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Raising Death

by Keith DeBlasi

*The role of
civilized man is,
finally, to fight
for a
compassionate
consciousness
that is neither
sentimental nor
overwhelmed
by the stark
and brutal facts
of a world
known to move
with almost
whimsical
suddenness
from the
elevated to the
barbaric.*

—Stanley
Crouch, *The
All-American
Skin Game, or
The Decoy of
Race*

A few weeks after September 11, 2001, to a query in the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s "Question Man" column on the effects on New Yorkers of the recent attacks there, the most memorable response came from a maybe forty-five-year-old black brother from Hunters Point, an S.F. neighborhood known largely for its poverty and violence.

Now they know how it feels, he said.

This is what young black men in America live with every day, all year round, for life, he said.

They got what was coming to them.

Appalling. Absurd.

Yet immediately I balked, rebounded, reflected: for decades, I too had voiced phrases nearly identical to these—first, out of my own besieged childhood and adolescence, then over the course of a career in police and

Guidelines

emergency medical services in neighborhoods such as the Answer Man's.

Contact

And on the heels of our response, Answer Man's and mine, shouldered up, like a pair of clay cookie men from the muck, that twosome of simpletons from Morality 101: *The G people*, who feel pleasure at others' pleasure, and pain at their pain, and *The E people*, who feel pleasure at others' pain, pain at their pleasure. Answer Man and I would seem E's.

But, in fact, neither he nor I had mouthed it: *They got what was coming to them*. Had we felt this? In his case, obviously, I don't know. But, no, I don't think so. "Now they know how it feels," is probably the furthest either of us got with it. Our E-ness here remains speculative, not evident.

Even in Berkeley and San Francisco, after 9/11, you started seeing in surprising places—the financial district, universities, shopping centers, tourist venues—a greater number of people awake to their surroundings, to themselves and others, and to the interactions and potential consequences of interactions between the two. Started seeing, in short, a hint of that sensibility possessed by most in more typically threatening environments. That fear and elevated attention not too distantly akin to awe.

New Yorkers writing for popular New York-based magazines, would, in the months following 9/11, acknowledge their recent conscription into this world "hard for us to understand and where it is extremely difficult to exercise power," a world that "forc(es) us to focus our . . . attention on something so elemental as our survival" and that might prove "a threat *in continuum* . . ." (David Halberstam, *Vanity Fair*). In this world, father finds it needful, evidently for the first time, to admonish teenage daughter seriously on local public place danger. Then, with his eyes, dad braces daughter as she steps from home looking "as if someone strapped a boulder onto her back." And daughter—so understandably—comes to grieve for those children, including herself, who "like in one minute flat [went] from being this flighty kind of kid to this instant adult" (Richard Price and Anne Hudson-Price, *New York Times Magazine*).

If in remarking "Death destroys a man," E.M. Forster disgorged the obvious like an avalanche, in adding that "the idea of death saves him," he brandished the cryptic like a sorcerer's stone. These days, however, even echoes of the "idea of death" stand hushed. Increasingly, we haunt that dismal interrogatory warned of by Goethe: *Unless thou followest the call of Dying and Becoming, thou art but a sad question on this dark earth*.

But Forster's *idea* and Goethe's *call*—these are the "it" and "this" of which Answer Man spoke: *Now they know how it feels*. This is *what* . . . And despite my speculation into our "E-ness" (abetted by such speculation?), I have, I find, come to join Answer Man—who, I'm now remembering, self-identified as an officer of the Omega Boys Club/Street Soldiers, stated mission, "to keep young people alive and free, unharmed by violence and free from incarceration"—in following Goethe's call.

Hemingway termed it "the rule of death." And, as with most rules, adherence to this one rises on the heels of the adherent's inner

representation or symbolization of the rule, their concrete grasp of the idea of it. (When real-life acts are the going currency, and the consequences of those acts equally real, perhaps that question posed, rhetorically, elsewhere by Forster, on fiction, applies only if flipped: “How am I to know what I think till I hear what I say?”) In any case, this capacity for representational and symbolic thought, unique and essential to human being, takes meaning through the same etymology and antonymy that flesh out those capacities of ours most antithetical to being human: *Symbolic*: *sym*, together + *bol*, from *ballein*, to throw; *Diabolic*: *dia*, apart + *bol*, evil, wicked, cruel. Incorporation of the idea of death, then, counters evil and cruelty, and engenders integrity—or, as Hemingway put it: “Once you accept the rule of death thou shalt not kill is an easily and naturally obeyed commandment.”

In discussing the myopia, the “isolationism,” of U.S. national character at the time of 9/11, Mr. Halberstam mentions, particularly, the character of the more privileged of our society, including those such as he and other New York writers—voluntary transplants there, most, he notes—who, as Halberstam observes, had “been bingeing for a decade . . . paying so little attention to the world around it . . . as if the old isolationist impulse had been restored and magnified.”

And in contrasting our national character at the time of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, with that of 9/11, Halberstam draws comparisons between traits characteristic today to specific groups of citizens, and between traits characteristic to the social strata which, respectively, these groups represent. Halberstam describes a nation whose “relentless affluence is quite different” now than during WWII, “much more materialistic, with a significantly more abbreviated and fragmented attention span.” And he recognizes the “in some ways terribly revealing” gulf, on September 11, 2001, between “the selfless behavior of those magnificent New York firefighters, rushing into the inferno of the Twin Towers to save strangers, (and) the stock-market players, architects of the greatest one-week drop in the stock market since the Depression.”

Price and Hudson-Price recount a scene during a pro boxing card at Madison Square Garden. After the “spotlighting of the usual schizophrenic mix of New York royalty in the crowd: Sharpton, Trump,” etc., an ovation erupts—“this one a little stronger, a little more from the gut”—for someone blocked from view at first by the crowd. For someones, it turns out, when, “a little stiffly, some displaying awkward smiles, others giving half-waves of acknowledgment,” a dozen or so, wearing jeans and FDNY T-shirts, are seen rising from their seats. One can only imagine, the writers conclude, “the great sense of disorientation they [the firefighters] must feel; heroes, grievors, survivors.”

Disorientation, yes—for the business of these men is to *be* heroic, not *act like* heroes. Transactions of true heroism tend toward the banal, or toward the appearance of banality. When, in attempting fairness to his mentioned stock-market players, Halberstam observes that both they and FDNY were “merely doing their jobs,” he is dead-right. The former were (at best) “merely” doing a mere job; the latter, “merely” a mighty one.

Even during this eclipse in our acceptance of the rule of mortality, we maintain, however skewed, that other uniquely human sense, of immortality. And as through representational means we negotiate and engage our mortality, so our immortality—as with Dying, Becoming: our mortality, through pain, terror, and evil, through brushes with death, with wickedness, with cruelty, through a variety of death-imagery and death-equivalents; our immortality, through modes that R.J. Lifton and Eric Olson identify as the *biological*, *creative*, *theological*, *natural*, and *experiential*.

Of these, the first three remain sufficiently self-explanatory. Beyond that, the *natural* mode is described, essentially, as “identification and participation with nature and its enduring rhythms,” the *experiential*, as “experiential transcendence” (much like Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow”), which, unlike the other modes, “depends solely on a psychological state” and can be undertaken through “music, dance, battle, athletics . . . artistic or intellectual creation, sexual love, childbirth, comradeship.”

Conspicuously excluded from these modes of symbolic immortality is *science*—meaning, here, the bulk of techno-mechanistic and materio-economic structures and functions descendant from and produced by science and industry. Largely, science offers at best what Lifton and Olson term an “impaired symbolic immortality,” though more often, a “counterfeit” one—a “psychologically cowardly path to immortality” in either case. Even academic psychology, arguably among the most humanistic of sciences, has, observe Lifton and Olson, addressed principally the mechanistic (i.e., *how* people think or learn) over the humanistic (i.e., *what* and *why* people think and learn and do). I suspect that the degree to which we as a culture now venerate the techno-mechanistic and materio-economic—wherein relatively insignificant and worthless (inhuman) ends grossly overshadow the significance and value of means (including human and other beings and organisms)—is a collective, unconscious attempt at balance-seeking proportional to the depths at which, collectively, we “bury” death.

Tellingly, the mode of symbolic immortality with which science appears most consonant is the *biological*, the sole mode in which the inhuman can operate. (In *nature*, non-human organisms may *participate*, but with nature, they cannot consciously *identify*.) And, perhaps not coincidentally, the *biological* is the mode probably most frequently counterfeited.

In engaging the *biological*, in contrast to the other modes of symbolic immortality, consciousness and conscience, value and meaning are not only unnecessary, but often are antagonistic. As also is the case in science. And in science, as well as in the *biological* as carried out by some individuals, an inverse ratio appears to crop up between quantity of production and quality of life. Frequently, the greater the degradation and hardship folks face, and the greater the lack of value and meaning to their lives, the more they procreate. The biological and “science.” Procreation and production. Bodies and (other) things.

“Scientific consciousness,” says Morris Berman, “is (an) alienated consciousness,” one in which “subject and object are always seen in opposition to each other . . . everything is an object, alien, not-me,” and in

which, "I am ultimately an object too, an alienated 'thing' in a world of other, equally meaningless things."

For most of human history, notes Berman, "the world was enchanted and man saw himself as an integral part of it." The "complete reversal of this perception in a mere four hundred years or so has," however, "destroyed the continuity of human experience and the integrity of the human psyche." And, thanks to this decimated integrity, "It has nearly wrecked the planet as well." Our ability to fulfill our roll as custodians of this planet not only demonstrates but is dependent upon the magnitude of our lived humanity.

William James referred to Tolstoi as "a primitive oak" of a man whose sufficiency of "aboriginal human marrow" prompted or enabled him, alone in the forest one spring day, to suffer a so nearly intolerable sense of doom (James's *Zerrissenheit*, or "torn-to-pieces-hood"), so excruciating an "idea" of death, that, finally, a time arrived when, as Tolstoi later described, "Everything in me awoke and received a meaning."

Mircea Eliade, too, while reiterating that "the cosmos has been desanctified as a result of the triumph of experimental sciences," suggests the possibility of re-sanctification of a kind probably both awakened by and awakener of (chicken-egg style) the sort of "primitive" symbolic thinking that acknowledges that "the world is not only 'alive' but also 'open' . . . (that) an object is never simply itself (but) is also a sign of, or a repository for, something else."

Which might be pathetic, but damn sure ain't no fallacy. Pathetic, precisely, as in that which gets exercised through the best we possess: *empathy* and *sympathy*, commiseration with and allegiance to others, that "willingness," as Stanley Crouch has it, "to empathize with the range of mortal triumph, mortal folly, and mortal pain" that "protects the world from the eradication of its humanity."

Which is where death comes in.

Its imagery and symbolic equivalent.

Take, for instance, a guy who has started to sense his compromised or destructive dealings with his children—anything from overt brutality or abandonment to inadequate provision of material or other support. And say this guy, his world, his culture, recognizes the instrumentality of the idea of death in reviving humanity, personal and cultural. And that, with this man's assent, each of his breasts is pierced with the "wish-bone" of a hawk. That from each of these bones is stretched a cowhide cord tethered to the crown of an eighteen-foot-high willow pole under a blistering sun. That he lies in the dust and "pray(s) to the Creator to give me strength, to give me courage." And that, then, rising to his feet and leaning back, he is shot through with pain, as he falls to and from the pole, in the dust and sun.

I was doing it for my children. . . . Every time I leaned back on my rope, I felt intense pain in my chest. . . . I felt pain, but I also felt that closeness with the Creator. I felt like crying for

all the people who needed my prayers. I prayed that they could get enough to eat. I prayed for all the people who are sick in the world. It brought tears to my eyes. . . . The pain did not compare to what I was receiving from this sacred experience.

—Manny Twofeathers, in Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*

What we're talking about here is revolution. About turning. About undergoing to overcome. We're talking here about sacrifice.

A "deliberate engagement with death as a means for measuring the possibilities of freedom," is how Irving Howe describes revolution. Such as that experienced by Gisella Perl, for whom, in Auschwitz, "gradually the horror turned into revolt . . . shook me out of my lethargy and gave me a new incentive to live." A revolt Terrence Des Pres terms a "turning," and he observes that, for other death-camp inmates too, "Once it was made, the possibility of coming through was greatly increased . . . (T)hey turned to face the worst straight on . . . away from the nihilism and despair [and] back to the small strands of life and decency which constitute, however faint and scattered, a fabric of discernible goodness amid that evil."

And even amid lesser evil, amidst lesser challenges, such turning might occur, might prove equally invaluable. Each of us encounters events, threats and stress, which we might ourselves deem extreme. Few encounter events that the majority of us would deem most extreme. Many encounter events that we and others may or may not deem extreme or most extreme, but that we might ourselves, anyhow, choose to view so, with purpose.

"I had no idea what good and evil were, and whatever was allowed seemed fine to me," says Nerzhin, in Camus's *The Plague*. "But the lower I sink into this inhumanly cruel world, the more I respond to those who, even in such a world, speak to my conscience." And in such a world, says Nerzhin, "one must try to temper, to cut, to polish one's soul so as to become a human being."

For Nerzhin, and for others like him, notes Des Pres, "the way down is the way up."

Which also is perhaps why "Saint Genet's" creative genius, as seen by Sartre, was less a "gift" than a way through and out of desperate circumstances. Perhaps, too, why Etty Hillesum, who believed that "If all this suffering does not bring about a greater humanity . . . then it will have been in vain," managed, as Elie Weisel observed, to "see love even during the Nazi occupation." And why Weisel, while unequivocal that this ought never to be used to justify evil, notes that such a response as Hillesum's might exemplify our capacity to "engender the burst of humanity that we are talking about."

In a discussion on torture in Brazil, Thomas Nagel, distinguishing between *knowledge* and *acknowledgement*, defines the latter as "what happens to knowledge . . . when it becomes officially sanctioned, when it is made part of

the public, cognitive scene.”

Similarly, through personally “sanctioning” what we know of our own particular responses to evil and death—our sense of shame, alienation, brokenness, our terror, pain, and rage—we no longer remain merely *subject* to these symbolic equivalents of death but *experience* them, undergoing to overcome, a process Nagel terms “sacramental.”

Interestingly, while to *sanction* is “to authorize or legitimize,” a *sanction* is “a consideration, influence, or principle that dictates an ethical choice.” And *sacer*, the word root in both “sanctioning” (as *sanctus*) and “sacramental,” when suffixed to *facere* (the same “to make” as in *dignify* and *signify*) becomes *sacrifice*: to make sacred, holy—from the Indo-European for *healed* or *whole*.

I remember awakening one morning, some four months short of my twelfth birthday, in the Valley of the Moon, Teotihuacán, Mexico, at the abrupt terminus of a parched, rutted side road about a half mile west and south of the Piramide de la Luna. The pyramid stood tall behind the crescent of eight or ten soldiers in blue uniforms leveling rifles at us in the back of the pickup. Startled first into a disarrangement of fear, confusion, and mouthful of tequila hangover, I snapped awake then to a shame that shut me out of myself suddenly like air from a collapsed lung. I was convinced that the soldiers, most of whom, clean-shaven and squinting, looked just a few years older than I, knew what I’d done. “What I’d done”—that’s how I saw it.

The deal was a pound of weed (worth, then, about \$350) for anything that the guy, Peter Ban, wanted from me. Ban was a “teacher” at People’s Community School, where I attended 6th grade, and a member of Ma Revolution, the heath food collective with a house on my block and a store at which I worked. And just this night I had learned the meaning of “anything.” Had, in fact, known, though; had been through it before. But had not yet, as Nagel might say, “acknowledged” it. Just after my eleventh birthday, I had been taken off a Berkeley street and raped and used in pornography by a guy named “Chuck.” Drinking, I had passed out. For months afterwards I found blood when I wiped. I walked, as other kids seemed pleased to note, like I had a stick up my ass. My butt seeped sweat, nearly unrelieved, as if a child screaming to be heard. But that was it. All this I knew but I acknowledged nothing. Then, about a month after Mexico, Ban took me to a neighborhood house, a puce clapboard two-story on Parker, where, in the barely furnished living room, a ring of men, including Chuck, lounged in folding chairs to the steady muffled reeling tick and fan-hum of a super-8 projector. I sat cross-legged on the bare-wood floor and got stoned. Most of the movies were of boys fondling themselves or other boys. Occasionally, the men seated between me and the screen emitted animated wordless outbursts. I looked up, and there I was, on Chuck’s Murphy bed, naked and giggling, cradling the Southern Comfort bottle, paging through a porn magazine and fondling myself. Then Chuck was in the frame, wearing only a white T-shirt. I lay limp as he rolled me onto my face, hoisted my haunches, and raped me. What happened next I don’t remember, neither in that darkened living room on Parker nor in Chuck’s spotlight lit flat. After seeing that movie it took years to begin to

acknowledge what I knew.

Snapshot #2: Somewhere south of Teotihuacán and north of Palenque, the wide bend of a dry stony river bed that rises in sandy irregular arcs to a shaggy tree line barely green before the undulating moonlit desert. Ban lies on his right side, facing away. Waves of heat dissipating off close larger stones are the only moving air, and Ban's breathing, which has remained deep and untroubled for many minutes. At his left hip (Ban is left-handed) is the sheathed, black-handled Buck knife that soon, in a village Mercado, we'll be taken in for by la policia, until Ban pays our way out (as he had with those soldiers in the Valley of the Moon) with handful of bills. I'm convinced I can get the knife from its sheath and into the near angle of Ban's neck before he wakes. That I can finish the job then without too much fuss. Can drive the truck, have before. And in Ban's pocket, there's cash, though he hasn't had any wired down for days. Beyond that, I have no sense of how I might make it back to the States. Not that I think it out real well. But in the end, I reckon my chances are better with Ban than without him. Truth is, that's just how scared I am to be here alone. Times when failing to avail oneself of an opportunity leave one feeling awfully culpable for what follows, for what continues to go on.

Snapshot #3: Another pyramid, this one in the ruins of the Mayan city Palenque, far south, almost to Guatemala. Rather than pay and enter through the gate with other touristas, Ban walks us in from a far corner of the sprawling near-empty parking lot, through a spatter of deep prickly brush, and under the high, rangy vines and leafy hot wet crush of green where a scrawny monkey faces us down, fidgeting and shrieking. Up the steadily narrowing side-long stairs of the pyramid, steep as a roller coaster rise. And at the top, into it, and down, an even steeper stairway, cool, zigzag cut, lamp-lit. At the foot of the stairs, in a low-ceilinged room big as a bungalow, the tomb of a boy-king.

Whatever the factual appearance of that tomb—I know now that Pakal the Great, while crowned at 12, lived to be 85, and was interred there in stone—I have always remembered it as open, chest-high, a sprawling bronze throne-bed crowned by a tightly wound, ashen-black mummy, size and shape of a boy.

From Mexico I carried away these snapshots much as I had carried to that country the knowledge of previously being exploited and raped. Happening upon one of them, I would look quickly away, look quickly away, too, from my reactions to what I'd happened upon, aversion averted. To "look" at my largely involuntary and unconscious reactions to these snapshots—inner representations of outer confrontations with death, death imagery, evil—might, of course, have nudged those reactions into the realm of *response*, of greater consciousness and volition. But the "unspeakable" remained unspoken, even, largely, to myself. Instead, it emerged in acts of harm, some more overt and dramatic, some covert and incremental, against myself and others.

My dream about snapshot #2 came the night before an offense I had planned and prepared for, and that seems a decent example of both the

more dramatic and more covert of my acts, my crimes.

I had to have been 16 or 17, since I was working not only at Manuel's, but for Willard, from whom I got the gun. Bill and Frank, two white guys from L.A., had moved a cook up from Mexico and opened Manuel's, in Durant Center, just off Telegraph, hiring me as the restaurant's first dishwasher. Willard was a gay black guy, paraplegic from a truck wreck along the Alaskan pipeline, for whom I did my first job as personal attendant. With Willard, I visited Seattle where his mom and eighteen-year-old sister, Alicia, lived. Alicia, who was hooking, had taken to carrying this cheap little .22, and Willard put me up to snagging it from her purse one afternoon when she ran into the liquor store from his van, to help keep Alicia out of trouble. I got to keep the piece.

Strangely, Bill or Frank made their cash drops in the morning, every three days, Thursdays and Sundays. For a couple of years already I'd kept my vow, that had sprung up in one of those fissures that periodically broke in the strain between holding at bay and taking peeks at memory, never to do to another what was done to me. But robbery isn't rape (neither were any of the crimes I did, mostly nonviolent).

I would wear a mask—just how (though *stupid's* not precisely it) stupid I was, to imagine this an adequate disguise—and would intercept Bill or Frank on the Durant side of B of A, before they rounded the corner onto Telegraph. The mask, a black ski mask with red-thread-rimmed eye holes and mouth, I had pilfered at J.C. Penny, downtown. The gun was in hand. Jacket or shirt? The maroon windbreaker I wore to and from work daily was all I had.

From this plan, fortunately, I was awakened by the dream. Of which I recall no beginning, only this: in a field of darkness, Ban's suspended in reach in front of me, wearing something white, a T-shirt, maybe. Over and over, I drive the knife into his flesh, into his organs, his bones. And do not stop. Only when long after Ban is dead and I am fully exhausted do I awaken. Then it ends.

I often carried that scraggly .22, with its tarnished chrome barrel and cylinder and cracked yellowing grips. I neither knew nor cared what brand it was—a Taurus, maybe, in retrospect. Though over the years that pistol got me through several tight spots. But only against threats. Never to offend.

More than thirty years later, when, for me, personal past converged with personal and professional present in ways that caused unnecessary risk to both me and my family, I had the dream on snapshot #3. My wife and I had been married, then, some twenty years. Our oldest daughter was ten or eleven, our youngest, nine or ten. For just over a decade and a half I'd been a cop. And now, increasingly, I was getting into trouble, both on-duty and off. At work, it was over lesser acts, invariably verbal; off work, over worse acts, property damage, threats, firearm brandishing, against non-existent or relatively low-level threats. Occasionally, these latter acts occurred in the presence of my wife or kids.

Since dropping out of high school, I had been employed in various service jobs—from dishwasher and cook to aid for disabled men to gas station attendant to grocery clerk to construction laborer to house painter to furniture mover to medi-cab driver—before earning an EMT-P certificate and working almost nine years as an Oakland field paramedic. While a medic, having on and off since age eleven witnessed the city shoot, stab, beat, and smoke itself to death and ruin (at work, more disturbingly memorable than the bulk of warlike mayhem were each of the three-fold more fetal corpses, spawned prematurely by crack-moms, that from toilets and bathtubs, sofas and laps I collected and carried away for the coroner, than the three healthy babies born to moms on the gurney in the back of the rig), I began to imagine that as a cop I might help stop the death and dismemberment instead of simply laboring to stanch its aftermath. Too, medics earned then about \$12.45 an hour, no benefits; cops, double that, with benefits and a retirement plan.

The second dream, on snapshot #3, struck me as morbid, improbable, unsettling. On a black slab of stone lay a diminutive figure cocooned in soiled rags: my favorite mummy. With curiosity and affection, I climbed onto the stone and crawled on top of the figure, mounting it as though to penetrate. Under me, the figure shuddered to life, like a chick from an egg. Next to me, the figure knelt and then stood: me, as a boy.

As a cop, I had worked Patrol, Dope, and Sex Crimes before rotating back to Patrol. Recently, I had put in and tested for, then been appointed to and sent out for training in, SWAT, initially as a medic, then as a tactical operator. Our department had just been in a series of officer-involved shootings, a couple of ours wounded. Caught up in what seemed a rising number of on-the-job force-on-force encounters—fist fights, defense against weapons other than firearm, near-shootings—lately I had with increasing frequency been injured and re-injured on the job—thumb, knee, shoulder, back. Then, just weeks after reassignment to Patrol, I'd been first on scene, shortly after dawn one morning, to the third-floor flat of a young woman who I knew as a prior victim of spousal rape and (she disclosed to me during detective interviews on that) chronic child sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators, and who that morning I found lying in bed, under the high, east-facing windows of a rear alcove, cradling her limp seven-year-old son (classmate, at the time, of my youngest daughter) who, now blue-lipped and cool-to-touch, she had drugged and suffocated to death before stabbing and slashing her own chest and arms and throat as bad as I'd seen done by anyone who'd tried but failed to kill themselves.

The second dream still perplexes me, particularly in light of the first. The first seems simple enough. Killing Ban put to final rest the rapist in me, affirmed and solidified my earlier vow. And the expression of rage in that dream—potent rage, as cast—dissipated my own, helped not only keep me from raping, but from killing, in life. That's my read. Still, these dreams seem to contradict one another, to be out of sequence or the product of some other twist-up. All I know for sure is that the dream on snapshot #3 heralded the beginning of the end for me, of police work.

A follower of Sartre named Erich Kahler condensed and simplified,

substantively, one of Sartre's best-known aphorisms. Said Sartre: "Man is characterized above all by his ability to rise above a situation, by what he manages to do with what others have done to him." Said Kahler: "(S)elf-determination and self-transcendence" are our "most precious and essential human qualities."

Since the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, Oakland has remained among the five U.S. cities with highest per-capita homicide rates—higher, consistently, than either San Francisco or New York, more on par with Newark or Detroit. The vast majority of both killers and victims in these crimes have been young black men. Given the progressive, or liberal, majority of the Bay Area, probably greater popular concern gets voiced here than in most otherwise similar regions over these high numbers of black-on-black killings. And while exceedingly well justified, this concern finds expression principally through seeking answers and casting about for responsibility (or blame) outside of the community most directly involved. Which amounts to fodder for white supremacist wet dreams: to locate chief responsibility for black-on-black violence outside the core involved community is to deny the people of this community of the tools most needed to end the violence, to dispossess them of those "most precious and essential human qualities" of self-determination and self-transcendence.

Paradoxically, the most purulent injections into the community of this mortal (and moral) infirmity began at around the height of the Civil Rights era, a time when black America had undergone what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes as "a dramatic transformation . . . the most rapid growth in history," during which, while "the annual earnings of white men doubled . . . those of black men actually tripled."

Enter hijackers, stage right.

White and black, universally self-serving (and occasionally misguided), these often criminal opportunists forced and finagled the weaker and more vulnerable into surrendering those hard-won principles and practices that best affirm and grow humanity, and they secured these folks in a desert of dependency—on dope, sure; but also, through investment in what Shelby Steele calls "the culture of entitlement and grievance," on *anything but themselves*—that Egypt of dissociation from self where "shouting for all to hear just how the white man had subjugated the black man, the matter of being a human being was not a problem at all" (Gates). Being fully human—assumption rather than abdication of the agency and personhood for which the civil rights movement had fought—simply no longer mattered. What mattered were the self-servings' contrivances of counterfeit immortality that have rendered so many of us crack-ridden and broken, more destitute than ever in American history, generation after generation born simply to kill and to die.

Largely, the white, upper middleclass outsiders who today, in acts of mock redemption for white guilt, insinuate themselves into often self-created positions of agency (power) for (over) the people of the community, are the same parasitic opportunists who used as cover the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s to usurp and desecrate the humanity not only of so many

Oakland blacks, but, through acts of neglect, abandonment, and abuse, of so many of their own children.

Predictably, then, when it comes to what some call Oakland's "plague" of mostly black-on-black homicides, thanks not only to the murderers themselves but also to their mostly white, upper middle-class cheerleaders and enablers, the best this city can muster is that plaintive over-a-quarter-century-old refrain of passivity and impotence: *How can the killing be stopped?*

In answer to which I offer the following.

Born, in my late teens, of that embryonic acknowledgement of the degradation and cruelty to which I had been subject (Ban and Chuck weren't the half of it), paired with the belief (the recognition, given my window on the world) that pain is life's chief currency and yield, the logic is simple, simple and sound: *Overwhelmingly, life is pain. One ought not to cause an increase of pain. To bring children into the world is to cause an increase of pain. I will, therefore, not bring children into the world.*

Now, I don't for a moment subscribe to any of those commonly floated fallacies on why poor and besieged people tend to procreate at rates higher than virtually any other. Of this, the roots may lie in that instinct that drives most organisms, when threatened, to, in the interest of species-specific continuation, increase attempts at reproduction. But that's not simply it; it can't be. We as a race have come beyond that. Haven't we? And to assert that significant numbers of individuals consciously and intentionally procreate out of a kind of revenge, or anticipated revenge, against others, or against "the system" (growing a literal or figurative fighting force, say), or for financial gain from others, or from "the system" (through, say, government benefits or private philanthropic aid), remains insupportable.

Though in this question of how to stop black-on-black killing in Oakland, birth does matter.

When C.S. Lewis said, "It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death,' or 'Death doesn't matter,'" he was referring to each of us who have yet to accept the idea of death. "There is death," he said. "And whatever is, matters. . . . You might as well say," he added, "that birth doesn't matter."

Birth definitely matters—but only insofar as does death. However much we "know" or see of death, we will, until we acknowledge and accept its rule, continue to generate its increase inordinately. All the horse-drawn, wooden-wheeled hearses and booze-bottled street shrines in the world do not reflect an *experience* of the rule of death. They only prove that the dead and their followers have been *subject to* the source of this rule. If through such reflections of death, the idea of it were truly accepted, the spate of killings would cease. Until the absence of cruelty and degradation in one's circumstances far outweighed its presence, until the humanity of one's conditions substantially outweighed the inhumanity, each of us would simply

stop having babies.

Now that's a modest proposal—or would, reasonably, seem so.

But doesn't this suggest putting the cart before the horse?

No, not exactly. Though it does resurrect that ornithological conundrum on the order of origins. To which the only best answer is a hearty Yes. What is, matters. Without brooder, no broodee. Without broodee, no brooder.

The capacity for consciousness and conscience, for representational and symbolic thinking, for entertaining ideas of mortality and immortality, is given only to us human beings. The degree to which we exercise these capacities is the degree to which we become, and to which we remain, human. And vice-versa.

Keith DeBlasi recently retired after 27 years in California public emergency services, including as an Oakland paramedic and Berkeley police officer and Sex Crimes Detail detective, and has been previously published only in small local periodicals. For over a decade, DeBlasi has spoken on child abuse, specifically male child victims of sexual trauma, and on resilience, at colleges and universities, child welfare, social service, and mental health agencies, professional associations of law enforcement investigators and forensic nurses, and state prisons. Presently, DeBlasi helps facilitating groups of prison inmates in victim-offender reconciliation and restorative justice and other work, and teaches meditation inside the prison system. He is also presently in formation as a candidate for the Order of Secular Franciscans, and is married, with two young-adult daughters.

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