

## Episode 31

### Naso

When I was in high school, I was part of a literature club. The name of the club was *Quintessence*. Not only was I part of the club but I was on the board. I think I was secretary or layout editor or something like that. We would meet once a week and basically sit in a circle and read poetry, write poetry, talk about ideas, and so forth. When someone said something worthy of note, we wouldn't clap with our hands, but rather, with our index fingers.

As you might have guessed, *Quintessence* wasn't too popular, at least compared to other afterschool activities. Usually we'd get about ten or twelve students to show up.

At the beginning of my senior year, we had our first meeting of the year in which I was on the board. Another student was the president, so he got to pick the theme for the first meeting. The theme he chose was America. At the meeting, we all sat in a circle and talked about America. We read some poems about America; everyone went around and had to say what they most loved and most hated about America. I remember the president of the club said what he hated most about America was "the two-party system." At the time, I had no idea what that meant, but it sure as hell sounded cool. Our first meeting was a big success. Students laughed, became animated, smiled, thought deeply. The energy was good, the vibe was good. America. At that time, it didn't have quite the same stigma it has today.

Well, the second week rolled around, and we had our little *Quintessence* board meeting to prepare for the second meeting. The other board members, which was only two other students, turned to me. Steve: why don't you decide the topic for week two? Me? I thought. Me? Really? Okay, sure, I said. I thought about it for a few moments. I have a good topic for the meeting, I said. Yeah, what is it? Death, I said. Death? Yeah. Death. Let's do what we did last week with America, only this time with Death. So, we agreed. Death would be the theme.

We met in our circle as usual. And I began with the question: what do you think happens when you die? I thought it would generate a stimulating discussion on God, religion, the afterlife, and so forth. It didn't. These happy, innocent, starry-eyed youngsters all clammed up. The room became very uncomfortable. It was like being at a party and suddenly everyone realizes the beer they're drinking has no alcohol in it. Well, the show must go on. I slogged through the rest of the meeting, reading poems about death, forcing the other students to write poetry about death. Then, by the grace of the clock, the hour ended. The meeting dissolved, the students hurried out of the room. Most of them never came back.

I walked down the hallway afterwards with a good friend of mine who had sat through the meeting.

"That meeting was awful," he told me. "Totally uninspired."

"Thanks," I thought to myself. As if I needed someone to remind me.

I learned a valuable lesson on that day. People don't like to talk about death. Particularly people who are young and who can pretend like death is something which will never happen to them.

But this aversion to death is not limited to conversation. In general, we have an instinctual, natural repulsion toward death. We love to look at birds flying through the air, building nests, singing from treetops. It's a beautiful sight. But as soon as we see one dead on the ground, misshaped, the life sucked out from it, we recoil in disgust. It's not like the bird looks "that" much different when it's dead on the ground than when it's cooing from your window sill.

The major difference is, that, now, the pigeon is dead. And as soon as our brains register “dead,” our instinct is to turn away and flee.

Okay, so nobody likes looking at a corpse. That’s fairly obvious. But actually, our minds are so programmed to eschew death that we are also repelled by things which even are a little bit dead, or on their way to being dead. When a person is super skinny and you can see their entire skeleton through their skin. Sure, they may still be *alive*, but they seem to have one foot in the grave. That’s enough for us to recoil, to turn away in disgust.

We do this instinctually with plants as well. When a house plant, say, is bright green, its flowers and leaves erect and stretching up to the ceiling, we are quite pleased and satisfied with this plant, with its beauty. But when the flowers wilt, when the leaves turn brown, and the plant in general sags, sure, it is still technically “alive.” But we no longer want to look at it and get near it. And then when it’s really dead and turns completely brown, nothing can stand in our way from aggressively pouncing on it and throwing it into the nearest trashcan.

As a species, we are so naturally drawn toward life, and repelled by death. So much so, that even things *related* to death, *tangential* to death, *associated* with death, turn us off. As I mentioned, in my afterschool literature club, the mere mention of the word “death” caused the students to climb back into their snail shells. It’s not like I began the meeting by throwing a decapitated torso into the middle of our *kumbha-yah* circle. All I said was “death”—and that was enough.

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche made one thing very clear. Life equals good. Death equals bad. For Nietzsche, anything which was vivacious, alive, budding, vibrant was good. Anything which was decaying, tired, sickly, weary was bad. That was Nietzsche’s moral philosophy in a nutshell.

But Nietzsche’s genius lay in showing how it can often be rather tricky to figure out what stands for life and what stands for death. Nietzsche showed how certain behaviors or practices or mindsets are filled with life, whereas others are *deathly*, a disguise for death. The following activities, for example, Nietzsche would say are life-affirming activities: dancing, singing, laughter, Italian music, athletics, adventure, jousting. The drives toward death, however, are more surprising and unexpected. Nietzsche saw “death” in the following: pity, belief that one had sinned, equality, science, academic research, Wagner’s music, excessive thinking. Unfortunately, we don’t have time in this episode to go into all of the myriad activities which Nietzsche saw as mere disguises for a drive toward death. The point is that Nietzsche was very astute in seeing that negative, decaying impulses often lie behind seemingly innocuous or even enlightened activities. Nietzsche was the expert in calling all of us out on our BS. He knew how to remove our masks and show why we *really* went to that protest, or why we *really* are in love with science.

For today, let’s focus on pity and equality as examples. We will leave science and Wagner and academic research perhaps for another day. How can pity and equality *possibly* relate to death, you might ask? Clearly Nietzsche had never been to a Bob Marley concert, you may think. Didn’t John Lennon once write that “All you need is love”? What could be more life-affirming than to stand arm-in-arm with your fellow man and try to make the world a better and more equal place?

For Nietzsche, the problem was not pity and equality *per se*. Rather, it was the underlying motivations which went into them. When you pity another person, feelings of guilt and shame within you can arise. Why is my life *better* than this person’s? I don’t deserve the life that I have. These are thoughts of self-laceration, thoughts which try to reduce your own joy of life. These, for Nietzsche, are nothing less than thoughts directed toward death. And remember, death equals

bad in Nietzsche's world. The same is true for equality. When we wish for others to be equal to us, this wish can be self-lacerating. *I don't deserve* to be better off than others. *Everyone should be the same* because no one *deserves* to enjoy life more than their neighbor. These, for Nietzsche, are thoughts which at first glance might seem to be life-affirming, but are actually life-denying. Death thoughts.

Nietzsche is very careful to distinguish *healthy* pity with *unhealthy* pity. In his 1885 book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes "verily, I like them not, the merciful ones, whose bliss is in their pity ... if I must be pitiful, I dislike to be called so." Notice that Nietzsche writes that these people find "bliss" in their pity, that is, they get a kind of twisted joy out of showing pity. Nietzsche believes that pity is valuable but only when it comes from a position of strength and when one finds no joy in the pity. Thus Nietzsche writes, "If you have a suffering friend, then be a resting place for his suffering. But be like a hard bed, however, a camp bed. Then you will serve him best." For Nietzsche, pity should be given quickly, privately, and sternly. It should not be boasted about. It should be embarrassing for both parties. Its purpose is only to provide momentary *help* as a "hard camp bed" and no more. Love, moreover, should never come from a place of equality or pity. Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "all great love surpasses forgiveness and pity... All great love is above pity." This is likely the kind of love John Lennon meant when he wrote his 1967 song. If you've ever *really* loved someone, you know it has nothing to do with pity or equality. If anything, pity and equality are antithetical to real feelings of love.

But actually, this point about pity's being a disguise for death is only just a prelude to the theme of this episode. This is a concept I have already discussed on *The Schrift*. What I am more interested in today is who *spreads* these ideas of pity and equality to the population and why people so readily latch onto them. Or put another way, who are the preachers of death in our society, and why do they always have a following? Why do we gravitate toward preachers of death if, like the high school students in my literature club, we are so naturally repelled by death? Well, Nietzsche has quite a bit to say on this point as well.

Nietzsche has two terms for these people. In his 1885 work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he refers to them as "preachers of death." Three years later, in his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he calls them ascetic priests. Here, once again, Nietzsche is equating asceticism with death. Here is how Nietzsche describes preachers of death or preachers of asceticism: "hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty." The first group of people he has in mind in his attack are quite obviously the priestly class of Christianity. He is thinking of priests and ministers. Not all priests, but those who are constantly telling you that you are a sinner, that you should be ashamed of your human impulses, that you should feel disgusting and guilty. Who then follow this rant up with: if you do what we tell you to do, you will be happy in the afterlife. These priests are Nietzsche's most immediate target in his attack. But, as I just said, Nietzsche saw preachers of death coming at us from all sides—they could just as easily be scientists, activists, Buddhists, communists, Wagnerians, and so forth. It all depends on their attitude and approach.

So, where do these ascetic priests come from and how do they get their power? Nietzsche's theory is that they sense when a person or a society is suffering. And what the ascetic priests do is give people an explanation for their suffering. What is that explanation? The ascetic priest says that *you* are the reason why you are suffering. Because you are somehow *guilty*; there is something *wrong* with you. But if you listen to me, I can fix you. Nietzsche

describes these preachers as doctors who *poison* a wound in order to treat it. And the way it is treated is through further *punishment*. The logic goes: if I am suffering, then I must have done something wrong, and the only way to “atone” for my suffering is to be punished. Suddenly, “punishment” and despising life became the “cure” for suffering. You can imagine how this creates a downward spiral. Nietzsche writes, “Man is suffering in some way ... like an animal imprisoned in a cage, unclear as to why? What for? And yearning for reasons ... and lo and behold! From this magician, the ascetic priest, he receives the *first* tip as to the ‘cause’ of his suffering: he should look for it within *himself*, in *guilt*, in a piece of the past, he should understand his suffering itself as a *condition of punishment* ... the sick man has been made into ‘the sinner’ ... And now we shall not be rid of the sight of this new sick person, ‘the sinner’, for a few thousand years.”

This clever trick of the ascetic priest, then, sets up a new dynamic, a new value system in the human mind. Suddenly, all that is strong, healthy, vivacious, fun, cheerful is looked down upon. And all that increases suffering, all that is toxic, poisonous, punishing, exhausting, deadening, is seen as “good.” Life becomes something to be avoided, and death becomes something to be embraced. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has a chapter on preachers of death. Nietzsche writes: “These are preachers of death. The Earth is full of people who preach that we must desist from living.” Nietzsche writes: “They teach: You shall injure yourself. You shall steal away from yourself ... Life is only suffering they say, so see to it that this life ceases, so that suffering will also cease.” And finally, Nietzsche writes: “The preachers of death say that pity is necessary. Take what I have! Take what I am! Then I will be even less bound to life.”

I admit that some of this is a little outdated. Our society has kind of moved beyond the days of worrying about going to hell and letting preachers tell us how guilty and sinful we are. But the same dynamic occurs today in other forms. Maybe preachers do not tell us we are going to hell, but they tell us in some other way that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. And the only way to fix ourselves is to listen to them. Moreover, they say that if we find ourselves suffering under this new way of life, that should be seen as normal. We need to suffer in order to “cleanse ourselves” from our old way of life. They trick us into thinking that feeling poisoned, intoxicated, deathly is somehow what we deserve. And that if we find ourselves feeling good and content with who we are, then that is bad, because we deserve much worse—oops, I mean, much better.

But it is a two-way street. We cannot put all of the blame on the preachers of death. Rather, what we have is a kind of seduction process between predator and prey. To win over converts, the preacher must be seductive, enticing, manipulative. Meanwhile, the victim must be vulnerable, feeling as though something is “missing” from his or her life, and longing for change. Death must somehow make itself attractive to the living. Moreover, the living must have an unhealthy curiosity in death, and must in some way be dissatisfied with living itself.

Perhaps you can sense where I am going with this. Perhaps what you can sense what I am ready to talk about.

Yes, you are correct. Vampires.

Vampires. Can we find a better symbolic image for this dynamic than in the story of vampires? Vampires are clothed in death. They sleep in a coffin. They cannot abide sunlight. They are pale. They only come out at night.

But they also need victims. They suck the blood of the living. And in the process, these victims then themselves become vampires.

But what's fascinating about vampires is how counterintuitive their tactics are. These representatives of death are not monsters who ambush you and then beat you up. Rather, they are master seducers. They are elegant, enticing, mysterious, sexy. When they "slay" you, it is not violently, but rather through a kiss on the neck.

Moreover, the victims always seem to be more than a little bit complicit in this seduction. Somehow, the victims do not see that the vampire is clothed in *death*. They don't see the pale skin; they don't wonder why they only meet the vampire at night; they don't feel their blood being sucked out of them right under their noses.

Put another way, they allow death to sneak into their lives. And then the downward spiral begins. They have been bitten. Now they, too, are creatures of the night, perhaps never to return to the daylight.

We have talked about German literature, philosophy, and German music thus far on *The Schrift*. One thing we haven't discussed, however, is German film. And actually, Berlin was the capital of film in the 1920s, known as the era of Weimar Cinema. This era produced some of the most legendary and landmark films ever created, including *Dr. Caligari*, *Metropolis*, *M.*, and *The Blue Angel*.

In 1922, one of the godfathers of film, F.W. Murnau, put out the film *Nosferatu*. This is considered by many to be the first "horror film" ever created. And it is about Dracula. The plot of the film is rather simple. Dracula comes from Transylvania into Germany to find victims. He sneaks into the country and begins to hunt for victims. He tries to find healthy necks into which he can plunge his fangs.

Why, we might ask, did Murnau make this film? Why create a film about Dracula and vampires in 1922 in Germany? In 1922, Germany was still reeling from having lost World War I, or the Great War, as it was then known. We don't have time to get into the details of this loss, but let's just say that it was cataclysmic, devastating, apocalyptic for the German soul and psyche. It made Germans extremely vulnerable psychologically. Of the 13 million soldiers that Germany sent into war, 55 percent either died, were wounded, or were taken prisoner. Walking down the street in 1922 Berlin, you would have been constantly reminded of the trauma of the war: seeing men missing limbs, in wheelchairs, impoverished, insane. It is generally believed that World War I and World War II were really just one long war. The desperation which World War I brought in its wake is what allowed fascism and totalitarianism to eventually rise in Germany.

So why did Murnau make a film about Dracula and vampires in 1922? Perhaps as a warning to his fellow Germans and fellow Berliners. He saw that his people were weak, enfeebled, and searching for answers and explanations for their suffering. It is in this state when the vampires—the preachers of death, the ascetic priests—come out to play. But while they are master manipulators, the victims, too, are complicit in this dance of death. Murnau wanted to warn his countrymen: be strong, embrace life, remember your values, remember who you are, because vampires are afoot!

Now, here you might be wondering: Steve, why did *you* talk to those poor innocent students about death? Might you be a preacher of death, too?

I wouldn't go that far. I wasn't really interested in manipulating and seducing my fellow high school students as, say, an ascetic priest or a vampire would. I just thought death would make for an interesting topic of discussion and we would have a successful literature club meeting. But still, the students in the club were right to be wary. They were right to guard against death from crossing into their vivacious lives.

In the parsha for this week, Naso, we get a rather interesting commandment. God tells Moses that if anyone has contact with a corpse—with a dead human being—they must leave the campground where all of the Israelites are hanging out. God says the reason for this is so that they do not *defile* others in the camp.

The first part of this commandment is rather understandable. If you touch a corpse, you've got to go outside the camp for awhile. Still, it is a bit strange. Why would the mere act of touching a corpse make one impure for a certain period of time. The second part of the commandment is even more fascinating. One who has touched a corpse can somehow *defile* others in the camp. Their touching of death could be spread to others.

Now, on one hand you could look at this passage and think, “okay, corpses are gross. That’s why you had to go outside the camp. Because you had just touched something gross and disgusting—namely, a corpse.” But I think we can go a bit deeper than this explanation.

In verses like this from the Torah, we see the advantages of reading a book which is so ancient. The Torah was written long before notions of political correctness, politeness, Puritanism, and all of the hundreds of modern movements which have gotten their paws on the human psyche. The word for “polite” or “equal” or “even political” simply cannot be found in the Torah. When the Torah was written, that which was good, was simply good, and that which was bad, was obviously bad. It was very clear to everyone: death is bad. Don’t touch a corpse. Moreover, death is so bad that *anyone* who even has the slightest connection with death needs to go outside the camp for awhile. We want life, we want to live. Don’t get anywhere near the dead.

The problem with the human animal is that we can somehow so easily be tricked into thinking that that which is *obviously good*—life—is somehow *bad*. We can trick ourselves to the point where everything we do, think, say is the exact *opposite* of what our bodies and souls intuitively *know* is good. Moreover, we, as humans, have a dangerous tendency to see the preachers of these upside-down ideas not as vampires and charlatans but as helpers and as gurus.

When I tried to make death the topic of discussion in our literature club, the students were too young to fall for it. They were too much in touch with their healthy, life-affirming emotions. They thought, perhaps unconsciously, why would I sit in a room and talk about death when I could be laughing, outside in the sunlight, enjoying life? Yet, if we took those same students ten or twenty years in the future, after they had been through college and watched enough news, the situation may have been quite different. Sure, let’s talk about death, they might have reasoned. Let’s punish ourselves. Let’s remove joy from our lives.

Yet, you may have sensed a slight problem. *How* can we know when we our poisoning ourselves or invigorating ourselves? How can we distinguish life from death? How can we distinguish the preacher of life from the preacher of death? How can we know who wants to heal our wounds and who wants to just pour acid in our old wounds? And the answer cannot be: I’ll just figure it out and know. Because you, as a human, cannot be trusted to make this distinction so perceptively.

In order to recognize the ascetic priest, we need to become more mindful of our emotions. The more we are connected with our emotions, the more we will feel and sense when this preacher is not healing us but rather poisoning us.

The other evening, I cooked myself cod for dinner. Something was not right about this cod, because I had a terrible stomach ache all through the night and most of the next day. I learned a valuable lesson: don’t buy cod anymore from that supermarket. Maybe give up cod altogether. My body alerted me to the toxic food, and I learned to throw the rest out. Now, I like cod. It is healthy, it is tasty, it is easy to cook. Normally, it *helps* me and makes my life better.

Therefore, I will almost certainly give cod another chance. Maybe even two more chances. But imagine if every time I ate cod, I got sick. Yet, instead of giving up cod, I just kept buying more of it, making myself sicker and sicker. This would be unthinkable behavior.

Yet, while we know not to do this with food, we do this with other people all the time. We bring someone into our lives, and after our interactions with them, we feel bad, we feel sick. And not just for a night, but for a week or longer. If you ate any food which made you feel sick for a week, would you ever eat it again? And yet, we keep going back for more punishment, more suffering, more toxic air.

Now, sometimes you might not feel “sick” *per se*, but you might experience other unhealthy emotions when you let a particular person guide you. Perhaps you feel intoxicated, woozy, drugged. Here, too, you should be wary. If I eat a banana and then feel intoxicated after, while perhaps I feel “good,” there’s probably something wrong with that banana.

And also, as they say in medicine, it is all about the dosage. That which is medicine in small doses can become poison in high doses. Maybe you can handle “one glass of wine” from this person, but if you drink four you’ll feel sick. Maybe you should only eat birthday cake on your birthday. Maybe one teaspoon of this person will add the ideal zest to your dish, but any more than that and the whole meal will be ruined.

I have probably reached the limits of this food analogy. It is, admittedly, an imperfect analogy. But still, I think it serves as a decent rule of thumb. Ask yourself: if a certain *food* made me regularly feel this way, would I continue to trust it, continue to eat it?

I don’t mean to sound too much like a *Star Wars* movie, but the truth is that, in the end, life will always win over death. Ascetic priests, preachers of deaths, charlatans, narcissists, vampires can only deceive us for so long. Our entire being is geared toward living, flourishing, procreating. Eventually, our instinctual emotions will step in and remind us what for the Torah was so obvious: life is good, death is bad. But we may want to speed up this process. To do this, we should practice being more mindful of our feelings. Letting our feelings and emotions speak to us. Locating the emotion in our body and becoming aware of it. Listening less to our brains, and more to our gut. Because our thoughts will never be able to distinguish life from death as well as our feelings can. Our feelings are in constant communication with us, yet society has taught us to tune out those messages. Mindfulness of feelings meditation allows us to recultivate our natural inclination toward life, toward feeling good, toward breathing light and refreshing air. It is like clothing your soul ... in garlic.