grey realizes that, in truth, this picture is his life because he was never willing to lift sail and commit himself to anything. Now, he says, "One must lift the sail...to put meaning in ones life may end in madness, but life without meaning is the torture of vague desire--it is the boat longing for the sea and yet afraid."

We, then, have heard three epitaphs. The first two were words of victory and the last expressed the most bitter and absolute defeat. The difference lay solely in the life that preceded. And so this was the answer to Bob's question: it is the life we live which determines whether we die in victory or defeat. Each day that we live we write our own epitaph.

May I ask you what kind of epitaph you are writing?