



THE IMPONDERABLE

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Question: Can death be designed?
Answer: Everyday.

Increasingly so, and with rare precision, the experience of death is designed. Just thumb through the U.S. State of Florida's guidebook titled *Execution By Lethal Injection Procedures* and what do you find? The experience of death *designed*.

In Florida's guidebook, slotted beneath the unambiguous sub-title, "On The Day Of Execution," parched entries, in the company of some quite lurid installments describe an almost *logarithmic order of death*, an irreversible path designed to surrender life. From the sound of it, things are to be strictly dull, leaden, and deaden all designed to *achieve* acquiescence. This recalls stage five in the Kubler-Ross model reliably describing the final steps in one's emotional reception of death; known as DABDA, the first "D" is for *denial*, the final "A" for *acceptance*. After reading through the droning style of "On The Day Of Execution," no one can miss that there is precious little room for procedural trail blazing in this ghastly business.

Try stomaching this episode from "On The Day Of Execution," – officially known as entry "i." Blocking out words like *execution*, "i" glides along in a voice of general authoritarian precision, the voice you would expect to be steering dental assistants in the pragmatics of a tooth pulling. It reads in part, "A designated member of the execution team will explain the lethal injection preparation procedure to the inmate and offer any medical assistance or care deemed appropriate." Matter-of-factly pressing on, "The inmate will be offered, and if accepted, will be administered an intramuscular injection of diazepam, in an appropriate dosage relative to weight, to ease anxiety." This *is* Death by Design. And that last part, about the "appropriate dosage . . . to ease anxiety?"

It seems to have been intentionally *over-designed*, to muffle the "execution team's" own anxiety in the course of quailing another's.

However, isn't the diazepam an expression of "reverse design," and in that sense, more for the executioners than the condemned? At the very least it is equally, if oppositely, designed into the experience for both. Not to put too fine a point on it, but it's only the executioners who will see the next sunrise. To this end, our society has decided that they should see the break of day unburden by their conscious, so that, on another day, on an appointed hour, on their own free will, they can walk back into this same death chamber, representing you and I, and repeat the job. In the end, perhaps the diazepam is *designed-in* for us, for society, creating a comfortable gulf between our lives, and the life freshly concluded in the death chamber.

It seemed as if he just went to sleep.

The scary rides at Disneyland are "over-designed" too, except most of us needn't the diazepam to be strapped in. The Magic Kingdom targets experience towards the *thrill of the close call*, whereas, the experiences for the condemned and their executioners in Florida's death chamber are intentionally designed to produce nothing close, to a "close call." Death is immanent, and doubly so in the death chamber, where every aspect of the experience points towards accelerating the end.

Death ultimately hosts an irreversible dénouement, lending it both identity and authority, and what better way to manage authority then to subvert it from a point of terminus to an awe inspiring threshold? For instance, theologians have long speculated that in the instant of our death, before we are assigned to Heaven, or the Underworld, "God" has opinions and options. A judgment to make, setting your afterlife course for either splendor,

ruin, or, before the Catholic Church theologically sidelined it, eternal equivocality. When the third choice remained, one could be surrendered to a permanent suspension known in Holy doctrine as *limbus infantium*. *Limbus infantium* is the afterlife for the unbaptized where, infants mostly, remain eternally teetering between the two spheres. These options, a set of second acts, functioned as a cataract, a holy diazepam, allowing the end to be a beginning. A design that is different, but not altogether opposite from Florida's protocol, because both serve the surviving, blur the end, and keep everything orderly.

Roll back the footage from the end of the reel, imagine your future death, your own concluding moments of human experience, where life, *your life*, rushes towards its close. Could such an experience be designed? Should it be? Shouldn't it unfold *unaffectedly*? Shouldn't death be artlessly genuine? In spite of the fact that most people would prefer to put it out of mind, shouldn't the very inevitability of death inspire us to recognize it as a part of life, part of living.

From 1922 to 1927, George Orwell served as a policeman in Burma, in his short story *A Hanging* (1931), he draws from this experience to offer a humanist epiphany while witnessing a man march to his execution.

And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path. It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive.

We all avoid the puddles.