

In the air

# Dreams and nightmares

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The other night I dreamt I was dead. Dead but still conscious of being. In my dead state I came, sort of floated really, into a room where members of my family were sitting round the dinner-table. As I entered, there was a slight stirring among them and I knew that although they couldn't see me they could feel my presence as I approached.

I also realised that as soon as I left that room I would no longer be conscious of being, because that was what death meant. And I was unable to imagine that state of non-consciousness - snuffing out like a candle; couldn't imagine not being aware of being.

What would happen to my consciousness? The dream would have to end, as there would be no one there to go on dreaming it.

I woke up, alert at once and thinking.

It was an interesting dream, not at all frightening or depressing, - not like the recent „anxiety“ dream, where I had to learn by heart a 120-page Beckett text for a one-man show I was to perform, or others, genuinely horrifying, where I was to be tortured or was terminally ill. I've had those too and the dark pall they cast over waking life sometimes lasts for days.

No, this was different. An interrogation, a genuine puzzle: what would happen to me when I left that room and was no longer aware of being. Death as the absence of consciousness which the conscious mind cannot conceive. „Imagination, dead imagine“, wrote Beckett.

But what of the opposite state, where you're conscious of being, yet not „alive“ in any meaningful sense of the term? When you are a prisoner of your consciousness, aware only that you are incapable of expressing yourself, of interacting with other humans, of taking nourishment, of making even the slightest movement ... of anything except going on being conscious. And in the worst, hardly uncommon, case, being in terrible physical pain as well and unable to tell anyone, get someone to make it stop. To make you stop ... being conscious.

That must surely be the worst nightmare of all. The consciousness equivalent of being buried alive - as a claustrophobic, my worst nightmare.

Personally I'm not afraid of dying, or rather I'm not afraid of being dead. Unlike Hamlet, I don't dread finding myself unable to return after death from some undiscover-



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## Consciousness

red country, do not believe in the dreams that may come after I've „shuffled off this mortal coil“, that there is a „rub“.

True, like most people, I suppose, I would rather not die alone: passing from being to non-being, from consciousness to non-consciousness, is a rite of passage that would seem to require the presence of friends to bear witness, to share those moments with you, give affection and companionship - and yes, probably, in extremis, support and comfort.

What I am very afraid of - and who isn't? - is dying in pain, of a death involving protracted suffering. And of being helpless to prevent it. If we have to die, well, that's what humans do, that's why we call ourselves *mortals*. But when the outcome has become inevitable, why should we be obliged to go through hours - or worse, days, weeks - of mental and physical pain before doing so? What gives other humans the right to inflict that on us, to decide in our place how our life story ends? What can possibly justify one human forcing another to suffer, solely because they personally believe in the literal truth of one of the many creation myths we humans have told ourselves since

the dawn of time? I do not share such beliefs; for me they are primitive and irrational - a confusion as to the nature and meaning of myth - but that is not my affair. Obviously anyone is free to have religious beliefs if they help give meaning to their own life and death. But that a believer can feel justified in interfering in the lives and deaths of others, imposing pain on them, because of what they happen to believe themselves - that I find totally outrageous. (I am not, obviously, talking about the deontological convictions which make some doctors unwilling to take life: that is another, very different, debate.)

There is nothing original or startling about these thoughts - they are banal even. But in the light of the crises generated by our euthanasia and assisted suicide law, it seems it is still necessary to express them.

It seems that though we all live chronologically in the 21st century, some of us seem to exist emotionally and philosophically in a mediaeval time-warp. Why otherwise is the Catholic Church fighting so desperately against the depenalisation of euthanasia and assisted suicide in Luxembourg? And why, incidentally, is it considering beatifying - beatifying! - late King Baudouin of Belgium for his stand against abortion? Why, in other words, is the Catholic Church resisting the right of us human beings to self-determination, to exercise control over our own lives? That is the question.

But to get back to my starting-point: The dream in which I was dead was quite serene; fear and pain were over and obliteration an intellectual puzzle. In the Beckett dream, it was not the thought of the show itself that terrified me but of the stage-fright I was going to feel beforehand ... I didn't think I could bear that fear. The terror of the other dreams - torture, terminal illness - also came from imagining, apprehending imminent or future suffering.

Everyone's been through times of fear and apprehension - for lesser or greater reasons.

For my part, if I had a terminal illness and knew that sooner or later I would begin to suffer, my fear and apprehension would be lessened if I could be certain the means of stopping the physical pain would be available when the time came. And in general, I'm surely not alone in thinking I would live more easily, even now, if I knew that should it ever become necessary, euthanasia or assisted suicide would be available.

Don't we humans have the right not to live in fear, when it is possible to alleviate that fear?