

Excerpt from: “Be That Ocean”: Death, Community, and Original Ethics
December 2009

For Johanna Justin-Jinich, whose life was taken cruelly and prematurely.

“[Nietzsche] said:

“But where do those waves of everything which is great and sublime in man finally flow out? Isn’t there an ocean for these torrents?—Be this ocean: there will be one’ (*fragment from 80-81*)...

“In experience, there is no longer a limited existence. There a man is not distinguished in any way from others: in him what is torrential is lost within others. The so simple commandment: ‘Be that ocean’, linked to the *extreme limit*, at the same time makes of a man a multitude, a desert. It is an expression which resumes and makes precise the sense of a community.”

George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 27

V. Conclusion: Entanglement

“If I am somehow feeling a short-changed emotion, I would not like to feel its full force. It would be far too painful.”

-A member of our class

I don’t live with my own death. I don’t know how to, except in the rare moments when I am forced to confront it. One such moment was last May, when I heard that a Wesleyan student had been shot and killed in the café where she worked. I rarely cry, but when I called my parents to tell them what had happened, sobs drowned my words as I tried to utter the sentence: “She just woke up like me or you, went to work, and now she’s dead.”

I was crying for her of course. But, to be perfectly honest, I was also crying for myself, and not in a self-pitying way at all. What I was reacting to was the realization that I will die one day, that being alive is a wonderful and highly improbable gift, and that the way I live rarely reflects this. I rarely feel things deeply, fully, or sincerely. I feel that my life is a sham, that there is no real person behind my words, my thoughts, my actions, my feelings, and this doesn’t disturb me nearly as deeply as it should. But in the wake of something like the shooting, it does, and I momentarily feel something real, something much deeper than this life of pretense.

What I experienced in the immediate wake of the shooting was a momentary dissolution of myself. All of a sudden, life, and death, were real. As I walked outside, overcome with emotion, I felt profoundly connected to every person, every tree. And yet, almost immediately, I had a sense that my response had a tinge of insincerity that hadn’t been present in the initial shock. I seemed to be making the tragedy into what I wanted it to be—something that reconnected me to my body, to my community, to nature; something that reassured me that I was human, that I could still feel.

I was also troubled by the insensitive responses of some people I knew: making light of what had happened, talking about how it would influence Wesleyan’s reputation, saying that we shouldn’t let it get to us. I perceived these responses as an indication not

of disregard for the weight of the tragedy, but rather of a severe inability to *communicate* outside a narrow repertoire of disembodied, affect-less social roles. There were also those who seemed to over-orchestrate their emotional responses, as if to prove that the tragedy had affected them more deeply than anyone else. For me, what all these responses had in common was an inability to let an experience that was totally unfamiliar, totally other, be such. This other was subsumed within the familiar self-involvement that colors life with alienation and superficiality.

A few days later, still unable to sort out the real from the unreal in myself, I became sad and frustrated, realizing that even this reaction was tinged with insincerity. The sincere and the insincere seemed hopelessly *entangled*, undifferentiable. Lost, I called the only person I thought could help. As I spoke to her, I realized that my words were not coming from me, not from my body. I was merely remembering how I had felt the moment I heard the news. Only that moment had been real; the rest was theater.

As I walked across campus, I came upon the memorial service that was being held for Johanna and ended my conversation. The speakers were profoundly insincere, disembodied, absent. Just more words. Then suddenly, as the service ended, I was overcome with grief and started sobbing uncontrollably again, as I had when I first heard the news. I was crying for Johanna, I was crying for her friends and family, and I was crying for the rest of us, so hopelessly entangled. A stranger embraced me, repeating the lullaby, “It’s going to be okay, it’s going to be okay.”

It wasn’t going to be okay, hasn’t been—neither the tragedy nor the entanglement. Yet in that moment, it somehow was. Boundaries between self and other, sincerity and insincerity, hope and despair dissolved in that embrace.

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