

Silencing the Dead

Tears sprang to my eyes in the fall of 2014 when I read of the short life and impending death of Lauren Hill. You may remember the story, too, though much in our culture works against the retention of stories like Lauren's for more than a few news cycles. This ill-fated young woman was set to enter college, and, as a standout high school basketball player, had committed to playing for the women's team at her university.

The reason she came to our attention, albeit briefly, was that toward the end of her senior year in high school, she had begun experiencing disconcerting health issues. She was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer before graduation. At age 18.

The NCAA allowed her school to move up their opening game so Lauren could play before her health deteriorated. She wound up playing in several games and [became an inspiration](#) to countless people around the country, not just because she played basketball while terminally ill, but because of the remarkably composed way in which she dealt with her dreadful situation.

"I'm spreading awareness and also teaching people how to live in the moment because the next moment's not promised," [Lauren told a reporter](#). "Anything can happen at any given moment. What matters is right now." She continued, "Especially after this kind of diagnosis, your perspective on life and what you value changes."

But I want to talk about something other than Lauren's basketball playing.

Lauren's story continues to make me weep. It is the story of untimely, inexplicable, and wholly unjust death of a beautiful, talented, good girl who had seemingly done everything right in her young life, who deserved a chance to

study, graduate, marry, have a family, and watch her children grow up. Why did she have to die? How can this be squared with a moral universe?

Furthermore, why it is so difficult for our culture to look at a story like Lauren's for more than a few days, and why do we prefer not to return to it after it has "concluded"?

Our culture once had a broadly shared system of beliefs for making sense of all this. This was of course a religious system, based in a Judeo-Christian moral framework and the related institutions, rituals, and methods for bringing the young into that system of meaning and helping them to understand how to navigate safely through such treacherous depths. We just passed through that religious tradition's holiday season that most explicitly deals with the question of death. It does so in the story of the incarnation, God coming to earth in the form of man in order to take on the accumulated transgressions of humankind and pay the debt for it in the only way it could be paid, through his own horrific sacrifice and death. In transcending death, he gives us the sign that we too can arrive safely at the distant harbor, through those turbulent seas.

At its origin, our culture took this story as its own, and we trained our children in it for a very long time. We were able to see deaths like that of Lauren Hill and integrate them into our own lives, as a method of reflection on the majesty of that transcendence of death. For generations, our dying left this world from their beds, surrounded by their loved ones, mourning, preparing, and reflecting. For generations, we held our dead in reverent memory for as long as we ourselves lived, visiting their graves and thinking about them frequently. Those thoughts made us cry, but they did not terrify us because we had a culture supporting us through such times.

Now, what we have is avoidance. Lauren Hill's story can be reported, but only when it can be made to look like the

materialist defeat of death. “Look, she’s still playing basketball, she doesn’t look all that ill! The medication must be working! Maybe she’ll be fine, and in any event, it’s best not to think about death any longer than absolutely necessary, agreed?”

But when the mortally debilitated Lauren took to her bed in the spring, and when on April 10, 2015, she passed through that veil, we no longer had the courage to look or think of her or remember her face and death’s ruination of her. To do that would expose us to terrors for which our secularized, irreligious culture has no convincing, compelling answers.

I think of Lauren Hill every year around the time of her death because it is the season of Christ’s Passion, and that death fits hers—and all the rest of our deaths too—into a framework of meaning that makes them bearable.

Our dominant culture no longer exhorts us to engage in such reflection. What a loss. We need to renew the cultural courage to follow Lauren and others we have lost all the way to the end, and to faithfully return to their memory as a way to recall our own ends and to answer the terrible question of death.

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