

***Red Beard* and Looking on Pain**

The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 devastated Tokyo and the surrounding region. Over 140,000 persons died in the quake, and numerous fires broke out with over 447,000 homes being burnt or leveled. His older brother took the then 13-year-old Akira to visit the destruction. This is what he recalled:

[M]y brother took me by the hand and walked on with determination. The burned landscape for as far as the eye could see had a brownish red color. In the conflagration everything made of wood had been turned to ashes, which was now occasionally drifted upward in the breeze. It looked like a red desert.

Amid this expanse of nauseating redness lay every kinds of corpse imaginable. I saw corpses charred black, half-burned corpses, corpses in gutters, corpses floating in rivers, corpses piled up on bridges, corpses blocking off a whole street at an intersection, and every manner of death possible to human beings displayed by corpses. When I involuntarily looked away, my brother scolded me, 'Akira, look carefully now.'

I failed to understand my brother's intentions and could only resent his forcing me to look at these awful sights. The worst was when we stood on the bank of the red-dyed Sumidagawa River and gazed at the throngs of corpses pressed against its shores. I felt my knees give way as I started to faint, but my brother grabbed me by the collar and propped me up again. He repeated, 'Look carefully, Akira.'

I resigned myself to gritting my teeth and looking. Even if I tried to close my eyes, that scene had imprinted itself permanently on the backs of my eyelids. In this way, convincing myself it was inescapable, I felt a little bit calmer. But there is no way for me to describe adequately the horror I saw. I remember thinking that the lake of blood they say exists in Buddhist hell couldn't possibly be as bad as this."

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The night we returned from the horrifying excursion I was fully prepared to be unable to sleep, or to have terrible nightmares if I did. But no sooner had I laid my head on the pillow than it was morning. I had slept like a log, and couldn't remember anything frightening from my dreams. This seemed so strange to me that I asked my brother how it could have come about. 'If you shut your eyes to a frightening sight, you end up being frightened. If you look at everything straight on, there is nothing to be afraid of.' Looking back on that excursion now, I realize that it must have been horrifying for my brother too. It had been an expedition to conquer fear.

--Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like An Autobiography*

Akira Kurosawa's *Red Beard* is a film about learning to look with compassion on suffering and death. In the film Dr. Noboru Yasumoto moves from his self-serving and prideful indifference to a growing sense of compassion and understanding. In the passage above, Kurosawa learns to look on the worst of horrors and not look away. Do you think he is correct that in doing so, one learns to "conquer fear"? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

1. How does the musical score, for better or worse, shape the film?
2. Why is the pacing slow and the plot episodic?
3. How important is sound to the film?
4. As I suggested above, why is sight so important to the film?
5. Is Dr. Kyojō Niide, *Akahige* (Red Beard) a hero? Is he a samurai? Is he a saint?
6. What does Red Beard have to teach those who plan to become doctors or other medical health professionals?

7. What does Red Beard's persona teach us about the ways that we idealize the vocation of doctor or nurse?
8. How would you characterize Red Beard's view of science? Of the human person? Of life and death?
9. How would you compare and contrast Sanjuro and Red Beard's approach to a corrupt world?
10. How important is confession to the meaning of the film?
Rokusuke's daughter? Sahachi's? The "Mantis"? Mansuke's? Yasumono's? Otoyo's?
11. Is Red Beard's analysis of the Mantis' illness correct?
12. Is the surgery scene necessary to the meaning of the film? [45:05-47:07] Why and/or why not?
13. Do you agree with Stephen Prince's reading of the film as a double-layered work in which hints of the spiritual break through?
14. What does the martial arts scene suggest about Red Beard? [1:48-1:50] How did you find yourself responding to this scene?
15. Is the film a theodicy or cosmodicy? If so, how? Are any answers provided?
16. How would you describe Yasumoto's transformation?
17. How would you describe Otoyo's transformation?
18. Why is it significant that the cooks and Otoyo cry into the well for Chobo?

