

# Life Considered as a Substitute for Writing Poetry About Death

by

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Books on public speaking frequently advise to start off a speech with a joke. It's supposed to relax both the speaker and the audience. But when you're doing a sermon on death ... well, you see the problem. Nothing is too good for you all in this church, however, so I scoured the Internet and found something to share. I am going to read to you a few odd causes of death that appear in the actual files of actual people who have actually died:

- "Went to bed feeling well, but woke up dead."
- "Mrs. Pomeroy died suddenly. Nothing serious."
- "Had never been fatally ill before."
- "Cause of death unknown. Died without the aid of a physician."

Well, I hope everybody is relaxed now because despite its popularity in churches, death, like sex, is not something we talk about openly in our daily lives, not unless we have lost a loved one or are poets. Although this situation has been changing some for the subject of sex, it is not the case with death. In our modern American culture death is pushed as far away as possible. For example, death is still considered by most doctors to be a foe to be defeated, while Dr. Kevorkian is in jail, and Governor Jeb Bush recently felt compelled to legislatively preempt death.

As the highly educated, left brained people we are, Westerners have intellectualized death to death, if I may, and stand aloof from death armed with our poetry, our philosophy, our theology, safely ensconced in our homes with our technology driven lives. We have sequestered death. We live our lives the way we run our hospitals: brightly illuminated, but sterile, with death and disease and all the nitty gritty aspects of life hidden behind heavy metal doors. I don't know about any of you, but I have never killed my own food—not even by fishing. And although I have watched three people die in my life, and been told that I myself was soon going to die from cancer, death is still a blurry figure, hiding in the shadows.

But it hasn't always been this way. It is mid-autumn, the time before winter sets in when the bounties of the land have been taken and ancient peoples believed that the veil that separates our world from the spirit world, the world of the dead, is paper thin, so thin that the souls of the dead could actually return to earth and the worlds could mix and become one. You can still feel it in the air if you pay attention.

This time of year was called Samhain (pronounced sow-en or sah-ween) by the Celtic peoples and was the time of their New Year. It was, we are told, a very spiritual time, when the living honored the dead and helped those who had died the previous year make the journey to the

other side on New Year's Eve when the door would be open between the worlds. The living invited the departed souls to feasts and lit great bon fires to show the way and provide warmth.

Christian influences eventually changed the ancient holiday. First, as was done all over the world to pagan cultures and holidays, the people were told that the spirits they were honoring were evil, horrible apparitions of death and the devil. This was a huge change in perception and fit the notion that death is a punishment for sin rather than a natural part of life (with all the attendant notions of pain and suffering that the Church saves us from), and also advanced the Church's agenda of tearing down the pagan holidays, making the objects of those holidays evil, and paving the way for Jesus to save the people from evil, sin, and death. Thus, the priests tried to stamp out the holiday and the practices that went with it and substitute Christian rituals.

Then, around the beginning of the seventh century, Pope Gregory the First issued an edict that instead of obliterating the pagan customs and rituals, the missionaries would instead incorporate them into Church dogma and custom. Samhain became All Hallows' Eve, ("hallow" means sacred or sanctified) and over time became Halloween. Trying to coopt and Christianize the holiday, the Church moved its holiday of All Saint's Day from May to November 1. Then later, in the tenth century, the Church added the celebration of All Soul's Day on November 2, thus creating a trinity of holidays—all of which were in one way or another about the mystery of death and dying.

That's all the history I am going to give you about Halloween. It is now primarily a children's holiday, commercialized beyond even Christmas if one considers the loss of meaning that has accompanied the commercialization. There are folk who are trying to reclaim it as an adult holiday, some of you perhaps, but in popular culture, Halloween is about candy, dress-up, and scary fun.

And in this respect, Halloween fits our culture. It has become a caricature of itself: the demons, witches, skeletons, werewolves, vampires, and other projections of death and the horrors of death that we have created over time now hold little meaning for us: American culture has defanged the vampires and declawed the werewolves, just as we have sterilized our experience of death itself. Oh yeah, there are gross and scary horror movies—but we experience them in the comfort of stadium seating theaters or our own surround sound wired living rooms—and being scared out of one's wits is no longer the serious business it was for thousands of years: now it's all a matter of fun. It's amazing how different our experience of death—and all that surrounds it—has become just over the last 150 years from that experienced for thousands of years by our ancestors.

One's attitude towards death is, of course, strongly influenced by one's theology. Traditional religion denies the finality of death and to the extent faith dominates, there is no need for philosophy and one need not think at all about death, except maybe to pray for it. But I don't know many people who pray for death, and I suspect that the aversion towards death in American culture is due to the fact that most people don't actually believe the doctrines of the mainstream religions, or if they do, they fear eternal punishment as much as they believe in eternal life.

So naturally enough we Unitarians, being both outside the mainstream just a bit and generally overeducated, we tend to respond to death by thinking about it and in thinking about it, believe we can deal with death and all its questions and mysteries. It's what we do. And never is philosophy as engaged as when it seeks to keep an unwanted truth at bay. So we philosophize and we talk—Unitarians love to talk more than any stereotypical teenage girl—but my favorite thing we do—we and millions upon millions of others—we write poetry about death.

Come on, show of hands. How many of you have ever in your lifetime, written poetry about death? I have. Lots of it. I had the good sense not to inflict any of it on you today, but it's out there, in my folders and on my computer. We write poetry about death as a way of dealing rationally with an essentially irrational, mysterious, and altogether frightening event. But let me just suggest for now that dealing rationally with a mysterious, irrational, emotional subject is almost always a cheat—one that we will pay for in the end.

The fear of and revulsion towards death is natural. But an obsession with the end of life sometimes ruins our experience of this one. I attended the memorial service for the victims of a tragic small plane crash. A mother and her two children were killed in that crash. The memorial was fundamentalist and speaker after speaker said, in one way or another, that unless those children and the other victims were up in heaven with Jesus, then there was no hope for life. No hope for life. I was appalled at the memorial. But this thought is in keeping with the thoughts of some of the best among us who have written poetry about death. Listen to what Blaise Pascal had to say about death in the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

There is no good in the life except the hope of another life, and one is happy only to the degree that one approaches it, and just as there will be no further misfortunes for those who possess a firm assurance of eternity, there is no happiness for those who have no inkling of it.

Do you believe this? Do any of you think that unless there is another life after this one that all is lost, there is no hope? I don't. I can't. And I won't.

Today is All Souls Day in the Christian world, El Dia de Los Muertos—the Day of the Dead—in Mexico and the Southwestern United States. The Day of the Dead is, in its essence, similar to the old Celtic holiday of Samhain. Like so much else, it has been Christianized, but it has its origins in pagan celebrations of death in old Mexico. Unlike the Spaniards who conquered them, the native Mexicans did not see death as an end of life, but as a continuation of life, and embraced it as a part of life. According to Christina Gonzales, a lecturer on Hispanic Studies at Arizona State University, “The pre-Hispanic peoples honored duality as being dynamic. They did not separate death from pain, wealth from poverty, as they did in Western cultures.”

But the Spaniards saw the holiday as sacrilegious and tried to stamp it out—sound familiar? They moved the Day of the Dead from the ninth month of the Aztec solar calendar (around the beginning of August) to All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day. But like most traditions

of the heart, the old holiday lived on and is today undergoing a revival as people from all cultural backgrounds seek to honor the dead.

Honoring the dead is what the holiday is all about and it is not a sad or morbid day. Death is taken as a given, as a part of life, but death is neither honored nor feared. The honor is given to the dead relatives, who are remembered through many acts of remembrance, including the baking of special bread and other foods, which are offered to the dead on alters called “ofrendas”. Some people spend the day in the cemetery, cleaning house, so to speak, leaving flowers, and lighting candles.

And importantly, there is reverence. Yes, there are skeletons everywhere, and in some ways it may be perceived that death is mocked or that the people are being reckless confronting death, a sort of false courage, but that is not what the holiday is about. It is about taking the time to reflect on the cycles of life and death, to remember the past and those who have left us, while at the same time, cherishing life and all it has to offer. It is a quintessentially experiential holiday of making food, going out to the cemetery, making alters, loading them up with the icons of memory, and simply being in the feelings, the sense, and the power of the time. Life becomes a mirror for death, and death a mirror for life.

I like the ideas behind the Day of the Dead, just as I like the ideas behind Samhain, and the ancient Celtic rituals that sought to reconcile life and death and in the process, give meaning to both. I wonder sometimes who it was decided that people were supposed to live forever in the first place? It is an arrogance that fits comfortably among the many arrogances we have about ourselves. But it, like so many of our beliefs, flies in the face of the most obvious evidence.

I have a rule about life. It goes something like this: the laws of the universe apply to me and other humans in the same manner and to the same degree as they apply to all other things in the world. This may seem like a simple rule, and it is, but it actually conflicts with what most people have thought for millennia, that is, that people are special, that we were specially created by God, and are intrinsically different from—better than—everything else in the world. The marvel is that a lot of people still believe that stuff.

Anyway, a consequence of my rule is that if a lion or a horse or a chimp or a dog dies and is dead, well, then so am I. I believe that when we die, we are gone. I retain this belief despite (or perhaps as a consequence of) having had cancer and being told I had about two months to live. Thanks to chemotherapy and my own biochemistry, those two months have blossomed into 17 years—and counting. This experience—and all the poetry I have ever written about death and dying—have convinced me that we as a people—as a species—need to move away from worrying about how to gain life eternal—rejecting Pascal—and concentrate our efforts on how to best live this life—the one we know we have, the one we know is short, the one we know will some day end. We need to stop guarding the doorway to death and instead spend our time on the playing fields of life.

They say that youth is wasted on the young, that only the old can truly appreciate being young. I do not want us to ever say that life was wasted on the living—but those who have come

close to death—including me—will tell you that is often the case. If the dead could speak, I think they would agree. Life is wasted on the living.

The poets tell death to be not proud or instruct old people to not go gentle into that good night. But as I suggested earlier, writing poetry about death does not deal with death: it gilds death, transforms death from a messy reality to an intellectual construct. Like almost all intellectualizations about life, writing poetry about death is a way to escape from the realities of life while still convincing ourselves that we are dealing with those exact same realities.

I believe that the best way to deal with the fear of death, our revulsion with death, is to embrace death as part of life. Fear, like most things that grow in the dark, withers from exposure. The ancients knew that and so do the people who celebrate El Dia de los Muertos.

So today I ask you to consider—just consider—living an active life, of getting dirty in the trenches of the real world, as a substitute for writing poetry about death and all the other mind games we play to deal with our mortality. Instead of writing poetry about death, of creating intellectual theories about death, of being good European Protestant types and hiding from death, I suggest we embrace death as an inevitable part of life, invite it into our lives, and then simply experience life to the fullest, like people all over Mexico in particular are doing today. Why not substitute a free, active, and full life for all the worry, stress, and fear of death that Christianity in particular has fed us over the centuries?

Life and death are intertwined, so let me take a minute here to talk about life, of living the full life. I worry about what it means to have a full, active life these days. Each of us gets to decide for ourselves, of course, but have you noticed that in this electronic, media driven culture, many Americans tend to live life on the periphery, almost vicariously? I just read a study that says that children under 6—under six years old—spend on average well over 2 hours a day in front of a screen, be it a computer, television, or whatever. Adults spend several times that in front of screens. Television is the most important of those screens.. Through television we connect our minds to life through the news, through sports, through so-called reality shows that are everywhere. But watching television, like writing poetry about death, is living life both passively and intellectually—that is, inside our heads.

Sitting around taking in stuff through all the screens of life isn't the only way we are passive about life. When *People* magazine first came out, I feared that it presaged the growth of a cult of celebrity the likes of which had never before been seen. People have always lived vicariously through others, but our cult of celebrity has reached epidemic proportions. It has spread out like an oil drop on water and now touches virtually every aspect of life, every age level (there is a kid's *People*), and every economic level. Not only does everybody want to be like Mike—or any one of dozens of sports stars, movie stars, television stars—they gain satisfaction in life through the exploits of others. The most obvious example of this is sports, but it happens everywhere. Living vicariously has become an art form in this country.

What ever happened to viewing life as an experiential phenomenon, something that should be done outside of our heads or at least equally on the right side of our brains as the left?

Life is not, should not be, merely a spectator sport. Life is quintessentially an experience in the real world.

It's gotten so bad there was an ad during a Saturday morning kids show a few years ago that encouraged kids to do something novel—instead of playing video basketball with their thumbs through the images on TV, this ad encouraged them to go outside with a real ball to real courts and actually play. I still believe in the adage that it's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game. This adage applies to life itself; but you have to get into the game before you can figure out how well you are playing.

Did any of you find it interesting that Neo, Trinity, Morpheus and the rest of the heroes in *The Matrix* risk their lives in order to be able to live in a ratty, cold, dark desolate world—the real world—and eschew existence in “the matrix”, an existence that for them at least would allow them to live like gods? I think that many people in our society—perhaps unconsciously—would rather live in the matrix than in the real world. Only we don't call it the matrix. We call it modern living, living that is increasingly less experiential in the “real world” and that depends ever more heavily on connections, if I can call them that, between our minds and the hundreds upon hundreds of plays and dramas and games that are enacted by others and which we encounter as a book, a play, a movie, television, radio, a CD or DVD, or even a video game. How many of our experiences in life actually occur in the real world? How many of the ones that make an impression, that we recall later in life? How much of our lives are lived in our own 21<sup>st</sup> century version of *The Matrix*, glued to a screen, ingesting information from sports to history to cops to the tragedies of the world on cable news?

I am not suggesting that we never go to the movies again. Far from it. I love the movies. I'm not going to stop going to the movies or watching TV or rooting for anybody who plays the Yankees. But movies are not life and neither is anything else we only participate in as observers, voyeurs, passive recipients of images, words, and events in our minds. That's the danger, that we become mere receptors instead of participants, spectators instead of players.

Because no matter how we choose to live our lives, they will end. It is as simple as that. And there will be—must be—pain. If not for us, then those around us. The relationship of that pain to life, of life to death, is expressed wonderfully by Debra Winger's character in *Shadowlands*. That's the movie about C. S. Lewis and his relationship with and marriage to an American woman who dies a young death from cancer. In confronting the pain of her impending death and the effect it is having on her husband, Winger's character says: “The pain then is part of the happiness now.” Such a simple and profound statement. The pain of my death is part of, entwined with, the happiness of my life.

And to some degree the intensity of the happiness now will be mirrored by the intensity of the pain then. Great happiness, great pain. Should we try then to live a mediocre life, hoping the pain at the end will perhaps be mediocre? That seems like a pretty silly idea at first glance. But maybe it is not so silly.

Fear is a very powerful motivator. Fear can operate on our subconscious selves and sabotage us. I wonder just how many people are afraid to live large because it will mean having to die large and that thought brings more fear and anxiety than they can stand? I wonder how many people won't allow themselves to become engaged with life, other people, everything, out of a fear of loss? I don't know. Maybe I'm crazy.

But I do know that people are always afraid they are going to lose what they have—especially their very lives. And I know there is a fear of pain—physical pain, emotional pain, existential pain, the pain of death, of loss, of the ultimate void of simply being gone—dead—forever and ever. But if we go too far to protect what we have or if we try to hang around at the periphery of life, practice avoidance techniques, and allow ourselves to become spectators of life—voyeurs really—then we insure we will lose what we have. Absolutely insure it.

Don't let that happen. Life is about opportunities and opportunities come and go. To put it in poetic terms: Our gift is not time, but opportunity: time is constant while opportunity is fleeting and ever changing. If we miss those opportunities for real life, and live in our heads instead of in the real world, live passively rather than actively, live not to lose instead of to gain, then in the end, what will be saved, what will be won? If not this, then what exactly *are* you saving your life for?

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