

Death and Dinner and Performance Project

Working Script

Arrival

Guests are met at the door of the new Adelphi studio and let into the Studio.

Inside is a long table with seven place settings. There is a warm wash over the table. Elvis music plays on a low volume throughout except during the monologues when it fades in and out. Participants are led to their seats. There is no allocated seating; they can sit where they like.

Greeting

The greeting covers three points:

- Not a polished a performance but a chance to ask some questions about death and dying and test some out some ideas. It offers some time together to consider death together while we're all very much alive and to see what happens to us and our feelings around death as a result? It's an opportunity to see if there are any benefits come from acknowledging death as inevitable and perhaps plan for that inevitability?
- Just like any dinner party (with cameras of course) so don't feel you need to speak etc
- There may be difficult subject matter so please take care of yourself.

Drinks, introductions, Menu

After a period of time Sheila:

So a toast, 'To good company and good conversation' CHEERS

LFX: Spotlight fades up,

SFX: Music fades

Sheila Moves to microphone

SFX: Music fades

First monologue

Can you remember when you first became aware of death?

My friend Niki's first experience of death was in 1977 when Elvis died. Upon hearing the news she went to her room, lay on her bed, crossed her arms over her chest, closed her eyes and tried with all her might to 'die'... Niki was seven years old. She wanted to feel what it was like to die and as she tells it, was more than a little frustrated when it didn't work. To make matters worse, her efforts were interrupted by her mother who was not at all impressed by the game. She informing seven year old Niki that 'death is nothing to play at' and the game was over.

Recently, I asked my nieces, Maeve (6) and Ellen (4) what happens when you die. Ellen is a bit obsessed with death at the moment and regularly informs me that both of my parents are dead, reminding me (as if I've forgotten) that 'I don't even have a Daddy'. My parents are in heaven she tells me along with my brother's delightfully gentle border collie Flossy. Maeve is a little more pensive than her sister. When asked the question she went quiet for a moment or two. Her sister Ellen on the other hand (always ready for an existential debate) blurted 'you go to heaven' and when I asked what heaven was like explained loudly 'it has beds and clouds'. Maeve then added her thoughts, 'it's your soul that goes to heaven' she said, 'we all go to mass and then your body goes into the ground'. When I asked her what a soul is she said it's 'inside you' and importantly, that it's 'the color blue'.

Several things struck me about this exchange:

- how comfortable these two little people both were discussing death;
- how familiar if abstract the concept was to them, and how they both know something already about the ritual and practices that surround death in my native island
- and finally, how all of this will change as they experience death throughout their lives.

My first experience of death was a little less glamorous than Niki's. It happened when I was 6 years old when my Mother's sister (my aunt Mary) died suddenly at the age of 56. My experience around this event has created two memories that have fused together. I know these moments happen separately but when I think about the events, they arrive as if happening at the same time. They are felt differently however, the first one at a distance, as though I am looking at my self experiencing an event and the second in the first person, as though I am living the events in the moment. The two combine into my first understanding of death, my first consideration of it.

But before that, some background. My mother was the youngest of six. Her own mother with whom she was very close died when she was a teenager and her father, which whom she was not close, as a newly married thirty something. There was ten years between the first three siblings and the last which meant by the time my mother was born her oldest sisters were already in the working world having children of their own.

I tell you this to explain that by the time Mary died, my mother was pretty familiar with death. She had already lost both her parents and another sister Sheila and this is my memory, however disjointed, of her second sister's wake and funeral.

So, first the memory observed. I see myself in my Aunt's house. There is a coffin where the dining room table would have been and I edge towards it, eager to see what's inside while also aware of tone of the room and the need to appear respectful, mournful even. As I am almost at the coffin the location shifts and I'm in a bedroom, I recognise it as my parent's bedroom but in the memory it takes the place of my Aunt's room and she's laid out on the bed. I do not recognise her and although I'm not alone I cannot see or do not recognise anyone else in the room. I am not at all distressed either **by** the memory or **indeed, in** the memory. In it, I'm curious and happy to be involved in something adult; to be included in the ritual.

All of this did actually happen, I did go to the wake of my Aunt Mary and that was the first time I saw a dead body. And while there's no clarity on the chronology of events, there is equally no sense that the experience was upsetting. The memory that accompanies this one is different however, it feels as though it is happening in the moment.

We're all bunched up. It's a small pew but we all want to sit together. I'm beside you. You are quiet, distracted. You are here with us but not. It's mass, I'm familiar... the pews are tight and the knee rests hard like Renmore Church, like the Garrison Church, like the Cathedral. Like every church I've been in, in fact. I've kneeled on a hard rest every Sunday but never for this, never for a funeral. This is my first.

I steal a sideways glance, aware of the heaviness around you. Your face is pale and you are crying. Slowly at first, controlled or at least trying, then deeper, your shoulders engaged. You are here with us but you are not. I think, this is the first time I've seen you cry. You have tissues, you're prepared, but you are inconsolable, distant in your grief. You are not a mother (and yet still a mother). In this moment you are a sister, a daughter and you cry for the death of your sister and for the others, your mother, father, sister Sheila. And more than that, you cry for the loss of the life you lived decades before us, before the McCormick's when you lived in a three story town house in Lurgan so cold in winter you moved coals from one room to another and in summer ran shoeless in Donegal eating fresh raspberries without running water. When you were a McCreanor and the youngest of six.

There are few moments from our childhoods that we remember viscerally as adults. These memories are in our muscles, our bones. We feel them in our grown body just as we did in our little one. They are faded, a little curled at the edges perhaps but they are still there.

I had never seen my mother cry and would like to think what upset me most that day was seeing her upset. That it was empathy that arrested and unsettled me. But it wasn't. It was something else, well two things really.

Firstly, it was the realisation that my mother had had another life, one before me and my siblings, one full of experiences and relationships beyond our family bubble and that this life, her other life, was equally as important to her as the life she now had with us.

Secondly, that my mother's distress came from her understanding that she would never experience that life again, that those people were gone forever and that **at some point in**

my life, I would experience exactly the same thing. I was not unsettled by the fact that I would die, I think the narcissism of my youth spared me that for a little while at least, more that in my future lay similar grief. Other people would leave me. I would be the one weeping in a pew mourning the death of my family and with it my childhood. And this, much more than my Aunt's wake is what comes to mind when I think about my first experience of death.

The most affecting memory of the two isn't the body of my aunt laid out, the wake, the funeral, memories created from that which remain vivid, however muddled. It's the memory of a realisation bought on by those events that I feel viscerally. It is the moment I began to understand the **impact** of death that shaped my understanding.

Can you remember when you first became aware of death? What was that like? What impact did it have?

SFX: Music fades back in
Sheila serves the food
Participants and Sheila eat together

After a period of time Sheila tops up glasses:

Now feels like a good time for another toast and for this one I drawing on Dame Cicely Saunders who said, 'You matter because you are you and you matter to the end of your life' CHEERS

LFX: Spot light fades up
Sheila Moves to mic
SFX: Music fades out,

Second Monologue

What does death mean to you at this moment?

It's late and my legs are restless. I can't get comfortable. It's a moment of quiet, so rather than shuffle around in the arm chair I quietly pace the room.

3am, mid-way but still the hardest part of the night, another five hours together and then I'll make my way home in the frost to bed. It's winter so it will be dark when at home I drift off and dark when I wake up again.

The lap top open, article to read but I can't concentrate. The room is warm. They've been kind enough to leave the heating on but now I'm worried they're sweltering upstairs under duvets.

The air is punctuated with breathing, not chain stokes or a 'death rattle' but shallow none the less and irregular. I've measured it as I held his wrist gently in my hands, inspected pressure areas, checked butterfly needle sites, and the medication pump – all the while with soft tones, explaining every action to a person I will never properly meet or know.

Around the room family pictures adorn the walls. At the bedside, next to an oral hygiene pack sits an image of a couple. Slightly yellowed by the passage of time, it reminds me of my parent's black and white wedding album.

I stop for a moment, jarred by something that invades the corner of my eye. It's a child's toy, one that belongs to the infant I met earlier, the one with yellow hair who gurgled and crawled about the room happily in her mother's company. Her picture accompanies the couple on the bedside table. Other than from stories, she will never know the man sleeping with shallow breath, in the bed, in this makeshift bedroom that was once the family sitting room of the home he made.

And for a moment everything stops. I catch my breath and my eyes sting. I am overwhelmed by something, not sadness, not fear, something else...

These pictures dotted around the room. Portraits of graduations, holiday snaps, group pictures of son's and daughter's weddings, they all tell a story. They are a map with roads that all point to the man sleeping with shallow breath, in the bed, in this makeshift bedroom that was once the family sitting room of the home he made. They are the stuff of a life, a full life... and in that moment, my own life, with all its uncertainty is pulled sharply into focus.

Beside the child's toy sits a tray of medication:

Diamorphine for pain

Metoclopramide for sickness

Midazolam for sedation

Hyoscine for secretions

I look them and in that instant, they seem bizarre. They are out of place and their position moves things even further into strangeness...

My body is mortal

My time fleeting

I feel connected to the now. A desperation to have as full a life when I leave. A family upstairs catching fleeting hours of sleep between precious hours of farewell.

And I am jealous, jealous of the time, the space, this opportunity to plan, to talk, to sit next to. I'm jealous, for you, of the peace....

I remember the noise of ICU. The florescent lights. The drips and tubes that pumped and pulled and which for you, were all inevitably futile.

And I wonder what I would have said, what objects I would have placed around you and who would have kept watch in a makeshift bedroom that once was **and is somehow still** the family sitting room of the home you made.

And all of this is in an instant because a child's toy sits beside a tray of medication. Because this space is neither home nor hospice... but something else, something sacred.

The uncanniness of this coupling shifts me from my restless state.

Course work can wait, no interest in the book I've brought for distraction.

It is 3am and I sit alert, present, listening to the breathing of a man I will never meet and contemplate my place in it all.

What does death mean to you at this moment in time?

LFX: Spot light fades down

SFX: Music fades back in and is played at a low volume until the end of the song

Sheila moves back to the table

Participants and Sheila continue to eat together

After a period of time Sheila tops up glasses

**So before dessert, our final toast, to 'difficult conversations and the chance to have them',
CHEERS**

LFX: Spotlight fades up
Sheila moves to mic
SFX: Music Fades out

Third Monologue:

Is there such a thing as a good death?

People have birthing plans? They imagine their child's birth. They read books and talk to friends who've been through it. They watch videos scaring themselves ridged in the process. They consider what medical intervention they want, what strategies they will use, who will be involved, who will be present at the precise moment when the new life comes into the world. Water birth, natural delivery, no pain relief, lots of pain relief... These options are all considered and a plan put in place for the moment life begins.

I imagine my mother and father, they talked to each other, planned and thought about what they wanted to happen when I came into the world. I wonder if I should do the same for myself in preparation for when I leave.

Why is it difficult to consider death and perhaps plan for its inevitability so as to make it our own; to have dominion over perhaps the most profound moment in our life, its ending?

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, she suggests our inability to integrate the expectation of death into our understanding of life might come from the fact that death has become unfamiliar.

Death happens all the time but we never see it. When a person dies in hospital, he or she is whisked away. A magical disappearing act clears away with the evidence before it can upset anyone. But being part of the dying process, the death and the burial, seeing and perhaps even interacting with the body, these are all important steps to coming to grips with death -

that of the person who has died and indeed that of our own (*Death the Final Stages of Growth*, 5)

I have had the privilege to see be present at the moment of death; to see the shift in energy as life leaves the body. I have touched a dead body, washed a dead body, dressed a dead body all with the knowledge and respect that this shell was one once a person, someone's loved one. I have done this with care and after my parents died hoped someone would do the same for them. I wasn't allowed to lay my parents out, they both died in hospital and were whisked away and tidied up in that magical disappearing act I mentioned. But how I wish I could have had that privilege. To have cared for them in that most personal of moments. Because when you get down to it, that's all that's important isn't it; that we take care of each other? Even if taking care means having difficult conversations so that a loved one's have the change to have their wishes heard. And might it have been even a little easier for me to accept my parent's passing had I'd had the opportunity to spend time with them after they were gone.

In the past, our traditions and rituals around death existed for a reason. Many of those reasons still apply. Funeral ceremonies allow mourning to happen openly; they give space and attention to grief. They help to prevent grief from becoming perpetual and provide structure and a focus in a chaotic time. Most importantly, they allow the celebration of a life lived. No one could describe me as a good Catholic but I tell you what, my cultural Catholicism was invaluable in the days after my parent's deaths. When you're whole world is shook and you don't know what way is up, you can't beat an Irish Catholic Funeral rituals.

In the Hindu religion when it becomes clear a person is about to die, he/she is lifted out of bed and placed on the floor. Relatives gather around the dying person, dip a basil (tulsi) leaf into the holy water of the river Ganges and place it on the lips of the person. In Judaism, two of the most important commandments are to honour the dead and comfort the mourner. The time before death is taken up with a review of one's life, ethical wills are written. These messages from the dying to their families expressing the hopes for those they leave behind. They are a comfort to the bereaved. In Buddhism, the emphasis is on a good death which is intrinsically linked to a good life.

In our society, rituals are in decline. Advances in the medical sciences have somehow convinced us death can be put off, postponed, held in check. We've keep death away from the home and absolved ourselves from its rituals. We are so distant from death that when it finally pushes itself into our lives we have no scheme, no system or belief developed from our experiences to make sense of it. But we can never fully ignore death, it will find a way to grab our attention and when it does surely the more prepared we are for it the better.

I've seen life begin and, for the most part, births are all pretty similar. There is fear excitement, joy or once on a bright spring morning, there was sadness. I have seen life end too and, in my experience, deaths are rarely similar. They are different because of a combination of things: the person, the circumstance and the people involved. This simple equation creates the outcome for every individual death and these are things I think we should all consider.

When I think about my own death I am immediately struck by how little I care about dying and how much I care about what I have left behind. Who will come to my funeral? Will anyone be there to organise it? Will anyone care that I have died? So much about my death is actually about my life and how I have lived it.

I can control how much I eat, how much I exercise, how much I drink. These things are important. But I can also be mindful of other things... How much I love, how much I understand, how much I prepare. I can plan what my death will be like in an ideal situation, what medical intervention I would like, what strategies I want used, who I want to be involved, who will be there with me at the end. And I can talk to my loved ones about that plan. It may be the ideal of course but why not. I might not have say on what ends my life but perhaps I can put my oar in and suggest how that ending happens.

So here goes...

It will be a bright Spring morning. I will be pain free thanks to the wizzing sound of my syringe driver. I will know and like my palliative care nurse and will have availed of all the peace and support that palliative care provides. I will have spoken to each of my children (and if lucky enough, grandchildren) explaining why I love them, why they are special and what they have to offer to the world. I will tell them being their mum has been my most precious occupation. I will have spent time with my siblings and travelled home to the West of Ireland one last time. I will be held by my husband with whom I will have had time to come to terms with our parting. Hearing is the last sense to go before a person dies so I will die hearing his voice reassuring me to it is ok to go.

When I was developing this piece, I thought I might perform it as a disgruntled waitress left in the lurch by an absent host (aka death) who never appears but who, nonetheless, looms large over the proceedings, over life. I changed my mind and decided instead just to be myself but perhaps that notion of that continuous presence isn't too far off the mark.

I'm going to end now and let us get back to our conversation but before I do I want to leave you again with Kubler Ross who said, 'It is hard to die, and it will always be so, even when we have learned to accept death as an integral part of life, because dying means giving up life on this earth. But if we can learn to view death from a different perspective, to reintroduce it to our lives so that it comes not as a dreaded stranger but as an expected companion to our life, then we can also learn to live our lives with meaning- with full appreciation of our finiteness, of the limits on our time here'.

So... my last question....

Is there such a thing as a good death and if so, what would it look like?

LFX: Spotlight fades down

SFX: Music Fades in

Sheila serves dessert: participants and Sheila eat together

Sheila thanks everyone for coming

House lights come up