

Social Relations

Gratefully Dead

Everyone does it once, so why not make the most of life's most likely event?

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

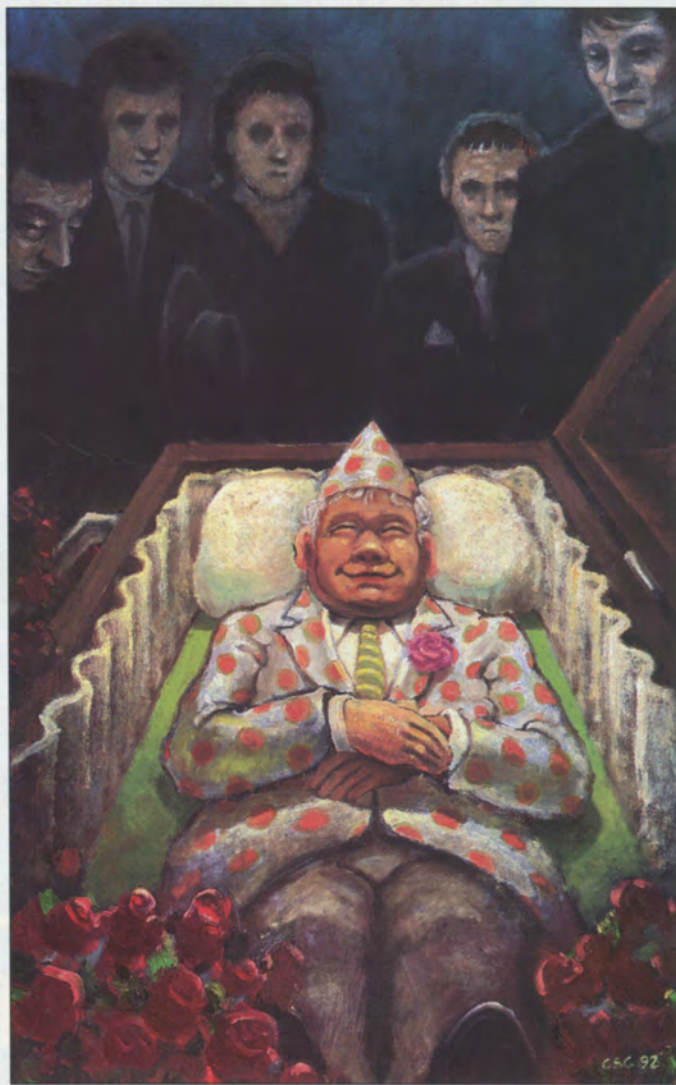
I HAVE REACHED THE STAGE IN LIFE WHERE I AM starting to attend more funerals than weddings, and, to be honest, I'm not sure this is a turn for the worse. It's almost scary: I've become something of a death freak, like one of those loony teenagers who dangle tiny skeletons from their ears, wear nothing but black, and sleep in caskets à la Sarah Bernhardt.

Let me say that weddings have their pleasures, champagne and cake being two of them. But they also involve so much enforced gaiety, so many say-cheese smiles, that I find them increasingly wearying, like a too-long stay in Florida.

Funerals are much more interesting. First of all, there is the sheer, almost palpable drama in simply knowing a corpse is so close by. It's as though everyone in attendance has suddenly been drawn into a real-life murder mystery.

Death is the Big One, and it is inspiring to be in its presence. It's almost as if God has come for a visit. Sure, funerals are sad. But they come by their emotion honestly, unlike other events on the social calendar, like a baby shower or Mother's Day.

A genuine tragedy provides a useful gloss on pseudotragedies like the latest Red Sox collapse or stock market slump. It helps you sort out what is important. In a sense, it provides a handy inspiration: you want to live in such a way that when everyone is gathered around your corpse, you wouldn't be ashamed to know what they were all thinking.



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Social Relations

Death yields one other unexpected benefit, too, the real prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box. As a person shifts from being a living body to being a memory, he becomes more a part of you, not less. It's almost insidious what the dead can do. They climb right inside your head and make a permanent home for themselves there.

While we know the living only in the most fleeting and fragmentary way, we somehow hold the dead complete and entire, and we don't ever forget them. I didn't know the writer Harvey Oxenhorn very well, but since he died in a car crash, two years ago, hardly a week has gone by without my thinking of him—a funny bald guy who wrote one terrific book and would have liked to write many more.

I think of the way he died, especially, because it was so quintessentially Harvey. His book had just come out; with his brother, he was driving to their mother's house to celebrate. Harvey had pulled his car over for gas, and, to his surprise, he had trouble getting the engine started afterward. That was odd—his car had always started perfectly. Harvey always paid special attention to such things, and he couldn't stop puzzling about it.

When he finally got the car going, he pulled out into the highway—only to get creamed by an oncoming car that had suddenly veered over into his lane. Apparently, the other driver had taken his eyes off the road to adjust his child's car seat. Harvey's last words were, "I just can't imagine why my car wouldn't start." I think of that often.

Death isn't really so bad for the survivors once the shock wears off. It is like the end of anything—summer vacation, a job, a favorite TV series. There's a kind of relief to it, the feeling that at least you don't have to do that anymore. You can finally move on.

Death can be a liberation for those left behind, and it may not be all that bad for the dearly departed, either, if all the heart-warming accounts of near-death experiences are to be believed. (I'd just as soon wait to find out for sure.)

An elderly English friend of mine tells me that his father used to read the London *Times* obituary page with great eagerness every morning over breakfast, and if he found the name of a friend in its columns, he'd slap his knee with delight. "Oh look, Jackie's gone!" he'd exclaim, pleased as anything finally to be done with another old duffer.

In the same spirit, I've started to take an interest in the obit page myself. It's a pleasure to be able to read the whole story of people's lives, to have them fully summed

up, provided they weren't too young, like Harvey. The weird part is reading about the deaths of people you thought had been dead for years already. In that case, they seem to die all over again, only this time somehow you've killed them.

THAT SENSE OF COMPLICITY MAY BE why I have come to feel a ghoulish appreciation for death's many merchants. Not the hotheads who blow their mates away one boozy Saturday night, but the real pros—the mass murderers, serial killers, trained assassins, homicidal maniacs, and all the other psychopaths who play the grim reaper with such enthusiasm.

I'm not alone in this, I know, considering the impressive sales of books describing their lurid exploits, and the hot box office for splatter flicks. It's the obvious

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delight these psychos take in their murderous tasks that always impresses me, the way they can't just kill somebody and leave it at that but have to go on mutilating the corpse or having sex with it.

Clearly, their greatest problem is containing their glee. It's just too bad they don't take more care in choosing their victims, since there are so many people still at large who could really profit from being bludgeoned to death. People who let their car alarms go for hours at a time, for instance, or certain local politicians it would be unlawful for me to name.

I shouldn't talk this way, I know. How would I like it if some kook decided to come after a member of my family? Well, all I can say is, it depends on which one. I'll admit I was a basket case after my father died, but that was a while ago.

Much as I loved him, I wouldn't want to have gone through my entire life with him, hearing the same stories over and over. And, much as I'd like to think my kids love me, I can't believe they'd enjoy my hanging around forever to bug them about their taste in music or boyfriends. Is all human life sacred? People say so, but they don't really mean it.

I don't notice anyone expressing much

concern for the thousands of Serbs and Croats slaughtered in the civil war in Yugoslavia, or for the Iraqis killed in the Gulf War. An untold number of Armenians can die in an earthquake, and the news barely registers on our consciousness. And then there are the mass murderers I happen to like so much: they are deemed by the state to be barely worth the electricity it takes to fry them. That is a pity, for I never tire of their exploits.

After all the excitement of Jeffrey Dahmer, we are in a bit of a serial-killer lull, and I am only sorry that no one has come along to go Dahmer one better in the manner of a Roger Maris rising up to outslug the Babe. I had the thrill of a lifetime when I met our state's own professional-quality mass murderer, the now—sadly—nearly forgotten "Hitchhike Murderer," Anthony Jackson, who acquired his name because he supposedly used to pick up his victims as they were thumbing rides around Boston.

At the time, Jackson was doing a long stretch in Bridgewater State for killing 3 women, with as many as 17 more supposedly to his credit. That brought his total to 20—a state record, I believe.

Whatever your view of Jackson's ethics, you have to grant that he showed creativity: he strangled one 23-year-old with her bra; garroted an art teacher in her apartment and then stuffed her under her bed; and strangled, stabbed, and shot a college sophomore, then put her into a closet in an abandoned rooming house and nailed it shut.

All great stuff, if you didn't happen to be friends or family of the victim. When we spent a little time chatting together there in the visitors' room at Bridgewater, I was struck by how normal Jackson seemed. It made me think that anybody could do what he did, if he just put his mind to it.

The only thing that seemed a little off about him were his hands. They were so soft, they looked like a woman's, with long, tapered fingers and perfectly trimmed nails. Seeing them, I realized that murder is a delicate job, after all.

Of all the killers who have graced our city, I admire Chuck Stuart the most. It is tempting, of course, to be hard on a guy who bumps off his wife and unborn child, but all I can think is: What a stunt! To be able to do that and then carry on as though he himself were the victim of the crime, and write out a tear-jerking eulogy for the wife he killed. Now, there is a man of world-class talent for his craft.

I'm just disappointed that his funeral was closed to the public. I'd love to have been there. □

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