



## Shuffling Off This Mortal Coil

*A Tribute to Robin Williams*

*by Joseph Conlin*

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When an individual of renown dies, I take only a passing interest. Lauren Bacall died yesterday, and Linda, my wife, read the actor's *New York Times* obit. New items discovered: Bacall (Betty Joan Persky) was Jewish, Bogart wasn't. And even though the Polish-Rumanian-American was born in Brooklyn (usually a note of significance because I too was born in Brooklyn), and even though she transformed the expression "just whistle" into a siren's call, and even though she was beautiful and lived until she was nearly 90, I did not care.

Of course, Bacall rose to Hollywood prominence during my parent's younger years, and she starred in movies that I never saw on the massive silver screen at the Loew's Kings on Flatbush Avenue. Rather I watched her at 4:30 pm on New York's CBS or NBC stations, which had programs featuring Thirties and Forties films. In the 1960s, her natural beauty coiffed in the styles of Forties and Fifties created an archaic appearance in my Peter-Max/*Yellow-Submarine* imagination.

A day earlier, the news of Robins Williams' death struck a different chord. I cared. More precisely, I cared that he killed himself. He was of my generation. He was 63; I'll be 62 this year. I did not care for those reasons, though.

Linda learned of his death first. It came in an email alert from the *Washington Times*. In the seconds immediately following, I presumed Williams overdosed.

His riffs sailed to stratospheric heights, but when he finished, the sparkle in his eyes vanished and my soul surrendered to a sadness as if we grieved laughter's demise, probably a homeostatic reaction to soaring so near the sun. It was after such fantastical flights, I wondered if Williams took an Icarian plunge into perdition, a penance for violating homeostasis, as if the gods were reminding us that happiness cannot exist without pain. And they would torture the upstart, the modern-day Prometheus stranded on a Mount Kazbek.

After my wife told me of his death. I muted the announcers of the Yankee-Orioles game. The house became quiet as I sat in the living room and my wife at a computer in another. Then she said loudly so I would hear, "It was an apparent suicide." My sadness morphed into anger. I was angry because he denied me of him, of new moments of laughter, of forgetting, of salvation from my demons. A day later, my anger became melancholic as I read his *Times* obit. The eagle had

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eaten his heart once too often. Now it gnawed at my own.

I lost him and his grace, his humor, his defense against daily pain. He offered a glimpse at salvation for he made me laugh at myself and those events/thoughts that confused or frightened me. He made life more bearable, rewarding, and hopeful. His thoughts touched me as few others could, so much so that I am sure that he could convince me in the existence of g(G)od. He made laughter seem eternal, a blessing, a reward and an escape from all that we don't like of living, thereby giving life hope, giving us hope.

I read many articles about him that day, hoping to recapture, restore, resurrect the man, his humor, my hope. A few obits referred to his 2001 appearance on *Inside the Actors Studio*. It was an atypical episode, as with most of his performances. Williams answered questions and performed for more than five hours. It was edited down to two for television, twice as long as any other episode. At the end of each episode, the show's host, James Lipton, asked all his guests a series of questions developed French television personality Bernard Pivot, the last being: "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?"

Robin Williams answered, "There's seating at the front. The concert begins at five. It'll be Mozart, Elvis and one of your choosing." Then he pauses. "If heaven exists, to know that there's laughter, that would be a great thing." Another pause. "Just to hear God go, 'Two Jews walk into a bar.'" Classic Williams' humor, a stream-of-conscious spoof of humanity's and god's follies. Obviously I appreciated the man's gift.

That's not why I write about a man who made me laugh and whose dramatic characters made me cry and, at times, shake with fear.

Linda and I noticed that in the many write-ups, few mentioned *What Dreams May Come*. Its box office receipts were \$2 million less than its production budget, and about half the critics panned it. Its lack of financial or critical success, though, says more about us than the movie or Williams.

The movie captured the humor and drama of Williams' craft. It is a club sandwich of life and death, depression and redemption. There's a connection between the man's suicide in life and the woman's suicide in the film. Loss, whether career related, financial, personal, or physical, triggers most suicides, especially among middle-aged white males. In the film, the loss of two children and then the loss of her husband and "soul mate" Chris (played by Williams) drives Annie (played by Annabella Sciorra) to destroy her painting, allowing her to steep in depression until her own suicide. In the end, his love saves her.

Williams reportedly had been battling depression. Speculation spread that he was depressed about his career, even though he stars in several movies coming out in 2015. His wife let it be known that Williams had been diagnosed with Parkinson's. Then came rumors that

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his depression worsened with the diagnosis, even though his wife said that was not the case.

Does it matter? Isn't speculation a means of finding relief, of saying without saying, "There but for the grace of god"? We want to forget that the suicidal long for salvation from pain. We want to believe that we could never suffer such pain, even though in the dark corners of our hearts we know that we could. More to the point, we hate the sad clown. The comedian, especially one such as Williams, alleviates our pain and personifies our hope and salvation. And our saviors cannot be suffering more than we. If his laughter becomes our laughter, then his sadness could become ours. The smile gets turned upside-down. We want life to reflect the movies where frown flips upside-down.

The title *What Dreams May Come* comes from a line in the *Hamlet To-Be-Or-Not-To-Be* soliloquy, that rant about the righteousness of avoiding fortune's outrageous slings and arrows:

'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,  
To sleep, perchance to Dream; Aye, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may  
come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause.

It marks a turning point in the soliloquy. Hamlet shifts from embracing death and grabs onto life. I wondered why Williams could not release death, why couldn't he be more like Chris than Annie, why couldn't he find Hamlet's transition, why couldn't he invert the frown?

It's odd that the work that defines the actor's act—found in his humor and dramatic gifts—is ignored.

One *Times* story overlooked the movie but noted how Williams' art mirrored life:

Peering through his camera at Robin Williams in 2012, the cinematographer John Bailey thought he glimpsed something not previously evident in the comedian's work. They were shooting the independent film *The Angriest Man in Brooklyn*, and Mr. Williams was playing a New York lawyer who, facing death, goes on a rant against the injustice and banality of life. His performance, Mr. Bailey said Tuesday, was a window into the 'Swiftian darkness of Robin's heart.' The actor, like his character, was raging against the storm.

His character "rages" against the storm of his wife's suicide in *What Dreams May Come*. His characters could fend off fortune's slings and arrows. His Learian-like character, Parry, raged in *The Fisher King*. It

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too is a film of depression and redemption. Whenever Parry finds an inkling of confidence, a Red Knight rears his steed, obstructing Parry's quest for the Holy Grail. In his quest, though, Parry saves the life of a suicidal radio shock-jock, played by Jeff Bridges.

In both movies, the hope of the living trumps death, and in that way, his comedy and drama had (has) helped me dodge the sometimes thunderous pain of living. The movies differ from his life only in their endings. On film, Williams' characters conquer the monsters and saved their victims; in life, the monsters conquered Williams. It was as if they were retaliating for all the laughter that one man gave the world.

His absence is sad. It is tragic. Its irony resonates, and therein beats the heart of his humor.

On August 11, I hope he heard laughter and the punch line to god's joke.

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**Joseph Conlin's** writing has appeared in a variety of literary and business publications. His short stories have won awards. He is the editor/publisher/founder of *SNReview* (*SNR*).

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