

Pulling Ourselves Together: Kierkegaard on the Catechesis of Contagion

Introduction

“You may have heard,” writes Kierkegaard in “To Preserve One’s Soul In Patience,”

how someone who had thoughtlessly frittered away his life and never understood anything but wasted the power of his soul in vanities, how he lay on his sick bed and the frightfulness of disease encompassed him and the singularly fearful battle began, how he then, for the first time in his life, understood something, understood that it was *death* he struggled with, and how he then pulled himself together in a purpose that was *powerful enough to move a world*, how he attained a marvelous collectedness for wrenching himself out of the sufferings in order to use the last moment to catch up on some of what he had neglected, to bring order to some of the chaos he had caused during a long life, to contrive something for those he would leave behind. You may have heard it from those who were there with him, who with sadness, but also deeply moved, had to confess that in those few hours he had lived more than in all the rest of his life, more than is lived in years and days as people ordinarily live (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 181).

Not since the flu pandemic of 1918, which took more lives than WWI, has an illness aroused so much anxiety and fear as the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet this global tragedy is also an opportunity for us to understand, perhaps for the first time, how we struggle with death from the moment we come to understand our mortality, even if we spend most of our lives in denial concerning this struggle. Our current crisis provides us, according to Kierkegaard, with an opportunity to reevaluate our lives, to catch up on what we have neglected, to bring order to some of the chaos we may have caused during our lives, to contrive something for those we will

eventually leave behind, to live more than in all the rest of our lives, “more than is lived in years and days as people ordinarily live.”

This paper argues that the confrontation with our mortality that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced upon us can, according to Kierkegaard, be a means of powerful spiritual instruction, instruction on what is truly meaningful in existence and how we may live our lives, however long or short they may be, so fully, so completely enfolded in the embrace of Grace that even the specter of death is no longer frightening.

I

Ordinary Life

Kierkegaard was a keen observer and brutal critic of how people ordinarily live. “People are prone to pay attention to earthly dangers,” he observes.

Even though the terrors of war do not rage destructively and disruptively with violence and lawlessness, but there is peace and justice in the land, even though the destroying angel of pestilence does not proceed from house to house in the cities and kingdoms, but there is health and happiness everywhere—yet there is danger, as we all know, danger to life and land, to health, honor, to welfare and property. People therefore seriously think about preserving and safeguarding what they possess; they therefore distrust each other and life (EUD, pp. 183-184).

We don’t live like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. “They sow not and reap not and gather not into barns” (UDVS, 172). They are not concerned about tomorrow. *We are. We sow, we reap, we gather.* “These three words,” observes Kierkegaard, “suggest the time category that underlies foresight” (UDVS, 172). And yet isn’t foresight a good thing? Aren’t we supposed to care about the future? Aren’t we supposed to make sure that we have adequately provided for our

futures so that we don't become a burden to others? Aren't human beings *required* to sow, and reap, and gather? Isn't that, presumably, part of God's plan?

The difficulty, Kierkegaard argues, is the *manner* in which we become preoccupied with providing for ourselves. We forget, what Kierkegaard reminds us of in the discourse “To Be Contented With Being a Human Being,” that all our activities would avail us nothing if it were not actually God who was providing for us. We make the mistake of the observer who believes that it is the farmer who feeds the birds, who provides for them, and not God who provides for the birds through the agency of the farmer.

We live, ordinarily, despite our absorption in what Kierkegaard refers to as “wretched sensibleness” (UDVS, 172), thoughtlessly, which is to say that we don't really live at all. “God is not to be faulted,” writes Kierkegaard, “if habit and routine and lack of passion and affectation and [gossiping] with neighbors right and left gradually corrupts most people, so that they become thoughtless — and build their eternal happiness on one thing and another and then a third something” (CUP, p. 47).

Ordinary life, according to Kierkegaard, is a kind of spiritual stupor. “Nowadays,” writes Kierkegaard, “the religious address, although it preaches against the monastery, observes the most strict monastic propriety and distances itself from actuality just as much as the monastery and thereby ... betrays ... that everyday existence is actually in other categories, or that the religious does not assimilate daily life” (CUP, p. 481).

Rather than trusting that God will provide, we live in fear of not having enough as if it were our activities alone that could secure our future, rather than God's beneficence. We live like everyone else, carefully observing what is required for material success, including the social acceptance without which we fear such success would be impossible, and then pursue these things as if our lives depended upon them. We confusedly view life of the spirit, to the extent that we allow ourselves to be dimly aware of it, as a threat to the life of the flesh and allow our animal instinct for self preservation to take over our selves, forgetting that while a human being is certainly an animal, it is also more than that and truly only fully human when that “more” is allowed its rightful place.

II

Cowardliness

Ordinary life is not merely thoughtlessness, however, it is cowardliness. Our preoccupation with providing for our material wellbeing pulls our attention away from higher things. Unlike the character who is so preoccupied with contemplating the heavens that he fails to see the hole in the ground in front of him, we are so preoccupied with avoiding the pitfalls of life, so focused, metaphorically, on the earth beneath our feet, that we lose sight entirely of higher things, of what Kierkegaard calls “the eternal.”

“Against Cowardliness” is the title of one of the *Four Upbuilding Discourses* Kierkegaard published in 1844. “If it is really so,” writes Kierkegaard

that there is something in life that has or can have such power over a person that it little by little makes him forget everything that is noble and sacred and makes him a slave in the service of the world, of the moment; if it is really so that time has or can gain such power over a person that while it adds days to his life it also every passing day measures the greater distance of his life from the divine, until he trapped in everydayness and habit becomes alienated from the eternal and the original; if experience has taught us that this also happened to someone who once had a strong sense of the presence of the eternal— then it certainly would be beneficial to recommend every means against this. (EUD, 347)

Many would argue that it is our fear of death that motivates our preoccupation with providing for ourselves, but that, I believe, is a confusion. Our preoccupation with providing for ourselves certainly stems from our animal instinct for “self preservation” but animals have no understanding of death so the “preservation” in question has to be against material privation not existential annihilation. We are motivated primarily by a fear of want rather than by a fear of death.

But *this* fear is not really that in which our cowardliness ultimately consists. We fear not having enough because we lack faith that God will provide for us. We lack this faith because we are afraid of acknowledging how profound is our need of God. We are afraid of acknowledging how weak, how *absolutely* powerless we ultimately are. We are afraid of acknowledging the terrible fact that we spend our lives fleeing from the truth about ourselves.

“In everyday affairs,” writes Kierkegaard, “total guilt [which is to say—sin] as a universally given gradually becomes so taken for granted that it is forgotten. And yet it is this totality of guilt that ultimately makes it possible for someone to be guilty or not guilty in the particular [instance]” (CUP, p. 529). Total guilt, which is to say—sin, can also be expressed as total cowardliness. We fear threats to our temporal wellbeing because we fear the eternal. “[T]he most strenuous of all thoughts,” writes Kierkegaard, the thought “compared with which even the earnest thought of death is [easier] [is] the thought of God” (CUP, p. 475). If we could admit our cowardliness, admit that we are afraid of the thought of God, and in that way become transparent before God, our fear for our temporal wellbeing would vanish, because —*God does not give “a spirit of fear, but of power and love”* (2 Timothy 1:7).

III

Death

“The existing subject,” observes Kierkegaard, “is eternal, but as existing temporal. ... [T]he illusiveness of the infinite is ... that the possibility of death is present at every moment” (CUP, p. 82). “Not only are those death’s plunder,” he writes, “who lie on the sickbed and whom the physician has given up; many whom death has marked walk around among us” (TDIO, p. 53).

Kierkegaard was preoccupied with death. He lost five of his six siblings to illness or injury, as well as both of his parents before he embarked on his literary career. Add to that the fact that his own health appeared to have been fragile, and his preoccupation with death is understandable. Some scholars have viewed this preoccupation as morbid, and yet for

Kierkegaard, it appears to have had a profoundly positive significance. He wrote, for example, in *Philosophical Crumbs* that the thought of death was his “dancing partner,” and his preoccupation with it indeed appears to have enabled him to live “more than is lived in years and days as people ordinarily live.”

Modern medicine has made it possible for people to live longer. It has pushed death into what often seems like a future so distant that we need not be concerned with it. In that respect, our age is very different from the one in which Kierkegaard lived. Death was ever present in the 19th century. Many people lost children, siblings, spouses in the bloom of their youth to accident or illness. Many children never knew their mother.

And yet even then people lacked what Kierkegaard refers to as “earnestness” about death. They were “prone,” he observes, to pay attention to *earthly* dangers, . . . danger to life and land, to health, honor, to welfare and property” (EUD, p. 184). They thought “seriously about preserving and safeguarding what they possess[ed],” and “distrust[ed] each other and life” (EUD, p. 184).

The specter of death, of the dark-robed figure sharpening its scythe sends chills down the spine. But these chills are only what Kierkegaard calls a “mood.” They are not earnestness. They’re like the chills we get watching horror movies, chills that are quickly dispelled by commercials or candy from the concession. Even the horror that welled up in people as they watched reports of the spread of COVID, listened to statistics on hospitalizations and deaths, was only a mood. It can rise to hysteria, this mood, can cause people to “distrust each other,” sow division among neighbors, pitting the vaccinated against the unvaccinated, as if a vaccine were a magical formula for immortality, not genuine immortality, of course, because the contemplation of that is earnestness, but a magical formula for an indefinitely extended worldly existence.

Many people are afraid of death, observes Kierkegaard, “because they harbor obscure and confused notions that the soul in death has to cross over into another order of things where the established laws and conventions are completely different from the ones they have learned to know in this world. The reason for such a fear of death is the individual’s aversion to becoming

transparent to himself, for if he is willing to do this, he readily perceives the unreasonableness of this fear” (EO II, p. 253).

IV

The Catechesis of Contagion

We have allowed ourselves to be seduced into thoughtlessness, into the panic of an animal that cannot actually understand death but only a threat to its safety. We *can* understand death, though, in a way that other animals cannot. Perhaps that’s the real difference between us and the other animals. They can reason, after all, so the difference between them and us, in that respect, is one of degree and not kind. We can understand, though, what they cannot — that our lives are circumscribed by birth and death, that there will come a time when we are no more. And the contemplation of that is seriousness.

“Every human being,” writes Kierkegaard,

is only an instrument and does not know when the moment will come when he will be put aside. If he himself does not at times evoke this thought, he is a hireling, an unfaithful servant, who is trying to free himself and to cheat the Lord of the uncertainty in which he comprehends his own nothingness. That much in life is empty and worthless, people certainly do know, but how frequently the single individual makes an exception, and even the highest mission in the spiritual world is only an errand, and one who is equipped for it with all spiritual-intellectual gifts is only on an errand (EUD, p 282).

A long life is ordinarily a blessing, but amnesia about one’s mortality is not. We have lost several important Kierkegaard scholars in the last few years. Tim Polk, David Kangas, Bob Perkins. I’m sure there have been others, but these are the ones I know, ones I counted as friends, and these losses, together with the loss of my own father a few years ago, has caused me to become preoccupied with death and the question of whether I am prepared for it. I remind myself

that the specter of death is cold and terrible, according to Kierkegaard, only to people who forget their mortality, who lose themselves in worldliness, who are torn away from God “in the forgetfulness of pleasure” (*EUD*, 79), who lack the assurance that everything comes from God.

But when the “destroying angel of pestilence” proceeds from house to house in cities and nations, it becomes difficult to lose oneself in worldliness if worldliness is interpreted to mean the pursuit of pleasure. Kierkegaard’s observation that in times of “health and happiness” people tended to be preoccupied with worldly “dangers” makes me wonder if in his own day, pestilence had what he sometimes refers to as a “tutelary spirit” (*CUP*, Hannay, p. 342).¹ Did Kierkegaard see people pulling themselves together as cholera raged through Copenhagen? Is it possible that that’s the origin of the story of the man who pulled himself together in those few hours before death?

Most of us continue to lose ourselves in worldliness not in the sense of the pursuit of pleasure, but in the sense of being preoccupied with our material wellbeing, with providing for ourselves, with fending off death, with protecting ourselves against it with every means possible, rather than accepting that we live with what Kierkegaard calls “the uncertainty of death” every moment of our lives, no matter how protected from it we often delude ourselves we are.

“Earnestness,” asserts Kierkegaard, “is that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that you are and death is also. Death is the schoolmaster of earnestness” (*TDIO*, p. 76). If you can do this, think death, that is, think it as *your* lot, this thought can transform your existence like it transformed the existence of the youth who Kierkegaard describes as having dreamed he was an old man on the verge of death and “looked back over a wasted life, until he woke in anxiety New Year’s morning not only to a new year but to a new life.... [T]o be wide awake and to think death..., to think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life—this is earnestness” (*TDIO*, p. 76).

1. The expression that is translated by Hannay as “tutelary spirit” is actually “*Genius*,” where the whole expression in the original is “*Dødens Genius*” (*SV VII*, 353).

To think death is to think one’s own nothingness. And this thought, no matter how distressing it is, at least initially, if it is thought *through*, will bring one to God. The thought of death is isolating, at least initially, and yet, “in this solitude,” writes Kierkegaard, “what beautiful fellowship with everyone! It is not true,” he continues, “that one human being does not have the same essential task as another human being, . . . but each understands it a bit differently and in his own way. There are not, as in confusion, different roads and different truths and new truths, but there are many roads leading to the *one* truth” (TDIO, p. 38).

And that one truth, of course, is God and our need of him.

“[G]ive everyone,” writes Kierkegaard in a prayer from the discourse “Strengthening in the Inner Being,”

give everyone the assurance that everything comes from you, so that joy will not tear us away from you in the forgetfulness of pleasure, so that sorrow will not separate you from us, but in joy we may go to you and in sorrow remain with you, so that when our days are numbered and the outer being is wasting away, death may not come in its own name, cold and terrible, but gentle and friendly, with greetings and news, with witness from you, our Father who is in heaven!

If we will pull ourselves together, like the youth who dreamed he was at the end of his life, if we will allow this pandemic to penetrate our psychological and spiritual defenses with the reality of our own mortality, our own nothingness, and with the fact of the uncertainty of when our own lives will close, then the pandemic itself will be a spiritual teacher. It will help us to appreciate how precious is our time here on earth, it will help us to catch up on what we have neglected, to bring order to some of the chaos we have caused during our lives, to contrive something for those we will be forced one day to leave behind.

If we will allow the fear generated by this pandemic to teach us how profound is our need of God, the fear will vanish and in its place will be *love* and the *power* to live however many hours we have left “more than is lived in years and days as people ordinarily live” (EUD, 181).