

On the Death of James Whale Revisited

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I'm taken by how often I have the impulse to do something and I do it and then it hits me what the impulse was about—"Oh, that's why I felt the urge to do that." It happened this past week. Out of nowhere it seemed, I felt a strong desire to see the 1998 film "Gods and Monsters." It's about the last days, back in 1957, of retired film director James Whale, best known for directing the classic films "Frankenstein" and "Bride of Frankenstein" in the 1930s. It ends with Whale's suicide by drowning himself in his backyard swimming pool. This was in Southern California, where Whale had moved decades before from his native England.

I went with the impulse to see "Gods and Monsters," which I enjoyed even more the second time, and which prompted some serious reading and reflection over the past several days. I'm very glad I responded to my urge to see the film. A significant outcome, I've gotten clearer about a question that has become salient in my late years (I'm bearing in on eighty): When is life not worth living? I see now that without consciously realizing it, that is the question I wanted to confront, and that the Whale suicide is a good vehicle for taking it on.

In "Gods and Monsters"—a fine film, I highly recommend it--Whale is portrayed by Ian McClelland in an Academy Award-nominated performance. Director Bill Condon won an Academy Award for his screenplay adapted from a novel by Christopher Bram (*Father of Frankenstein*, Plume, 1976), which speculates on Whale's real-life circumstances and thought processes in those last days and centers on his relationship with his gardener, Clayton Boone, a totally fictional character, no such person existed in Whale's real life. Whale, 67 and gay (he was gay in real life), is attracted to Boone, 25 and heterosexual.

I'd seen "God and Monsters" before. In fact, I wrote a thought for this site in March of 2008, "On the Death of James Whale," immediately after I saw it the first time.

Watching the film again led me to read the Bram novel for the first time and I found it first rate.

My 2008 site thought was based on a perusal, nothing more than that, of a 1998 biography of Whale by James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (Faber and Faber, 1998). Incidentally, the subtitle of the Curtis book is the most memorable line from "Bride of Frankenstein," considered by most critics to be Whale's finest film. This week, I read the Curtis biography thoroughly, and found it engaging, informative, and thought-provoking. I was particularly intrigued by discrepancies between the film, the Bram novel on which it is based, and what Curtis reports about Whale's life. Noting these discrepancies is this not to criticize either Bram or the filmmakers. Bram wrote a novel, not a biography. Bill Condon made a film, not a documentary, and his screenplay was *adapted* from the Bram novel—he didn't try simply to film the novel. Thus, these are three legitimately differing, and in many ways contradictory, takes on James Whale—the film, the novel, and the biography. I'll tap all three of these sources as they serve my purpose in this writing.

The film, per the Bram novel, attributes Whale's suicide primarily to the emptiness of his life in forced retirement--the movie studios had dropped him, he hadn't directed a film in over fifteen years--and his frustration with his diminished capability compared to his younger years. He had suffered two debilitating strokes and was taking medication that muddled his mind and disrupted his sleep pattern. Whale in the film: "There's no work, of course, or love, or drawing. Look—a page with scribbles on it. [He reveals to Clayton Boone the gardener, who has been posing for him, that in fact he has been able to produce nothing of worth.] There's nothing for me now. There's nothing. Nothing." And later: "I can't contribute."

The film depicts Whale as preoccupied with his lower-class upbringing and lack of formal schooling in his native England,

which have negative connotations for him. He had done his best to keep his meager beginnings hidden since emigrating to the United States in his early thirties. He is also saddened and filled with regret by persistently recurring memories and fantasies with reference to a lost love, a fellow soldier who died in the trenches during World War I. “I’ve spent much of my life outrunning the past, and now it floods all over me.”

The 2008 website thought ended with Whale’s suicide note, which was contained in the Curtis biography. I noted that at that time, in March of 2008, I was the exact same age to the day as Whale was when he committed suicide on May 29th, 1957—I was 67 years, ten months, and six days old. I ended the thought with a one-word paragraph: “No.” It was meant to affirm my commitment to go on, to keep living. I wasn’t going to do what Whale did. I remember feeling somewhat depressed at the time, and suicidal thoughts had flickered through my mind, though not serious ones. Death was “way over there” for me at that time. So the “No” had some, though not great, meaning for me when I wrote it. It was more of an intellectualized expression than a truly felt one.

It’s now May 29th, 2019, the 52nd anniversary of Whale’s death. I’m 79 years old, a bit over eleven years older than I was when I wrote the 2008 death-of-Whale thought. What is the significance of Whale’s suicide for me now, what personal meaning does it have? What is my answer now to the question, when is life not worth living? I’ll say up front that this thought will not end with “No” as the last one did.

What accounts for that?

For one thing, I’ve gone from old to elderly since the first Whale thought. I’m finding that death is a much more pressing reality at 79 than it was at going-on-68. I’m staring death more squarely in the face now; it’s much less of an abstraction. It’s not as easy to dismiss choosing to die with a simple, more of less off-handed, “No” now. This thought will be ten pages, not two pages as the 2008 thought was.

I'm retired now. When I wrote the first Whale thought I was a university professor with my name on an office door and classes to teach and committees to serve on and meetings to attend. I had an identity in the outer world, someplace I had to be each day. Now, all of that is gone, and forever. I can better relate to what Whale may have experienced in his final days with his life's work permanently absent from his life.

After his retirement, Whale had painting and drawing as expressive/creative outlets, but with advanced age and, particularly, with his two strokes those outlets were gone. "Look—a page with scribbles on it."

Since my retirement, I've found challenge and satisfaction composing these website writings, some of which have appeared in print and internet magazines. I'm still able to get them out and, within reason, maintain their level of quality, but ideas for topics that used to pop up constantly in my mind are decreasing in number, and the writing is taking longer and longer to produce (this piece has been a struggle).

Unlike Whale, however, at least as he is portrayed in the film, I won't be greatly disappointed when the well runs completely dry with my writing, which I expect to be soon, in the next year or two. In the film, Whale laments, "There's nothing for me now." I've decided that as long as we possess some measure of physical health and mental clarity, there are always good things to do if we look around for them. In my case, among these good things would be learning to cook well, reading classic works of literature I haven't read, viewing great films I haven't seen which are now available on streaming, and learning about historical events and personages I know little about. For me, writing isn't all there is to do in life by a long shot.

Unlike the Whale of the film, there is love in my life. (Curtis says at the end there was a young Frenchman Whale met in Europe and brought to the United States to live with him, though that seems to have been for Whale more of a physical than loving connection.) I have a fourteen-year-old daughter I love dearly and who loves me.

She gives my existence meaning and purpose. In contrast to the Whale of the film, when I recall the romantic loves of my youth--there were several--which I do often now in old age, instead of mourning their passing, I feel grateful that they once existed. Though none of those relationships ended with the other person's death, as it did with Whale's soldier love; memories of a loss of that sort could indeed result in mourning rather than gratitude. I need to be careful with my comparisons.

The film, and the Bram novel, had Whale feeling inferior because of his working-class roots and concealing his background from his world as an adult. I too am from a low-income, working-class background, but I've always seen my family and the people I grew up among as admirable, proud and strong and vital and morally upright and hard-working, and absolutely no one's inferior. I've never viewed myself as outrunning my past, the phrase the Whale character used in the film; rather, I have publically acknowledged and celebrated my past and gained strength from it.

In contrast to the film and Bram novel, the Curtis biography describes Whale as "proud of his heritage." I'm proud of mine. He quotes Whale as saying, "I can't help a feeling of comfort in my old age that I was born right." I feel I was born right too. Curtis describes Whale as "very sharp and direct" and notes that he "had no self-pity." If I may say so, that describes me as well, and I consider those qualities to be a product of my lower social class background. I wasn't trying to escape where I came from when I attained middle class status--I wanted to get to a place where I could make money and do the teaching and writing I wanted to do. I speculate Whale in real life was more like me than he was like the character in Bram's book or in the film, trying to get away from his past. I suspect that working class people feel a lot better about themselves and where they came from than the middle- and upper-class types who write fiction and make films about them presume they do.

All three sources refer to Whale's diminished mental capacity, likely from his strokes. From the Bram novel: "I'm losing my mind.

Every day, another piece goes. If it's not the headaches, it's a daze, a fog. Either sleepless nights or sleepless days. Time has come undone. I cannot distinguish past from present from fantasy. Soon there will be nothing but fog. Fog and helplessness."

Now, in 2019, I can better connect with that sentiment, because in January of 2015 I experienced an episode I describe in a website thought entitled coincidentally enough, "On Losing My Mind." <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/mind.pdf>

Suddenly, early on a Friday evening and alone, my head felt like it was full of cotton and I felt a pressure in my head and I couldn't remember my secretary's name at the university, where I was still working, or my dean's name, or my realtor's (I was selling my condominium). From the 2015 thought:

I know what I'll do, I decided. I've written emails to all these people, and their names are in my send box. I'll look them up. I did that, but somehow even though I was reading them I couldn't keep them straight, they'd kind of fade in and out; they'd be there, and then I wasn't sure if I had the right person, and the name would go away, and then it would come back but get mixed up with other names, and then it would be gone again. And when I closed the laptop I couldn't remember any of them. And then a name would pop into my head and I wasn't sure whether it was the audiologist I was giving a Meryl Streep book to or another audiologist I work with, the one who has an office at the university. No, that's not the university audiologist's name, or I don't think it is. I have two audiologists; I need two names. And now the name that just popped into my head is gone. Or was that my secretary's name? What's the name of the audiologist at the university? I don't know. Cotton. Pressure. Or is this feeling the same as always? I looked up my secretary's name again in the email list and now I can't remember it again, and I not sure I had it in the first place.

After a couple of hours in this state, I went to bed (I should have phoned 911). When I woke up the next morning, I was fine.

Was it a minor stroke? I'll never know. But unlike in 2008, I know what it is like to be in a fog.

I'm taken by how different my reaction to this circumstance was from Whale's as Bram depicts him. I didn't decry it as "fog and helplessness." In the 2015 thought, written ten days after the episode I wrote that it left me feeling that

It's OK to be however I am. Whatever is is, and it's OK. It was fine how I was seven years ago at sixty-seven and it's fine how I am now at seventy-four. And, if I'm still alive, it will be fine six years from now when I'm eighty. I don't have to be other than I am.

It's all been an incredible gift—my body, my mind, my ability to experience, to create, my capacity to love, and it's all temporary, and it is all going to pass, I'm going to pass. But that's OK.

I'm gratified with what I've done with my life. I've never quit trying to be responsible to the gift of life I was given. I've never stopped trying to make something of myself and to be of worth to the world. Within reason, I've done my best with the opportunity I've been granted to live. That's all any of us can do, our best within reason; as human beings we aren't perfect.

More than ever I feel it'd be OK to let go, to quit trying to make it happen, to quit running after it, after them, to leave the arena and just sit by the water. Relax your shoulders, R., let them fall. Get out of your boxer's stance. Retire from the ring.

I retired from the university a few months later.

The point here is that the same phenomenon—in this case a mental fog—can have very different meanings to different people. To one person, a torment; to another, a relief and release.

In his suicide note Whale's wrote, "The future is just old age and illness and pain." The prospect of advancing age doesn't have that negative meaning for me. But then again, I have been lucky to have avoided devastating illness. I've had a heart attack and I've lost my hearing, but I haven't been seriously held back by either one.

Now, in 2019, I can better relate to the part of Whale's suicide note where he says, "For the last year I have been in agony day and night." Since I wrote the 2008 thought, I have developed severe spinal stenosis, which results in very bad back pain (I wouldn't call it "agonizing," but it's close) if I stand or walk for more than minute or two. If I get off my feet, in just a few seconds it becomes a mild, dull ache that I've come to barely notice. But if my back hurt 24/7 like it does when I'm standing and surgery and physical therapy didn't work . . . well, I'm not sure what I would do.

Whale added a postscript to his suicide note that I missed the first time around in the Curtis biography which hits home with me now and wouldn't have in 2008:

My heart is in my mouth all the time and I have no peace. I cannot keep still and the future will be worse. I pray they [his relatives and close friends] will be given strength to come through and be happy for my release from this constant fear. I've tried very hard all I know for a year and it gets worse inside, so please take comfort in knowing I will not suffer any more.

I have discovered that in extreme old age, much of the time my heart is in my mouth—a good way to phrase it—that I am anxious, fearful, about what I'm not certain. Impending death, oblivion for eternity? I'm not sure. I thought I would be peaceful in retirement, but so far at least, I've not been. I don't like taking pills, so I'm not going that route, but I am working on meditation and mindfulness (learning to be in the moment, absent the inner chattering and images that take me away from simply being in the here and now), and it's helped some. But what Whale referred in his suicide note, including constant fear, is a problem for me. I wouldn't call it a serious problem at this point, it's more of a gnawing problem, but what if it escalated two-fold, or three- or four- or five-fold?

Very different now compared to 2008, and a very powerful reality for me, is the seriously declined physical and mental state of my older brother, I'll call him Edward. Edward is my only close living relative. He was 84 in 2008, very old but still living on his

own and vital and clear. I was in regular contact with him despite the geographical distance between us—I live in Vermont and he lives in the Midwest—we shared lengthy emails, and I would regularly go to visit him (even then he didn't any longer travel). Now, he's institutionalized, in constant care, assisted living it is called. He's barely recognizable--shriveled, bent over, barely over five feet tall, he used to be 5'9", his skin speckled, his thin arms bloodshot, his hands gnarled, his gaze vacant. He's had seven stents placed in his heart in the last decade. He can no longer drive a car. He fell and broke his back and is in constant pain, which makes sleeping very difficult. I don't believe he can read much at all, and he has told me that he can't follow the shows on television. He is unable to reply to my correspondence—or is it that he has just lost interest, I'm not sure. It really wouldn't make sense to travel all that distance to go see him in his current state, especially going on eighty myself—traveling is coming to seem a formidable challenge for me, and for some reason, scary. It would be very painful for me to spend time with Edward in the condition he's in. This is someone who at one time worked on the guidance systems for the Apollo space program.

I recall a couple of years ago when Edward was still reasonably lucid saying to him on one of my visits, “Hey, you can shoot for a hundred.” He looked up at me, tiny, elf-like, engulfed in his chair, the back of which was over his head, and replied firmly, “It's not worth it.”

This week, I read a *New York Times* feature story from 2012 by Katy Butler called “What Broke My Father's Heart” which sobering recounts the realities of old age for so many—dementia, incontinence, blindness, constant pain—which has stayed with me. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/magazine/20pacemaker-t.html>

So, how will I end my second go at the death of James Whale? Not with “No” as it was in 2008—not in 2019. Rather, in response to Whale's suicide, it's “I'm beginning to understand.” And with regard to myself, it's “Not now.”

