

Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (1980), pp. 5-6, 13

Each thing, said Spinoza in the "Ethics," insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persevere in its being." That may not be true for rocks and stars, but for societies and men it is undeniable. Survival of the body and its well-being take priority over everything else, although this imperative is transcended and lost sight of when the machinery of civilization is working as it should. The remarkable fact, however, is that while the business of living goes forward from day to day we reserve our reverence and highest praise for action which culminates in death. I am referring to images of the hero in Western religion and literature, and here there is no doubt: our serious models draw their sanction and compelling force from death. Those who for centuries have commanded love and imitation—Christ, Socrates, the martyrs; the tragic hero always; the warrior from Achilles to the Unknown Soldier—all are sacrificial victims, all resolve conflict by dying and through death ensure that the spirit they spoke or fought for shall not perish. The pattern is so honored and familiar that a connection between heroism and death seems natural.

The struggle to survive, on the other hand, is felt to be suspect. We speak of "merely" surviving, as if in itself life were not worth much; as if we felt that life is justified only by things which negate it. . . .

Men have always been ready to die for beliefs, sacrificing life for higher goals. That made sense once, perhaps; but no cause moves without live men to move it, and our predicament today—as governments know—is that ideas and ideologies are stopped by killing those who hold them. The "final solution" has become a usual solution, and the world is not what it was. Within a landscape of disaster, places like Auschwitz, Hiroshima or the obliterated earth of Indo-China, where people die in thousands, where machines reduce courage to stupidity and dying to complicity with aggression, it makes no sense to speak of death's dignity or of its communal blessing... The grandeur of death is lost in a world of mass murder, and except for special cases the martyr and his tragic counterpart are types of the hero unfit for the darkness ahead. When men and women must live against terrible odds, when mere existence becomes miraculous, to die is in no way a triumph.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), p. 50

In this closed world where conversation is displaced by interrogation, where human speech is broken off in confession and disintegrates into human cries, where even those cries can be broken off to become one more weapon against the person himself or against a friend, in this world of broken and severed voices, it is not surprising that the most powerful and healing moment is often that in which a human voice, though still severed, floating free, somehow reaches the person whose sole reality had become his own unthinkable isolation, his deep corporeal engulfment. The prisoner who, alone in long solitary confinement and repeatedly tortured, found within a loaf of bread a matchbox containing a small piece of paper that had written on it the single, whispered word "Corragio!", "Take Courage!"; the Uruguayan man arranging for some tangible signal that his words had reached their destination, "My darling, if you receive this letter put a half a bar of Boa soap in the next parcel"; the imprisoned Chilean woman who on Christmas Eve sang with all their might to their men in a separate camp tortured his or her voice, to use language to let pain give an accurate account of itself... As torture consists of acts that magnify the way in which pain destroys a person's world, self, and voice, so these other acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself...