

"Practice Dying" WHGC exercise

In the final pages of Book X of *The Republic*, Socrates recount the Myth of Er, the story of a soldier who, after being killed in battle, returns from the realm of the dead to tell of what happens after death, of how each soul chooses its next life. This myth describes the ultimate pay-off of the *vita contemplativa*, of living a philosophical life. "I believe, dear Glaucon," Socrates says, "that this moment of choice is the time of man's greatest peril. It admonishes each of us-even if we neglect all other studies-that a man should be concerned first of all with searching out and studying that which enables him to discern the god. He must seek out those who will give him the capacity and knowledge to distinguish the good from the bad, so that he might always and everywhere make the best choice conditions allow. These are the requirements for reasoned inference and choice in the matter of the better life and the worse" (308).

Alas, according to Er, "for the most part, the choice of a new life was determined by the habits and experiences of the old" (309). But for Socrates, knowing the better life is as much a matter of being able to identify and resist bad choices as much as anything else. What is good, what is true, what is just, is what is left once we have eliminated, stripped away, overcome the habits of mind-the prejudices, blind spots, desires, and appetites-that infect our minds and cripple reason.

What philosophy comes down to, then-what we're ultimately doing each time we accept or reject an idea, each time we make a decision-is practicing for that moment of "greatest peril." As so, to grasp the way Socrates' argument works, let's practice dying.

Part 1. The prophet's part

Before each soul chooses its lot in its next life, the prophet of Lachesis "flung out the life styles and patterns on the ground before them in far greater numbers than the souls assembled there. The variety was enormous, for they included the lives of all animals as well as human lives. There were tyrants among them...There were men famed for their beauty and bodily strength...There were some defective in these same virtues."

On the front of one card, write a 'life style' from among which we will soon choose. Be as specific as you can. You can choose figures from history, current political figures or celebrities, animals, etc. Choose someone or something that seems attractive (beautiful, power, intelligent...). On the back of the card, write what happens to this person or animal. What is his/her fate? When it comes his/her time to die, what choice does s/ he make?

Ex.

On one side of the card: TOM HANKS

On the other side: "Although he was really a wealthy, privileged celebrity, Tom Hanks wanted everyone to like him and so spent his life trying to act and look like an ordinary man. When he died, he selected a beggar's life, so that he could experience an ordinary life without celebrity. But then he was despised and shunned by all."

Part 2. Choosing your lot

First, we array the first set of card with the name/life style face up.

On the second index card is the name of a character, and a number. As I call your number (selected randomly), you will choose one of the lives, and explain why your character would chose that life over any other. Then we'll see what happens to you...

Characters on second set of cards:

Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Ishtar, Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Polyphemus (the Cyclops), Calypso, Creon, Ismene, Antigone, Haemon, Tiresias, Mencius, Zophar (one of Job's friends), Moses, Aaron, Pharoah, etc.