On Digital Obituary

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The searing reality of grief began to creep into my life the year I lost my friend to death. It was on a cold-ridden morning in Benue, when a phone call from a friend from home broke the news to me. Stunned by the gloominess that pervaded the voice that delivered the news to me like a parcel, I felt the pang of grief clenching my bones, altering my thoughts and plans for the rest of the day. Before the unexpected dirgic news, I had resumed as a corps member in a secondary school in Mbakudu, Tsar, Benue. Back home in Iseyin, we had shared a great childhood together. Both of us usually sat together on a bench in front of my mother's shop to discuss the future like a seer. We had read with the frail, unsteady light of a lantern on days heavy with the unbridled passion for books and the unmistakable love for success. Because we learnt early from our parents that only the shoes of the brilliant and successful children will sound so well that it will tingle the ears of the world. We learnt that failure should be extremely disliked, as it offers no respite from the hounding shame that one attracts. We also learnt to bow our heads for the elderly people, for the old men and women stretching their legs in the evening, their dim eyes peeping through their eye sockets, their voices rendered inaudible by time.

On the afternoon of my friend's demise, I logged in to Facebook to discover a myriad of his pictures congregating people's timelines. In those pictures, his face was distinct, sharp; his mien betraying the darkness saturating the day, binding us in that state of sadness with the thread of mourning. Most of the posters were familiar faces: some, secondary school mates that witnessed the educational growth and dreams of my friend; secondary school mates that shared secrets and laughter with him; and secondary school mates that watched him singlehandedly revolt against certain authorities on days of political activism in our hometown. Other people that honored his demise by posting his pictures were people whose names, I induced, were also his friends. But who wouldn't want to post the pictures of the dead, either as a proof of mourning or as a receipt of paying the due of grief? In the process of grieving the dead, this singular, but effective act is evident in the proliferation of the dead's pictures on social media platforms.

Over the years, this has been an unending ritual, a routine of sorts. In the case of my friend, there was nothing contradictory from what I had discovered online. Daily, the melancholic atmosphere of death becomes part of us. Death becomes ubiquitous, and its presence prepares us for the actuality of performing the quotidian rite of occupying our timelines with the deceased's pictures. Before my friend's demise, unfamiliar names of dead loved ones would pop up on my timeline, the faces of the deceased creating various impressions on us. In one of the pictures, with a name I can no longer remember, the dead man decked his head with a traditional cap, and his neck adorned in beads, like a chief of a town. His face was calm, unperturbed, stricken with plans for the future. In that picture, nothing suggested death. The picture might be recent, depending on the time and year, but in that moment distilled by the urgency of mourning, there was a certain grimness that clothed the picture. The poster, who I perceived was a close friend of the deceased, might not know the impacts of this picture on the multitude hurling their consolatory comments under his post. In those comments, the number of 'R.I.P' surpassed the prosaic comments that littered the post. Everybody became a prayer warrior of sorts, with manifold lines of prayers gracing the picture. Some of the commenters reminded us of their meetings with the deceased, days, months, or years before his transition to the great beyond. Some commented about his good and bad deeds, and as expected of a guy who was unapologetically blunt and straightforward with people in his lifetime, his sack of good deeds was also weighed.

After days of mourning my friend, I was accustomed to checking online to see new, heart wrenching mini-essays posted by people about him, to see how people showered his timeline with posthumous praises. It seemed the tributes would never end, maybe because he died in his prime. Maybe because his array of dreams was unfulfilled, terminated abruptly by the hand of death. Maybe because, in a different perspective, he was quite popular. He was always contributing immensely to the continuous project of establishing a better world, a world where life will be bereft of the everyday chaos that mitigates our progress. However, most of those superfluous comments were not heard during his lifetime. If at all they were pronounced to him by those who loved him, they were not as flowery as they were, until his cold body, garlanded in a white linen, had been lowered like a drawer, into the earth of a general cemetery.

On the morning of his burial, Barracks was a dark alley. The birds, quiet in their nests, partook in the untimely burial processions that governed the day. His mother, rife with grief, uttered incoherent words into the air, as a group of mourners circled her and tried to console her.

His clothes were discarded, as no one would love to remind themselves of the day, or the teary remembrance of the deceased. For days, his family's house hosted mourners from different places in and outside our town. But yet, his timeline never ceased the deluge of messages from those who learnt of his demise.

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Once, I sent a message to a friend that died hours before my knowledge of his demise. In that brief message, I started with "hi". I later furthered my message by enquiring about his health and family. After clicking 'send', it dawned on me that that message would forever remain unopened, unread, and one out of similar messages that would occupy his inbox in coming years. If the dead read our messages, they will encounter difficulty in sieving them, as these messages multiply daily. But the dead, laid in their vaults, covered in dust, are deaf to our wailing and screams, blind to our bodies rolling on the cold floors of our rooms. Or maybe in this ritual of grieving, we are all assigned to play indelible roles in paying obeisance to the departed, to condoling with their families as they continue sharing the grief, like dates during the holy month of Ramadan.

Before my friend's demise, he also participated in the digital culture of posting people's pictures on

Facebook. He celebrated people's birthdays, and on days of their deaths, he acknowledged their lived lives by sharing their pictures. Like him, there are others who troop like soldiers to digital platforms to execute the last task of paying homage to the dead. They will post people's pictures and, sometimes, the burial grounds of the dead are captured to serve as testimonies to those who are unavoidably absent at the funerals. Many times, I have stumbled on these pictures on digital platforms. The pallbearers, heavily suited, will be captured with the coffin bearing the dead swinging in their arms. Sometimes, the picture of the open mouth of the grave will be posted online for people to see. Recently, the former governor of my state died. His wrapped remains were posted online. In that instance, I was reminded of my own body, swaddled, scented, lowered carefully into the earth. In Islam, the place of Janazah is venerated. When someone dies, his body is interred immediately. There is this quickness that this demands, and there is no luxury of time to turn the dead into a spectacle of grief. Instead of embalming the dead for months, the dead are immediately returned to dust, to somewhere distant and distinct from the rowdiness of the crowd that claim the day with their mishmash of cries and lamentations. To aid the outpouring of grief on digital space, there are emoticons on digital platforms that symbolize and express the melancholic status and messages intended by the bereaved. When someone dies, people react by clicking the emoticon. Apart from the messages and comments, the deployment of sad emoticons is suggestive of one's mood.

In one of my past posts on Facebook, I recall the enactment of sorrow through the lens of post-burial happenings. The act of memorializing the death is a herculean task. However, the families of the dead have the privilege to choose the ways of remembering their dead. I have come across digital pages dedicated to the dead; GoFundMe accounts created to ease the financial burdens of the burial services for the dead. Sometimes, the dead owe debts, and these debts need to be paid. There are those who, before death, take loans from banks; those who, in the course of wrestling with death, lose tracks of their past financial inadequacies.

It is uncommon to be unprepared for death. For the post-death happenings that will trail one's absence. In the digital age, conflicts between family members also find home on the internet. In mourning the dead online, their private, intimate lives become exposed to both the trivial and important, the gossip and admiration, the danger of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. There are a lot of fabrications gaining recognition on the internet. There is an influx in the number of stories written about the dead. This, and many more, constitutes parts of what reigns on the internet after burials.

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Years before and after my friend's death, I have lost more people to the ravaging invasion of death. In 2012, my maternal grandfather died after days of sickness. In 2015, my paternal grandmother died after years of battling with stroke. In 2016, Abideen died in a ghastly motor accident along the Oyo-Ibadan expressway. In all of these, the intensity of grief shaped my understanding of the ephemerality of life and the unpredictability of life's happenings. The sequences of these tragic happenings tossed me into absolute detachment from the little joy of the world. I became immersed in the grimness that permeated my life. I was keenly aware of how fast we lose people to indescribable ailments. Each time that this thought inhabits my mind, I resort to reading poems that comfort me with tender language, poems full of compassion and enduring grace in the time of anguish. In Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," the poet persona creates a hierarchical representation of losses. She explores her losses in a way that draws us to the vanity of life, to the mundane treasures we accumulate in our daily struggle to survive in a world vulnerable to everyday chaos. These losses, defined by their importance and magnitude, offer us the shattering realities of life These realities remain inerasable. As we grow older, these events humble us, and also make us undermine the formidability of love and collective strength during turbulent times.

Since the pandemic started, the number of obituaries on social media platforms has skyrocketed. In countries hit by the pandemic, coffins become ordinary boxes, marched on the streets, like items for an exhibition. News about deaths of elderly people top news feeds of our timelines. The departed become portraits shared to validate the authenticity of the virus, and to debunk the series of false news and propaganda presented in the media to sway people from exercising required precautions that will effectively combat the virus. In one of the articles, a man regretted not saying goodbye to his father before leaving the hospital. He said he didn't know his father would die, and that he would have loved to stay with him.

The news is endless. The tsunami of grief spares no one. Every one of us is entitled to display sadness when death hits home. Or when we lose our houses. Our belongings. Our loved ones. Like Elizabeth Bishop. Since the internet serves as a veritable medium to documenting our grief-laden messages, we are drawn to sympathize and empathize with the families of the deceased. We are subjected to commemorate them, and immortalize them virtually. Because somewhere today, there are people burying their loved ones, people sharing their dead's photographs on social media platforms. Today, there are unclosed Facebook timelines and pages that belong to the dead. Today, there are people posting posthumous birthday messages on these inactive timelines. These messages, evocatively and nostalgically written, define the brevity of life, and how the internet suffices and substitutes as an epitaph, a monument for the dead. On my phone, my friend's picture stares back at me with the familiar demeanor that was his signature during his lifetime. Instead of throwing myself into an elegiac mode, I find myself writing about him. For all he did during his lifetime, and for the souls of countless dead left unburied, un-mourned on the internet; those whose bodies are lost in the abyss of water, and those who die in plane crashes, those whose names never made it to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other digital platforms.

This one is for them.

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