FROM THE GOOD DEATH TO THE GOOD LIFE: AMERICAN SENSIBILITIES ABOUT DEATH AS SEEN THROUGH OBITUARIES

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Although the portrayals of individuals provided by newspaper obituaries are disconnected from biological death and subsequent post-mortem rituals, these memorializations provide not only announcements of people’s deaths and narratives of their lives but also insights into the times in which they lived. Obituaries comprise one path to understanding the cosmology of the denial of death that peaked in America during the twentieth century. In the 1800s a Good Death signaled the existence of a proper and pious life and allowed for a smooth transition into the afterlife. The emphasis on dying and death as illustrated in the rhetoric, imagery, and structure of obituaries reflected this nineteenth-century concern with the transcendent soul and a mission to edify the community through the narrative of the Good Death. The majority of Americans possessed little denial about physical death because they had the promise of spiritual continuance. Twentieth-century America, however, experienced a shift away from such traditions, and, as a consequence, details and stories of the Good Life nudged the notion of death to the margins of the obituary.

An obituary provides a representation or literary image of a once-living individual and creates an ambiguous site of “paradoxical presence and absence” (Weber 21). More recent obituaries that emphasize the Good Life accentuate this paradox by fashioning portrayals of individuals in the midst of life. By contrast, obituaries from the nineteenth century presented more direct representations that highlighted the Good Death and an absence of the known person. This allowed the reader to “preserve
the social presence of the dead” by substituting an indirect representation by means of written description for the “direct gaze” upon a corpse (Weber 48). As a representation the obituary functions as an object, enabling readers to scrutinize the manner of death and/or the manner of life presented.

On a broader scale, obituaries have reflected and continue to communicate the ethos of a particular time in history. For more than two hundred years American newspapers have provided these commemorations of citizens that, in turn, have projected prevailing cultural values (Hume 12). Classifying information, both offered as well as omitted, on the obituary page frame these moral standards within specific historical moments. Names and occupations hint at social inclusion or exclusion; the cause of death as well as reports of funeral arrangements may elucidate attitudes about death; personal attributes and virtues often indicate current American values (Hume 23). As publishers of obituaries, conventional newspapers have always been obliged to present this public service in a manner that appeals to cultural understandings and mores of the majority of Americans (Hume 19), thereby situating a representation of an individual life and death into the broader realm of its expanded citizenry. In this way, the written memorialization ideally offers both the significant others of the deceased as well as unknown others the possibility of solace and/or reflection by creating a nexus where family and community can view the reality of death as both a singular event and a universal circumstance. These two perspectives, which consist of a personal account generally focused on either a Good Death or a Good Life along with an appeal for consideration of this death and/or life by the community at large, reflect the dual purpose inherent in the newspaper obituary.

The importance of a Good Death and of *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) to nineteenth-century Americans came through clearly in the obituaries of the time. As important as qualities and deeds that exemplified the deceased throughout life, the time immediately preceding death held
meaning for the dying and the survivors. Depictions of deathbed moments that emphasized Christian beliefs and a readiness to leave the mortal world provided “edifying scenes of saintly death” for the community (Farrell 189). Accessible to all, a Good Death spoke to attitudes about the meaning of life and provided a suitable coda (Faust 7-8). Most importantly, when abided by, the code of *ars moriendi* enabled a decedent’s family the opportunity to assess the state of their loved one’s soul, informing them of their chances of a reunion in Heaven (Faust 10).

If family could not attend the death of their loved one, they hoped for a detailed condolence letter that would offer them a virtual sense of the hour of death. In particular, families wanted to know that the deceased recognized his or her fate, demonstrated a willingness to accept it, expressed a belief in God and personal salvation, and forwarded personal messages to those who normally would have been in attendance during those final moments (Faust 17). Early obituaries often mimicked the style and substance found in these condolence letters (Faust 30). In describing the Good Death, condolence letters and, by extension, early obituaries “affirmed a set of assumptions about death’s meaning that established the foundations for the mourning that followed” (Faust 144).

The *Rutland Herald*, a small city newspaper in Vermont, published the obituary news of General George Washington on January 6, 1800. Beneath Washington’s name the newspaper venerates him as “Covered with glory, and rich in the affections of the American people.” The obituary itself comes with a preface announcing the “deficiency of language” to do “justice to the lustre and fame of the deceased!” as well as a poem exalting him and placing him in the company of other veterans. With the American Revolution still in the recent past, Washington’s service as a soldier and political leader elevates him to the “god-like” status referenced more than once in the poem. Despite the elevated rhetoric, additional information reinforces the fact that Washington was a mortal, destined to die. Not only
does the newspaper offer a significant representation of the first president in life but most vividly in death. The Rutland Herald includes a missive very much like a condolence letter, allowing the public a glimpse of the death-bed scene.

I mention to you the truly melancholy event of the death of our WASHINGTON. — He made his exit last night, between the hours of 11 and 12 after a short but painful illness of 23 hours. The disorder of which he died is by some called the Crape, by others an Inflammatory Quinsey, a disorder lately so mortal among children in this place and I believe not until this year known to attack persons at the age of maturity. (Rutland Herald, 6 January 1800)

The letter continues with a call for “all to close our houses, and act as we should do if one of our family had departed.” It concludes with the certitude that he died a Good Death, reassuring that “[h]e died perfectly in his senses and … perfectly resigned” with “no fear of death” and with “affairs … in good order…”

The fundamental values of the time accompanied by a call to grieve surfaced regardless of whether the decedent was a national icon or a local figure. Two months following George Washington’s obituary, the Rutland Herald published that of a prominent local lawyer, Samuel Williams. While not as lengthy or elaborate as Washington’s, the representation of Williams’ life and death shares similarities in the personal qualities it praises and inclusion of the details of his demise. The obituary underscores his outstanding character in the community and at home. The “steady patriotism and uncorrupted integrity” that defined his “public conduct” as well as Williams’ role as an “affectionate husband,” “tender parent,” and “warm and faithful friend” could prove edifying to readers. However, just as with Washington’s obituary, Williams’ comes with a supplementary letter from the attending doctor explicitly recounting the injuries which killed him.

The Rutland Herald printed, “He has a puncture made in his body by a pine knot of more than an inch in diameter. It entered at the right side of the
anus near the rectum.” After further description, the obituary describes the quality of his pulse, his “cadaverous” odor, and the appearance of purple discolorations upon his skin. Amidst the report of physical suffering, the reader receives assurance that “he retained his reason and speech to the last, and neither sighed nor groaned.” This, like many early nineteenth-century obituaries, presents a level of authenticity by juxtaposing spectacularly overstated moral qualities with vivid depictions of death in the context of ars moriendi.

As the nineteenth century progressed, obituaries reflected the shifting cultural mores. Influenced in part by the second Great Awakening of the 1830s, obituaries continued to emphasize the Protestant principles that included sentimental emotion and a purity of heart but also validated interest in home and hearth as a sign of veneration (Green 163). The years surrounding the Civil War, for example, produced more inclusive obituaries, presenting lives and deaths previously disregarded by newspapers and, likewise, describing them with qualities more realistically achievable to the average American (Hume 56).

The use of flowery language and mourning poetry continued for both national and local personages. As Walt Whitman’s poems spoke to America’s sorrow following President Lincoln’s assassination (Faust 159), local papers also published obituaries either partially or fully in verse. Such a mourning poem appeared in the Rutland Daily Herald on January 4, 1864, in response to the death of Joseph P. Pingrey.

Lines composed on the death of Joseph P. Pingrey, who was killed by the cars near Gassett’s Station, Dec. 5, 1863, aged 23 years and 11 months.

Farewell, dearest Joseph, thoug’rt gone to thy rest,
We miss thee wherever we roam.
But we hope we shall meet in the land of the blest,
In yonder bright heavenly home.

“Hush’d Be the Camps To-Day,” “Oh Captain! My Captain,” & “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”
Thou wast called unexpected: though often we feared
That you thus wouldst be taken away;
Thy once manly form to us all so endeared,
Lies heavy and lifeless as clay.

Few and short were the hours that had glided away,
Since we thy bright face did behold,
All radiant with smiles like the sun’s genial ray —
But alas: it is now dull and cold.

Thy welcome approach nevermore shall we hear —
Thy loss, O how deeply we feel!
Our sorrowing hearts, which thy late voice could
cheer, —
The Savior alone can now heal.

’Tis hard thus to part with the young and the fair,
To lay thee away in the tomb.
And to return to our home and remember that there,
We may never expect thee to come.

We shall miss thee dear brother, surrounding our
hearth,
At morning, at noon, and at even;
But though we are parted so sadly on earth,
May we joyfully meet thee in heaven.
(Rutland Daily Herald, 4 January 1864)

Prefaced only by a few pertinent facts, the commemoration itself explicitly addresses the brevity of life and the attending grief for family in the context of an essential Christian faith. Pingrey’s sudden death made *ars moriendi* an impossibility, a scenario that his family “often feared.” Although circumstances denied the young man the opportunity to proclaim his acceptance of his mortal fate, his love of God, and belief in his salvation, the poem in no way dismisses or obscures death. Instead, this consolation literature presents an emotional reaction that amplifies the significance of life’s end (Douglas 201). As these examples illustrate, nineteenth-century Americans did not shy away from discussing grief and death openly in the obituary pages. However, during the next century these same pages demonstrated the “reversal of death” that Philippe Ariès describes. The clear
indications that the dying “owned” his or her own death and that survivors could openly grieve gradually evaporated from obituaries (136).

Changes to the care of the dying and dead in the early years of the twentieth century resulted from the “institutional outsourcing of death,” which included a new and growing medicalization of society and the subsequent transition of moribund and deceased individuals from the home to the hospital and the funeral home (Weber 74). As a result, medical facilities and the predominantly male-operated funeral industry assumed care and control of these people from the hands of primarily female caregivers and “layers-out.” If, as David Field points out in “Making Sense of Difference—Death, Gender and Ethnicity,” women perform a central function in the “process of making sense of death,” both practically as caregivers and psychologically by effectively providing emotional space for grieving, then shifting this paradigm places the care of the dying and dead into primarily male-dominated settings (8). From the end of the nineteenth century and into the next, this gradual de-feminization of dying situated it in both a patriarchal and an industrial context. Over time, this “reversal of death” with its exchange of a familiar and domestic setting for a clinical and controlled one, increasingly denied the terminally ill personal agency in his or her own death while similarly denying the survivors crucial emotional space and time to grieve (Ariès 136).

The obituaries of the mid-decades of the twentieth century illustrate this sense of denial. Americans have become so acclimated to the substance and style of post-nineteenth-century obituaries that their predecessors come across to our modern sensibilities as strikingly gratuitous and morbid in their “gruesome descriptions of death scenes” (Johnson 10). Much can be inferred from this tremendous discrepancy when we regard obituaries as screens that filter facts, narratives, and values of the deceased within their own temporal and cultural contexts (Hume 16). The deathbed scene all but disappeared by the early part of the twentieth century,
and obituary writers then (as well as most today) omit the cause of death “unless there’s a tale to tell” (Johnson 33-34). Desolate and dreary death notices, occupied by bland lists of job histories and survivors, became the norm in American newspapers. Occasionally, however, commemorations for famous or distinguished Americans would include an abbreviated version of the deathbed scene. For instance, Judy Garland’s June 23, 1969, obituary in the *New York Times* mentioned that the troubled star’s husband found her body in the bathroom. The inclusion of this fact (while not exactly a deathbed scene) delivered a veiled judgment about Garland’s lifestyle and life. In contrast, a year earlier on June 2, 1968, the *New York Times* reported on Helen Keller’s death, prefacing the chronology of her life with a bedside quote from her companion Mrs. Winifred Corbally. “She drifted off in her sleep. … She died gently.” Along with the account of Keller’s Good Life came a reassurance that she also experienced a Good Death.

Whether recognizing a renowned figure or an average American, newspapers historically presented a notice of funeral arrangements, the place of birth, and nearest survivors. Typically, inclusion of a more detailed chronology of a decedent’s life—one that highlighted human qualities such as career, accomplishments, and personal characteristics—corresponded to that person’s prominence in the community (Green 227). Therefore, a common citizen’s austere mid-twentieth-century obituary, devoid of mention of a Good Death, may have included implications of a Good Life but often stopped short. On November 5, 1969, the *Rutland Daily Herald* printed Norris M. Barton’s obituary. After reporting the basics of where his life started and where it ended, it teased the reader with a singular sentence: “He was known as ‘Bicycle Pete’ due to his traveling by bicycle to many parts of the country as a self-employed artist.” No further information concerning his life is given. This obituary had the potential of inspiring readers in the community with a commemoration of Barton’s life.
instead of offering a mere death notice.

These obituaries, marked by their dearth of information, provided unedifying representations of individuals in life and in death. Considered in Freudian terms, the tangible “lack” obvious in these mid-century death notices could be conceived as a manifestation of widespread psychological repression or denial resulting from fear of death. Marilyn Johnson asserts that perhaps “all those wars” contributed to this “gray,” “dusty,” and “depressing” period of obituary reporting (10). This makes sense when considered in conjunction with the increased quality of life many Americans enjoyed due to scientific and commercial innovations of the time. With so much to live for, who would want to dwell on death?

Meaningful commemorations eventually did resurface, however. The 1980s signaled the onset of the “Golden Age of the Obituary” (Johnson 10) which has continued into the present. New genres of obituaries emerged. Just as the originals of the nineteenth century consisted of a variety of ways to represent facts and feelings surrounding an individual’s death and life, the modern version, too, is a hybrid obituary. Instead of incorporating doctors’ letters and/or poems in a condolence letter style, the hybrid of today combines basic information in a chronology with short story or vignette form. These narratives inject substance and authenticity to the celebrity remembrance as well as celebrate the Good Life of average citizens. They strive to present the “extraordinary in the ordinary person” (Johnson 11). The basis for these obituaries on either end of the historical spectrum plays on the human desire for knowledge and meaning.

In addition to knowledge and meaning, Americans desired entertainment. With increasing access to more news and entertainment sources beginning in the 1980s, the average citizen learned to expect more. Obituaries reflected these values and transitioned into an art form for the masses. Marilyn Johnson traces the origins of this trend to a 1982 edition of the Philadelphia Daily News. The paper’s obituary editor Jim Nicholson
selected ordinary citizens and published representations of their otherwise average lives through “shards of detail and glimmering quotes,” allowing them to become in death “characters of consequence” (Johnson 90). These obituaries, however, served a broader purpose than inspiring readers with snapshots of a Good Life or illuminating the universal nature of individuality. They functioned as stories, elevating the obituary to the “level of folk art” (Johnson 97).

The modern obituary with its shift toward a hybrid art form and source of entertainment also adjusted its content with the times. Those who write obituaries chronicle events in a decedent’s life that memorialize and protect a cultural ideal. The New York Times elucidated this mission following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The newspaper somehow had to respond adequately to the reality of so many New Yorkers missing and presumed dead. Instead of modifying its obituary page, an institution in its own right, the Times established an “alternative obituary form” (Johnson 62). Called “Portraits of Grief,” these vignettes or “memorial sketches” (Johnson 68) broke the rules of traditional obituary writing and became known as the “anti-obituary.” Deepa K. Pakkala’s “Portrait” exemplifies this anti-obituary quality that relies on mundane detail to convey a poignant message.

Deepa K. Pakkala was a perfectionist. She went to work early and returned late to her home in Stew- artsville, N.J., and then she often cleaned. Every last spot of dirt. She was a consultant for Oracle and was working for a client at the trade center. The morning of the attack, she was at her desk before she had to be. Her husband, Sampath, whom she met in Bangalore, the technology center of India, realized that her drive was an essential part of her, but he often tried to persuade her to scale back, if just a little. He said he would always ask her to go in a little later. “She would say that ‘if I do that, I would have to leave my job’.”

Ms. Pakkala, 31, did slow down for the birth of their first child, Trisha, last January on the couple’s ninth anniversary. She took two months off, but then it was back to work. “She didn’t want to stay at home and do
nothing,” Mr. Pakkala said. “She wanted to contribute to the family.” (NewYork Times, 4 November 2001)

Prior to September 11, newspapers such as the Philadelphia Daily News had already utilized a version of this new form for local obituaries; however, the appropriation and refinement of it in the NewYork Times illustrated how an internationally recognized newspaper had concurrently maintained its expected standards and preserved its origins as a local paper (Johnson 62). The number of Americans killed in the attacks, along with New York’s and the nation’s sense of helplessness following the tragedy, created the impetus behind “Portraits of Grief.” This new style of commemoration served the purpose of nineteenth-century memorial poetry without the pathos. In fact, the NewYork Times’ tributes almost solely represented images of life. Perhaps because the circumstances disallowed a Good Death, death was only tangentially referenced in these remembrances. The purpose of the writing was to display average life with all its banalities and routines and to reassure the world that this kind of life, accessible to all, constitutes the Good Life.

Due to the inescapable nature of death and death’s inextricable link to life, the subject of any obituary, whether represented explicitly by ars moriendi or ars vivendi (the art of living), comes through in a newspaper’s memorialization in relation to both. From the American obituary’s beginnings in the newspapers of the nineteenth century through its drab slog of denial in the mid-1900s until its present day Golden Era, it has offered readers information, solace, entertainment, and/or edification depending on the needs and values of society during its time. Just as obituaries connect death with life, they also marry the individual with his or her community. Today’s popularity and celebration of obituaries as an art form challenges the notion that Americans still suffer the pervasive sense of denial about death that existed in the mid-twentieth century. Examined broadly as indicators of highly regarded cultural ideals, obituaries today reflect the
fundamental value of the individual and, more specifically, the presence of a Good Life inherent in each.

Works Cited


“Samuel Williams Obituary.” Rutland Herald 10 March 1800 Microfilm. 5 March 2015.