

Mortality and its Alternatives

Rev. Gary Kowalski

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Last February, a year ago, I got my DNR--my legal Do Not Resuscitate order--signed by my doctor and laminated in plastic so I could hang it on the door of my fridge, right next to the pictures of my kids and the recipe for sesame noodles. It's handy, because if the EMTs ever come bursting in the door, they're required to start compressions and electric shocks and intubation and injections of epinephrine unless someone waves a physical piece of paper in their faces and yells at them to stop. Heroic measures aren't anything I want at this point in my life. Because while I hope to enjoy a good many more years trying new noodle recipes, I don't see survival-at-any-cost as the best alternative. As a First Responder, I've done CPR. It's rare for patients' hearts to start beating again and, if they do, it's usually just long enough to get to the emergency room or ICU where maybe, if they're lucky, family members can gather to say goodbye. The odds of walking out of a hospital with all your wits and under your own steam are pretty small. So if my ticker stops ticking while I'm at the stove, I'd rather just go quietly without the medical fuss and with the savory smell of hot chili and garlic as the last thing I know, no tubes or IVs but just this old body and General Tso's eggplant for my wife to remember me by.

I'm not even sure I'd want to live forever. At least since Ponce de Leon sailed in search of the Fountain of Youth, that's been the perennial human quest and now it's also a technological holy grail. The motivational speaker and author Ellen Wood of *Questa* who writes a column on age reversal for the *Taos News* is just one of many many voices who suggest that getting old is optional and that with the right combination of vitamins, tantric practices or yoga rejuvenation is right around the corner. Her book *The Secret Method for Growing Younger: A Step-by-Step Anti-Aging Process Using the Law of Attraction* promises that daily affirmations like "with every breath I take the cells in my body get younger" can peel decades off the age on your birth certificate, and I doubt if affirmations can do any harm. Maybe they help. That can't be said of the supplements

and cure-alls that human guinea pigs such as those who worship at the Church of Perpetual Life like to sample. Located in Hollywood, Florida, the Church of Perpetual Life describes itself as a “central gathering place for Transhumanists & all People interested in Age Reversal, Cryonics and the Singularity,” the singularity being that point where humanity achieves so-called escape velocity and attains immortality. Most devotees expect this breakthrough to occur within their own lifetimes. Founder William Faloan makes his money from a Ft. Lauderdale storefront selling herbal boosters while also promoting experimental cocktails like anti-cancer drugs that have been shown to extend the lives of lab mice, but that the FDA warn aren’t intended for human consumption without medical supervision. And for those who expire before their warranty runs out, an ultra-low temperature freezer in Texas serves as Plan B for the Church of Perpetual Life, as though frozen bodies or sometimes just the frozen heads of rich old dead white guys are really what our descendants need most. It’s a business. The Alcor Cryogenics lab in Scottsdale will pickle you and or your pet in liquid nitrogen for just 200 grand. They have dogs, cats, a turtle and even a chinchilla in cold storage awaiting re-animation. Meanwhile, more visionary thinkers like Elon Musk and Ray Kurzweil foresee a day when human brains will merge with artificial intelligence and our minds, memories and personalities will all be stored indefinitely in the cloud or perhaps on a thumb drive. It all seems like science fiction, but also quite possible. Elon’s way smarter than me and maybe death is really just an engineering problem. But whether living forever is wise or a good idea is a completely different question.

Folk tales, faith traditions and even popular culture have cautioned against it. In their famous schtick on the 2,000 year old man, Carl Reiner asks comedian Mel Brooks if he has any children. “Yes, fifteen hundred,” Mel replies. “Eight hundred boys and seven hundred girls.” “Really,” marvels Reiner. “Fifteen hundred children.” “That’s right,” says Mel, “and not a single one ever visits on a Sunday. You’d think maybe one of the girls, but no!” More birthdays for Mel just equal more aggravation. That’s in keeping with other Hebrew lore, where the Almighty made every kind growing thing in the garden and in the middle put two trees. Having tasted the fruit of good and evil, Adam and Eve are banished lest they eat also of the Tree of Life and become like gods, which

is not our fate. According to legend, our biblical ancestors often attained extraordinary longevity, like Methusaleh. But by the time of the patriarchs, mortals were destined for a more modest allotment, as in the words of Psalm 90, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years ...” Today many of us will make it past ninety but realize there’s a limit. Those truly wise don’t aspire for more, according to Ecclesiastes, but know and accept that there is a time to be born and a time to die, a season for everything under the sun.

One lifetime is enough. That seems to be the Confucian attitude. Ju Li ventured to ask about the next world and the master answered, “We don’t yet understand life, so why do you inquire about death?” Buddhists say that impermanence is the mark of existence and that trying to put life in a bottle, where you can control it and keep it safe and stable on a shelf forever is a big mistake. To be alive is to be always changing, evanescent, ephemeral. Of course that doesn’t make it any easier when it’s you or your loved one who gets a terminal prognosis.

Then we tend to pull out all the stops. I recently read the book *Being Mortal* by surgeon Atul Gawande on the recommendation of one of our congregational members who, past the age of eighty, was pondering his own end game strategies. Our entire medical system, Gawande observes, is focused on treatment and cure, even for the incurable condition we all face of being creatures born into space and time where laws of entropy apply. Vast sums are expended on the last weeks or days of individuals who never really wanted to spend their final moments hooked to machines anyway. Better, he suggests, to acknowledge that death is not a defeat but just the final step on the journey to be managed intelligently or otherwise. Most of us want to be in a supervisory position, not to become mere patients but to maintain our autonomy and decision-making to the extent possible. Dignity matters and can even be measured. For example, Gawande notes that individuals who are given the option of controlling their own pain medications at the end of life actually tend to use less than those dependent for relief on doctors and nurses. People in hospice who have options and choices either to receive active treatment or only palliative care seek fewer interventions and actually

live longer than those in control groups who want extreme measures taken. We do better, we're healthier and happier, being in charge of ourselves right down to the wire than when we're not.

I think I'd like to remain alert and oriented and *compos mentis* to the very end, if it's convenient. For one thing, I'm curious about what's next. I don't think it's completely impossible that there's more to this mystery. Maybe I'm just touching part of the elephant, after all, an ear but not the trunk or tail. Life after death seems improbable to me, but not totally. There's some evidence for it. Years ago, Dori and I were driving home on a late afternoon in Seattle on Interstate 5. We hit a patch of black ice and our little Chevy Chevette started to spin wildly out of control down the four lane road at seventy miles an hour. These were the days before air bags. We did maybe three complete three-hundred sixty degree revolutions with other traffic on either side. Dori says her entire life played out like a movie in front of her eyes as we spun down the freeway, every episode from her childhood and youth, years of living condensed into that half second of sheer panic. Amazingly, our car wound up in the lane of travel, headed in the right direction, and no one was hurt. But her instantaneous life review was real. As poet Mary Oliver writes, "I look upon time as no more than an idea, and I consider eternity as another possibility."

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

Even if episodes like Dori's and the end-of-life out-of-body-experiences with the bright light and the tunnel that are so common are merely epiphenomena of the brain's neural network preparing to shut down, they seem like wonderful trips I don't want to miss. You know, in my mother's generation women wanted to be knocked unconscious for childbirth, totally etherized. My mom was blotto when I was born, under general anesthetic. Now so many women say giving birth is among the most meaningful and often mystical experiences of their lives. Maybe it's the same for both exits and entrances. Death and birth. The portal in and out of this world are both once-in-a-

lifetime occurrences, perhaps equally miraculous. So give me a conscious death, if possible.

Unless there's too much pain. Then in the words of grunge band Nirvana just keep me sedated. Or as Woody Allen said, I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.

I don't know that I've made peace with death. But there seems to me something beautiful and appropriate about the human lifespan. Whether you consider life a comedy or tragedy, a romance or irony, we do make sense of our existence in terms of being a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. There's a narrative arc that would be lost if we were immortal. Were you to live forever, how would you know when any chapter was complete? It would be like writing a novel that goes on too long, one darned thing after another, and not knowing how to end it.

The poet Robert Frost wrote,

The same leaves over and over again!
They fall from giving shade above
To make one texture of faded brown
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again
To fill the trees with another shade,
They must go down past things coming up.
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is way in ours.

In a world where people lived forever, no one could have ever written that poem. No one would understand it, either. Probably no poetry would exist at all. Nor any childhood. Nor youthful folly. Nor teen romance. No life-or-death gambles nor existential questions. Just old folks everywhere. Sort of like Florida. Not a humane world, nor one I'd wish to live in.

The columnist David Brooks makes a distinction between what he calls resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the gifts and talents that help you climb the ladder. They usually result in academic degrees and job titles and prestige. They help you pull ahead. Eulogy virtues on the other hand are the qualities people tend to remember when the race is over. Were you a good person? Did you love deeply? Were you kind? A world where people lived forever would be one where individuals spent eons polishing their resume virtues, and very little time cultivating the other kind, because there would be no eulogies, ever.

For all its pain and sorrow and frustration, I like this world of sunrise and sunsets. It's a beautiful creation. Until I go to that Big Sleep, to join the ancestors, to the last Rodeo, it's a world I try to gratefully accept. I can't say three cheers for mortality, but it's better than the alternatives.