

The old and the death

O velho e a morte

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The following day, no one died, this fact, being absolutely contrary to life's rules, provoked enormous and, in the circumstances, perfectly justifiable anxiety in people's minds, for we have only to consider that in the entire forty volumes of universal history there is no mention, not even one exemplary case, of such a phenomenon ever having occurred, for a whole day to go by, with its generous allowance of twenty-four hours, diurnal and nocturnal, matutinal and vespertine, without one death from an illness, a fatal fall, or a successful suicide, not one, not a single one.
(Saramago, 2005)¹

ABSTRACT: The fear of death comes from the fear of physical destruction of the body, which, in contemporary society is narcissistically valued. Adopting the youth as its main model, this society stigmatizes the old. This situation arouses different ways of coping, ranging from one being to another. We discuss the forms of understanding the old age and the death in elderly subjects living in the community and institutionalized.

Keywords: Old; Death; Aging.

¹ No dia seguinte, ninguém morreu. O fato, por absolutamente contrário às normas da vida, causou nos espíritos uma perturbação enorme, efeito em todos os aspectos justificado, basta que nos lembremos de que não havia notícia nos quarenta volumes da história universal, nem ao menos um caso para amostra, de ter alguma vez ocorrido fenômeno semelhante, passar-se um dia completo, com todas as suas pródigas vinte e quatro horas, contadas entre diurnas e noturnas, matutinas e vespertinas, sem que tivesse sucedido um falecimento por doença, uma queda mortal, um suicídio levado a bom fim, nada de nada, pela palavra nada. (Saramago, 2005) (tradução nossa).

RESUMO: *A aceitação da velhice leva ao reconhecimento das próprias restrições e da finitude, pois a mesma, que não tem início definido, possui um fim claramente estabelecido: a morte. Na sociedade atual, a palavra de ordem é silenciar quando se trata da morte e também da velhice, na medida em que ela é tida como seu prenúncio. Assim, é importante que os profissionais de saúde não permaneçam no silêncio quanto à questão da morte nos atendimentos aos idosos. Esta temática deve ser abordada com naturalidade, pois, à medida que as pessoas tomam consciência de sua finitude passam a compreender a vida em sua complexidade e podem rever seus valores.*

Palavras-chave: *Velhice; Morte; Idoso.*

Ever since the beginning of life, human being is subjected to the suppression of its existence. In fact, this means that man is a being destined to die. This situation awakes varied forms of confrontation, differing from one being to another. It is on the unfold of contemplation about his existence, that man lapidates in his being the meaning of death.

The fear of dyeing, perhaps one of the most profound human feelings, comes from the dread of the physical destruction of the body, which, in contemporary society is valued in a narcissist way in its extreme materiality. This society, ruled by productivity and consumerism, adopts the young as its main model and, consequently, stigmatizes the elderly. To deny oldness is linked with not acceptance of the bodies that evidence the marks of the years, which are the opposite of the idealized young standard in the present social model, perhaps because the old age is the phase which most approaches to death. Its acceptance leads to the recognition of his own limitations and of finitude, since old age, doesn't have a defined beginning, but is believed to have a clearly definite ending: death (Kovács, 2002).

França (1998) affirmed that there are two fundamental aspects of changes that comprehend the phase of life of old age: the first, in a consistent and tranquil way, recognizing what is important in this stage of life, to be able to enjoy it in the best way possible, even with its limitations, emerging with more positive images of oldness and aging; the second, with great intensity, when associated with illness and inability, when then the old tend to picture negatively the old age. It all depends on the relationship that the person establishes with his own oldness.

Soares, Silva, Rosa, Galvão e Ribeiro (2009), interviewing institutionalized old people about their understanding of old age, obtained answers that pointed out to the elementary forms proposed by França (1998): one intense and complicated manner (bad or sad phase); and the other, a tranquil one (natural process). For the elderly, the incapacity to carry out tasks saddens them for being related to uselessness. For many, old age was synonymous to death. These authors described that the perspective of death became more decisive with the approach of old age. The progress of aging could also cause the experience of losses, for many people that die are close to the old person and belong to his age group, such as mate, friends and family.

For the younger people, death is a remote idea, which many occur one day. For the elderly, it is something that can happen tomorrow. Because of this, many old people spend the time that is left looking only in one direction, into the past, for they know that there they will not find what they fear and what the future set aside for them: death. In our society, death and oldness are looked upon as synonyms, both consisting of a taboo, a threat to the illusion of immortality sustained by the modern world. Since there exists still many myths comprehending this theme, the first to be broken is the one of old age being synonymous to death. Although either one are universal and democratic, do not choose man or women, age or social class, one is not stipulated by the other (Loureiro, 2007). Old people, sometimes, reconcile with a miserable oldness with the motto that “It is best to be old than to be dead”.

The human finitude becomes more decisive with the arrival of old age. Frumi and Celich (2006), interviewing old people from Rio Grande do Sul, observed that they understand that death is a fact, however, they have a lot of difficulty to assume it as something belonging to human nature. According to Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1983), fear of death fits into two categories of suffering: personal suffering, associated with physical suffering and to indignity; and vicarious suffering, related to the affliction of witnessing someone else’s suffering.

Fear of death is described by Shakespeare (1975), in “*Measure for measure*”, in the following way:

*The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.*

According to Yalom (2008), recognition of one's own finitude mobilizes the *quantum* of necessary anxiety for the establishment of the psychic functioning, for the idea of death can not be tolerated in a conscientious way for a indefinite amount of time by the human being, by the penalty of threatening the integrity of the psychic organization. The anguish of death is an omnipotent feeling, with influence over the self-esteem, which shouldn't be mistaken for the fear of cruelty, abandonment or destruction, although it is in the profound roots of these fears. Thus, seeking to guaranty survival, the organism wisely performs the repression of the feeling that torments it ever since memorial times: the dread of annihilation, the fear of death (Py, Pacheco & Oliveira, 2009).

Fear of death is present in the human psyche in many ways, to know: phobias, neurosis, nervous breakdowns and insecurity. To avoid thinking of death as a possible and feasible personal event, we expunge from our conscience the fear of death through the illusory reality that life will always lead its course, by the same way and with the same people. However, when conscience arouses from the daily anesthesia to the fact that we will never be in absolute safety, the terror of death can emerge, even in the form of psychotic outbreaks (Becker, 1973). Jung (2008) affirmed that "it is the same young people which are afraid of life, that later will be afraid of death".

Kovács (2009) commented that, with age, death becomes better accepted, for this is the natural path for all. People age and the tendency is the proximity to death, being this a certainty. Thus, the old would have less fear of death than the young. It would be the conditions of death, which worry them, much more than death itself. What many fear is the agony of a terminal disease or of being alone and helpless when sick (Gomes, Loureiro, & Alves, 2012).

On the other hand, Oliveira (2008) showed that the terror and the anguish felt by the elderly in Pernambuco in light of death is very strong. According to the author, it doesn't exist among the elderly greater acceptance of this occurrence, because they do not consider it a good event. This anguish is even greater because these people affirm that, before it was the children that died more, but now it is the old. They associate old age with death, because it is them that get the sickest and die the most. According to them, it is necessary to accept this coming death without waiting and in an unpredictable way. The fear of leaving alone the sons or grandsons that are dependent of them is also terrorizing. For this, they prefer not to think about death, "so that they do

not die sooner". The author verified that to speak of death caused them affliction, for it was associated with pejorative feelings, as if it was a deceitful action of betrayal.

Soares *et al.* (2009), investigating the meaning of death among institutionalized old people, observed that the majority of them showed to be disturbed by the subject, associating death to sadness. Few understood death in a natural way, that is, an event that makes itself present in every human beings life. Society, marginalizing the elderly that are no longer functional in relation to there projects and abandoning them in Homes for the Aged, many times causes, in them, the desire of their own death, known that they feel lowered, humiliated and useless (Loureiro, 2000). There is the possibility that many diseases somatised by the old people could be nothing more than the result of loneliness, abandonment and lack of affection, elements that conduct them to a depressive state and that accelerate there physical and mental deterioration, leading them to death. Old people`s reaction to the inhumane treatment many times granted towards them, leads them not to take the medications, not to follow the medical instructions, to disobey the prohibitions of smoking and drinking, to refuse food and to face situations known to be harmful to them (Carvalho, Gomes & Loureiro, 2010). For them, oldness is faced upon as the "waiting room" or the "anteroom of death" (Morais, 1977). Many times, they rebel and cause self-destruction, what is not noted as such, for in this age group accidental death is confused with the natural kind.

There are elderly, which ask for the ending of their suffering and their agony of waiting. If the person doesn`t see any meaning in his life, feeling to be a bare bourdon and a worry for his dear ones, he thinks to be doing an heroic act and a sacrifice ending his own life. However, it is necessary to consider that, even when not adopting any religious principle, the act of ending ones own life is rejected, being associated with the prohibition of suicide and murder (Novaes & Trindade, 2007). Preparing for the consent of dyeing is different, contemplating about the passage of death, giving it a true and proper meaning.

Oliveira (2008) verified that old people from the third age groups and the homes for the aged from the metropolitan area of Recife (Pernambuco), thought the word old to be depreciative of this age group, using the word elderly as a way of masking the old age and transforming it in a stage of life in which only good things happen. However, in Carnaíba, a city in the interior of this same state, where there doesn`t exist consumer market for the elderly, this perception is different, and the people from the third age group don`t like to be called the elderly but yes of the "olds". In this same town, they

also play the role of witnesses of history and head of the family, being valued for their knowledge acquired with time. But, on the contrary of what would be expected, these elderly also do not deal with death in a natural way, that is, with expected death and one shared by all that have any proximity with the dying person (Ariès, 1977). For them, a grieved and moaned death is considered an undesired and/or bad happening.

Ever since childhood till the old age, life implies in loses and its mourning for each specific faze of development. According to Bowlby (1999), the intimate attachment to other human beings is the nucleus which surrounds the life of the person till the old age. Thus, when there occurs ruptures of bonds, there are loses, presupposing grief. Not very different is the grief resulting from the loss of the young body, the loss of health and of the appearance of the signs of multiple chronic diseases which assaults a large fraction of the elderly population. However, in the occidental society we continue with the desire to deny it for many reasons, namely: desire to prolong indefinitely the youth; motivation by the actions of the media and the consume industry; social fascination with the advances of medicine; attempt of banning death and the dying person from the social scenario, with the objective of avoiding having to live with the anguish of finitude (Py, Pacheco, & Oliveira, 2006).

According to Loureiro (2000), we use in the imaginary the feelings of suffering, attachment, loss and fear as weapons against the anguish of overtime and fear of death, trying to fight against finitude of life by believing in our immortality. These feelings are normal and are part of the process of loss. The majority of people refer to fear of loss as being fear of death, related to the material and affective bonds which we make through out the years in our lives and take root by the culture of power, for in the occidental society we are not accustomed to loosing (Alves, Gomes, Vianna, & Freitas, 2006; Gomes, Loureiro, & Alves, 2012). Because of this, perhaps, we have so much difficulty in understanding and accepting death as a natural process.

The experience of dying and its confrontation occurs in different manners in each period of history (Ziegler, 1977). The Medieval Times were the period in which, according to Ariès (1977), death was accepted in the more mild way and not being characterised as something terrorizing. As in this period the more frequent deaths where by diseases or in war, is was much easier to foresee the date in which the individuals died. With this, the dying person himself planed his farewell from the living whom remain. When foreseeing death, the dying person went to his room and was

accompanied by parents, friends and neighbours to fulfil the public ritual of asking forgiveness for his sins, to destine his possessions and to wait for the moment to come. There wasn't a dramatic character or gestures of excessive emotion.

Nowadays, death doesn't occur at home, but in hospitals, intensive therapy units and is, in priority, accompanied by health professionals. In this manner, in the present time, it occurred the reclusion at the moment of death in major parts of occidental societies. Elias (2001) affirmed that the exclusion of the dying person in society indicates that we are more sensitive towards the suffering and to the death ritual in relation to the men who lived in the Ancient Times and in the Middle Ages. The proximity to death causes discomfort and embarrassment to people and leads them to stand back from the dying person. Apart from this physical withdrawing between the ones who are dying and the ones who are living, there is another dimension that can be attributed to this relationship: a symbolic one. Kovács (2009) affirmed that, nowadays, we are closer to death and that this occurs due to the development of telecommunications. Death makes itself present daily in our homes throughout television, with scenes of death, violence, accidents and diseases, becoming a quotidian, invasive and unlimited companion. So, although so close, it occurs a grave disturbance in communication called conspiracy of silence.

Death, in the actual social model, is relegated to the background, and should not be discussed, as if this could avoid it from happening. It is an interdicted theme, which should be hidden, institutionalized, medicated, without great demonstrations of pain by the ones in grief, not anymore a carrier of rituals. The word of the hour is to silence when dealing with death and also with old age, in proportion to that it is said to be its presage. We silence, in part, because we were educated for the idealised and distorted success, where there is no space for sadness, old age, disease and death. Part of this education contains, yet, the desire to run from the existential anguish of taking care of the dying people, the gravelly sick elderly or to deal with themes related to death (Py, Pacheco & Oliveira, 2009).

The disturbances caused by death occur because men fear the loss of his identity (Morin, 1997). Thus, death will be accepted or not as a natural process depending on the following belief: or everything will be over or there is another life, be it determined by faith, intuition or proved by collective unconscious archetypes which appear in the myths, in the fables and in the dreams. To consider this life as a passageway or not, makes therefore, a lot of a difference. Individual interior life encloses the religious and

spiritual dimensions, being up to each one to discover them. It doesn't make any difference which are the answers that we get to where the soul exists, if there is life after death or if reincarnation exists. What we have to do is to recognise our common humanity. In relation to what happens after death, what has to happen will happen, whether we believe it or not. The fact that we are searching means that there has already been established a spiritual link. There wouldn't be the search for something if there weren't the belief that it existed.

The social presentation of death brings the idea of fear of the unknown, which justifies the fact that the elderly characterize it as treacherous and bad, anchored in the religious idea brought since the Middle Ages, where was born the concepts of heaven, hell and judgment brought by the Christian Church. The Jewish-Christian religiousness, by emphasizing the terror of the final judgment with the idea of the Catholic Hell and Heaven, reinforced the thanatophobia in the western history. The major part of our population is part of the Catholic religion that has its roots in the Christian Church from the Middle Ages (Ariès, 1977). And that is when we realize how the elderly support themselves in God to explain and confront themselves in front of such an abstract and unexplainable episode.

Religiousness, therefore, is seen as a weapon, a resource of confrontation to accept the old age and death. Golstein and Sommerhalder (2002), in a research involving the old age and religiousness, showed that the power of religion and spirituality helps people to deal with the losses, giving meaning to life, helping to face the fears and the anguishes of death. These authors (Cattani & Girardon-Perlini, 2004) showed that the home carers of elderly who presented intense religiousness and spirituality demonstrated greater serenity in answering a questionnaire about the death of these elderly. To them, by living in a country with important religious influence, the relation between death and God's "will" is recurrently found.

The certainty of the presence of God helps the elderly to proceed their lives with perseverance (Frumi & Celich, 2006). The old person who is capable of testifying about his life is in possession of wisdom, for he doesn't see only what is superficial and transitory, but also realises what is eternal. The elderly acquire their spirituality in a long life of services and work of sacrifice and suffering (Sarmiento, & Lima, 2000). To those who only live for their body, the old age represents the decline, but to those who live for the spirit, it represents the synthesis and revelation. It is necessary to give

reasons to be for the elderly not to become a life “*defunctus*”, that is, he who doesn't have any more function. Thus, the dimensions of spirituality, of the responsibility and of faith displaces man's points of affirmation and ambition to new paths, amplifying his temporal horizon and revitalizes the trivial of daily routine and the lack of variety of living.

When we review the rituals that happen with death considered to be naturalized, it reminds us to the Medieval Times when death was considered to be “tamed”. In Carnaíba, in the interior of Pernambuco, Oliveira (2008) mentioned that there exists a funeral scheme, looked for in 90% of the cases by the elderly, in which are included: coffin, flowers, drinking fountain for the people who go to the funeral home, candles, candlestick, and other things. An announcement is also made, in a sound car around the whole city, with a note about the decease of the individual. All the people are invited to the funeral home and funeral. The coffin goes out in the funeral procession, from the church till the cemetery, passing by the whole city. The photos with the dying person are also part of the ritual.

However, even with the occurrence of these rituals and death being watched by all, the fear of the unknown and the repulsive ideas about death, were present in the speech of the elderly of these towns. Thus, death is considered a taboo among the elderly of the interior of the state of Pernambuco, from the urban or rural area, being loaded with negative senses. It was also noted the presence of the phases described by Klüber Ross (2008) in her studies about death, specially the revolt and the denial, phases that accompany as much the people who are at the end of their lives as their caretakers.

Soares *et al.* (2009), interviewing the institutionalized elderlies about their comprehension of death, observed that the majority of them, when asked what is the meaning of death, showed to be bothered, associating death to sadness. Only the minority of them understand death in a natural way, that is, as an event that is present in the lives of every human being.

Aging and death composes a natural process of the human existence, however not always accepted by the beings that experience it. But, when death gets really close peeping by, when some limit situation puts man face to face with the unsophisticated reality of impermanence, man commonly wakens to the restructuration of his life. Once deflagrated the crises of the real discovery of death, as a personal and tangible possibility, the period that follows will be lived not only according to the particularities

of each life history, but also, above all, according to the confrontation mechanisms of each individual. And it will be the moment to revive and visit again the life experiences, finding new meanings of lightning them, giving them proper dimensions to dignity, revealing a new intimate world and making the existence sublime with a new type of maturity.

The greatest objective of our lives is to get to know ourselves profoundly, and use this knowledge as a way to cultivate love and for the affirmation of our desires in the conduction of our lives. It is important to consider old age as the last stage before death and that announces itself as the living and precious memories of an accumulated life experience, an indispensable bond that links the past to the future and also the cultural and social conditions. Inner life is fundamental for the understanding of old age. It is important that we use all the experiences lived in the years of life so that the physical discomforts should be overcome. Old age is an intense and varied experience; it is a defeat and also a victory.

The privations of advanced age can make us discover that aging demands a capacity for that which we call “ego transcendence”, capacity of feeling pleasure with the pleasure of others, capacity of worrying about facts that are not directly linked to our own interests, capacity of investing a lot of ourselves even though knowing that we will not see the results in time to come. This “transcendence of the ego” permits us, giving us an idea of immortality, a connection with the future by people or ideas, surpassing the personal limits through a legacy that we can leave for the future generations. As grandparents, teachers, mentors, social reformers, collectors or art creators, among other things, we can establish a contact with those who will be here when we leave.

Cora Coralina (1997) overflows this feeling in the poem “My epiphany” (“Meu epítáfio”):

*Dead... I will be tree
I will be trunk, I will be frond
And my roots
Tied to the stones of my cradle
Are the broken strings of a lyre.*

*Embellish with green leaves
My tombstone
As a symbol
Of vegetative life.*

*He will not die
Who left in the earth*

*The melody of his song
In the music of his verses.²*

While few look at death face to face, without fear, as something natural, others believe it to be always early for its arrival and complain of the lack of time to continue alive, not accepting it. Teofraste, by dying 75 years old, regretted “that nature should grant the crows such a long and useless life and to men a life almost always very short”. Renoir, with 88 years of age, said: “We always die before finishing our task. It is the saddest of the said things of life” (Morin, 1997). However, when the knowledge and the life history of the elderly are valued, understood and respected, this being frequently realises that his existence has a meaning. These attitudes of consideration, respect and love help to support the elderly, for there exists the recognition of his singularity, promoting a meaning in aging and making the confrontation with death possible. Viorst (1986) quotes the dream of an old woman who stood with her full vitality till the moment of her death, showing that life can be mildly put aside when lived entirely. In the dream, this lady is seated at the table and has dinner with friends. She is eating with pleasure from her plate and from the others plates. Before, yet, finishing dinner, a waiter starts to clean the table. She raises the hand in protest, wanting to avoid the food to be taken. But then, she reconsiders and slowly lowers the hand. She lets the waiter clean the table, not intending to stop him. She hasn't finished, the food is still tasty and she would like to eat more. But she has already eaten enough and is ready for what is left to be taken off the table. Thus, it is necessary that we should live with intensity, so that we do not regret at the moment of death.

We realize that there isn't a previous established formula about how people understand their our death, old age and loses. The pathways are contradictory, as presented by Saramago (2005), there are no deaths and eternal life displays itself, there isn't anymore the fear of death, for no one dies: nevertheless, such a news cases panic.

Therefore, it is important that the heath professionals do not stand in silence in relation to the matter of death in the reception to the elderly. It is necessary to have a “Death preparation Program”, in which it would be created a space for the elderly to express their fears and fantasies about death. The objective will be a more desirable elaboration/debate about the theme and with that, make it possible for the elderly to live better with the idea of death. It is understood that these set of themes should be brought

² Morta... serei árvore / Serei tronco, serei fronde / E minhas raízes / Enlaçadas ás pedras de meu berço / São as cordas que brotam de uma lira / Enfeitei de folhas verdes / A pedra de meu túmulo / Num simbolismo / De vida vegetal. / Não morre aquele / Que deixou na terra / A melodia de seu cântico / Na música de seus versos.

up in a natural way, for, in proportion that people gain conscience of their finitude, they get to comprehend life in its complexity and can review their values. The reflection about this theme will make it possible for society to learn (again) that death is essential so that life fulfils its course. Thus, dialoguing about the process of aging and death makes it possible to comprehend man in his social, cultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions, making it possible to obtain a higher quality of life.

To finalize, we will transcribed the poem “Preparation To Death” (“Preparação para a morte”), by Bandeira (1993):

*Life is a miracle.
Each flower,
with its form, color, aroma
each flower is a miracle.
Each bird,
with its plumage, its flight, its song
each bird is a miracle.
The space, infinite,
the space is a miracle.
The time, infinite,
the time is a miracle.
The memory is a miracle.
The conscience is a miracle.
Everything is a miracle.
Everything but the death.
Blessed is the death, the end of all miracles!³*

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³ A vida é um milagre. / Cada flor, / Com sua forma, sua cor, seu aroma, / Cada flor é um milagre./ Cada pássaro, / Com sua plumagem, seu vôo, seu canto, / Cada pássaro é um milagre./ O espaço, infinito, / O espaço é um milagre. / O tempo, infinito, / O tempo é um milagre./ A memória é um milagre. / A consciência é um milagre. / Tudo é milagre. / Tudo, menos a morte. / Bendita a morte, que é o fim de todos os milagres.

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