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The Paths To Glory Lead But To The Grave

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-Tapesh Kumar

There is an astonishing disposition in human mind to seek pleasure from varied sources, even from pain and melancholy. If it weren't so, the gothic genres of literature, horror and bloody movies, lamenting lyrics and grievous ballads would not have been so popular. We receive comfort in gloomy tale, acceptance in sad sonnets and calm pleasure from the elegies which raise our melancholy, for no matter how pompous our life might be, there is always some room for bitter truth of pain and sorrow. Eighteenth century English poet, classical scholar and professor at Cambridge University - Thomas Gray - wrote this mournful poem titled 'Elegy written in a country graveyard' in a country church burial ground:

"The boast of heraldry,

the pomp of power,

And all that beauty,

all that wealth e'er gave.

Awaits alike the inevitable hour,

The paths of glory lead but to the

grave."

Such quatrains are a continuous reminder of mortality of human life and inevitability of death irrespective of social position, beauty, wealth or any glory. It was the same burial site where Gray was later buried.

Of all the truth, death is the most universal, whose realisation is assured beyond any doubt and without any exception. One thing that man has consistently failed at is in achieving physical immortality. No alchemy, sacrifice, yoga and no enlightenment or Nirvana could

materialise into an everlasting enduring life. One who has been born, shall die, so shall one who will be born. Entire life, people torment themselves for money, material, love, family, health, glory etc. But all the varieties of trouble a life might encounter, with all its preoccupations, find their submergence in death. Death is an inevitable phenomena associated with life, since the moment worldly existence of life form is realised.

Greek hero of Trojan War, the central character and greatest warrior of Homer's Iliad - Achilles- was tried to be made immortal by his mother Thetis, herself a sea-nymph. He was dipped into the holy water by her mother to attain immortality. However he was killed at the end of the Trojan War within the city of Troy by an arrow which struck him in the heel. It was discovered that he was left vulnerable at the part of the body by which she held him while dipping into the water, which remained dry. After his death, all his bravery, all the swiftness of his sword and all his insurmountable strength reduced to a phrase of grammar called 'Achilles heel' which means a weakness or vulnerable point. Indeed death is the ultimate truth. There is nothing that can stop one from realization of this truth.

Nevertheless, fear associated with death might be optional. The fact is, death seems scary, not because death is scary but because life, many a times, gets scary. The fear of death follows from that of life. One who is prepared to die anytime, is the one who lives the life fully. It is in such achievement of fearlessness for life that glory sprouts and nurtures itself. The durability of life is often associated with the intensity of glory achieved. Maria Corazon Aquino was a self proclaimed plain housewife till she decided to run for president in Philippines after her husband was assassinated. She was the most prominent figure of the 1986 People Power Revolution and was named Time magazine's "Woman of the Year" the same year. She toppled the 20-year authoritarian rule of President Ferdinand E. Marcos, restored democracy to the Philippines and served as the 11th President. Prior to this, she had not held any other elective office. She would say: ***"I would rather die a meaningful death than to live a meaningless life."*** Sacrosanct and inviolable as she might appear, but she died of colon cancer in the year of 2009. Death doesn't demand a submission of being, but it ensures the same.

Before being social, man was only an animal. Concept of society, tamed him for the sustainable needs of inter-dependence. Path to glory resonates with such balance of needs and sustenance. Still, a beast always resides within. This beast stares and sharpens its claws, and attacks vigorously when drunk with power and pride followed by imbalance of conscience. Glory is not an unproblematic select to deal with ease. Oriana Fallaci - an Italian author, journalist and an ardent interviewer - having keenly observed her political interviewees, said: ***"Glory is a heavy burden, a murdering poison. To bear it is an art, and to have that art is rare."***

One can plan for a safer life by keeping away from any glory, for more glorious the path, closer it is to dying. Nevertheless, there is no safe box which couldn't be torn apart by the claws of death. Death is like the deep dense woods whose immensity cannot be fathomed

from ground because the vision is blocked by the first few rows of trees itself.

It is life that categorises; death on the other hand declassifies them all. Death is the union of all life forms. Paupers struggle on daily basis throughout their life to make it to the end of the day. Their life might not mean much to the society as much as they are said to have died like flies. On the other hand, upper class has their burial site booked, crypt engraved or funeral sumptuously occasioned. Eventually, rich men don't live enough to witness them all. No matter what we do, achieve or feel and how differently we do them, death unifies all classes of people. In fact, poor people might have lived like flies, but they all died as good as any riches. A couch of thorns or an embroidered bed, are matters of indifference to the dead. Death is like that volume of calm water where all the deeds die out like a ripple. German author and playwright - Wolfgang Borchert, whose work was affected by the environment of Second World War, writes in his play 'The Outsider': ***"A man dies. Only a few circles in the water prove that he was ever there. And even they quickly disappear. And when they're gone, he's forgotten, without a trace, as if he'd never even existed. And that's all."***

We all need some or the other motivation to sail through the struggles of life. Search for food is motivated by the inherent characteristics of hunger of human body. It is the acceptance in society, showering of praise, recognition or being envied by fellow being, that drives one to the paths of glory. Marcus Tullius Cicero - a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, and writer who vainly tried to uphold republican principles in the final civil wars that destroyed the Roman Republic- puts up his thoughts which came to be known as Ciceronian rhetoric: ***"We are motivated by a keen desire for praise, and the better a man is the more he is inspired by glory. The very philosophers themselves, even in those books which they write in contempt of glory, inscribe their names."*** When it comes to survival, death is the ultimate motivation. It helps men discover unknown boundaries, untraversed locations and unfathomable will. The philosophy of vicious cycle of rebirth, karma and nirvana basically stream-lines human being for peaceful coexistence, to abjure violence, to be accommodative and to comfort, sympathize and distract mind from the lamenting nature of death. Even though Buddhist teachings professes the cycles of rebirth, according to a Jataka parable, when a grieving lady visited Buddha with the corpse of his son to request bring back the life, Buddha asked her to bring a handful of cereal from a family in which nobody had died before. Tired of her efforts, when lady returned to Buddha bemoaning, he summed up the lesson that death is certain, its time is not.

Ailing Steve Jobs, having known of his march being closer to death, tried to describe honestly his perception of death as: ***"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the***

new.” Dying is a continuous process which starts as soon as one is born. In softer terms we call it ageing. Death is the ultimate result of this ongoing process. In fact, the vanity of life is in death. Health remains prized possession because of the cruelty of sickness and life remains so because of unwarranted death.

A thought that makes life the liveliest is the idea of **'memento mori'** which means ***'Remember that you must die.'***