

NBA Star Kevin Love: Making a Hole in Denial. Love and Death. “This is an Everyone Thing.”

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Theme: [History](#)

*“For behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways....No one is free of the fear of death.” - **Gregory Zilboorg**, psychoanalyst*

*“An anxiety is a lack that causes pain; a game is a lack that causes pleasure.” - **John Fowles**, writer*

*“What we play is life.” - **Louis Armstrong***

In his [moving essay](#) revealing his existential anxiety and panic attack, NBA star [Kevin Love](#) has touched a nerve that underlies not just sports and male experience, but life itself. He is right to say, “This is an everyone thing.” In doing so, he has performed a public service far beyond getting men and boys to open up about their fears and feelings. He has, as befits his surname, opened many people to a consideration of the **marriage of love and death**, and why all efforts to divorce them result in the diminishment of life’s passion and intensity.

Commenting on the unavoidable but often denied link between love and death, the important American psychologist **Rollo May** said this in *Love and Will*:

To love means to open ourselves to the negative as well as the positive - to grief, sorrow and disappointment as well as to joy, fulfillment, and an intensity of consciousness we did not know was possible before.

So it is fitting that in telling us of his conversations with a therapist, the one personal experience Kevin tells us about is the death of his Grandma Carol, who meant so much to him and was like another parent when he was growing up. Busy with his basketball career, he didn’t see her when she was dying.

“I felt terrible that I hadn’t been in better touch with her in her last years,” he writes.

Deeply pained at losing her and guilty about his behavior, he shared this with no one, bottling it up as he had learned since boyhood (Be strong, be a man), and like the athlete that he is, perhaps thought that if he did not dwell on this loss, the next game would be a win and he could somehow move on. But this never works for long, as Love learned when panic burst into his consciousness and took him down during a game last November. “It came out of nowhere,” he says, having learned, however, that nowhere is somewhere, even

when a surprise.

Substitute sportswriter for athlete, as Richard Ford does in his dazzling novel, *The Sportswriter*, whose main character Frank Bascombe, a sportswriter haunted by the death of his young son from Reye's syndrome but trying to lose himself in the ordinariness of sportswriting, says,

"Since after all, it is one thing to write sports, but another thing entirely to live a life," and we have Love's cautionary tale.

For sports (shopping for women) is the perfect metaphor for the modern American male's flight from authenticity. As the etymology of the word sport attests (from old French, *desporter* to divert, literally "to carry away"), sports are a diversion from something. Let's call it "real life," the place from where, as Ernest Hemingway so aptly put it in the title to his short story, "The Winner Takes Nothing." Trophies are handed out at post-season dinners, but as the American philosopher William James said, "The skull will grin in at the banquet."

Although sports can inspire one to think deeply, for most people, athletes and spectators alike, sports are a diversion from existential matters involving relationships, fears, deep feelings, life's meaning, love and loss, death, etc. While surely fun, entertaining, and lucrative for professionals, sports are also absurd since they involve movements through time and space toward unnecessary and fictitious goals where someone wins (lives) and someone losses (dies) in a game of unreality. In sports we play to overcome artificial and superfluous obstacles for fun and money – and for deeper reasons we may not realize.

Take golf, for example (my apologies to golfers). Why does anyone care who can hit a little white ball with a stick in the fewest strokes down stretches of green grass into a hole in the ground? Many do. They spend enormous amounts of time and money trekking after those little white balls. They care primarily because it's fun, and fun is good. Such fun is utterly meaningless in the larger scheme of things, but many find it relaxing from the "stress" of everyday life – a relaxing distraction. And of course distractions can be good in moderation. It is not sports that are the problem, but the obsession with them.

I knew a woman who felt her husband was overly obsessed with sports, and although she was wrong, she used to say to him, "With you it's balls, balls, balls." To which he would respond, also erroneously, "And with you it's malls, malls, malls." But their humorous exchange catches a widespread truth about men and women in American society where there are plenty of obsessively distracted people of both sexes.

Sports only matter because they don't. And it is in that gap between mattering and not where panic, anxiety, and depression can appear "out of nowhere." Another athlete, the Nobel Prize winning French author **Albert Camus**, a soccer goalie in his youth and a lifelong fan, phrased this experience differently when he said,

"At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face."

Athletes ride intense emotional roller coasters. You win, you lose, you're up, you're down – like "real life," just faster and with a much quicker turn-around time. While Kevin is right to

say that “everyone is going through something that we can’t see,” athletes live at a different pace and intensity, and the resulting highs bring deep lows as well. One day you’re dead; the next day you are resurrected, as long as there is another game or season. Some days you are in purgatory and wonder if all the aches and pains you endure are worth the cost.

This is true for the spectators also, absent the physical pains. Many fans are fanatics for a reason. The intensity of sports, its unpredictability, its “never over till its over” drama makes it the perfect distraction from more important matters. It has an extraordinary power to energize and deflate, but all in a land of make-believe that often blinds its devotees from trying to understand “something that we can’t see” in their own lives.

But a fan’s life can last until actual death, while an athlete has a limited amount of time to perform. One day when your playing days are over your confrontation with “reality” happens, either consciously or out of the blue. For many former athletes, men particularly, because women have come late to the games, the rest of their lives are lived in a desperate reliving of the past among “the fraternity of missing men,” as Don DeLillo says in his incredible novel, *Underworld*. It is a place where “desperation” speaks.

A few years ago there was a short Grantland documentary, “[The Finish Line](#),” about Steve Nash. An uncanny player, Nash was battling injuries and age, and the documentary shows him pondering whether or not to retire or continue his rehabilitation and attempt a comeback. In the opening scene Nash goes out with his dog into the shadowy pre-dawn where he muses on his dilemma. His words are hypnotic.

“I feel,” he said, “that there’s something that I can’t quite put my finger on that - I don’t know - I feel that it’s blocking me or I can see it out of the corner of my mind’s eye, or it’s like **this dark presence**is it the truth that I’m done?”

Hobbled by a nerve injury that severely limited his movement, he played a few more games and retired within a year. He had brought an infectious joy to his playing, but he left without fulfilling his dream of winning an NBA championship. Of his retirement he said,

“It’s bittersweet. I already miss the game deeply, but I’m also really excited to learn to do something else.”

Unlike many athletes, Nash was moving on; his “dark presence” wasn’t a final death but a step on the road to a hard rebirth. It was a Dylanesque restless farewell: “And though the line is cut/It ain’t quite the end/I’ll just bid farewell till we meet again.”

I think it safe to say that behind every panic attack, at the deepest level, lies what William James called “the worm at the core,” by which he meant death, the fear of it, the anxiety it engenders that rumbles beneath the placid surface of everyday life and breaks the surface here and there when least expected. Sometimes it happens during “little deaths,” what the French call *La petitemort* in reference to the sensation of sexual orgasm, but which happen throughout life in so many guises such as losing a game, missing a shot, or failing an exam. It can happen anywhere and any time, even in moments of great success, such as hoisting a trophy above one’s head after being named the Most Valuable Player.

A few years ago my friends and I were playing in basketball tournaments for men over fifty and we qualified for the Senior Olympics at the University of Pittsburgh. We acquired a sponsor, a local funeral home that made warm-up jerseys for us. Being used to dealing with bodies at rest, these comedians knew we were a bunch of aging hoopsters intent on keeping our bodies in motion for as long as we could. So they had shirts made with that up-beat and adolescent cliché printed on the front, "Basketball is Life." Lest we forgot, and being in the trade of taking bodies at rest to the underworld, on the back they had printed "Leave the Rest to Us: Flynn and Dagnoli Funeral Home."

Kevin Love's essay, "Everybody Is Going Through Something" is like that shirt. He reminds us that at the back of everyone's face there are matters that deserve scrutiny even when we can't see back there.

He deserves a Most Valuable Person award for making a hole in a denial that is an "everyone thing."

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