

## **Fascination with Dying & Death as Participation (Which is Generally Adaptive)**

**By**

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**Background:** As you likely are aware, there has been a lot of research written up in newspapers and science periodicals and web pages that focuses on the nature of consciousness and the brain mechanisms that give rise to it. I do not want to delve into so weighty a topic as consciousness, but instead just want to draw your attention to mirror neurons and cortical-limbic (higher mental processes-emotions) connections. It is these that facilitate identification with others including experiencing their emotions be it anger, terror, joy, etc. as though we ourselves were experiencing these feelings. This makes explicable, in part, our love affair with certain novels, movies, documentaries, and life experiences. It also provides at least a partial explanation for why we are generally fascinated with injury, death and dying (Don't tell me you don't rubberneck at accident scenes or find some aspects of death and dying curiously compelling. I am not talking out morbid obsessions or pathological "enjoyment", but rather natural curiosity informed by a sense of identification with the dying or soon-to-die soul). It is these brain mechanisms which I'd like to posit as one of the main players in human fascination with death and dying; mechanisms which are also, I contend, adaptive in some respects.

### **Humbly Submitted for Your Consideration:**

The individuality and social belonging and cohesiveness engendered by the neural mechanisms cited above, influenced and shaped by one's native home life and culture and such, lends us to be everything from loners to "the life of the party" (The boorish extrovert). This self-same set of neural modules – consciousness – also makes us aware of our own mortality and that of others. We find ourselves thus fearful of death – yet drawn to it. Sometimes the greater the fear experienced, the greater the curiosity about the process of dying and death. We want to both understand and by so doing disarm or at least lessen our fear and the resultant anxiety or unease it engenders in us. Or if nothing else desensitize ourselves to it, and by so doing surmount or transcend our fear or distress.

Given this, the historic and ongoing fascination people experience when it comes to death becomes explicable: It arises from a combination of curiosity and *participation* in the sufferings and death of others. We rehearse our own death, in short. When this participation - -this empathetic tie – with the dying is one tempered by sympathy and concern, we experience death as pain. When the dying is the object of our revulsion or dislike or even hatred, there may be an element of pleasure associated with his or her passing. These feelings also engage our sense of competitiveness – of wanting to survive – of being left standing while another or others have not been so fortunate. History shows that this is natural; that is, part of the human condition; a feature of our evolved brain.

If most or all empathy is lacking and death is inflicted or observed as sexually exciting or pleasurable in another sense, then the normal mechanisms have become pathologic. This is the world of the sociopathic killer – single strike or serial or what-have-you.

As such, we should not really be surprised by a history filled with morbid, even sadistic occurrences such as gladiatorial combat to the death, crowds excited by and cheering at the sight of a publically disgraced and then executed criminal or malcontent (under prevailing law, however unfair or unjust it might be), etc.



Of course, participating (neutrally, so-to-speak) in the dying process and death of a relative or historic personage can be adaptive and is so, I would argue. In short, it reduces death anxiety and by so doing frees us to better focus on living and thriving as we do so. Or if our circumstances are onerous, it can liberate us to carry on the good fight; to wage the good fight to hang on and survive to see a better day.

This little excursion into the “Shadowlands” is not comprehensive. I like to leave room for my readers to think and ‘cuss & discuss’ within themselves and others.

Here are some posted writings of mine that may inform your own cogitations on dying and death:

<http://www.healingcare4u.org/inflicted-violent-death.html>

<http://www.healingcare4u.org/quick-bytes.htm#anchor3>

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