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Conversation With Death Commentary on “Conversation With Death”

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Conversation With Death
Attributed to Lloyd Chandler

Oh, Death
Oh, Death
Won’t you spare me over ’til another year
Well what is this that I can’t see
With icy hands takin’ hold of me
Well I am Death, none can excel
I’ll open the door to Heaven and Hell
Whoa, Death
Whoa, oh, Death
Someone would pray
Could you wait to call me another day
The children prayed, the preacher preached
Time and mercy is out of your reach
I’ll fix your feet ’til you can’t walk
I’ll lock your jaw ’til you can’t talk
I’ll close your eyes so you can’t see
This very hour, come and go with me
I’m Death, I come to take the soul
Leave the body and leave it cold
To draw up the flesh off of the frame
Dirt and worm both have a claim

Oh, Death
Oh, Death
Won’t you spare me over ’til another year
My mother came to my bed
Placed a cold towel upon my head
My head is warm, my feet are cold
Death is a-movin’ upon my soul
Oh, Death, how you’re treatin’ me
You’ve closed my eyes so I can’t see
Well you’re hurtin’ my body
You make me cold
You run my life right outta my soul

Oh, Death, please consider my age
Please don’t take me at this stage
My wealth is all at your command
If you will move your icy hand
The old, the young, the rich or poor
All alike to me you know
No wealth, no land, no silver, no gold
Nothing satisfies me but your soul

Oh, Death
Oh, Death
Won’t you spare me over ’til another year
Won’t you spare me over ’til another year
Won’t you spare me over ’til another year

Commentary on “Conversation With Death”

“Conversation With Death” or “Oh Death” is a folk song comprising a dying person’s dialogue with a personification of death, who threatens the interlocutor with power over body and soul. Some versions, especially from Kentucky and Virginia, plead for Death to give the singer one more year.

It is not clear when the song was written or whence it came. Some believe it was handed down from English ballads, while others assert that it came to Lloyd Chandler in an apocalyptic vision in Madison County, North Carolina, in 1916. Tracking the exact history of any folk song is difficult; this one may be a reassortment of older European and African songs with Chandler’s original material. Regardless of authorship, the song is enhanced by Chandler’s story, which came out of a near-death experience, in a moment of repentance from a past of often tempting death. As one folklorist describes it, “The life that he had denigrated to the point of willfully destroying he is now terrorized into seeing as a fragile, finite good, to be honored and cared for.” Chandler spent the rest of his life preaching and sharing his song, encouraging listeners to consider mortality and what faith offers in the face of mortal fear.

Whether in Chandler’s life or another’s, the song was born of experience with death, and it continues to speak to that human experience. When the song began circulating around Appalachia, it may have resonated with listeners who encountered the specter of death in day-to-day life. In 1920, pneumonia, tuberculosis, influenza, and various now-eradicated infectious diseases counted among the top causes of mortality, as they had for decades before the 1918 influenza pandemic. A century later, amidst another pandemic, the song might feel familiar once again. Some of our ancestors’ fears have returned to haunt us, and it seems fitting to listen to some of their music.
Medical education, however, has a strange way of shaping human experience. It shifts our attention away from the song’s emotion to its complaints—a catalogue of symptoms encapsulated and transmitted through history. Heard with biology in mind, Death’s threats seem to describe the dying process: As rigor mortis sets in, the corpse cannot walk or see. The singer, pleading with Death, is aware of death creeping in, suggesting a medical reading where death is accomplished through the threats—where Death’s devices sound like sequelae of infectious disease.

As we slide from listening into clinical thinking, we can posit occupational hazards of early twentieth-century rural life. Banjo player Dock Boggs, for example, who recorded an early version of “Oh Death,” spent most of his life working in coal mines. With a social history and chief complaint, the singer suggests a pathology. “Lock your jaw” echoes lockjaw or tetanus, a well-known threat to a farmer or miner at the turn of the last century.

The interlocutor’s language conjures a differential diagnosis for those of us anchored to a medical reading of the song. Tetanus remains on our differential when we come to the symptom of “fixed feet” that cannot walk, but this paralysis could be due to other infectious etiologies present at the time, including botulism, diphtheria, and polio. If it is the presenting symptom, ascending paralysis might better fit the clinical picture and lead us to think of Guillain-Barre syndrome, perhaps following Campylobacter infection. Visual disturbance or blindness could be a complication of these diseases or a separate problem since the singer raises this complaint twice. Fever and cold extremities raise suspicion for septic shock and lead us toward infectious processes rather than primarily neurological conditions. Septic meningitis or encephalitis would provide a unifying diagnosis accounting for the new onset of subjective fever, chills, cold extremities, trismus or speech changes, lower extremity paralysis, vision loss, and possible
auditory hallucination. Given the prevalence of tuberculosis at the time, tuberculous meningitis should be considered.

Attending to the song’s medical aspects, it becomes easy to miss the human drama of a give-and-take with Death. As physicians, we are taught to use our knowledge—to overhear the conversation with death and intervene. Too often, this kind of thinking helps us ignore the conversation as it continues around us. Lloyd Chandler’s son recounts such a misencounter:

You know how my dad was about pain. He wasn’t groaning, he went, “Mmm”—just a whisper. And another doctor came in and mashed around on him some more. Dad said, “This hurt me.” And that doctor look at me and he said, “Old people’ll moan some, they put on some. They do that to get attention.”

We must learn to identify clinically important parts of a story, but we must also remember to recognize humanity in medical details. Music, like any art, reminds us how to see and acknowledge humanity around us. In moments when knowledge cannot save—like those captured in “Conversation With Death” or when a novel virus fulfills age-old threats—we can find a timeless invitation to witness human suffering. In these moments, the best we can do is listen.
References


See facing page for “Conversation With Death” (attributed to Lloyd Chandler). Public domain. Commentary first published online