

Life Is Short, Therefore....  
Ken Olson

Have you ever had a near-death experience, a situation in which you narrowly escaped dying? I'm guessing that most of us have had numerous such close calls, but we simply haven't noticed them –such as the oncoming car with a texting driver veering into our lane just an instant after our meeting it, instead of just before.

Along with our profound grief over those whom we have lost and our gratitude for their lives, Memorial Day might occasion such thoughts. Many of us here and now have had illnesses or emergencies that, in another age, would have ended things. As an aid to your own reflection, let me tell you of my “close to home” experiences.

One of my older brothers served in the Air Force in Alaska. Due to illness, he missed a flight; that plane crashed on a glacier and was not found for a year. Another served as a cook in the Army during the Korean War. He was transferred to a different unit, and, just two days later, the group he had left was overrun: no survivors.

Personally, I've had the proverbial “brush with death” at least three times. At age six, I almost drowned while swimming with my brothers in an abandoned gravel pit. (I'm still not comfortable on the water.)

When in high school, I came down a steep hill on my motorcycle in the dark of night, and the angle was such that the dim headlight did not reveal the train that was crossing at the bottom. At the last instant, I laid the old Harley on its side, coming to rest just a few feet from the rails.

And some thirty years ago, alone in Montana's remote badlands and in hundred-degree heat, I took a very hard fall down a steep talus slope and was knocked unconscious. I woke up with torn knees, my water container ruptured, and no memory at all of having fallen. My head had landed between two boulders –six inches, either way, and I would still be there.

In the 900-page *Collected Poems* of W. H. Auden, four lines stand out to me above all the wonderful rest, because I gratefully associate them with those times when “Fear gave his watch no look / The lion grieves loped from the shade / And on our knees their muzzles laid / And Death put down his book.”

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut, with his dry sense of humor, began a sentence with “If I should die, God forbid, ....” Of course, death is not forbidden --far from it, and that writer would know. In WWII, he had been taken prisoner by the Nazis and survived the firestorm of the Allied bombing of Dresden, Germany only because he was doing slave-labor in an underground meat locker when everything above was reduced to ashes.

For us, accidents are in the news; friends and relatives are no longer with us; we read the obituary columns, all reminders that this life is fragile and has limits not of our choosing. “At my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near.” So wrote the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet Andrew Marvell.

James Pecquet titled this image-filled passage *Across the Street*: “Boys chased grounders and flies over the green grass, learning winning and losing and dreaming the glory of tomorrow's game. Occasionally a freak of wind or muscle would send the ball out of the park and across the street to the pine-needle carpet of the nursing home where two or more old men sitting on the porch would rise slowly and with halting steps race each other to retrieve it and win a soda. It only took a lifetime to cross the street.”

We Americans are often in denial about all this, thinking death is something that happens to other people. We spend untold millions trying to look younger. Or we are beguiled by the pitiful cliché, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.” Or we simply postpone thinking about the issue and thus fit the description by Epicurus of ancient Greece: “The fool, with all his other vices, is always getting ready to live,” instead of living well this precious gift.

But, just for a moment, let’s imagine that we really could put the issue on hold. What if we knew that we would never die? Then, it might be that neither could we embrace love nor any other noble thing. For, consciously or not, isn’t it precisely because “time flies” and we sense that we do not have “all the time in the world” that we are moved to devote ourselves to the things that matter most? Only one life, soon to pass; only to stand for goodness will last.

Thus, even at its longest, life is short. However, it need not be small. There are lots of ways to enlarge it. And, as always, Now is the time.

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