DYING

J. David Velleman

Some people hope to die in their sleep. Not me. I don't regret having been oblivious at my birth, but I don't want death to catch me napping.

My birth hasn't figured much in my life, other than having begun it, whereas my death will have figured far more than just ending it. It's been on my mind, one way or another, ever since I learned what death is. I've wondered about it, worried about it, once or twice wished for it, and in any case constantly sensed its presence in my future.

One usually thinks of death in the abstract. But at some point it dawned on me that I will have a particular death, my very own death. Since that moment of clarity, I have felt possessive about my death. Death is a momentous life-event, and I am going to get one.

The expectation of getting a death of one's own lies behind the ancient belief in the Fates. They are the guardians of the tantalizing facts as to when, where, and how one will die, the facts that will finally bring the abstraction of death down to earth. We have dispensed with the Fates but not with their function; we've merely reassigned it to the cardiologists and oncologists. They tell us the 'how' of our deaths and then we demand the 'when' by asking 'How long have I got?' Of course, physicians are not the Fates, and trying to cast them in that role disturbs the doctor-patient relationship. Having a diagnosis is not enough, but it's all we can get until our fate is revealed by being fulfilled.

Many philosophers think that death is a deprivation, whereas immortality would at worst be a bore. I see deprivation on the side of immortality. Being immortal would

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entail living forever without life's most persistently anticipated consummation.

Immortality is not a deprivation for the gods, who have known literally forever that they would never die and who have therefore never considered the prospect: the gods have always planned on being immortal. Their immortality is quite different from what we mortals would get if granted a reprieve. As nouveaux immortals, we would have spent years contemplating our inevitable deaths only to be told, 'Never mind'. But I do mind, have minded all of my life with all of my mental strength. At this point, I'd rather go through with it.

Going through with it would be a bad idea if death were a significant harm. But I have lost my grip on the philosophical question about the harm of death. I've lost my grip because I cannot imagine an answer that would affect how I feel about death, and I can't imagine how anything could count as an answer unless it would affect how I feel.

When I say that my feelings wouldn't be affected, I don't mean that they are permanently settled; I mean that they are permanently unsettled. About death, most of us have mixed feelings.

Our feelings about death are mixed because we see it as the end of our life-stories and we can tell those stories, and that ending, in many different ways. We can tell the story of missing out on the future; we can tell the story of running out of time; we can tell the story of becoming nothing but a memory. None of these is a good story, but they are bad in different ways – sad, scary, spooky. And then there are stories that aren't bad at all: the old-time Christian story of laying down our burdens, the Buddhist story of living fully in each of only so many moments.

What would it mean for one of these stories to be right and the others wrong? What would it mean for one of the associated feelings to be right and the others wrong? I don't know; and so I no longer know what's at stake in the philosophical debate about the harm of death.

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We can of course come to realize that we have spun out some of these stories too far. If we imagine that laying down our burdens will lead to a refreshing night's sleep, then we're making a mistake; we're also making a mistake if we imagine that we'll be disappointed at missing out on the future. Yet even after we adjust our stories to the realities of death, the adjusted stories remain compelling: we really will be relieved of our burdens, even if we won't feel the relief; we really will miss out on the future, even if we won't know what we're missing. Nonexistence isn't that difficult to comprehend; and no one can tell us that we're mistaken to feel forward-looking relief or forward-looking grief about it, despite knowing that we won't feel relief or grief at the time.

That said, I have now argued that there's something to be learned – namely, that there's nothing else to be learned. Once we realize that we'll never resolve how to feel about death, we can stop trying to resolve it, stop feeling frustrated about not having resolved it, and hence stop feeling at least one of the things that we currently feel. We can also be less rigid in our remaining feelings, by feeling each of them in the awareness that we can also feel the others.

They say that when you face death, your whole life passes before your eyes. Taken literally, the expression is ludicrous. Woody Allen:[1]

> They took my hood off and threw a rope around my neck, and they decided to hang me. And suddenly my whole life passed before my eyes. I saw myself as a kid again, in Kansas, going to school, swimming at the swimming hole, and fishing, frying up a mess-o-catfish, going down to the general store, getting a piece of gingham for Emmy-Lou. And I realize it's not my life. They're gonna hang me in two minutes, the wrong life is passing before my eyes.

Having the right life pass before his eyes would not have been as funny, but it would have been just as absurd. A

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fast-forward replay of his life? With a noose around his neck?

If the expression is to make any sense, it has to mean that when facing death, you suddenly see your life as a completed whole, a particular life bounded at both ends. So long as a life is open-ended, it remains an abstraction, some completion or other of what has gone before. When your life comes to a close, it becomes fully specific and hence concrete. Not to see your life out to its end would be never to have known it as a concrete particular.

In a traditional Jewish wedding, the bride walks around the groom three (or seven) times. As you might expect, there are all sorts of explanations for this custom. I like to think that it gives the bride a good look at what she is getting, not just in the sense of revealing bald spots but in the sense of showing the groom as a fully specified individual, with all of the details filled in. The bride is being shown that she is marrying a particular man, not an abstraction.

Until people circumnavigated the Earth, they lived somewhere in the midst of somewhere or other. In order to see where they stood, they had to close the circle. Similarly, closing the circle of one's life is necessary to seeing it as the particular life one has lived. And I want to know the particular life I've lived before I stop living it – which will entail fully living it up to the very end.

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Note

[1] http://www.ibras.dk/comedy/allen.htm

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