

Meditation on mourning from the *ante mortem* perspective

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ABSTRACT

As commonly known the notion of mourning refers to the experience that occurs in a human's mind after the death of someone close to him/her. Meanwhile, in the light of the contemporary discourse the term of mourning gains a different perspective. The new look at the feeling of mourning shows that it can occur when someone loses an important value such as health, or a child of one's own. Each of the situations when someone

loses a person or thing important to him/her causes different constellation of feelings to arise and dictates new pace. However, within these differences some similarities can be picked out, which show a common denominator. That common denominator determines the curiosity of the feeling of mourning experienced during a lifetime, before the actual hora mortis comes.

Key words: mourning, death, existential experience

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In an era that promotes an innovative outlook on philosophy - which has become almost the fundamental principle of intellectual activity - the concept of meditation acquires an archaic meaning. Innovation has been widely perceived as novel solutions and market attractiveness. Meanwhile, the concept of meditation stands in exact opposition to innovation and does not fall under its definition. Meditation does not recognize the spirit of competition and selfishly calculated pragmatism. However, the use of meditation to present the specifics of the concept of mourning in the ante – mortem perspective is not dictated by contradiction to the idea of innovation (which has been described by prof. M. Łagosz as *the new queen of Poland* [1] nor an expression of irony, but a conscious reference to the powerful, noble philosophical tradition. Meditation was practiced, among others, by Marcus Aurelius and Descartes. The convention of meditation was present in L. Boros' writings. Recently W. Strózewski started to practice this kind of philosophizing. There are many indications that, also in the future, meditation as a kind of philosophical method will become present in the field of philosophy.

Meditation owes its presence in the field of philosophy to the fact that it avoids purely rational thought and allows the voice of feeling, inspiration, or even enlightenment to come from the border of mysticism. In meditation cogito intertwines with intuition. Rationalism is therein mixed with elusiveness. Meditation stimulates the mind and keeps it in a constant state of tension and mindfulness. Meditation, by nature, renounces the ambition of unambiguous conclusions. Thanks to such character meditation helps to find the place where one should be looking for the origin of thought, and creates favorable conditions to get to the bottom of cognition.

The formula of meditation protects the mind against being rush in answering questions and leaves the open field for further investigation. It also does not try to appropriate the object of cognition. On the contrary, meditation allows it to reveal its true countenance. At this point a key question arises: How can the truth of mourning be manifested from the ante-mortem perspective?

A clear answer to this question depends on prior explanation of the concept of *ante mortem mourning*. This term does not say much to a contemporary man who, if he has any idea of mourning, connects it directly to its traditional interpretation. As commonly known, the notion of mourning refers to the experience that occurs in a human's mind after the death of someone close to him/her. The dominant sense of mourning perceived in such a way is painful memory. Yet, regardless of the intensity of memories and strength of the presence of a beloved object within them, this object

always remains something separate, located so to say 'in the outside sphere of consciousness'.

The primary difference between the classical understanding of the concept of mourning and its recognition in the ante – mortem perspective lies in a different time perspective of its experiencing and in a different existential position. According to Freud's intuition, the feeling of mourning also occurs when a person loses a significant value of crucial importance to him/her. It can therefore be assumed that mourning begins with the loss of health and beginning of slow progressing death. From this point of view the beloved object, which in this case is one's own existence, remains no longer beyond the internal structure of being, but starts to expire in its immanence [2]. A dying person is expropriated from his/her life long before the actual *hora mortis* comes. Whether it is because of bad luck or a pure chance such person is condemned to struggle with 'infernal madness' of annihilation and becomes aware that any form of separation from his/her own expiring existence is not possible. There is no escape from the devastating emptiness which deprives a human being from the opportunity to repeal all his/her libido from any previous relations [3].

This is obviously not the only possible interpretation of mourning in terms of *ante-mortem perspective*. In fact, there exist many more. However, we have to limit ourselves to articulation of several important elements creating the specificity of the view mentioned above, especially since it has been rarely studied within the field of philosophy [4].

One of the crucial aspects of the above mentioned interpretation is the question of time which embodies the disappearance of life and starts this painful "celebration" of disintegration of existence. Although the concept of time is a known and ubiquitous phenomenon, in context of mourning analyzed from ante mortem perspective it is sometimes interpreted in a different way and can be experienced in several of ways by an individual. From a subjective perspective of a human being time can be seen as a phenomenon which swallows up the human existence and tries to replace it with a sense of utter emptiness. In such a situation time becomes a specific background to the process of annihilation. It seems that this scenery is a stationary phenomenon frozen in duration. Time does not indicate any change, nor transformation. Every change seems to take place within its own margins [5].

The opposite experience of time may be its perception in terms of rapid transience which pulls all aspects of human existence into the vortex of death. St. Augustine called such conviction of momentary passing of one's own existence as *minutissimas momentorum* [6]. Being a witness of one's own disintegration and having complete consciousness of this state makes a man understand that he/she has existed in a limited time. Fast

elapsing moments of time limit not only human's existence in the world, but often deprive him/her of a chance to get control over the transition into oblivion [7].

Many people left at the mercy of death feel as if time has stopped for them forever. Such unbearable state of suspension was formerly referred to as *taedium vitae* - the weariness with life filled with sadness, unfulfilled longings and disappointment by lack of any chance for improvement of the situation. Such feeling of time deepens the tragedy of human's existence and justifies a conviction of being sentenced for a futile torture and amoral order of the universe.

A brief reflection on time, subjectively experienced in the *ante mortem* phase of mourning, suggests that it is a phenomenon with many existential, axiological and therapeutic implications. It is not without significance then to capture its specific character. This will allow us to respond appropriately. We can react, for example, by stopping to complicate our own existence and building a distance to the currently experienced state of affairs. In this way a man might understand that time does not necessarily have to be a 'curse' or a 'tormentor' but it may become an integral 'part' of one's history which can give new quality to life.

Probably it will not be a simple matter as the variations of time experienced by people are enveloped in sadness. As we know, every man carries one's own experiences. Despite of the variety of these experiences some common points can be picked out. We can say that the landscape of grief and sadness can be clearly stained by negation of truth. Denying the truth comes from inability to accept the fact of one's own fading. A person in a state of *ante mortem mourning* tends to cling on to the false belief and its arbitrary interpretation to his/her own advantage. Such state of fending off the truth has already been described by E. Kübler-Ross. There is therefore no reason to go on about widely known things. However it is worth to focus our attention on the elements which have been rarely mentioned by the author of *On Death and Dying*, or even not mentioned at all.

Without the risk of duplicating of obvious statements it is worth noting that the intensity of grief consists of fear permeating all human experience. Sometimes it is so strong that it disables outside expression of 'inner mental sobs.' In psychiatry, this type of inhibition is called *the feeling of aggravation* [8]. Sometimes the inability to express painful sensations creates the impression of a more sophisticated "collapse" and a growing anger directed at oneself or facing others. Such state of mind has been well illustrated by J. Dražba:

'I do not know what to do? What to do with myself? I get lost in myself. (...) I'm going crazy! I'm going crazy! I'm going crazy! (...) I am furious. I am angry because I am powerless. (...) I feel like yelling

and, screaming. I am frantic with grief. I hate everyone. I'm bitter, full of anger. (...) I'm suffocating with my helplessness and rage. I'm sick of anger. I have dark spots under my eyes. It is because of this damn anger and inability to discharge it' [9].

That peculiar mental anesthesia can also work the other way round and paralyze all reflexes of rebellion while anticipating another strike aimed on one's existence. Such kind of experience has been described by Jane Zorza. Due to the meaningfulness of her expression I shall quote the following passage in its entirety.

'I have recently discovered the seemingly obvious thing. There are two kinds of fear; the first is this big, irrational. It comes upon me when I imagine the cancer spreading over my body, devouring its healthy cells. I try to defend myself by rethinking my feelings. I then think about what exactly I am so scared of. Suffering? Death? Uncertainty? Or maybe of the impact the pain has on my psyche? These are the fears which one can cope with. But the Great Fear is not subject to such reasoning and I can not deal with it, focusing on other matters' [10].

Undoubtedly, the pressure of fear strongly determines the present and significantly influences the future of a man. It can fill the present with a feeling of strong resignation, and cover the future with darkness so gloomy that nothing else can be seen. Deep and lasting grief powered with growing fear, as Thomas Aquinas aptly remarked, burdens the spirit so tightly and closes it in itself [11] that only with the greatest difficulty one manages to break this wall and get out into the expanse of diverse experiences [11]. Sadness experienced in the *ante-mortem perspective* gradually undermines human's contact with the environment, as long as it separates him/her completely from the outside world. After a man has been fully isolated from the reality it pushes him/her into a state of constant listening and observing of his/her own grief and its reasons. Since then, the man remains in the *continuum* of diving into the same stream of thought almost *ad infinitum*.

In this state of mind all feelings quickly deplete. Thoughts lose their abundance and become monothematic. They circulate around unfulfilled dreams, longings, unrealized plans, purpose of suffering or hostility of fate. Sometimes the thought keeps revolving around the desire of life which, because of different reasons, had been neglected [12]. This state of mind may manifest itself in asking questions about some fundamental issues. For instance, a young childless woman bothering about not being able to hug her own child. Thus, she will be wondering: What could it have been like? Who could have been its father? What kind of love would she have felt as a mother? [13]. One can multiply different questions however, the case is not about

drawing up a thorough list, but rather about painful exposure to the absurd theatre of existence.

The dynamics of life becomes suspended as if one was 'exempted' from it. Life becomes tasteless, dull, disappointing, silted with overwhelming pain.

'I'm like a field corn beaten down by the hail. Everything in me is sick, burned, shaken. (...) I beg for temporary suspension (...)' [14].

Such preoccupation of thought with only one subject goes hand in hand with a sense of severe loneliness experienced in several dimensions: ontic, moral, social and metaphysical. In the ontic sense loneliness stems from the awareness of one's own existence being torn out from the entirety of existence. What used to be the union of loving and loved had been mutilated and in the final stage condemned to absolute decay. The progressive atrophy of existence of a human being leaves free space in the universe. With the passing of time it will even efface the memory of an individual.

An inseparable companion of ontic loneliness is moral loneliness caused by ill-considered interpretations of suffering, dying and death. Even those people, or maybe especially those, who feel sympathy towards a person being in the *ante mortem phase of mourning* motivated by the desire to alleviate suffering tend to misrepresent reality. Such distortion occurs when a person accompanying the dying utters such slogans as 'Death does not exist', 'Death does not matter' or 'Death is the moment to decide on one's final fate.' It is hard to stay indifferent in face of such consolations. Their wickedness and cognitive fineness has been once expressed by E. Cioran in his collection of essays entitled *On the Heights of Despair*.

Perhaps resorting to his thoughts will become a warning to those who have enough courage to juggle with empty words over the edge of the abyss of human life. Thus, it will spare a suffering person the trouble of new torment.

'What would happen if a man's face could adequately express his suffering, If his entire inner agony were objectified in his facial expression? Could we still communicate? Wouldn't we then cover our faces with our hands while talking? Life would really be impossible if the infinitude of feelings we harbor within ourselves were fully expressed in the lines of our faces. Nobody would dare look at himself in the mirror, because a grotesque, tragic image would mix in the contours of his face with stains and traces of blood, wounds which cannot be healed, and unstoppable streams of tears' [7].

The source of social isolation of a person waning within the horizon of *ante mortem mourning* are usually inadequate reactions of his/her friends, relatives or acquaintances. The presence of a dying person may be considered confusing or puzzling. One does not know what to say, or what to do. An

attempt to make contact may reveal our hesitation or impatience. These are signals that a suffering person can pick up as a sign of rejection.

It is not hard to understand that the state of *ante-mortem mourning* is a part of an extreme situation which threatens a human being with despair and succumbing to the invasion of evil. For many thinkers surrender to despair is synonymous with the collapse in the face of inevitability. Despair is a kind of taking off a protective armor and unveiling the very substance of human selfhood, exposing oneself to smite of devastating trauma. In such case hope, which plays a very important role, may help to resist the decay.

For the sake of clarity, it should be mentioned that the notion of hope in context of meditation has little in common with its traditional recognition in terms of virtue. Hope understood as virtue implicates that its direct object is the ultimate life, or 'kingdom of heaven' and not that what happens on the way. Hope also should not be interpreted according to its definition disseminated by psycho-oncology or thanatology. In these disciplines, hope is interpreted in terms of a wish for a certain state of things to occur and simultaneous uncertainty about possibility of its happening [15]. With this interpretation of hope there appears a danger of losing it easily, especially when the waiting time for a desired improvement reaches its critical value.

It is commonly known, that waiting for a thing to realize for too long significantly reduces the chance of its realization. A man can be also deprived of hope when some important, previously unknown news become known. Losing all hope will deepen a feeling of disappointment which will be directly proportional to the degree of seriousness of what could have been fulfilled.

What is more, 'counting on something' or 'hoping for something' is often accompanied with a degree of self-interest. As G. Marcel pointed it out, even the term 'to pin one's hopes on' carries a pejorative connotation. In circumstances to which these phrases refer one expects some benefits from someone or something such as fate and counts only on understanding or generosity. A person that harbors such feeling implies in advance that the good of which he/she asks is the extreme opposite of obligations that must be completed first [16]. Marcel associates such understanding of hope with idolatrous attachment to a miserable substitutes and poisonous surrogate [16].

Also in M. Mayeroff's approach hope is not wishful thinking or waiting for any specific things to occur. According to this thinker and psychotherapist hope is not connected to future compensation of present shortages. It connects with future perspective, but in actual facts its task is to "expand" the realm of present [17]. After all, hope is the

expression of the richness of human being revealing here and now as its attainable potential.

It seems that Mayeroff treats hope as concentration of all one's internal force and an activator of ontical power. Living with hope, according to Mayeroff, probably means mastering of using these energies and the ability to acquire them into one's own existence. Hope, therefore, is not a passive duration and passive waiting for some desired event to happen without human intervention but an active attitude towards the reality surrounding an individual.

Both G. Marcel and Mayeroff seem to conclude that hope is a way of human existence in the world and has a merely existential and not psychological character. Hope is a form of crossing one's own limitations, and a transcendent act different from the act of will and knowledge [17].

Meditation would be burdened with the stigma of incompleteness if the category of repetition was omitted, which is closely related to the concept of hope. While organizing the semantic field one should mention the fact of using the Latin terms *repetitio* and *repeto* in which the accent falls on the process of renewal, starting something again [18]. Connotations which are more reminiscent of returning to the past, duplicating what has already gone, and reminding of some past states or events are not taken into account in this context.

In analysis of the category of repetition from the *ante mortem* point of view it is worth to quote S. Kierkegaard, who is known of his thesis about the priority of individuality and of that what is unique in human existence over general and common. According to Kierkegaard, the human individual is lonely and solitary, standing in front of an amorphous, infinite abyss of nothingness, which does not have any attributes allowing to define it, and thus he/she has to go through a private drama [19].

Kierkegaard sees a man as the only creature able to act in two ways. He/she may persist in a state of so called pure existence comparable to floating on the waves of life without any control. On the other hand, he/she is able to take control over his/her life and try to define its flow. In other words, one can change life into something which it has not been previously and will not be in the future [20]. In this context *repetition* means striving to fill one's own being with important content and to renew its internal balance, which is never given for granted but still appears anew. The authentic being is therefore fulfilled by repeatable creation of certain state of existence situated in between two poles: nothingness and already desolated height of life.

If one treats human life, also in the phase of *ante mortem* mourning, as a stream of light, which is somehow quantified and not a continuous phenomenon, it can be seen that these quantum may analogically correspond to different states of being

repeated in new existential locations and new subjective time dimensions [21].

Thanks to this repetitive character, there is a chance to give life a new, positive value. It is difficult to say exactly what form such value can take, as in each case it turns into another shape. For some it may be a rise to a higher level of consciousness and freedom. This was probably the case with Trea Wilber who, by means of repetition, was trying to influence the style of her life in its last phase. In her opinion, the worst thing that could come upon her was not death as such, but the deadness while being alive and dying in resignation. On the other hand, for someone else it can be something different.

Obviously this meditation on mourning in *ante-mortem* perspective does not cover the complexity of the issue. What is more, it leaves us unsatisfied and even calls for complementation. However, it has been deliberately constructed in such a way to revive further debate and set field for deeper exploration which may verify the state of present knowledge on the phenomenon of mourning and allow better understanding of complex human nature.

Limiting the scope of our meditation to selected elements is also an incentive to investigate the degree of adequacy of many terms used to describe things. It is very important, as language not only evokes some experience but also carries a culture-creative function. It may therefore influence the choice of attitudes towards *ante mortem mourning* and determine the type of individual philosophy of existence in life's last chords.

Conflicts of interest

There is no conflicts of interest.

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