

*THE SICKE MANNES SALVE*

My whole adult life, I have made a study of death. Professionally, I am immersed in it. I have written about how people died in the past, and how the still-living thought about the death of their friends and prepared for their own ends. I am a professor of archaeology, specializing in mortuary and commemorative practices. I have written dozens of papers and several books about death, the dead, and how the relationship between the living and the dead changed between the late medieval period and the twentieth century. I teach classes on the archaeology and history of death; I have travelled the world giving lectures and research papers on excavated burials and standing memorials. I can tell you about the history of cemeteries or the growth of cremation; or talk about the places where people disposed of dead bodies by pickling them in alcohol, exposing them to the birds and weather, or placing them inside living trees. I can talk about the rituals of reburial and secondary burial. I have curated exhibitions and organized conferences on the topic, and written a PhD. On top of that, a few years ago, I trained to be a humanist funeral celebrant, so I developed a sideline in talking to newly bereaved people about the person they had

lost, and finding the right words to say at non-religious funerals.

Even though I spend much of my waking life thinking about dead bodies and how people in the past have treated them, I do not find it depressing or ghoulish. I love archaeology. I enjoy the fieldwork, I like teaching at the university, I like finding out new stuff. Most of all, though, I love trying to work out what you can say on the basis of incomplete and inadequate data. As archaeologists, we only ever have a partial, unrepresentative body of evidence, without enough context – a few glimpsed and distorted details, never the whole picture, or even a sketch of the whole picture. That process of inference is what archaeology really is. People think archaeology is the same as excavation, but that is just a small part of it. Excavation is one way of retrieving evidence, but there are others; the art of archaeology is in taking all those bits of evidence – things recovered from below ground, standing remains of structures, traces in the landscape, microscopic traces in soil, bone or pot – and thinking about what they might mean, how we can use them to tell a possible – a plausible – story of the past. We never have enough evidence; we never know how representative our evidence is. To scientists in other disciplines, our data is rubbish. But it is all we have; we cannot generate more through experiments or trials. The fun lies in taking our terrible data and using it to say something interesting about people in the past. Our knowledge of the past is always incomplete, patched together out of material that is never enough, not quite

the right thing and usually the wrong shape. My personal memories are not so different.

I am fascinated by the human understanding of death, the ways people make sense of it, and how the people left behind manage their relationship with the dead. I wrote my PhD about bereavement and the way that emotional relationships between the living and the dead, and the metaphors people use for death, have changed over the centuries. What does it mean, emotionally, to say that a person has gone on a journey, fallen asleep, gone to another world, is living in the ground, or has been reunited with relatives?

One question I have been working on since my PhD days is what archaeologists can say about the emotional relationship between the living and the dead. My partner, Mark, also an archaeologist, helped me find a way of talking about this epistemological problem, over many conversations that we had when walking in the hills, eating dinner or going about our lives. I remember one early exchange, while I was driving us home from Cardiff Airport after a long weekend in Paris. I had been researching the 'new' eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cemeteries of Montmartre, Montparnasse, Père Lachaise and Vaugirard. There was little to see above ground at the site of the old cemetery of Les Innocents, which had been cleared of burials in 1786, the exhumed bones taken by night, in a torchlit procession of wagons, to the disused quarries under the city. However, we were able to visit those catacombs, where the bones of the dead had been arranged into elaborate patterns and ornamented with wooden boards painted with

quotations about death. Heroically, Mark forwent trips to galleries and museums in order to accompany me on my visits to the dead. On the way home, we talked about a paper I was writing on the archaeology of emotion.

'But you can't assume, can you, that people in the past had the same emotions that you do?' Mark said. 'That's just projecting.'

'I can't assume that people in the *present* have the same emotions that I do,' I answered. 'That's why this is hard. If all humans had the same emotional experiences and the same affective responses to things, there would be nothing to study. We'd already know. So the first hurdle is recognizing that people in the past might have felt differently – from me, and from each other. I can misread the emotions of friends and family, and they can misread mine. Come to that, I cannot even be sure about my own emotions half the time. Certainly not yours.'

'So, what hope could there possibly be of getting at the emotions of people from the past – especially the distant past, and when they haven't left us any written clues?'

'I think it must be to do with how a whole society values emotions, rather than an individual. I can't know whether you really love me, but I can see that we both live in a culture that values romantic love – look at all our films and books. Look at how we organize life around the romantic couple. We privilege romantic love at a societal level, and that's different from how other societies in different places and times have seen things. And when somebody dies, society has ideas of what the appropriate emotions are: grief, or

anger, or fear. Whatever. So, even though I can't know exactly how a person felt, or feels, I think I can study "emotion" more broadly.'

'OK. You ought to know that I do really love you, though.'

The details vary according to anthropological or chronological context, but it seems that everybody wants a good death. Topping the late-medieval bestseller lists were how-to manuals written entirely with this end in mind – the *ars moriendi*, or art of dying handbook. These books are dominated by religious and spiritual concerns, and describe idealized, perfect deaths, with the dying man expressing theologically sanctioned hopes, fears and wishes in his last moments. The earliest *ars moriendi* books were published in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They were immediately popular, not only with the monastic scholars who were the usual consumers of books at that time, but with the laity too. Latin originals were soon translated into German and French. William Caxton published an English translation, *The Arte and Crafte to Know Well to Dye*, in 1490. Books on the art of dying went on being published till about 1800. After the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant traditions existed and continued to be reliable sellers. Indeed, the peak popularity of this kind of literature was not until the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

Thomas Becon was a sixteenth-century Protestant who held strong opinions on the theological controversies of his day and expressed them zealously. He fled abroad during the

Catholic reign of Queen Mary, but came back when Protestant Elizabeth I came to the throne. He wrote several religious books, but his biggest popular success was an enormously long *ars moriendi* text called *The Sicke Mannes Salve*. Sixteenth-century Britons could not get enough of it, and it ran to seventeen editions between 1560 and 1620. Apparently, *The Sicke Mannes Salve* had such a devoted fan base in its heyday that some people could recite the whole book from memory. It is basically a single deathbed scene, spread over 355 pages, recounting the last hours of Epaphroditus as he wrestles with the temptations that conventionally confront the dying man: pride, despair, impatience, loss of faith, and greed. Rather than the priests and liturgical rites of Catholic *ars moriendi* texts, the Protestant Epaphroditus relies entirely on the prayers and consolations of his lay friends to keep him on the theological rails. As he nears the end of his life, Epaphroditus experiences the disappearance, one by one, of his five senses; this is a part of the conventional narrative of death at the time. He asks his friends to prop him up a little in bed because, he says, 'I begin to wax very faint, and my breath decreaseth and waxeth shorter.' Soon after, he tells his friends that he can no longer see, and then that, 'As God hath taken away my sight so do my other senses decay.'

Next, he claims to have lost the power of speech, though that does not stop him from uttering pious hopes and prayers for several more pages. And finally, when he no longer speaks, his friend asks him to show some sign if he is still able to confirm his faith; Epaphroditus's last act is to lift a hand to show this, even when all his other abilities have left him.

People say that your sense of hearing is the last one to leave you. It is comforting to think that, even as the world slides from your grip like a wet bar of soap, you can still hear the normal sounds around you – a train going by, the washing machine working up to a juddering spin downstairs; maybe, if you are lucky, the voices of people you love. Maybe a radio.

Mark lost so much in the years, months and weeks leading to his death. Were his final minutes a shedding of the last senses and abilities that still remained available to him? One by one, system by system, the things that kept Mark anchored in the world had been taken from him. First it was his abilities – to drive, then to run, then to walk, dress and even go to the toilet. Next it was his very perception of the stuff of his life that was leaking away. Losing his sense of smell and taste not only derailed his professional plans, but also took much of the colour and joy from his life.

His ability to touch was not compromised – his fingers retained all their sensitivity till he died – but his capacity to feel gradually changed. Neurological tests charted his declining sensitivity to pinprick or vibration. At home, sensations that he had previously enjoyed or ignored – the touch of a fluffy, cotton towel, for instance – became hard for him to feel, or he experienced them as pain or irritation. His skin felt constantly prickly or itchy. Because this feeling was produced in his brain rather than in his skin, creams and lotions did not eliminate the symptom, although the feeling of cool moisturizer being rubbed into his skin gave him some temporary comfort. At least twice a day, I rubbed body lotion into his back. I thought it was the lotion that mattered and

the relief from itching, but now I think it was also the touch of human hands, and the alleviation, if only for a while, of being alone.

In the last few months of his life, Mark's eyes began to fail. Since his little stroke in January, he had occasionally had trouble with his vision. Sometimes it would seem to close in, as if he were about to faint; sometimes it would swim or dance. When that happened, he could not read, and even keeping his eyes open to look at another person could be like riding a fairground waltzer. With his eyes unruly, all he could do was lie in bed, listening to the radio, and increasingly that was how his light was spent.

Medieval and early modern *ars moriendi* books are religious books. They aim to prepare the Christian soul for death and give it the best chance of salvation. A good death in all these exemplary works is one where the dying person manages to keep to orthodox faith, carry out whatever prayers and liturgical acts are necessary and die calmly, without fear, and in steady hope of resurrection. The texts take us through the death of a man, sometimes called *Moriens* ('the dying one'). Most of the words are devoted to prayers and affirmations for the dying person, and catechismal questions and answers about death and resurrection. For a modern, secular death, there is little in all this religious stuff to offer our apprehensive mortal souls in our last days, but there are features of those *ars moriendi* books that could still model a good death for us.

The illustrated version of the most popular late medieval book has a woodcut showing a jam-packed deathbed scene.

At the centre is Moriens on his bed, but all round him are his friends and neighbours. As he dies, he opens his mouth and his soul comes out in the form of a naked child. Angels are on hand to receive his emerging soul, and, beyond our mortal vision, though perhaps not beyond Moriens's, a crowd of saints is observing this key moment. Whatever death was, for the medieval hero of the art of dying, it was not lonely. His friends, the consolers, have a key role in the deathbed scene, not only in keeping him on the theological straight and narrow, but also in comforting and reassuring him, warding off fear. They tell him how well he is doing, and that he is making a perfect end to his life. They keep talking to him, even after his ability to see and to speak has left him. They assume he can still hear. Moriens never has to die alone.

Medieval art-of-dying books are notable today for their lack of interest in explaining the death medically; they make no attempt to avoid or delay it. The Moriens character never dies *of* anything. His time is simply up, and he is about to die. That is all we need to know. None of his friends ever suggests that he should concentrate on getting better or that he still has many happy years ahead of him. This is, of course, a prerequisite for being able to talk about your own death with honesty and in detail.

Both Moriens and those around him know what to expect. Most of us no longer have this kind of familiarity with death, nor do we, for the most part, know how a normal death is likely to unfold. This state of affairs is completely different from the public and private discourse surrounding birth. I have given birth three times and each time I have had books

to read and classes to attend, so that I could go into the experience knowing what would happen at different stages, knowing what might go wrong and how to put it right. I had checklists of equipment and supplies that would ease the process. I was advised to think about what music I would like to listen to, and to consider essential oils, or being in warm water, or getting a massage during labour. When the time came, I had my partner with me all the time, and a midwife who reassured me that I was doing well, that everything was going as planned. Yet too often we go into our deaths darkly and in fear. Even those who are knowledgeable and experienced in death often deny that it is coming. There is about death the whiff of failure and even of shame: a failure of medicine to restore health and youth; a failure of the dying person to fight hard enough or to have lived a healthy enough life; sometimes, a failure of those around them, for not noticing soon enough that an illness was taking hold, or for not getting the right kind of help. Guilt is endemic among the bereaved, who often feel that if they had only been more assertive with their relative or the doctors, if they had only tried a little more, loved a little harder, the death should have been preventable.

Many of my generation do not know what to expect when we die, or how we can control it. We fear that we will not cope with the pain, that we might conduct ourselves badly, swearing at the nurses or upsetting our families. We worry that death might happen to us when we are alone and helpless, or drug-addled and terrified. It is no wonder that Mark chose to keep control over the time and the manner of his death.

Perhaps we need a new *ars moriendi*, a handbook for a secular age. We need books not only to prepare for our own deaths, but also for some instruction and guidance on how we can help to ease the final days of those we love. Such a book would contain the factual knowledge of what happens in a body as it dies, and what signs we should expect to see. It would tell us what the experience might feel like to the person undergoing it. It would suggest things we can do or say to make it as good as it can be. I have not been present at either of the deaths closest to me. My brother and I, driving to Northallerton together, got to the hospital an hour after my father died, although my mother and sister had been with him throughout. In an expression of colossal bravery, to keep me safe from prosecution, Mark died alone. His choice, but not his preference.

In the medieval art-of-dying books, the dying person does not wait passively for things to happen to him. He is actively dying. He has the starring role. Having a good death is within his control. At the time those books were written, suicide was a civil as well as a religious crime. To end one's own life was to succumb to despair, to appropriate a decision that was rightly God's and to reject the natural and divinely ordered way of things. But our modern *ars moriendi* must make some provision for control over the process of our own ending. Because we have the medical knowledge that makes this possible, and because we no longer have an obligation to follow a medieval religious code, the kind of control we have will not be the same as Moriens's. When my time comes, I think I want somebody who loves me to sit by my side and

remind me that I have mattered, that I will be, at least for a while, remembered, that the world is a different place because I have been in it. I want to hear the sounds of my house or of the season, birdsong or rain, wind or traffic. I want to know that my children will be OK, that my friends love me. I want to hope I can be forgiven for the wrong or hurtful things I have done, and for the things I failed to do that I ought to have done. I want more than anything to be forgiven for not making that kind of an end for Mark.

Mark sent his last text around midnight. He did not explain what he was doing: that would have meant I would either have had to call an ambulance and stop him, which I knew he did not want, or go to court for failing to prevent his death, or aiding and abetting suicide.

I know it will make me cry, but I cannot stop imagining his last hours. Did he feel calm as he arranged the notes on his table? Was he frightened? What were his last thoughts, his last memories? Why was the radio switched off? This was rare for Mark. For all the time I knew him, he was a radio obsessive, and found it hard to fall asleep without the World Service talking to him through the night. Years earlier, he bought a little speaker that went under his pillow so that he could listen to the radio all night without disturbing me – though, whenever I woke in the night, I could still hear its tinny, muffled voice or the faint ghost of ‘Sailing By’, the music that plays at quarter to one every night when Radio 4 offers up the last shipping forecast of the day and cedes its wavelength to the World Service. When he fell ill, that radio became everything to him: his connection to the world

outside his bedroom, the foundation of all his conversation, his truest, most patient and tireless companion, when the rest of us, myself included, had fallen short. So why did he turn it off? Did he want to focus on his thoughts? Was he thinking ahead to my return, and planning that the silence from his bedroom would warn me what I might find in there? Was he just, committed environmentalist that he was, trying to save electricity?

So, he texted me, turned off the radio and then, I suppose, swallowed the pentobarbital with water. The effect of the drug is quick. He would have been asleep within a few minutes, dead probably within an hour.

Did he think of me? Did he feel alone, abandoned? Did he call for me, for his mother, for anyone to hold his hand while the darkness filtered in?

I cannot bear the thought, but nor can I drive it from my mind.