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Mahler and the Theory of Grief in the *Symphony No. 2*

In 1969, the American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote an essay that was to become very influential: *On Death and Dying*[1]. With sample interviews and conversations, she deepened our understanding of how imminent death affects the patient, the professionals who serve the patient, and the patient's family. Moreover, she introduced the now-famous idea of the five stages of dealing with death:(1) denial and isolation; (2) anger; (3) bargaining; (4)depression; and (5) acceptance.
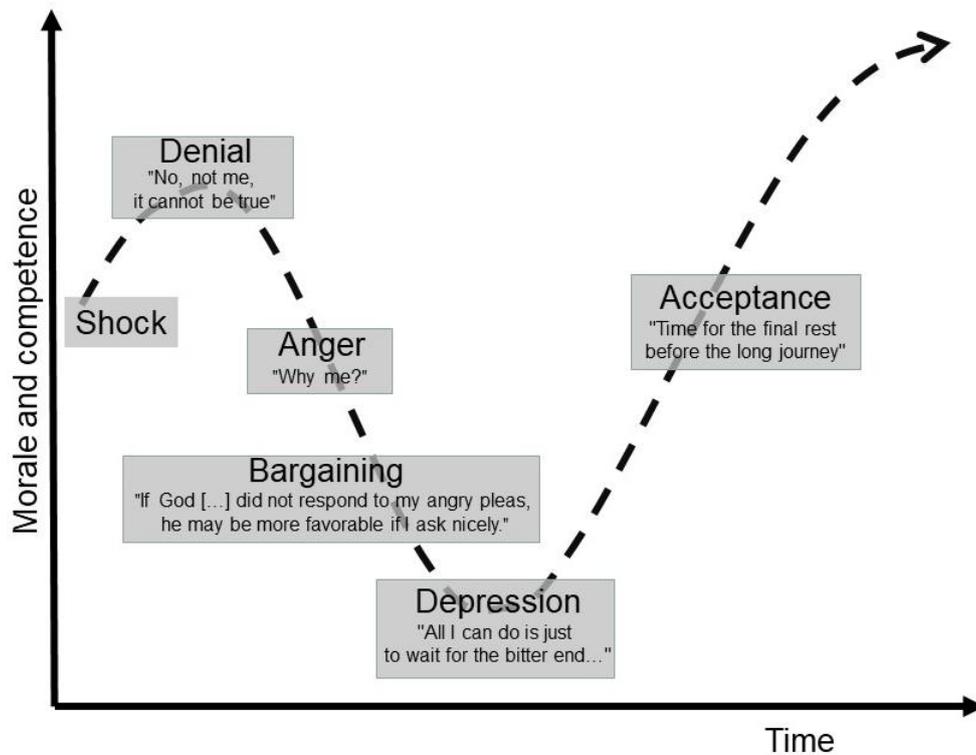

FIGURE 1. The Kübler-Ross Change Curve.

Since the release of this essay, many therapists have commented, completed, and amended her model[2]. For instance, Pascale Dendauwconsiders a model in two parts: the first one is a downward trajectory which is the result of the waking up to the reality of an

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[1] Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1970.*On Death and dying.* London; Sydney; Wellington; Toronto; New York: Tavistock publ.

[2] Moreover, sufferers and therapists have reported the usefulness of the Kübler-Ross model in a wide variety of situations, including change management, children grieving in divorce, grieving a lost serious relationship or in substance abuse…

imminent death, and is followedby a symmetrical upward trajectory reaching acceptance, forgiveness, and serenity[3]:
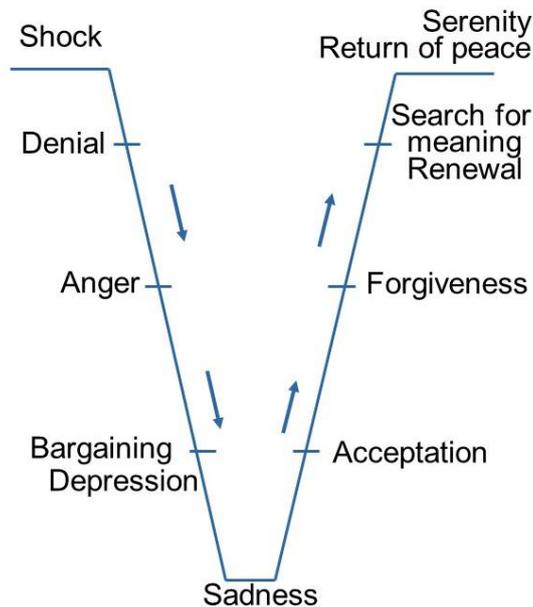

FIGURE 2.The Dendauw Grief Curve, inspired by Kübler-Ross.

The Kübler-Ross model proved to be very inspiring, but at the same time attracted criticisms, centered mainly on a lack of empirical evidence supporting the stages described by Kübler-Ross[4]. The much-awaited empirical evidence came in 2007, when a group of experimental psychology researchers examined the relative magnitude and patterns of change over time post loss of the five grief indicators described in *On Death and dying,* among 233 bereaved individuals. The results are quite consistent with the stage theory of grief:

"Counter to stage theory, disbelief [i.e. denial] was not the initial, dominant grief indicator. Acceptance was the most frequently endorsed item and yearning [i.e. bargaining] was the dominant negative grief indicator from 1 to 24 months post loss. In models that take into account the rise and fall of psychological responses, once rescaled, disbelief decreased from an initial high at 1 month post loss, yearning peaked at 4 months post loss, anger peaked at 5 months post loss, and depression peaked at 6 months post loss. Acceptance increased throughout the study observation period. The 5 grief indicators achieved their respective maximum values in the sequence (disbelief, yearning, anger, depression, and acceptance) predicted by the stage theory of grief."[5]

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[3] Dendaw, Pascale. 2010. "Théorie du deuil". Programme latin de don d'organes. Morges (Switzerland). May 27th, 2010.

[4] See, for example, Corr, Charles A., Kenneth J. Doka, and Robert Kastenbau. 1999. "Dying and Its Interpreters: A Review of Selected Literature and Some Comments on the State of the Field." *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying*39(4): 239–259 ;Stroebe, Margaret, HenkSchut, and Kathrin Boerner. 2017. "Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided Through the Stages of Grief", *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying* 74(4): 455–473…

[5] Maciejewski, Paul K., Baohui Zhang, Susan D. Block, et al. 2007. "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory of Grief". *JAMA* 297(7): 716-723.

It may be worth noting, in order to circumscribe the criticisms, that each individual's psychological process of dying or grief is singular, and that these models are only general ways of depicting the major stages experienced when death is approaching. For instance, dying patients can remain stuck in an early stage until death comes, others can skip some stages, or can go back to earlier stages they have already experienced… In reality, what these theories summarize in their general models don't cover exhaustively the vast diversity of possible experiences.

Seventy-five years before the release of *On Death and Dying*, in 1894, Gustav Mahler composed his *Second Symphony*, the so-called *Auferstehungssymphonie* ("Resurrection symphony"), which is marked with the seal of death. For instance, the first movement was first designed as a symphonic poem called *Totenfeier* ("Funeral rites"), composed in 1888. This work attracted bitter criticisms from the great Wagnerian conductor Hans von Bülow – whom Mahler admired and feared a lot –, which deviated the composer from orchestral composition for a few years, in favour of songs inspired by a collection of folk poems called *Des KnabenWunderhorn*. It was not until summer 1893 that Mahler decided to design *Totenfeier* as the opening movement of a new symphony, of which the second and third movements were subsequently composed. Both also deal with death; Mahler described their content in a letter to Max Marschalk on the 26th of March 1896:

"It certainly occurred that you have brought a loved one to his grave, and then, perhaps, on the way back, the picture of a bygone hour of happiness that now lingers like a ray of sunshine in your soul suddenly arose – nothing to darken it – to make you almost forget what happened! That's the 2nd movement! – When you wake up from this wistful dream, and have to go back to the confused life, it can easily happen that this incessantly moving, never resting, never understandable transmission of life becomes *terrifying* to you, like the dancing of figures in a light enlightened ballroom, which you look into from dark night – so *far* away that you can*not* hear the *music* anymore! Life becomes useless, and a gruesome haunting, that you can only express with a cry of disgust! – This is the 3rd movement!"[6]

Ironically, this time it was thanks to Hans von Bülow that this symphony was completed: the conductor died on the 12th of February 1894, and Mahler, who attended the funeral, was highly impressed by an ode sung by a choir, whose text was written by Klopstock and whose music was composed by Graun; it was not so much the music that struck Mahler than the poem, which deals with the rebirth of the soul after death, and which gave him the material for the fifth and finale of the *Second Symphony* (since he also composed a forth movement entitled *Urlicht,* inspired by the *KnabenWunderhorn,* and dealing in simple terms with the will for the soul to be illuminated by divine light after death). Mahler considerably extended the text by Klopstock with his own words, and

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[6] Mahler, Gustav. [1924]. *Briefe: 1879-1911.* Berlin: P. Zsolnay, 189: "Es ist Ihnen doch schon begegnet, daß Sie einen lieben Menschen zu Grabe getragen, und dann vielleicht auf dem Rückwege erstand plötzlich das Bild einer längst vergangenen Stunde des Glücks, das sich Ihnen nun wie ein Sonnenstrahl in die Seele legt – durch nichts verdüstert – beinahe können Sie vergessen, was eben geschehen! Das ist der 2. Satz! – Wenn Sie dann aus diesem wehmütigen Traum aufwachen, und in das wirre Leben zurück müssen, so kann es Ihnen leicht geschehen, daß Ihnen dieses unaufhörlich bewegte, nie ruhende, nie verständliche Getriebe des Lebens *grauenhaft* wird, wie das Gewoge tanzender Gestalten in einem hell erleuchteten Ballsaal, in den Sie aus dunkler Nacht hineinblicken – aus so weiter *Entfernung,* daß Sie die *Musik* hierzu *nicht* mehr hören! Sinnlos wird Ihnen da das Leben, und ein grauenhafter Spuk, aus dem Sie vielleicht mit einem Schrei des Ekels auffahren! – Dies ist der 3. Satz!"

wrote a forty-minute movement structured in two parts, the first one in which we only hear the orchestra (bars 1-401), and the second one in which Mahler added a mixed choir, a solo soprano and a solo alto (bars 402-764). These two parts are quite symmetrical and form a kind of "Tod und Verklärung" (death and transfiguration) trajectory.

This symmetry and the opposition of a fall and a subsequent rise somewhat recall the Kübler-Ross model, and even more the Dendauw grief curve. My opinion is that, in this movement, Mahler anticipated the research made in understanding the dying psychological process, since it seems that he accounted for all the stages experienced by the one who is about to face death. In other words, seventy-five years before Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Gustav Mahler gave us in his music an incredible insight into the psychological process of leaving life.

Before analysing this movement from that angle, let us clarify some matters. In this finale, Mahler mixed two independent perspectives: the religious one, in two parts (death of the body, transfiguration of the soul); and the psychological one, also in two parts, with two symmetrical trajectories. This mix of perspectives supposes that the upwards trajectory must happen *post mortem*, which is not in principle the correct process described by the psychiatrists: obviously, one should face death only *after* having completed all the stages. But let's remember that Mahler didn't refer to any theoretical writing when composing the finale of his *Symphony No. 2*, but rather followed an intuitive path, which implies inevitably some deviations with the different models created by psychiatrists. Nevertheless, the correlations between these theories and the course of this movement are quite astonishing.

The first stage is *shock*: it is a phase of intense stupefaction and destabilization, which is necessary for the grieving process to begin; it is often accompanied by blunted perceptions, paralyzed organism, amazement, screams, howls, floating dissociation, numbness, panic… In the music, the finale opens witha terrible dissonant chord played *fortississimo*, and assembling a *C* bass and a *B-flat* minor chord (b. 1-25). This strange harmony first appeared close to the end of the third movement, and corresponds to the "cry of disgust"aforementioned in the letter to Max Marschalk – a cry which is contemporary to the famous *Scream* from Edvard Munch painted on the exact same year of 1893, and expressing much the same feeling.

The second stage is, in Kübler-Ross's words, *denial and isolation* (b. 43-61): "No, not me, it cannot be true". It is a (usually) temporary defensive way of rejecting suffering by ignoring reality, which is meant to be soon replaced by at least partial acceptance. In the symphony, it takes the form ofa very slow horn call, surrounded by silence (b. 43-47, *See FIGURE 3*). Mahler takes care to underline its solitude by creating a spatial depth with multiple pause signs or indications such as "echo", "etwasschwächer" ("a little bit weaker"), "wiederstärker" ("even more"), "verklingend" ("dying away").
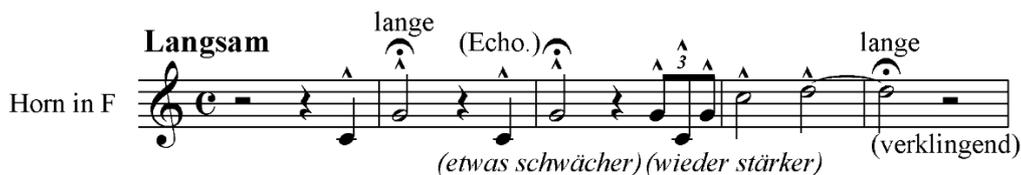

FIGURE 3.Denial: Horn Call (b. 43-47).

The response that follows this isolated horn call doesn't inspire hope: a mysterious rustling from the harps and the muted violins playing trills forming a succession of descending chords at a distance of thirds (either major or minor: on *A-flat, E, D-flat, A, F, D, B-flat* and *G-flat*)leads to the succession of two death-knellson empty fifths (*C-G* and *E-flat-B-flat*, b. 48-61), as if the distant sound of a funeral march was resounding from afar…

When the dying person understands that the catastrophic news was not a mistake, the stage of denial is unsustainable and is replaced by *anger*, rage, envy, resentment; moreover, "this anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random[7]", which makes it difficult to cope with from the point of view of family and staff.

Here Mahler quoted, quite a propos, the first four notes of the very famous medieval sequence called Dies Irae ("Day of *Anger*", *See Figure 4*), evoking doomsday, the apocalypse, the end of the world of the one who is still living but not for long…Used multiple times during Romantic times in order to suggest the presence of death in a macabre or grotesque way (by Berlioz in his *Symphonie fantastique,* Liszt in his *Totentanz,* Saint-Saëns in his *Danse Macabre,*Rachmaninoff in at least the third of his works…), this tune became so famous that it wasn't necessary for Mahler to quote is extensively in order for his melody to be recognized as the Dies Irae[8].

FIGURE 4.Dies Irae Sequence.

FIGURE 5.Anger: The Dies Irae Quotation (b. 62-69).

Little by little, led by the Dies Irae motive transformed into a chorale (bar 143), the orchestra gains force and ends by repeating, fortissimo, the two death-knells on empty fifth already heard at the end of the second stage of this movement (b. 183-184)[9].

After about a hundred bars of Dies Irae inspired music (b. 62-96 and 143-193), Mahler goes on to the next stage: *bargaining*(b. 194-323). The dying man still thinks he can be the master of his fate, and that he can postpone, if not stop, the inevitable. Since, as Kübler-Ross states it, "most bargains are made with God[10]", Mahler goes on using the motive inspired by the Christian Dies Irae. This time, it is converted into a march playedfortissimo, staccato, "martellato" (b. 219), and is engaged in a military-like

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[7] Kübler-Ross, *op. cit.*: 44.

[8] In "Der Spielmann" ("The Minstrel"), the second movement of *Das Klagende Lied* (1880, rev. 1897, 1901), Mahler uses the exact same method: a horn chorale evokes the Dies Irae by quoting only its first four notes (bars 73-88).

[9] These death-knells elements had already been repeated with their preceding violin trills on bars 91-96.

[10] Kübler-Ross, *op. cit.*: 75.

struggle with two other themes, while the tempo ebbs and flows and the harmony becomes unstable.

BARS	TEMPO	THEME	HARMONY
194-195	Maestoso	*INTRODUCTION*	f
196-219	Allegro energico. "Sehrscharfrhythmisiert" ("to a very sharp rhythm")	Dies Irae	f → B-flat → g
220-229	Kräftig ("sharply")	Dies Irae	F
230-241		Awakening	F
242-266	"Wiederetwasgehaltener" ("again a bit held")	Awakening	D → B → A-flat
267-288	"Immervorwärtsdrängend" ("always pushing forward")	Dies Irae	*chromatic*
289-296	"Miteinem Male etwaswuchtiger" ("suddenly heavier")	Dies Irae	b-flat
297-304		Awakening	B-flat
305-306		Resurrection	
307-310		Dies Irae	
311-323	Piùmosso, "Heftigdrängend" ("violently pushing")	*CLIMAX* (Dies Irae)	b-flat

FIGURE 6. The Bargaining Section (b. 194-323).

The first melody confronting with the Dies Irae motive will be called the Awakening Theme, since the lyricssay, when it will later be sung by the choir (bars 472-481, *See FIGURE 7*): "Auferstehn, ja, auferstehnwirst du, meinStaub, nachkurzerRuh." ("Arise, yes, you shall rise again my dust, after a short rest!"). It has already appeared in the immediate surroundings of the Dies Irae motive (bars 70-77, 151-161) and had brought a resolute yet ephemeral upturn in this gloomy environment.

FIGURE 7. The Awakening Theme (b. 472-481).

The second theme that is briefly heard next to the Dies Iraewill become the most important tune of the whole movement: we call it the Resurrection theme because, later in this movement, it will be sung by the choir with the lyrics "Sterbenwerd'ich um zuleben" ("I shall die to live"). This idea of death and transfiguration is represented in the profile of the melody by a downward fifth ("I shall *die*") followed by a diatonic rise ("to *live*"), which recalls, at a microscopic level, the macroscopic design of the whole movement, and even of the whole symphony (beginning with a ceremony of the dead in the first movement, continuing with memories of the lost one in the second movement and cries

of disgust in the third one; then initiating an ascent in the fourth movement, *Urlicht,* confirmed by the large second part of the finale, from bar 402 to 764). The Resurrection theme's first statement, in this movement, is heard near the beginning, just after the shock stage, as a prescience of a transfiguration that is yet to come (b. 26-42).

FIGURE 8. The Resurrection Theme (b. 31-35).

Let's notice that the bars 301 to 323, i.e. the peak of the conflict, are reminiscent of the end of the development section in the first movement (b. 282-303). By this means, Mahler creates a narrative connection between the beginning and the finale of his symphony. Indeed, the first movement is inspired by the poetic drama *Dziady,* written by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, and translated into German as *Totenfeier* in 1887 (a year before Mahler wrote the symphonic poem that would later become the first movement of the *Second Symphony*). The drama opens with a Lithuanian popular ritual in which peasants are summoning ghosts to ensure them the access to heaven. Its musical transposition by Mahler lies in a constant discrepancy between darkness (embodied by a funeral march in minor keys, often accompanied with chromatically descending ostinatos) and clarity (represented by an ascending comforting theme, mostly in *E* major). It is quite obvious that this dialectic between optimism and pessimism, light and shadows, rest and unrest can be of good use in the finale, and most of all in the bargaining section – explaining why Mahler recalls there the music once heard in the *Totenfeier* movement.

The outcome of the bargaining is predictable: Death, embodied by the Dies Irae motive, is the winner of the fight (clearly: Death always wins the fight). So it's time to proceed to the next stage: *depression*, sadness (b. 324-401).As the terminally ill patient have more and more symptoms, becomes weaker and thinner, he can no longer deny his illness and depression makes its way as the sense of imminent loss grows stronger. In the music, we can hear a very sad lamenting motive, which consists in a descending semitone with an accent in the first note, just like a groan.

FIGURE 9. The Lament Motive (b. 31-35).

This motive has already been heard earlier in this movement, between two statements of the Dies Irae sequence (b. 97-142). But now is the time to acquire substance; because now is the time to die: "The end of every living thing has come, the last judgment is at hand and the horror of the day of days has come upon us. The earth trembles, the graves burst open, the dead arise and march forth in endless procession. The great and the small of this earth, the kings and the beggars, the just and the godless all press forward. The cry for mercy and forgiveness sounds fearful in our ears. The wailing becomes gradually more terrible. Our senses desert us, all consciousness dies as the Eternal Judge approaches. The last trump sounds; the trumpets of the Apocalypse ring

out[11]".Here, Mahler creates a very impressive dramatic effect: coming from backstage, louder and louder, "the trumpets of the Apocalypse", accompanied with hysterical percussions (bass drum, cymbals, triangle) superimpose their terrible music to the lament motive still expressing its sadness on stage, before overwhelming the latter when the brass section announce the Apocalypse directly *from* stage, *fortissimo*, which leads to a symmetrical return of the beginning of the movement and its cry of disgust (b. 402-417). Death has just struck its fatal blow.

Since we have reached the bottom, now we're on the way back up. The terrible cry has opened the second large part of the finale, which starts very symmetrically to the first one, although the horn call, played this time from backstage, now gets a response (b. 448-471), embodied by birdsongs ("In the eerie silence […], we can just barely make out a distant nightingale, a last tremulous echo of earthly life[12]"), giving cause for hope, and introducing the sixth stage: *acceptation* (b. 472-559). From now on, the text sung by the solo singers (soprano and alto) or by the choir is the best way to understand the ideas the composer wants to convey in the second part of this movement.

Here, Mahler writes an homophonic chorale suggesting a gathering of "saints and heavenly hosts[13]" whispering the Awakening theme *pianississimo* (while orchestral interludes peacefully recall the Resurrection theme):

Arise, yes, you shall rise again my dust,
after a short rest!
He who called you
will give you eternal life.
You are sown to blossom anew.
The lord of the harvest strides
And gathers sheaves us who have passed away.[14]

One should note that, given the symmetry of this movement, at this moment we were supposed to hear some more Dies Irae. Instead of this, the choir sings this

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[11] Mahler, Gustav. [1924]. 190: "Das Ende alles Lebendigen ist gekommen, das jüngste Gericht kündigt sich an, und der ganze Schrecken des Tages aller Tage ist hereingebrochen. – Die Erde bebt, die Gräber springen auf, die Todten erheben sich und schreiten in endlosem Zug daher. Die Großen und die Kleinen dieser Erde, die Könige und die Bettler, die Gerechten und die Gottlosen – Alle woollen dahin; der Ruf nach Erbarmen und Gnade tönt schrecklich an unser Ohr. – Immer furchtbarer schreit es daher – alle Sinne vergehen uns, alles Bewußtsein schwindet uns beim Herannahen des ewigen Gerichtes. Der "Große Appell" ertönt, die Trompeten aus der Apokalypse rufen".
[12] *ibid.*: "in der grauen vollen Stille glauben wir eine ferne, ferne Nachtigall zu vernehmen, wie einen letzten zitternden Nachhall des Erdenlebens!"
[13] *ibid.*:"Leise erklingt ein Chor der Heiligen und Himmlischen".
[14]"Auferstehn, ja, auferstehnwirst du,
mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh.
Unsterblich's Leben
wird, der dich schuf, dir geben!

Wieder aufzublühn werd ich gesät.
Der Herr der Ernte geht
Und sammelt Garben,
Uns ein, uns ein, die starben."

comforting chorale; every trace of anger has disappeared: it is time for the protagonist to accept his fate.

Then comes *forgiveness* (b. 560-617): we forgive the sufferings and what caused them. This is exactly what is expressed in the third and fourth stanzas of the text, and since the issue is to show forgiveness for having so much suffered, it is sung by the alto solo followed by the soprano solo using the Lament motive which precisely recalls all these sufferings.

[Alto solo]
 Oh believe, my heart, believe:
   Nothing will get lost!
   What you have longed for is yours!
   Yours, what you have loved, what you have strived for!
[Soprano solo]
 Oh believe: you were not born in vain!
   You have not lived, suffered to no avail![15]

Then, the choir, still singing the Awakening theme in the style of a chorale, introduces the next stage: *search for meaning* (b. 618-639). This corresponds to the time when, having accepted one's own death, there is an attempt to integrate it in a logical process, to make sense. In his letter to Marschalk, Mahler explained it this way: "Behold: there is no judgement, no sinners, no just men, neither great nor small. There is no punishment and no reward. A feeling of overwhelming love fills us with blissful knowledge and illuminates our earthly life.[16]"

This is also more or less what is expressed in the fifth stanza:

What has come into being must go!
   What is gone must rise again!
   Stop quaking!
   Be willing to live![17]

It leads to the last section of the movement (and of the symphony): *the return of peace* (b. 640-764). Death is welcomed with serenity, we are ready to die, and open ourselves to eternity.

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[15] "O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube:
Es geht dir nichts verloren!
Dein ist, ja dein, was du gesehnt,
Dein, was du geliebt, was du gestritten!

O glaube: Du wardst nicht umsonst geboren!
 Hast nicht umsonst gelebt, gelitten!"
[16] Mahler, Gustav. [1924]. 190: "Und siehe da: Es ist kein Gericht – Es ist kein Sünder, kein Gerechter, kein Großer und kein Kleiner – Es ist nicht Strafe und nicht Lohn! Ein allmächtiges Liebesgefühl durchleuchtet uns mit seligemWissen und Sein!"
[17] "Was entstanden ist, das muß vergehen!
 Was vergangen, auferstehen!
Hör auf zu beben!
Bereite dich zu leben!"

Oh pain! You all-penetrating power!
I am wrested from you!
Oh death! You all-conquering power!
You are vanquished at last!

With wings that I have gained
I shall rise!
I shall die to live!
Arise, yes, you shall rise again,
my heart, in no time!
What you have beaten
to God it will bear you![18]

All this last section is largely dominated by the Resurrection theme, which rings out with greatest clarity and strength, whether in the choir or in the orchestra.

Now that all the process is complete, we cannot help but note that all the stages of dealing with death described by Kübler-Ross, and then by Dendauw are represented in music and in the text by Mahler. But how could a young man who was only thirty-four years old when he composed his *Second Symphony*, never having suffered from any critical illness and who would still live for another seventeen years, report with so much accuracy on the psychological process of someone who is dying? Maybe the answer lies in Mahler's childhood: not only did the family live in a building which was adjacent to a funeral parlor, but also Mahler was the second-born child in a family of fourteen children, only six of whom survived childhood. As a consequence, Mahler as a child saw many of his siblings die. He later explained that growing up meant to be part of "a funeral every other week[19]". This intimate experience of death certainly contributed to give him a better understanding of its process[20]… and it is worth any interview of dying patients carried out by psychiatrists.

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[18] "O Schmerz! Du Alldurchdringer!
Dir bin ich entrungen.
O Tod! Du Allbezwinger!
Nun bist du bezwungen!
Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen,
In heißem Liebesstreben
Werd ich entschweben
Zum Licht, zu dem kein Aug' gedrungen!

Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen,
Wer dich entschweben!
Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!
Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
Mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
Zu Gott wird es dich tragen!"
[19] Blaukopf, Kurt. 1974. *Gustav Mahler.* Harmondsworth: Futura Publications Ltd: 18-19.
[20] And it also explains the fact that the nursery rhyme "Frère Jacques" gets hijacked by a funeral march in the third movement of Mahler's *First Symphony*.

DEATH			TRANSFIGURATION		
STAGE	THEME	BARS	STAGE	THEME	BARS
1. Shock	Cry of Despair	1-25		Cry of Despair	402-417
	(Resurrection)	26-42		(Resurrection)	418-447
2. Denial	Horn Call	43-61		Horn Call	448-471
3. Anger	Dies Irae (+ Awakening, Lament)	62-193	6. Acceptation	Awakening	472-559
			7. Forgiveness	Lament	560-617
4. Bargaining	Dies Irae / Awakening, Resurrection	194-323	8. Search for meaning	Awakening	618-639
5. Depression	Lament	324-401	9. Return of peace	Resurrection, Awakening	640-764

FIGURE 10. The Structure of the Finale of *Symphony No.2*.