Faith & Reason Look at Death



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John Bluth Gill Massimo Pigliucci



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At Death's Door— What I Learned at the Far Edge of Life John Bluth Gill

On Death—Thoughts of an Optimistic Atheist Massimo Pigliucci

John Bluth Gill



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At Death's Door-

What I Learned at the Far Edge of Life

John Bluth Gill

I want to thank Pamela Schoenewaldt, the UT Libraries' Writer in Residence, for including writers of all kinds and all levels of experience in this series. I am both pleased and humbled to represent a certain group of writers who often go unnoticed—the many ministers and pastors who write, day in and day out, week in and week out, for their congregations. (This, of course, excludes those who use desperatepreachers.com and other similar websites.)

Now, I know some of you "real" writers will cringe at the notion of including the lowly pastor in your ranks, but it's true. If I am not writing every single day, I am thinking about something I am writing. In addition to sermons, I write brief articles, prayers, poems, liturgical pieces, occasional lectures, words of celebration for weddings, and words of remembrance for funerals.

My weekly sermons, or "meditations" as I prefer to call them, include elements of biography, autobiography, philosophy, theology, science, dramatic dialogue, pure fantasy and more. Sometimes they are even biblical! While I never recall dangling my congregation on a spider's thread over the pits of hell, I certainly try to lead them to places where the waters of the Spirit always run deep and still.

Sometimes I succeed. Out of the 40 or 50 sermons I write every year, I hope to come up with at least six that are excellent—the kind that make the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I write. I also give myself permission to produce six really bad

ones—the kind that most real writers would never even try to publish. For some reason, I have never been able to bring myself to reuse an old meditation. I would rather offer up an original sermon that stinks than an old sermon that has some merit. On those Sundays, I suspect my congregation would prefer something from desperatepreachers.com, but I am stubborn.

I have no doubt that there are ministers in this area who are better writers than I. I only hope I can represent my colleagues reasonably well. At any rate, the next time you are going to bed late on a Saturday night, remember that there are many unknown writers still at work all across the community, wrestling with words and angels, reaching for the inexpressible, hoping to find the right turn of phrase to unlock the human heart or open up some darkened corner of the mind. Think of them bent over their keyboards and smile. Think of them and be comforted. They are warriors of the heart. They are lovers of the Spirit, women and men who care deeply for their world with a hope that is both human and divine, foolish and inexhaustible.

Before I talk about death, I want to acknowledge the obvious fact that I can only speak out of my own particular experiences of death. With a few notable exceptions, most have been with people who died of disease or other natural causes after long and productive lives. Those who live through war or those who work extensively with dying children, for example, have very different experiences to draw upon than I.

Even now, as we gather here to revel in the power and beauty of words, I am also very aware that all across this world there are people dying in terrible and oppressive circumstances. It is important to me to acknowledge that reality, as well as the limitations of my own experience.

Finally, before I begin to tell my story, I want to say thank you to all of the people, individuals and families, who invited me to share their own uncertain and deeply personal journeys toward death. I remember and offer special thanks to Mirabel Kelt, Opal McCawley and Lester Gill, my father. If there is anything of value in what I share with you tonight, I probably learned it from them.



Introduction

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.

So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind: Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.

Crowned with lilies and laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

From "Dirge Without Music" by Edna St. Vincent Millay¹

Let's get one thing straight at the outset. There is nothing good about death. Generally speaking, it is an ugly, nasty and painful process. The only other life process that comes close to it in difficulty is birth. I'm not saying that death is evil in some deep ontological sense. After all, as so many people are fond of saying today, it is just another part of life. It is natural. Indeed! But so are lice, the flu and food poisoning, and I don't approve of any of them either.

Natural? Of course it is. Each one of us will one day lie with a breathless and gaping mouth. But that doesn't make it all right with me. I have seen too many beautiful people go into that dark tunnel of loss to call it good—fine people, better than me by a long shot, reduced to hollow shells by a process of suffering that would break down the most hardened CIA operative.

It's not the exit that kills you. It's not the last breath from the gaping hole that used to be a mouth that makes you ask how this could be a natural part of any world called good. All too often, that closing moment *IS* good, but only as an end to the

relentless and unmerciful process of death that is nothing less than the collapse of the body, the loss of the mind and, all too often, the destruction of personality. No, I have seen too much of the process of death to call it good.

Edna St. Vincent Millay continues:

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind; Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave. I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

But that is precisely what makes my story so surprising. At death's door, where good people are compelled to watch other good people, their beloved ones, suffer the horror of crucifixion by natural causes, in a place where there ought to be nothing but darkness and the gnashing of teeth, I have found something...something I did not expect to find.

A Home for the Dying

My first real experiences of death took place during an internship as a student chaplain at a massive nursing home in Connecticut. Prior to that time, I was amazingly insulated from the reality of death. I still have terrible childhood memories of being left behind when my parents went to attend the funeral of Grandma Gill, the best gift-giver I have ever known. For months afterward, she came to me in dreams, bringing wonderful toys from heaven. Even then, my seven-year-old mind knew that it was too good to be true. When my heart finally understood that she would not be back, ever, I had one last dream, of two stern angels who came to me saying that I would not be able to see Grandma anymore. She had been arrested for shoplifting in heaven.

Somehow, I managed to miss the funerals of all my grandparents, right through college, so when I came to the nursing home in my mid-twenties, I had no idea what to expect. It was a huge place with multiple floors and levels of care, from independent, to assisted, to just-barely living. Passing through the front doors of that place was never easy for me. I commiserated with those who always sat on the front porch, soaking in the fresh air and waiting, for a cab perhaps, or a long-lost loved one, to pull up to the curb and bring them home. They looked at me expectantly. I took a deep breath and entered.

Not that it was a bad place. As geriatric facilities go, it was state-of-the-art; clean, bright and fully staffed with every kind of professional a person might need in the last stages of life, even a gang of student chaplains like myself, none of whom had any idea what they were getting into.

I was assigned to work on two different floors. One was a restricted access floor for those in the last stages of Alzheimer's disease. Each floor at the home had a name, but I have blocked this one out. At the time, it seemed to me like a scene from some circle deep in the heart of Dante's Inferno. As soon as the electronically locked doors swung open, you could hear loud cries and weeping. Some people were strapped into beds and chairs for safety reasons beyond their understanding. Most were restrained simply by the broken state of their own bodies. The air was filled with moaning and the sound of voices crying out to go home to places and people that no longer existed.

The patience and compassion of the staff amazed me, but *I* was just stunned. Young and inspired, I was coming from Yale Divinity School, a place where the intellect is worshipped as much, or more, than God. All my education, all the power of my mind, even all my faith, and I had nothing to offer those poor, tortured souls—nothing!

Or so I thought. Ray, the staff chaplain, advised us to provide a ministry of "presence." The simple presence of a fully attentive human being, he said, was the most important thing we could offer to many in the home. To them, it was nothing less than God's presence.

With that in mind, I went back through those grim doors many times. I learned to sit with the suffering I found there. I

listened to the cries and offered the sound of my voice even when it appeared to accomplish nothing. I held trembling hands and kissed foreheads creased with confusion and pain.

Needless to say, it was tremendously draining. Once in a while, a surprising word or smile would spring from the lips of one of the residents, but it was rare. To be honest, I often found reasons not to go at all, or retreated to the second area of my responsibility, another floor called Ramage 2.

Ramage was a skilled nursing unit where residents were also in a bad way physically, but more lucid and capable of communication. I can still see many of them in their chairs and beds: Mildred, who always told me to go away, Barbara who made passes at me, and Madge, a round-faced and curly-haired immigrant from Scotland. In her 60s, Madge was the youngest person on the floor. Bedridden by MS, she had been abandoned by her husband. By the time I got to Ramage, she was nearly paralyzed by the disease and had to talk between short gasps for breath. Nevertheless, she was the widely recognized floor general. Social events could not begin or proceed without her blessing. "Where's Madge?" the women always asked, and nothing began until her bed was rolled into place where she could see and comment upon whatever was going on.

Madge also served as the primary practical and theological trainer for each new student chaplain who appeared on the floor. I will never forget the twinkle in her eyes (or was it a fire?) that communicated both affection and disdain for me at the very same time. Like everyone else who lived or worked on Ramage, it did not take me long to learn to defer to her in group settings. Somehow, perhaps through mere stubbornness, she transcended the circumstances of her body and lived defiantly in the presence of a death that was everyday consuming her life a little bit more.

But she was the exception. Death held sway on Ramage and everybody knew it. Nearly every month, at least one person died or moved on to another floor where critical care was offered. Few who took that short journey ever returned. Often, I learned, you could sense death coming to someone in the form of a weakening of the

will or a visible slackening of the jaw. At other times, you were not aware of it until the day you arrived on the floor to find an empty bed.

Mirabel Kelt

Eventually, I found refuge in the room of Mirabel Kelt, one of the least communicative of all the residents on the floor. Mirabel was 98 years old. She had totally white hair, a solid New England kind of face with a sharp nose, and thick glasses that made her liquid eyes look unnaturally large. Mirabel never seemed to be out of bed. When the nurses insisted that she get up, the process of moving her to a chair looked, and sounded, quite painful. Most of the time, I found her lying in bed, a soft, silent lump of human flesh hidden under the sheets and blankets.

In fact, even if Mirabel happened to be awake when I stopped by, she would say, "Oh, hello," and that was about it. Questions about her health or feelings yielded only curt answers like, "Oh, I'm fine...Kind of tired..." and then silence.

I learned to like the silence. In a way, it was a relief to find a place where I could just be, without trying to figure out what someone was saying to me. On days when I was especially tired, I often found my way to Mirabel's room for a rest.

"Oh, hello," she said each time.

"Mind if I sit here awhile?" I asked."

"Why should I mind?" she responded. So I sat in the blessed quiet until I was ready to go again. I had a feeling this was not the kind of ministry of presence that Ray had in mind, but I didn't care. It kept me sane.

After one particularly hard day of visiting on the floor, I retreated to Mirabel's room as the sun was setting beyond the hills outside her window. As usual, she was silent, barely even acknowledging my presence. But, as the room slowly filled with evening light, I heard a sound, which I suddenly recognized as a voice, strong and firm, rising from the old, broken body in the bed.

"'May He support us all the day long," she said in clear tones, "'till the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done! Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last."

I looked at her, amazed. I had never heard so many words come out of her mouth at one time, let alone in the form of an old, familiar prayer. "That's beautiful," I said.

She gave me a wry look as if she had been waiting for this moment for some time. She knew I was surprised. "Yes, it is," she said. "It's from the *Book of Common Prayer*."

"You know it by heart?" I asked.

"Well, of course! I've been an Episcopalian for a long time, you know."

In that moment, my times of silence with Mirabel came to an end, but I didn't mind. For in that moment, a friendship began. Almost every successive visit brought out some new story from her life. Ray said Mirabel had never opened up to anyone before. Now, the words flowed. She had been a high school language teacher, French and Spanish. She talked about her parents and siblings, her husband, and her children. They loved to camp and travel, the more adventurous and uncertain the trip, the better. She described the experience of cross-country travel at a time when most roads were still unpaved. She laughed as she remembered, and sometimes she cried.

I found her in tears once. Not sobbing, she was too much of a New Englander for that sort of thing. She was just sitting up in bed, quietly letting tears roll down her cheeks. I stood next to her. "Are you okay, Mirabel?" I asked. She nodded without looking at me. I took her hand and waited in the old familiar silence. I thought about how strange it must be for her, at 98 years old, to be so alone in the world. Almost everyone she ever knew was dead; all the beautiful faces of her friends and loved ones, all of her companions along the way, gone.

"It must be terribly lonely," I said, almost inadvertently.

"What?" she asked.

"So many of your loved ones are gone now. It must be hard to be so alone."

I guess I was trying to relate to her suffering like a good chaplain. Instead, her eyes flashed. "Oh, I am not alone," she said, looking right at me with wide-open eyes. "They are all here...right now...gathered around my bed."

A shiver ran through me. "Oh no, I'm *never* alone," Mirabel continued, still looking at me. Then she chuckled and spoke in a lower tone. "Sometimes I talk to them. The nurses think I'm crazy, but I don't care. I know they are here. I can feel their love."

I had an impulse to look over my shoulder. Suddenly, the room seemed crowded with people encircling Mirabel's bed, people from the old stories and others I knew nothing about, all around her.

Then it hit me. "I too am one of them." Through our friendship, I had stepped into the circle of love that began on the day she was born and which surrounded her even now. I stood shoulder to shoulder with people I didn't know, people I could not know, but with whom I was connected across time and space by the love we shared for Mirabel.

Almost immediately, in that same moment, I also understood deep in my bones, that there was a circle of love around me, and that Mirabel herself stood in it. It struck me like a thunderbolt: one day, I will be in the bed and she will be one of many gathered around me. I will speak to her. The nurses will think I'm crazy, but it won't really matter. At that point in my crumbling existence, only love will matter. Love is the only thing that ever really matters.

Tears filled my eyes. Mirabel looked at me. I had been quiet for a while. "Are you okay?" she said.

"Yes, Mirabel, I'm okay," I said. And I meant it.

The last time I went to see Mirabel Kelt, I knew it would be our final visit together. I was going away to live in Ecuador for two years or more. Given her condition, there was little chance that Mirabel would live that long. I stood by her bed and choked out the news.

Then I couldn't speak any more, not one word. Tears poured down my face. Maybe it was because of all the funerals I had missed, all those goodbyes that were left unsaid. I don't know. But I couldn't stop crying. Mirabel took my hand and talked for both of us. "Well, I'm so thankful for all your visits," she said. "It really has meant a lot to me." I couldn't say a word. "You are going to be a good minister. You have the gift," she said, handing me yet another gift with her words.

I stood there for a while, holding her hand, reluctant to go. She spoke quietly about a variety of things: how exciting my travels would be, how much I was going to learn, including Spanish, of course. "That will be wonderful," she said.

My tears flowed and flowed, but with far more joy and gratitude than despair. Mirabel had taught me so much about death and the journey of life. In her broken body I found a beautiful soul and a kindred spirit. In her friendship I discovered the true nature of ministry. Standing with her near the end of her life, I began to understand that I am part of a circle of love and life that is always beginning anew.

A comfortable silence finally fell between us.

"Good-bye, Mirabel," I said at last, and leaned far over the railing to kiss her forehead.

She smiled at me. "Vaya con Dios," said the old Spanish teacher. "And God will go with you."

Conclusion

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels," wrote the Apostle Paul. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed everyday."

"Here indeed we groan...not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life!"³

I do not know, I cannot prove, *anything* about another dimension of human existence after death, but that does not mean it is not there. Martin Luther once said, "When I lay sucking at my mother's breast, I had no notion how I should afterwards eat, drink, or live. Even so we on earth have no idea what the life to come will be." More recently, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg stated it another way, saying, "We can know as much about life beyond death as a fetus traveling down the birth canal and about to be born can know about the world it is about to enter."

Even as a person with a background in science, I have always been amazed at the modern tendency to think that once something is described, it is understood. Light energy travels, we are told, across vast expanses of empty space to the surface of the earth, where it is converted, by a now well-known process called photosynthesis, into a basic source of food for all living things. "Ahhh," we say, "Now, we understand!" Well, I don't. I mean, I do on one level, but knowing such detail does nothing to alter the deep and beautiful mystery which surrounds and pervades the very fact of my existence. Indeed, the more I hear about the so-called physical nature of the universe, the more miraculous it is to me. In every waking moment, with every well-understood breath I take, the irrepressible mystery of Life presses upon me.

But I did not go to the far edge of life looking for tunnels of light or seeking proof of heaven. In fact, I went to that dark room somewhat unwillingly, because it was my job: to be a pastor, to be present there, as a compassionate witness and fully human companion to the dying and their families.

Perhaps I should have expected what I found in that place, but it surprised me. In the midst of tremendous loss and suffering, instead of growing darkness and dying light, I found life shining through and brimming over. Like bright lava showing through cracks in the surface of hard black earth, like the spilling of light across the sea at the crack of dawn, I found life shining through and brimming over from the broken bones and fading lives of the dying. I saw it in the grace with which they faced their pain and loss. I saw it in the love and compassion they called forth from their loved ones and caregivers. I felt it in the great interconnected circles of life and caring that came together in the moment of their passing.

In my experience, it is difficult to be a witness to the process of human death without coming away with a greater sense of the sacred nature of life itself—not merely that it is precious in its brevity, but that it is somehow sacred in substance, like some great and mysterious tide, rising and falling, falling and rising again in us.

I know nothing more about life after death now than I did when I first began this journey, but I find that I no longer cringe when I get to the parts of creeds that speak of eternal life, and the words of hope in the memorial service no longer seem the least bit strange to me.

For I am sure now, with the kind of surety that only the heart can give, that nothing can separate us from Love. As the Apostle Paul wrote: "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, now depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God." Nothing can separate us from the Love which unites all things.

May you live with full awareness of those precious ones with whom you share the journey of life, and when death comes for you, as it most certainly will, may you find yourself among them and know the embrace of Love in all its fullness.

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Massimo Pigliucci



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On Death— Thoughts of an Optimistic Atheist

Massimo Pigliucci

When I was fifteen, I was having serious doubts about the existence of a supernatural entity benevolently looking over me, and—perhaps even more disturbingly—about the possibility of an afterlife in which I would again see my friends and relatives and exist happily ever after. It was at that point that I started reading the writings of Bertrand Russell, 1.2 one of the most controversial philosophers and political activists of the Twentieth century. Those writings made a lasting impression on me, especially these words:

I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.

It took me more than twenty years to really understand what Russell meant, and I'd like to share it with you, with the optimistic hope of perhaps providing other people with somewhat of a shortcut through their philosophical and emotional journey.

"I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive." People often refer to death as a mystery, the

greatest mystery of existence. But in fact, there is very little mysterious about death. Death is the cessation of all biological functions, the moment in which the living goes back to the non-living. A human being, while alive, is much, much more precious to his fellow human beings than the pounds of mostly water (with some carbon, nitrogen, phosphorous and a few other things thrown in for good measure) that he physically is. After death, the water quickly evaporates, and the rest gradually meshes again with the rest of the universe. We are literally made of stardust, so perhaps it is only fitting that our atoms should provide the building blocks for new beings, human or not.³

However, we have no reason to believe that anything at all of what makes us conscious will survive our death.⁴ Of course, we don't know that for sure, but this lack of knowledge is of little help to a rational thinker: it is quite obvious that the only reason to hope for life after death is our own wishful thinking. We don't want to face the prospect of complete annihilation, so we make up stories to feel better, while pushing the specter as far back as we can.

This fear is perhaps misplaced, as philosopher Epicurus wisely admonished us.⁵ He said that there is no reason to fear death, since where *it* is, we are not, and where *we* are, it is not. Perhaps, but my guts still tighten every time that I go through a moment of turbulence on an airplane, and I don't enjoy thinking of a moment in time in which I will not exist. Nevertheless, I think with Russell that our ego, even one as big as mine, does not in fact survive the death of our body. The question is, what are we going to do in the meantime?

"I am not young, and I love life." Well, I actually am a bit younger than Russell when he wrote those words. But I am sure that I love life as much as he did, and in fact as much as anyone else. Sometimes people think that a skeptic or atheist must be a very cynical and unhappy person, with no prospect of an everlasting existence, miserable and resentful at the rest of the universe. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am a very happy person (though the degree to which this shows depends highly on the weather), an

incurable optimist about the future of humanity (despite all the evidence to the contrary), and a firm believer in the human spirit (by which I mean the resilience, ingenuity, and love for each other that our species can display in its best moments).

Where does this love of life come from? Biologically, from our genes: simply put, organisms that did not have a zest for life perished earlier than others, and probably left fewer progeny. Which means that only the optimists are left standing. From a human perspective, love for life comes from the knowledge of other people's love for us, from the ability to make our way through the world, from the chance to decide what is meaningful for us.

It is a precious gift from nature, and one that is unfortunately increasingly rare in some parts of the world. I cannot imagine the desperation that leads a young Palestinian to volunteer as a suicide bomber. The combination of not seeing a future for one's own family, and the religion-instilled illusion of an eternal reward in the afterlife, result in a deadly cocktail that after September 11, 2001 has become an all-too-familiar feature of our own existence.

Love for life is not something that we can take for granted. We have to create the conditions for it, for ourselves as well as for other people. This means that it is not with coercion or weapons that we will defeat our enemies, here or abroad. It is by taking away the reasons for other people to despise life to the point of taking the lives of their fellow human beings, of being willing to give up their own life at the push of a button. The war against crime is a perpetual failure, and so is the war against terror. We will overcome crime and terror only by realizing that people don't go around stealing and killing if they have something to live for, if they can provide food, education, and a future to their children—if, in other words, we make it possible for them as well as for us to love life.

"But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation." Actually, here I disagree with Russell: I really do not like the prospect of annihilation (though I'm surely not spending most of my time shivering with terror while thinking about it). As another of my favorite philosophers, Woody Allen, said, "I don't want to be

immortal through my work, I want to be immortal through not dying." In this, the believer has an apparent advantage over the atheist. But I truly think that this is only illusory, an advantage bought at the price of refusing to accept reality, always a dangerous habit to cultivate, and one which has brought terrible wreck upon humankind.

Indeed, I think it is this willingness to face our own permanent annihilation that makes being an atheist a particularly brave choice in life. You are faced with hard decisions that are not even a consideration for the believer. Why should I be moral? Why should I live a life of work and sacrifice? Make no mistake about it: atheists are, on the whole, at least as moral and good as believers, but they rarely get the extra credit for it. In some sense, the difference is like the one between two kinds of soldiers: the one who doesn't fear death, and the one who fears it, but goes into battle nevertheless. While they may both be regarded as heroes because of their actions, certainly the fearful one had to overcome much more than his fearless comrade. If you don't fear death (or you don't believe it will happen to you), it is much easier to face the bullets. But it takes real guts to do what you have to do even though you are terrorized by the consequences.

"Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end." This was perhaps the most difficult part of what Russell said for me to understand. I can accept that happiness has to come to an end, but why is it true happiness because of its fleeting existence? Why is it that "all good things must come to an end," as the saying goes?

Imagine that you are watching a movie. A good movie, perhaps the best movie you've ever seen. It was so good that when the titles roll you are a bit upset with the director: couldn't she have given you a few more scenes? It surely would have been nice to see how the life of the main characters would have turned out beyond the timeframe of the movie. I guess this is the primary motivation behind the persistence of sequels in the movie industry. And yet, you know what the critics say: a sequel is seldom as good as the original.

Imagine that you could in fact protract that movie for a bit longer, and then again a bit longer than that. Initially, you will feel satisfaction, perhaps. (That will actually depend on what is going to happen to your favorite characters: what if one of them soon dies, or her life takes a bad turn and she becomes somebody you can no longer admire?) But you will soon realize that you can't take that movie forever. No matter how good it was, it has to end some time, or situations will start repeating themselves, dialogues will become stale, and boredom will settle in.

I think the same is true for life, and Russell was right on the mark. If we really did live forever, we would simply die of boredom. Except, of course, that we couldn't die, because we would be immortal! This, I suspect, is a true image of Hell for human beings: like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day, condemned to repeat every motion and every word after we have exhausted them all eons ago. A similar situation was described by the genius that was Douglas Adams in his The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: one of the characters in that book is an alien that happens to be immortal, a very unfortunate condition, which he copes with by inventing all sorts of ways to pass his endless time.⁷ At the moment he appears in the book, he is involved in the project of personally insulting every sentient organism in the universe, in its own tongue. But, of course, it is a desperate (and meaningless) attempt to retard the inevitable: eventually, he'll run out of beings to insult, and out of insults to hurl at them. No, ladies and gentlemen, happiness truly is such only because it must come to an end.

"Nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting." Indeed they don't, quite the contrary. The meaning of my life extends beyond my life because (hopefully) what I do will still affect in a positive way those people who will be alive when I will be gone. This thought is more than enough to keep me happy and active. It is, I think, a grave fallacy to believe that meaning has to be universal and everlasting in order to have value. I am often asked: "But if you don't believe in an afterlife, or a god, what gives meaning to your existence?"

Besides the fact that I never understood why the existence of a god^{8,9} would give any more meaning to my life (I don't consider worshipping somebody, no matter how powerful, a meaningenhancing activity), I simply don't have the time to worry about it. I have my wife and my child to take care of, I have my parents to comfort through their declining years, I have my brothers, sister and friends to nurture and grow old together. I also have my students, to whom I can perhaps communicate my enthusiasm for knowledge and reason, which will possibly help them in their own lives. I have the readers of my columns and books, with whom I can share whatever experience or insight I may have been able to gather in the course of my reflections. Moreover, I have billions of fellow human beings that I hope my country will help to live a long and meaningful life, and you can be sure that I will vote in the next elections so that those that are supposed to represent me will get that simple message!

What I am trying to say is that the meaning of it all is in you, which is a wonderfully liberating realization. Knowing that there is an end in sight gives you a sense of urgency to make a difference while you can. Again, as Woody Allen said in one of his movies, "It's later than you think." Another of my favorite movie directors, the Italian Nanni Moretti, put the point eloquently in his April. The main character has been playing around with his life for a bit, without being able to bring himself to do what he really wants to do (which happens to be a musical which has for a main character a Trotskyite pastry maker, but never mind that). A friend asks him how long he imagines he will live. The character (played by Moretti) answers "until 80." His friend then asks how old Moretti is. He answers 46. The friend takes a measure tape, indicates the length of 80 centimeters, then the length of 34 (80 minus 46). "That is how long you still have to go." Moretti understands the message, smiles, and decides to finally do something with the rest of his life before it's too late. He also recriminates himself for not having answered "100" instead of 80.

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Death is a serious issue, even though it is not mysterious. In the last two years I have seen its specter two times, when both of my parents were diagnosed with cancer and both had to struggle to survive and add a few more years to my pleasure of seeing them in this world. I still am not completely over the death of two of my grandparents, with whom I grew up. I regularly see them in my dreams, talk to them, and wish very hard that they could still be with me. But I know they won't, and what I need to do is to take care of those that love me now and are still around to see that I love them.

When it comes to death, it is hard to walk the rope between the rational and the emotional, the scientific and the philosophical, to understand how death can be faced without the belief in a god or in an afterlife, to inquire into how human dignity and moral strength can be maintained even in a universe that doesn't care about us, and it is nevertheless our only home. Still, it is our choice and privilege to make that home as pleasant for us and for our fellow creatures as we possibly can. There is much to be done, and Moretti's meter is getting shorter every day.

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