

End-of-Self Help

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In December 2007, at the annual World Congress on Anti-Aging Medicine in Las Vegas, Suzanne Somers, the actress and bestselling author of *Ageless: The Naked Truth About Bioidentical Hormones*, delivered a rhapsodic keynote speech in praise of hormone replacement therapy. “I go to these parties sometimes with all these successful men who’ve really achieved in their careers,” she told the enthusiastic, middle-aged crowd. “Seventies, eighties, and they’re out of gas. They’re just so out of gas! They all sit there, they’re drooping—their face, their body’s drooping—they’ve all got deep belly fat, they’re all kind of grumpy . . . And I look at them and I think, ‘This out of gas doesn’t have to be!’ You know this. I know this. It’s hormones!”

Thanks to modern science, the grail of enduring youthfulness—if not eternal youth—is within the grasp of middle-class Americans, for whom the road to senescence is now paved with restorative procedures and rejuvenating formulas. You can be young again, at least until you’re dead. And while Somers is still a ways from a National Institutes of Health appointment, the government and its bedfellows in the private sector are enmeshed in life extension of the more pedestrian variety. Sustaining people in the last two years of their lives consumes a third of Medicare’s budget, and of the 16 percent of the country’s GDP that is now spent on healthcare, an ever growing proportion is dedicated to treating a range of diseases that would have been death sentences half a century ago. Medical advances have pushed back old age—the duration of the average American life has increased by a decade since 1950—and turned the final years into a series of expensive encounters with corpse-maintenance machines.

And this may be only a prelude. There are those who say we are not even beginning to approach the horizon of mortality, and that death may be delayed another twenty, thirty, even fifty years. Aubrey de Gray, a biogerontologist who is perhaps the foremost scientific proponent of life extension, argues that through cell therapy and the deceleration of metabolism, we’ll be able to “eliminate aging as a cause of death this century,” allowing people to live as long as a thousand years. Much to the chagrin of so-called bioconservatives, we are redefining what is “humanly possible,” as well as what is human.

Death has always been feared and eternal life sought, but for most of human history anxiety about death was resolved through the promise of an afterlife—hence the treasure-packed burial chambers of the pyramids, the human ash clogging the Ganges and the catacombs of Rome. Why? “People didn’t live half so long in the old days,” as the novelist Julian Barnes points out in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, his memoir of mortality. “Forty was doing very well, given pestilence and war, with the doctor as likely to kill as cure. To die from ‘a draining away of one’s strength caused by extreme old age’ was in Montaigne’s day a ‘rare, singular and extraordinary death.’ Nowadays we assume it as our right.”

The ancients lived in much greater proximity to death, which may explain the Greeks’ sober estimation of Hades, lord of the underworld: “He was unpitiful, inexorable, but just,” according to the classicist Edith Hamilton, a “terrible” but “not an evil god.” Today’s obsessions with everlasting youth and life extension are spurred by our cognitive distance from death, as we have ever more

reason to defer our contemplation of its icy embrace. And yet if the task of philosophy is, as Cicero put it, “to learn how to die,” it’s a wonder there aren’t more Wittgensteins among us: now the golden years stretch on and on, stinking of death, and so they also provide ample time for considering it.

Of course, contemplation of death is not restricted to seniors, though extra years may grant us more time to steel ourselves for the moment when our organs cease functioning, the mind becomes muddled and the hormonal bank is cashed out. And there is plenty of evidence that fear of death will survive the longevity economy it begat. How else to explain that the most popular nonfiction book of our time is not a romance novel, get-rich-quick guide or legal thriller but a memento mori: *The Purpose-Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, with more than 30 million copies sold to date. “You may feel it’s morbid to think about death, but actually it’s unhealthy to live in denial of death and not consider what is inevitable,” Warren writes. “Only a fool would go through life unprepared for what we all know will eventually happen. You need to think more about eternity, not less.” The megachurch magnate’s tract alloys the metaphysical concerns of classical philosophy and the tautologies of evangelical Protestantism to create a millennial “anti-self-help book,” guiding readers away from questions about their success, status, self-worth and virility, and toward an understanding of why God has placed them on earth and what they are meant to do here—meaning how they are meant to serve Him.

To Warren, mundane reality is “the staging area, the preschool, the tryout for your life in eternity. It is the practice workout before the actual game; the warm-up lap before the race begins.” It is, in the words of Thomas Browne, “but a small parenthesis in eternity,” and it is impossible to live well without reconciling oneself to this fact.

According to Simon Critchley, a philosopher at The New School in New York City, there’s a simple explanation for the anxiety afflicting readers of Somers and Warren: “What defines human life in our corner of the planet at the present time is not just a fear of death,” which is normal enough, “but an overwhelming terror of annihilation.” Critchley’s *Book of Dead Philosophers*, a survey of nearly 200 philosophers’ views on mortality in relation to their own lives and deaths, attempts to show how embracing the ideal of the philosophical death can help us vanquish this terror without recourse to the promise of a great beyond.

All philosophy positions itself in relation to death, and the foreknowledge of divine judgment was once its great consolation. But ever since Averroës declared philosophy independent of theology in the twelfth century, that consolation has heartened the religious alone. It’s no surprise that, for Warren, “revelation beats speculation any day.” He has little use for modes of thinking that emphasize inquiry over knowledge. What the minister offers is assurance that God is not dead, and that the medieval understanding of death as a continuation of one’s service to God (“your birthday into eternal life”) is still valid. Philosophy provides much colder comfort. At its most frank, there is Schopenhauer: “We begin in the madness of carnal desire and the transport of voluptuousness, we end in the dissolution of all our parts and the musty stench of corpses.” At its most astringent, there is Seneca: “You act like mortals in all that you fear, and like immortals in all that you desire.” At its most agnostic, there is La Rochefoucauld: “Nothing proves as well that philosophers are not as convinced as they claim that death is not an evil, as the torment they go through in order to establish the immortality of their names by the loss of their lives.”

Generations of philosophers have contended that to live with death on the mind is to allay the anxiety of mortality. *In Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Barnes somewhat tentatively takes up this assertion, convinced of the value of meditating on death but unconvinced that the end result of that

endeavor could be anything like “coming to terms.” He sides with Freud, who wrote, “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so, we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.” Philosophers, in his estimation, are satisfied spectators of the self.

Critchley disagrees. “The philosopher,” in his decidedly macho formulation, “looks death in the face and has the strength to say that it is nothing.”

Barnes turns to melancholy, and Jules Renard: “The word that is most true, most exact, most filled with meaning, is the word ‘nothing.’” For most people, neither “nothing” compares with the succoring image of St. Peter presiding at the pearly gates.

In the future, we may be able to engineer our way out of death or at least buy ourselves a few hundred years. But for now, the coming-to-terms paradigm is still fairly close to what Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross prescribed in her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), which birthed the Conscious Dying movement and provided the Age of Aquarius with a thanatological gloss. Kübler-Ross’s model of the five stages of dying—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—is her most enduring legacy, still widely used by mental health professionals to explain how people with terminal illnesses, as well as their bereaved, confront and cope with death. Less remembered are Kübler-Ross’s more radical, Eastern-influenced views about death: she encouraged her followers to devote their lives to “death awareness,” viewing the end of life as a spiritual progression toward a transcendent, universal form of existence, an ascension made possible by the cool acceptance of mortality. Not only should the living envy the dead, she suggested; they should imitate them, abasing the self until nothing but an empty vessel remains. Then you could meet your maker in monastic form, just like St. Antony, who in Critchley’s telling “stretched his feet out a little and looked upon death with joy.”

But much later in life, after a series of strokes had left her paralyzed and scandals had damaged her professional reputation, Kübler-Ross proved herself just another backslider. “I love E.T.,” she told a fellow aficionado of the paranormal in a 1997 interview, “because he represents everything I believe in: to prolong life—when they hook him up to the machines.” By the time she reached her deathbed, in 2004, Kübler-Ross had convinced herself that death as such did not actually exist.

If “death is the limit in relation to which life is lived,” Critchley writes, too few people today are willing to accept their limit; they deny it even as they suffer incontinence, deformation and what the novelist Lawrence Durrell described as “the slow disgracing of the mind.” The biological sciences hint at a greater conundrum: Barnes observes that their major achievement over the past century has been to discover that the autonomous individual is, at root, a genetically determined package of cells. Our limits may be extendable, but in other ways we are even more limited than once thought. Not only must we eventually die; we must admit that the self is a clever fabrication, however it benefits us evolutionarily. Furthermore, we must assume that death as we know it will also expire: when the sun goes cold in a few billion years, it won’t be *Homo sapiens* toasting it farewell.

Critchley argues that this reality should not impinge on our desire to die as we have lived—if we have lived bravely, drolly and with panache. For him, the best deaths are those in which a lifetime of fruitful rumination on the nature of mortality ends with gracious acceptance and perhaps a final-breath witticism to boot. Critchley relates the story of St. Thomas More, who while imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting his beheading wrote a meditation on the pain endured by Christ on the cross; when the moment of his execution arrived, More calmly applied his blindfold and awaited the blade. John Locke also died at peace, declaring, “I have lived long enough and I thank

God I have enjoyed a happy life; but after all this life is nothing but vanity.” The ancient skeptic Anaxarchus made the mistake of insulting Nicocreon, the tyrant of Cyprus, who later deposited him into a man-size mortar and pulverized him with iron pestles. But he denied his materiality till the end, gleefully shrieking, “Pound, pound the pouch containing Anaxarchus, you do not pound Anaxarchus.”

Then there are those who died in character, if not with dignity or slogans. Pythagoras’ hauteur is said to have offended a powerful Calabrian, who sent his retinue to chase the philosopher. They burned down his house and pursued him as far as a bean field, which Pythagoras refused to cross—he and his followers had a prohibition against the testicular-looking legume—and then cut this throat. Later, the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius captured and tortured Pythagoras’ acolyte Timycha in order to find out why her master would rather die than come into contact with beans; she bit her tongue off and spat it at Dionysius, taking the secret to her grave. Heraclitus died somewhat less nobly. In order to cure his dropsy, he covered himself in dung; either the dung was wet, causing him to drown, or it was dry, and the sun entombed him in adobe.

Perhaps we should all hope to die well, if not to enjoy the pleasure of a last line delivered with aplomb among loved ones, a bon mot denying the Angel of Death his satisfaction. But the point of Critchley’s book is not so much to recommend any particular variation on the good death as to suggest that heightened attention to mortality increases our quality of life. His keystone here is Montaigne, who took pleasure in stories of ancient Egyptians bringing a skeleton to banquets and propping it up like a scarecrow. “Drink and be merry,” its caretaker would call out, “for when you are dead you will be like this.” The lesson Montaigne absorbed from this scene was to have “death continually present, not merely in my imagination, but in my mouth.” Critchley takes it further: “To philosophize, then, is to learn to have death in your mouth, in the words you speak, the food you eat and the drink that you imbibe.” Chew on death, and the good life will follow.

But can the classical prescription still produce these desired results? Barnes recounts the story of a man who becomes aware of his imminent mortality and resolves to do his death justice: Eugene O’Kelly, the CEO of a major accounting firm who at 53 is told he has inoperable brain cancer and less than three months to live. Immediately, O’Kelly begins drafting ways to make his death “the best death possible,” applying “the skill set of a CEO” to devising the “final and most important to-do list of my life.” He creates “perfect moments” and “perfect days” during which he “unwinds” his relationships with friends and loved ones. For his daughter, he arranges a sojourn to the Arctic Circle via private jet so that he can watch her “meet and trade with the Inuits.”

In Barnes’s estimation, this is “not so much dying in character as dying in caricature,” a tragicomic update of the classical ideal. O’Kelly reacquaints himself with God, learns to meditate and makes “a positive connection to the ‘other side.’ ” He lays out detailed plans for his funeral—Gluck’s “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” arranged for flute and harp, “moving and unique” eulogies—and hires a ghostwriter to pen a memoir of his death, *Chasing Daylight*, which takes its title from a golf metaphor and reads like the ultimate case study from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Eventually, he dies in “a state of tranquil acceptance and genuine hope.”

“O’Kelly was surely dying as he had lived,” Barnes acknowledges, “and we should all be so lucky.”

Given advance notice, a private jet and a stockpile of cash, many of us might meet our maker as calmly as O’Kelly did. But such an end is not in the cards for most people, who as likely as not can expect their death to be painful, protracted and undignified. O’Kelly’s drive to “succeed” at dying repulses Barnes because it betrays a narcissism born of privilege, a sense of metaphysical

entitlement. Nevertheless, O’Kelly is not a reprehensible person. He may be self-centered and oblivious, but he also strives quite genuinely to “come to terms,” and by the end of his life he believes that he has. He is a fitting advertisement for the twenty-first-century good death and a testament to why men of his position may be the most likely to attain it.

Barnes combs through the details of O’Kelly’s story hoping to find some answer to the questions animating his book—questions that Critchley ignores. Has the good death ever truly existed? Should we moderns emulate what we think the ancients might have said or done?

We are programmed to fear death, and for Critchley the ancients offer a way to deprogram ourselves, overcome our basic instincts and thereby transcend both our animal nature and the degradation of contemporary life. It isn’t hormone therapy, but the point nonetheless is to become a kind of superman, if in spirit rather than flesh. In some ways, Critchley’s book falls under the popular *ars moriendi* literary genre inaugurated in 1415 with *Tractatus Artis Bene Moriendi* (*The Art of Dying Well*), which was not philosophical in its objectives but instructional, a manual on preparing oneself for a good, Christian death—what might be termed an end-of-self-help book. Critchley clearly aims to be provocative rather than didactic, but like that of the *Tractatus*, his agenda is ultimately one of self-actualization. As Critchley quotes Montaigne, “He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.”

But a slave to what? To biology, yes, but also to what Critchley derides as our culture’s “countless new sophistries,” which offer knowledge of self for a fee and are to us today what religion was to Marx: the “sigh of the oppressed creature.” He never names these specifically, but he does contrast their promises of “Knowledge (capital K) of something called Self (capital S)” tricked out in “expensive, brightly colored wrappings” with the free and radical skepticism afforded by philosophy. Critchley allows that he wrote most of the book in Los Angeles, a city characterized by a “peculiar terror of annihilation,” where “death, darkness and desperation lurk behind the various screens that human beings use to block access to the outside world: vast wrap-around sunglasses, Venetian blinds at every window and tinted glass in the black, usually German, SUVs.”

The strange neon surreality of Los Angeles seems a fitting backdrop for Critchley’s meditation on how we might improve our relationship with death, and his desire to penetrate the opaque surface of our plastic desires is commendable. Unfortunately, the story he tells his readers about LA is no more credible than his stories about philosophers. They are all myths that contain elements of truth and suit his purposes. Critchley’s account of the death of Pythagoras, for instance, is prefaced by an admission that, “sadly, it is now almost universally assumed by classical scholars that Pythagoras never existed But let’s not allow Pythagoras’ mere non-existence to deter us, as the stories that surround him are so compelling.” Socrates, whose trial and death Critchley describes as marking the beginning of philosophy, could hardly have died as Plato says he did, calmly relaying bits of wisdom to his followers even as the poison gripped his veins, seeing as how hemlock tends to induce vomiting and violent convulsions as it courses through the body and stills the organs.

Critchley’s style is pithy and anecdotal, and he is more concerned with the morals to be gleaned from these philosophers’ deaths and last words than the finer points of how, when and why. The power of their stories transcends fact, as does the story of Los Angeles as a depraved cultural wasteland populated by surgically augmented seekers of eternal youth. What is important is the tincture of truth and the ease of extrapolation. But these dead thinkers are not just players on a stage to Critchley. He argues not only that the “philosophical death” is a noble idea but also that it is, in some fashion, achievable, an assertion that is undermined by his casual conflation of mythology and history, ideal and real.

Critchley may not put forth a viable antidote to Suzanne Somers and Rick Warren, but then again, the sophistries hawked by New Age gurus, life-extension enthusiasts and televangelists have been around since, well, the Sophists, and are likely to endure for as long as we do. And while many of Critchley's philosophers seem intent on conquering death, some are simply humbled by it, teaching us that "it is only in grief that we become most truly ourselves." Still others are flummoxed by death, and "despite the lofty reach of their intellect," they "cope with the hand that life deals them like the rest of us."

Between the example of Cicero and the likelihood that he will expire without grace or glory in a hospital bed, slowly deprived of his faculties, Barnes assiduously avoids any conclusion—perhaps, in part, to ward off his own. He weighs the fear of dying against the fear of not existing, considers the consolations of religion and literature and contemplates the words of philosophers and family members. He takes solace in the thought that he won't really die until his last reader does. And at the conclusion of his book, he wonders what he has accomplished with all this, whether he has "got this death thing straight—or even a little straighter."

The frivolous things with which we fill our lives may well leave us anxious, old and wanting hormone therapy, God or both. But if there is to be salvation for us on earth, we must come to terms even with those things. Or we must come to terms with not coming to terms, and move on.