

# Dying At The Right Time

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**Morgan Rempel** wonders whether there is a good time to die.

Not long ago, while waiting for a haircut at the barber shop, I found myself thumbing through a well-worn copy of *Time* magazine from March 12, 2007. The magazine's closing piece, 'The Fine Art of Dying Well' by Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer got me thinking, not only about the examples of 'good' and 'bad' deaths he mentions, but about something I had read only days before by Friedrich Nietzsche on that very topic.

## Krauthammer

Focusing on several famous deaths from the relatively recent past, Krauthammer's article points to a handful of factors that come into play in determining whether a particular exit from the stage of life deserves to be characterized as a 'good death'. After quickly applauding the 'good death' of American writer Art Buchwald (who died of kidney failure in 2007, mocking his looming death to the very end), Krauthammer moves swiftly to his central hypotheses: that 'dying well' is very often simply "a matter of luck."

One way luck can play a significant role in the attainment or undermining of a 'good death' has to do with timing. It turns out that *when* one dies can sometimes be as important as *how*.

To illustrate this theory, Krauthammer recalls the death of Mother Teresa in 1997. As is well known, for over forty years Mother Teresa devoted to herself to caring for some of Calcutta's most desperate citizens; the poor, the orphaned, the sick, the dying. Krauthammer asks, "does anyone remember when Mother Teresa died? The greatest saint of our time died on the frenzied eve of the funeral of the greatest diva of our time, Princess Di." Krauthammer further illustrates this theory with the sad example of Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953). "Tormented in life by Stalin, his patron and jailer," notes Krauthammer, "Prokofiev had the extraordinary bad luck of dying on the same day as the great man." Because all of Moscow's musicians and flowers were reserved for Stalin's massive state funeral, Prokofiev's interment was accompanied by paper flowers and tape-recorded music, and news of the composer's passing was relegated to the margins of Soviet media, which eulogized Comrade Stalin for weeks. Prokofiev's ill-timed departure ensconced the composer "forever in the tyrant's shadow" notes *Washington Post* critic Sarah Kaufman.

But bad timing, Krauthammer points out, is merely one factor that can interfere with what he calls "the fine art of dying well." In the interesting category of deaths that seemingly 'undo' or 'steal' an individual's life, Krauthammer cites the notorious 1964 death of 28-year-old Catherine 'Kitty' Genovese. On March 13 of that year she was stabbed repeatedly outside her New York apartment building. The most frightening aspect of the story is that while a number of her neighbors later admitted to hearing her repeated cries for help, none immediately came to her aid. Kitty bled to death in the stairwell of her apartment.

As Krauthammer points out, Kitty Genovese's name soon became "a metaphor for urban alienation" and her senseless death "an indictment of the pitiless American city." Krauthammer goes on to characterize the murder of Ms. Genovese as a 'double injustice' and a 'double death'. Writing of Genovese's killer, Krauthammer notes:

“He – a stranger, an intruder – gave her a perverse immortality of a kind she never sought, never expected, never consented to. She surely thought that in her 28 years she had been building a life of joys and loves, struggle and achievement, friendship and fellowship. That and everything else she built her life into were simply swallowed up by the notoriety of her death, a notoriety unchosen and unbidden.”

Not only did Genovese’s killer define her death, but his cold brutality violently re-defined her short life as well.

Lastly Krauthammer examines the type of death achieved by what he calls “greatest moral monster of our time” – the suicide bomber. Using World Trade Center bomber Mohamed Atta as his example, Krauthammer observes that the suicide bomber chooses “not only the time and place” but the “blood soaked story” that will accompany his death. As I point out below, in other circumstances such a degree of control over one’s exit from life could indeed *facilitate* one’s achievement of a good death. For Krauthammer however, the type of death engineered by Atta and others like him – “self-creation through the annihilation of others” – represents the “the ultimate perversion of the good death.”

## Nietzsche

The Nietzsche passage Krauthammer’s article brought to mind is entitled ‘Of Voluntary Death’ and appears in Part One of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). There Nietzsche, or more exactly, his fictionalized mouthpiece Zarathustra, proposes his own *good ways to die/bad ways to die* ledger.

Like Krauthammer, Nietzsche places great weight on the matter of timing in achieving a good death. Zarathustra emphasizes the difficult art of going at the right time:

“Many die too late and some die too early. Still the doctrine sounds strange: ‘Die at the right time.’... Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches.”

One type of death Nietzsche’s Zarathustra explicitly recommends is “to die in battle and squander a great soul.” It is likely that Nietzsche, a well-known admirer of the classical world’s celebration of strength and struggle, associates this heroic form of death with ancient Greece and Rome. In addition to dying in battle, Zarathustra celebrates two types of death: i) The so-called *voluntary death*, and ii) what he terms the *consummating death*.

Nietzsche’s description of ‘the voluntary death’ is both clear and thoughtful. “I commend to you my sort of death”, Zarathustra announces, “voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it. And when shall I wish it? – He who has a goal and an heir wants death at the time most favorable to his goal and his heir. And out of reverence for his goal and his heir he will hang up no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life.”

Note that the matter of timing is central to the type of death recommended in this passage. Nietzsche speaks of wanting death at the time most favorable to one’s goal and one’s heir. And surely his recommendation to “hang up no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life” speaks to the importance of recognizing when the time to exit the stage of life has come.

The important matter of the timing of one’s death also figures prominently in Zarathustra’s poetic celebration of the so-called ‘consummating death’: “I shall show you the consummating death, which shall be a spur and a promise to the living. The man consummating his life dies his death triumphantly, surrounded by men filled with hope and making solemn vows. Thus one should learn to die: and there should be no festivals at which such a dying man does not consecrate the oaths of the living! To die thus is the best death.”

One famous death that seems to meet Zarathustra's criteria of both a voluntary *and* a consummating death, is that of the Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 BC). Indeed, Zarathustra's vivid description of what such a triumphant death would look like seems to have been written with Socrates in mind.

## Socrates' Death

With respect to the voluntary dimension of Socrates' death, two things immediately come to mind:

1) Socrates' most famous student, Plato, tells us in *The Apology* that during Socrates' legendary trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, each side was given the opportunity to propose a punishment to the jury. Socrates' accusers proposed death. Instead of offering a realistic proposal of his own – which may well have been countered by a compromise proposal of exile on the part of the accusers – Socrates dares to suggest that rather than punish him, Athens should *reward* him with 'free maintenance' for life (*Apology* 36d-37a). Plato tells us that Socrates' next proposal was that of a very small fine (38a). With these mocking and audacious proposed counter-penalties, Socrates effectively "put the hemlock to his lips" as I.F. Stone puts it in his book *The Trial of Socrates*, p.189.

2) Plato offers further support for the voluntary character of Socrates' death in his *Crito*. There we learn that Athens, possibly reconsidering the pending execution of its most famous citizen, seems to have left open the possibility of Socrates' escape from jail. Indeed, Plato tells us that the wealthy Crito made arrangements for his friend's escape and exile, bribing guards etc. Crito then pleads with Socrates to flee (*Crito* 44c-46a). Socrates argues that escaping and living in exile would be wrong, despite any shortcomings of his trial, and chooses instead to stay in prison and face execution. Crito's impassioned pleas and arguments are of no use: "Socrates is determined to stay and die." (Stone, p.190).

Socrates' death is many things: unjust; epoch-defining; a turning point in the life of Plato and other young Athenians; and, it seems fair to say, at least partly *voluntary*.

With respect to the matter of whether Socrates' famous final act can also be said to live up to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* image of the consummating death, the Socrates portrayed in those dialogues of Plato concerned with his master's final days – *Euthyphro*, *The Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* – is certainly a figure seeming to consummate his life's message. Squarely facing death, Socrates' longstanding basic priorities remain fundamentally unchanged:

- i) That obedience to truth is paramount.
- ii) That doing the right thing is more important than doing the easy or self-interested thing.
- iii) That having understood what the right thing to do is, it would be incomprehensible not to do it.
- iv) That the soul is the most important part of a man.
- v) That the well-being of the soul must take priority over that of the body.
- vi) That there is reason to believe in the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body.

Not only does Socrates face his death (in the form of a poison cup) with extraordinary composure and serenity, he takes the time to calm, reassure and instruct the devoted followers with whom he is spending his final hours.

As for the matter of the *timing* of Socrates' death: whether his death comes at the *precise* "time most favorable to his goal and his heir" is debatable. What we can say, however, is that at the time of his death,

Socrates' mission had essentially been accomplished, and his guiding principles carefully communicated to his philosophical heirs. So while Socrates is not named in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his final teachings, demeanor and famous death-scene *embody* the triumphant, well-timed and consummating death lauded by Zarathustra.

## Jesus' Death

While Socrates' name does not appear in *Zarathustra*, Jesus' does. And while the 'Of Voluntary Death' section of *Zarathustra* presents the death of Jesus as decidedly *voluntary* (like that of Socrates), the Nazarene's death is presented as anything but 'good' or 'triumphant'. Much of the reason for his failure to achieve a good death has to do with timing. Zarathustra says:

"Truly, too early died that Hebrew whom the preachers of slow death honor: and that he died too early has since been a fatality for many. As yet he knew only tears and the melancholy of the Hebrews, together with the hatred of the good and the just - the Hebrew Jesus: then the longing for death seized him. Had he only remained in the desert and far from the good and the just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and learned to love the earth - and laughter as well!... Believe it, my brothers! He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching had he lived to my age! He was noble enough to recant! But he was still immature."

While one could follow these provocative remarks in any number of directions, here I merely want to note the emphasis Nietzsche places on the matter of *timing* in what he takes to be the ultimately disappointing death of Jesus of Nazareth. *Three times* Zarathustra insists that the death of Jesus came "too early." While Zarathustra suggests there was indeed a *voluntary* component to the death of Jesus, its tragic *pre-maturity* essentially prevents the Nazarene from achieving the elusive well-timed 'good death'.

Near the end of 'Of Voluntary Death', Zarathustra remarks:

"In your death, your spirit and your virtue should still glow like a sunset glow around the earth: otherwise yours is a bad death. Thus I want to die myself."

The question of whether Nietzsche's Zarathustra achieved his wish for such a glowing death is unanswered. We know from his notes and letters that Nietzsche considered adding additional parts to his *Zarathustra*, and that he gave much thought to how he would write Zarathustra's death-scene. These additional parts never materialized, however, and as it stands, *Zarathustra* ends with its protagonist alive and well. But while his Zarathustra's death is not a matter of record, Nietzsche's own death is. I would like to close with a few Zarathustra-inspired reflections on Nietzsche's own final act.

## Nietzsche's Death

As surely as bad timing compromises the death of Jesus according to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, I propose that the matter of timing likewise causes Nietzsche's *own* death to fall on the bad side of Zarathustra's ledger. For dying too early is only one way that poor timing can make for a less-than-successful death, according to Zarathustra. The other, of course, is dying too late.

While Nietzsche in fact died at the age of 55 in 1900, it is the sad circumstances surrounding his illness and death which bring to mind *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* admonitions to those who "hang on... too long" and as a result, fail to master "the difficult art of going at the right time." As is well known, Nietzsche was plagued by steadily deteriorating health since his youth. A litany of physical symptoms: acute myopia, ever-worsening bouts of nausea and other gastro-intestinal problems, and agonizing headaches, contributed to him resigning his promising professorship in 1879, at the age of only 34. By the mid-1880s, Nietzsche's wretched condition, compounded by his ongoing efforts to self-medicate, left the increasingly isolated

philosopher bed-ridden for days at a time. In January 1889, at the age of 44, Nietzsche collapsed on the streets of Turin, and lapsed into madness for the rest of his life [see p.38].

What brings to mind Zarathustra's warnings about the 'too late' deaths of those who "hang on... too long" is the fact that the insane Nietzsche went on to live for another eleven years, with each year bringing greater mental and physical incapacity. By 1900, the year of his death, the 55-year-old Nietzsche was barely able to move, and had essentially no knowledge of where he was, who he was, or who he had been.

While no-one wishes death upon a 44-year-old, it seems clear that according to Zarathustra's criteria, Nietzsche would have died a better death had he *expired* in the streets of Turin in 1889 rather than only end his sane life there. Though sometimes, as in the case of his Jesus, an early death can forestall the achievement of a 'good death', Nietzsche's own protracted final act certainly seems to confirm that sometimes an early, or *earlier* death can actually facilitate the fine art of dying well.

Recognizing this, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, comparing men to apples, prophetically proclaims:

"Many too many live and they hang on their branches much too long. I wish a storm would come and shake all this rottenness and worm-eatenness from the tree! I wish preachers of *speedy* death would come! They would be the fitting storm and shakers of the trees of life!"

Unfortunately, even if Nietzsche had died in Turin in 1889, his noteworthy lack of immediate intellectual heirs would seemingly still have prevented him attaining the consummating death Zarathustra lauds and Socrates embodies. But at least he would have been spared the 'double death' that was his fate. At least, to use Zarathustra's imagery, the long-suffering philosopher would not himself be counted among those who hang on to the branches of life so long as to become 'rotten' and 'worm-eaten'.

## Last Words

As both Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Charles Krauthammer remind us, achieving a good death is no easy matter. Whether considering the death of Prokofiev, Jesus, or Nietzsche himself, we see that timing plays a crucial role in what Krauthammer calls "the fine art of dying well." While the timing of one's death is sometimes something we can exert some control over – as in the case of the consummating and glowing death of Socrates – at other times, Krauthammer reminds us, one's ability (or inability) to achieve such a timely death simply depends on luck.

It seems appropriate to give the last word to Zarathustra. Having examined the deaths – some successful, others not – of several famous figures, his poetic proclamations on the topic take on a fresh significance:

"Many die too late and some die too early. Still the doctrine sounds strange: 'Die at the right time.'... Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches."

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