**Late Reflections (ii):
Death**

by Yasha Beresiner

*'How dreadful is the prospect of death, at the remotest distance!
How the smallest apprehensions of it can pall the most gay, airy, and brisk spirits!
Even I, who thought I could have been merry in sight of my coffin, and drink a health with the sexton in my own grave, now tremble at the least envoy of the king of terrors.'*

WELLINS CALCOTT, *Thoughts Moral and Divine* (1756)*i*

The third degree was by far the most impressive ceremony I experienced in my Masonic career. The symbolism conveyed in the ritual and demonstration of the event, almost frightened me at first. However, after due thought and when the ceremony I had witnessed accessed my heart and comprehension, it was of revealing significance: namely that, unable, by force of circumstance, to do good beyond our limited mortal capacity, we have a 'second chance'. We can still improve for the better and fill the empty spaces left by our failures, before we depart to the eternal East. Better yet, by a permanent awareness of our imminent mortality, we can continuously do good. We can avoid the pitfalls of human error and suppress aspects of the malevolence, the wickedness inherent in every one of us.

 How is that malevolence manifest? The majority of human beings are kind at heart and well intentioned. That, however, is not a sufficient quality to prevent acts, intentional or otherwise, that maybe termed malevolent at worst and inconsiderate at best. Here, it seems to me, is where we can genuinely improve ourselves. To distance oneself from the egotism and selfishness instilled in each one of us since early childhood. The attention and care of the loving family on a new born baby lasts throughout his early years, his whims cared for, his actions and gestures admired and tolerated, his health and welfare carefully scrutinised and supervised. How then can a child reach adulthood other than a selfish and self-centred individual?

 We have to learn to be tolerant and considerate. We have to make a conscious effort and keep our good intentions in the forefront of our minds. This learning process will take us well into adulthood, even dotage, because it is not easy. Here then Freemasonry comes into play. Here, now as of today, having embraced the tenets of the Craft, reflected in the many other Orders and Degrees beyond the Craft, we have a second chance to improve ourselves. Remain aware of our natural tendency to selfishness, fight such natural tendencies and tolerate our friends and foes equally. Express overt love and affection to those close to us. Extend a helping hand to those in need without question or condition. Accept into our midst every man and woman of whatever race of creed or tendency. It is this fulfilment of an anticipatory opportunity to do good, remembering that death may take us at anytime, that can make us industrious and honest, whilst on earth.

 There are many dignified funeral processions and solemn burial ceremonies in the multitude of racial customs extant. Many are biblical, some secular. The ancient Egyptians, who acknowledged the immortality of the soul after death, mummified the body of the deceased and cast magic spells in their elaborate burial ceremony, to ensure the continuity of the soul in the after-life. Their grave goods, placed in the coffin for use by the deceased in the afterlife, are the equivalent to our Masonic emblems of virtue, righteousness and morality (eg heart, maul and scales of Justice) to be found in aspects of our third degree of the Craft and the ritual of various other Orders. There have been changes in the practice of customs over the centuries but emotions have not changed. The tearful eyes of a Jewish brother dressing the body of his dead sibling in a plain white shroud, is no less heartbreaking than that of the Hindu child at the cremation of his father, too soon departed or of the Islam widow, who will remain tearful for the four months that she has to mourn her late husband. Such is the deep universal enduring sorrow for the departed.

 How then can man not believe in life after death? It is the only hope left with him when those closest have forever departed. The Christian will place his total hope in the resurrection (a return to life after death) that is promised him by his faith. It is the very central and focal convergence of Christianity manifest in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Reincarnation (a new life after death, in a new body) is recognized as an integral component of Jewish tradition and Jewish mystics expressing their view in the 2000-year-old classic work *'Zohar'* believe reincarnation to be a divine reality even if not mentioned in the Talmud. The Muslims too, have their crucial *Yawm al-Qiyāmah* - "Day of Resurrection", described in the *Koran* as a bodily resurrection preordained by God but unknown to man. (Incidentally, and for the of the record, any interpretation of a resurrection in the third degree is a misconception).

 The death of a close relative or friend reminds us of our own mortality, that we start to die from the day of our birth and that death, finally, is not an event in its own right but a cause, the failure of our bodily functions, no longer able to perform and fulfil their purpose, cease to work for ever. It is not death that comes to us but life that leaves us. That is the reason that death need not be feared and that thinking and considering our life style is so crucial. Just as death has a one hundred percent record of success, so the gradual physical decline and ultimate failure of our frail body is assured. Our standing in life, our ethnic origins, age or education, religion and intelligence have no meaning when the time for absolute equality has arrived. Ecclesiastes 7: 2 quotes the wise words of King Solomon: *“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that* (death) *is the end of all men; and the living will lay it* (should take this) *to his heart.”*

 Yet one inevitable thought comes to mind. The genetic, historical, evolutionary aspect of the absence of death, when considering the origin of life. Life, so far as we know it, in its earliest and simplest form - which every school child has studied and learned about - is the single celled free-living freshwater amoeba. The amoeba never dies of natural causes. It reproduces asexually by binary fusion and survives forever. Life, therefore, can continue forever. When then, in the inescapable and incessant evolutionary process of the past thousands of millennia, did death become an integral and accepted part of life? Could it have been different?

 We leave behind us generations that follow in our footsteps. We are duty bound to allow them to have pride in their ancestors. Our actions today will reflect on those that carry our name and retain memories of us. But how are we to leave our impression behind us? Men of history who remain immortal and will forever be remembered were, in the broadest categorisation permitted, either thinkers or warriors: from Plato to Einstein and Alexander the Great to Napoleon. If we have no fame to maintain our name for posterity we have to choose our own modest philosophical approach and in some minute way make a difference for the better. Material necessities aside - which, in any case, are short lived - the only true significance to our lives here on earth is the influence we may have on events of the future after we have gone. In this context the very action of writing this article, hopefully preserved for posterity, is a consoling thought in my name not being erased too soon after my departure to the Grand Lodge above.

 Writing this essay brought to my mind the passing of the closest person to my heart, my father. He spoke freely about death, with a clarity of thinking, an approach to life and to death, for that matter, which was refreshing, persuasive, almost soothing. I recall his telling me, when still in my teens, that there was nothing to fear of death; yes, there may be concern as to the way a man dies. He wanted to depart this world with dignity and least inconvenience to his family and friends. Otherwise, so far as he was concerned he was returning to that journey from which he had temporarily and briefly deviated in order to enjoy a short presence here on earth. The day would come, he told me, when he would return to continue his journey. I have no doubt that my Dad returned to his journey. Since his passing I have always felt that he is watching me. As I have often recounted, I can visualise him smiling, sitting on a parapet his feet dangling. Next to him, on one side, any one of the so many that have gone before us: Socrates, Washington, Elvis Presley? Why not! and on his other side, that empty seat . . . awaiting me to join him one day, hopefully not too soon!

 Calcott, Wellins (1726-79) An active Freemason and author of 'A Candid Disquisition of the Priciples and Practices of the Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons' [James Dixwell London 1769]. Among the handful of British Masonic authors of the 18th century, this was his second book, with several editions published in England and the USA.