

Death: Fun for Everyone or Just a Pain in the Ass?

Greg Bennick

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I want you to imagine the character “Pig Pen” from the Peanuts comic strip by the late cartoonist Charles Schultz. Foreign readers unfamiliar with the strip would do well to imagine a dirty young boy surrounded wherever he went by a three-foot diameter cloud of dust. Do you have the visual in mind? Excellent. Now, for our purposes tonight, replace the dust that surrounded Pigpen in the comic strip with the odor coming from my body in real life, in this moment, as I type these words. As I always aim to provide the reader with the most exacting sensual experience possible, please allow me to describe the odor for you: it is a blend of cigarette and marijuana smoke, human sweat, a touch of beer, and some other unidentifiable tidbits thrown in as well. “But Greg,” you might ask, “Why, if you are of the committed drugfree variety, would you be smelling of the long-forsaken weed or beer?” The answer, dear reader, is because I attended tonight the event of the decade thus far...the single greatest night of Dionysian bliss one could ever hope to find in this new millenium...the one thing which could pull me out of my recent state of existential dread (to be explained later) and into the direct heart of life itself. Yes, you guessed it: tonight I went to see Iron Maiden play at the Tacoma Dome.

I find it difficult to describe in words just how much I love Iron Maiden. I here is no other band in the world which embodies the creativity, innovation, ridiculous premises, and sheer metalness contained in these six (yes, count them, six!) British lunatics (The current tour features all three guitarists from their last few years together onstage with bassist Steve Harris, frontman Bruce “Tattooed Millionaire” Dickinson, and drummer/psycho Nicko McBrain for a total of six Maidens for your simultaneous viewing and listening pleasure). They had it all, from fire and explosions to feet up on the monitors for guitar solos, to lights and moving sets...whew! “But Greg,” you ask, “What was the show itself like? Would you tell us, in the CrimethInc tradition, of what the experience FELT like, what PASSIONS were aroused in you as you stood within that. Temple of Metal?” Well, it was like being thrown back to 1985: a sea of long haired white guys in various KISS, Motley Crue, and Metallica shirts talking loudly about how they were ready to rock, dude. On the “way in, I mentioned to my friends that the difference in the crowd now as opposed to ‘85 is that many of them probably held stock options for dot com companies and were simply posing for the evening as metalheads. Rather quickly however, as we drifted through a sea of humanity beyond description — filled with interlocking devil horned handshakes and cigarette lighters ready to punctuate the ballad filled darkness of the arena — it became obvious that at least some of the people there were the real deal: the true metal maniacs of yesteryear, the Bill’s and Ted’s of a bygone day. I wondered where these people had been for the last decade or so. I realized that though I’d seen them from time to time around Seattle, I’d just not had the chance to observe them in their natural habitat or in as concentrated a space as I was able to observe that night. The most frightening thing I saw by far was a metalhead of about 35 or 40 years of age standing WITH HIS SEVEN YEAR OLD SON, both wearing matching Queensryche t-shirts and jeans. “My god, I thought, “They breed.” This was a terrifying thought, and it was one that had not occurred to

me in 1985: that metalheads actually produce offspring. It is for the best that this was a new thought. Had it crossed my impressionable teenage mind during the 1980's, it would undoubtedly have sent me into a state of panic comparable only to Nostradamus or the National Enquirer in terms of an apocalyptic vision of what the world might in fact become.

As for the band themselves? Six forty-somethings wearing jeans and white high top shoes with three of the six in Iron Maiden t-shirts, bless their little hearts. Bruce Dickinson was amazing on vocals, sounding even better than the records...HE should be giving lessons to all of us hoarse hardcore singers. Rumor has it that Bruce is a world class fencer in his spare time. Can* anyone confirm this? I was ready for the show. About three years ago, at a Trial show at Gilman in Berkeley, a guy came up to me with a gift. It was a set of cassette tapes he had made for me featuring every song, outtake, and B-side Iron Maiden had ever recorded. That guy, wherever he is right now, is proof to me that Nietzsche was wrong: Good and evil *do* exist: GOOD=that guy, and EVIL=anything which harms worries or concerns him until the end of his days. He should be knighted, bronzed, canonized, or all three.

I left the show feeling very alive...in fact tingling with life...or was that the effects of residual pot smoke? (Perhaps I should quantify/clarify my self-proclaimed straight edge title with something more specific and accurate: "straight edge except when receiving second hand bong hits from metalheads"). Arriving home to my beloved Cynthia, I could not begin to express my joy. After all, how would someone who went through a finite metal "phase" (metal is forever, my love) listening to Kix and Extreme EVER understand what it was like to kickbox in the center of a pit of metaloids during "The Trooper"? Forget it. I can only hope that she and I continue to connect on other levels, since metal, in all of its splendor and glory, seems to be out of the picture for her.

"But Greg," I hear you ask, "What is this column really about? Surely you can't expect to retain our ex-worker collective attention for even one more paragraph if all you keep typing about is middle aged metalheads, one of which you yourself are quickly becoming?" Ah true, my friends, and so I refer you to the title of this column. I had spent quite sometime trying to decide what to write about, given the intensity of the last column and the implications of the previous ones. The problem is that I live in a state of writers block. I do not find "writer's block" to be an occasional occurrence which inhibits my process of purring words on paper. Rather, I live in that state, constantly unable to write, and the rare "writer's unblock" is what actually frees me to pour ideas onto the pages of zines worldwide. With that, I offer you the following:

"The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else, it is a mainspring of human activity — activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man." -Ernest Becker.

I have been obsessed with death recently. In a way, perhaps "obsessed" is not the right word as I have not been only able to think thoughts of death and dying. Rather, it

would be more accurate to say that many of my actions are influenced by the foreboding feeling that my eventual death is a reality, and inescapable at that. I suddenly *feel* rime, rather than just experiencing it at a distance. I was walking recently with a college professor friend of mine who just turned 50. I told him that I often worry that I am not living fully enough, that I am afraid to die, and that I need to come to terms with death in a more comprehensive way somehow in order to feel alive again. He stopped walking, turned to me and yelled with a smile, “What is wrong with you, man? You are having a fucking midlife crisis at age 29! You are 20 years too early!” Good advice, and I guess that is what friends are for, but it didn’t heal me completely by any means.

The quote above is by Ernest Becker. Becker wrote a book called *The Denial of Death*, which I would ask you to remember if you remember nothing else from this column. Find the book and read it from cover to cover and let me know what you think. Keep in mind that Becker was a student of Freud early on, and his descriptions of Freud’s ideas in Chapter 3 should be pushed aside a bit in favor of focusing on the book’s central theme. Freud was a sexist jerk; Becker a genius who went far past Freud in terms of overall vision. Becker explained that the world is terrifying, with the cause of the terror being death itself and our fear of it. He said that the basic motivation for our behavior is our biological need to control our fear of death, which he saw as the primary anxiety facing us in our lives. This is an anxiety that Becker argued we attempt to keep unconscious because it is so overwhelming. He suggested that we attempt to overcome death by constantly involving ourselves in a social hero system which makes us believe that we will actually transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. Becker called this the *causa sui* (cause of the self). Ultimately, in his second book, Becker described the social implications of this “immortality striving” and its effects on society. He argued that our attempts to destroy terror and ugliness through involving ourselves with projects seen as the highest good ultimately had the paradoxical effect of bringing more ugliness and terror into the world. We would trample and destroy all of those around us in our attempts to transcend this existence.

The implications of Becker are overwhelming. If we are motivated constantly by the fear of death, and if we deal with that by involving ourselves with projects that we hope will insure our immortality, then what is that to say about such seemingly basic tasks as writing this column? Couldn’t it be argued that the reason I have pursued this task so consistently, worrying when I couldn’t decide what to write, was because psychologically my entire existence depended on the outcome of the challenge? And I am not joking. What if the psychological implications of not completing this column on rime were that I would be cast aside and not remembered by future generations of people on this earth because I had failed to provide the world with something lasting? Becker suggests that art is a result of that immortality striving. He would suggest that a root cause of creation by the human animal is to craft life into a tangible form which will outlast the body, which of course, is finite.

Becker suggested that we are in continual competition with one another as well through our immortality projects. He suggested that what we fear is being left behind

while another attains the transcendent, and as a result, we do whatever we can to insure that we are the one who survives, who wins, controls, and dominates. Again the implications here are astounding. What does this say about all those who flip people off while driving (he/she who gets there faster or more efficiently wins the race), or succeed in business (he/she who makes the most money wins the race), or for that matter — and in order to stay focused here — those who kickbox during “The Trooper” at Iron Maiden concerts (he/she who clears the most space on the floor and frightens the metalheads wins the race)?

Ultimately, the effect of thinking this way can be restrictive. Reading Becker put me into the aforementioned stare of existential dread, where I worried about death and thought about it clearly for the first time. Or rather, for the first time in my conscious mind. I found myself concerned with what I perceive as a societal lack of acceptance of death, an ignorance of it so to speak, and an unwillingness to contemplate or face it on any widespread scale other than for its shock value in the media. There is a distancing which happens in media representations of death. The images we see play on our fear of death and our wonder about it, but do not directly address the issue. We all suffer as a result. The restrictive element enters when we consider the implications of Becker’s thought: if I am motivated by a fear of death, and if my actions are inspired by a psychology far deeper than I can readily perceive, then what is the reason behind even getting up in the morning? Why would I engage in activities throughout the day no that I know that everything is a defense mechanism against my fear of death? Ah *mes amis*, before you let yourself get roped into this mode of thought and end up laying face down on your sofas across the world crying in paranoia and pessimism, let me offer a few thoughts. Understanding and appreciating Becker and fully integrating what he has to say is entirely a matter of putting him into perspective. This is where the greatest challenge lies. Now that we are aware of death and our fear of it and what that fear implies, the question becomes: how will we deal with this information? My process has not become one of identifying EVERY example of death-anxiety-driven- action in my life and negating it: that would literally be impossible, as EVERY action *is* driven by death anxiety. (Wait! Don’t run to the sofa yet...there is still hope!) Instead, the answer is to be found in balancing out my fear with a sense of wonder at the process of life itself. The process involves making myself aware of every moment of life and of fully experiencing it, and more importantly of crafting my life and the moments within it into art itself, and then offering that art to the world at large for them to experience, enjoy, discard, or embrace. The act of creation and of experience is what we have in this world, and learning to fully understand that *in the context of our imminent death* is what I now feel to be the task at hand for me, and hopefully for the people around me.

Wow, sounds like a party! Hey everyone, come on over to Greg’s house! Let’s contemplate death, pain, and suffering! Yay! Hooray! Yippee! (...there are the sounds of noisemakers and party favors in the background...children singing in chorus... rain-

bows in the sky...a cake in the shape of a decaying corpse...etc...). Sorry, must be the residuals from the show tonight.

Anyway...this actually brings me to the next section of my little treatise on demise. What do we do with the information Becker has offered us? Your faithful editor and I were recently discussing life, love, and van break-downs, and in the midst of that I said to him "Do you know what I would be doing with my life right now if I could do anything at all? I don't even think that I would be juggling. I would be spending my every waking hour preparing for my own death." Joy, bliss, death! Really though, I think that something is missing from my life, and that is a greater comprehension of death and a preparation for it. Socrates, from my understanding, advised people to practice dying. Becker agreed. As I am not an anthropologist, I know little about what other cultures have done or are doing in terms of role playing their deaths. (Any insight would be appreciated folks!) I think that establishing a means of communicating about death would be a first step to a new broad based social psychology. Admitting that we are afraid, and examining our projects as extensions of our fear would be a good first step. Sharing information openly about custom and death ceremony would be a good second step. I might go so far as to suggest role playing, or even reinstating ritual into our lives, the symbolism of which would bring us psychologically more in line with death itself.

Recently, Bill Moyers did a four-nightlong special on death and dying on PBS. From what Cynthia said, the shows were very intense, and well needed. I taped them but was only able to watch the first few minutes of one night's broadcast. I saw something striking in those few minutes. Before the show began, a man came onscreen and told viewers that if they were troubled by what they were about to watch, that there was a number offered which people could call to discuss their feelings. While this foresight (and the series itself) is to be applauded, I was struck with how limiting the offer really was and how it clearly represented a troubling aspect of our culture. The offer was not a suggestion to create local support groups, or an idea to share thoughts with friends, neighbors and family. It was an offer to solve the problem, so to speak, through a phone call. What are the implications of this? It was yet another example of people hiding behind technology, social construct, or character in order to solve problems that they have been taught not to admit to those around them. Becker might suggest that this tendency stems from a desire to not appear weaker than anyone and thus continue to maintain an appearance as a formidable opponent for immortality conflict. I wondered about the people who would call in, and actually should have called myself. I wondered if they would be linked directly to a person who would become their confidante for a number of follow-up calls as well, and maybe offer to meet in person to really establish some connections and valuable human interaction on the matter. Doubt it. But this is what we need. We need to meet eye to eye and face to face and admit that we are scared. We need to start thinking about the personal construct of 'character' and what it represents, and the group construct of 'society' and what it represents in terms of death. I would suggest that both are distancing tools. We need to explore or examine

death and its implications on our lives. At least I think that I need to. Anyone else interested?

Out soon: a new issue of a great zine called No Longer Blind from Australia, which will include columns and articles by a number of good people about intensive personal politics. The writings will be much like what I have been writing about in the last few Inside Front columns (email nxldb@yahoo.com for more information on contributing or getting your hands on a copy). Also upcoming: I am always on the lookout for people to help raise money through benefit shows or any other means for the Western Shoshone Defense Project. Contact me for more information at xjugglerx@yahoo.com and check out <http://www.alphacdc.com/wsdp/>.

Well, it is now time to shower ten pounds of Iron Maiden residue from my body and go to bed. Write me anytime about anything from any of my Inside Front columns, and thanks for reading. This column was written under the influence of the new In Flames album "*Clayman*" which is more metal than your grandma's soup kettle. Check it out (The *album* that is. Leave your grandma and her kettle alone.)

Talk with you again sometime soon my friends.

The Ted K Archive

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