

IF WE DID NOT DIE

Edwin F. Taylor



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When I was a graduate student at Harvard, the *Crimson* student daily ran a column by David Riesman, a Harvard sociologist. One sentence jumped out at me.

If we did not die, I would have no hope for man.

This sentence has rattled around in my skull for more than sixty years and forms the basis of this meditation.

Turn Riesman's saying into a positive statement. Change "man" to "humanity" to make it inclusive. Add the word "all" to make it universal:

The fact that we all die gives me hope for humanity.

The death of a child is tragic. So was the death of my father at age 55 in a mountain climbing accident. Here we limit ourselves to death in old age, which is my good fortune.

My thesis: Death in old age contributes to life, both the life of the individual and the well-being of humanity.

The playwright Samuel Beckett denies my thesis and uses death to tell us that life is meaningless. In “Waiting for Godot” Pozzo declares:

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

Humans rebel against mortality. Those with rank, power, or genius often use these tools to attempt immortality. The report of Jesus’ resurrection made him, for his followers, an immortal. Saint Paul offered every Christian *spiritual* immortality as a believer in the resurrected Christ.

The poet William Cullen Bryant suggests that death provides motivation to live a good life.

*So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.*

My wife Carla often said that we grieve about everything we will miss after death but rarely grieve about what we missed before birth. Leave it to Shakespeare to turn this symmetry into poetry.

*our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

The poet Shelley too pondered the fleeting nature of both life and fame. In his sonnet Ozymandias he describes the monument of a fictional ancient ruler on which the inscrip-

tion embodies the uselessness of worldly ambition. The sonnet ends with the words:

*“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The Great Pyramid of Egypt is another “colossal wreck” from which “level sands stretch far away.” A paid army of citizens worked with dedication for twenty years to erect this only surviving Wonder of the Ancient World. Scholars now understand that the Great Pyramid was designed to be a resurrection machine for Pharaoh Khufu. A pair of tunnels, one from each side of his burial chamber, connected it to the outside world. Every night Khufu’s spirit traveled out through these tunnels and ascended to become a star in the heavens, a star that showered blessings upon every Egyptian.

By good luck, when I was inside the Great Pyramid in 1978, I discovered a path to one of these tunnels, a path cut through the rock by thieves. My dollar pocket flashlight revealed the tunnel’s cross section to be square, about six inches on a side. Straight lengths of this tunnel, each eight to ten feet long, connect Khufu’s burial chamber in a sweeping arc to the outside world. The pair of escape tunnels for his spirit were a working feature of Khufu’s “resurrection machine.”

The cathedrals of Europe contain burial crypts for the famous. Most of those buried there expected eternal life. Prominent families funded elaborate side-chapels where their members were buried. English poet and dramatist Ben Jonson insisted that he be buried in the vertical position,

standing up. Jonson said to the Dean of Westminster Abbey, “Six feet long by two feet wide is too much for me.”

The fact that we all die gives me hope for humanity.

David Riesman felt that without death humanity could not move forward. Even a genius has but a few truly revolutionary ideas. Albert Einstein created special and general relativity between the ages of 26 and 37. During the remainder of his long life, Einstein’s fame and some of his work was a drag on physics. He hated the idea that quantum mechanics predicts probabilities, not certainties. He claimed that “God does not play dice with the universe.” Well, it turns out She does!

Steve Jobs did not share Einstein’s blindness about quantum mechanics. Here is a central point of Jobs’ 2005 speech to the graduating class at Stanford University:

[D]eath is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. . . . Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true. Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

I rest my case that death contributes fundamentally to our individual lives and to the well-being of humanity.

But why must we *all* die? Why not limit death to those who would hold us back in some way? You know the answer to that: No person limited by the accepted truths of his or her era can know which proposed innovations are blind

alleys and which few will carry us to surprising new goals. No, we must all die, preferably in old age.

The pillars of my life are not built of stone like the Great Pyramid. These pillars are, first, my children and, second, my textbooks, particularly those on special and general relativity.

God willing, my children – and Carla’s child – sit among you. They turned out well and bless this world with professional lives and children of their own, as Pharaoh Khufu’s spirit among the stars blessed his people.

Writing textbooks thrilled me. I found breathtaking the power of a well-edited phrase to bring understanding and the way a small handful of fundamentally simple equations embody the mighty physical structure of the universe -- and predict its action. I truly felt that to express a beautiful theory with accurate and comprehensive clarity is to “bring it into being,” at least for the reader.

More: To summarize this structure in a textbook gave me extended tutorials from co-authors John Archibald Wheeler, who resurrected general relativity from obscurity, and Edmund Bertschinger, who is its master. We tried out scores of sequential chapter drafts with students worldwide. Their comments helped us to present these subjects powerfully and effectively.

In addition to my children and textbook writing, I was inspired by humans that have gone before. Among those from our nation: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. Rank upon rank of others worldwide illuminate for us what it means to be human at the highest level. The columnist Roger Cohen memorializes such “great souls.”

Great souls resemble the elements in their immensity. They absorb everything — pain, injustice, insult, folly — and give back decency and kindness. . . . They come into being through unflinching confrontation with life's spears. They reach quiet. Discipline is the backbone of graciousness. Stoicism is the other face of wounds. In the most beautiful smile, painful knowledge hovers. . . .

Life hangs by a thread. Pay attention to its ephemeral gifts.

My son Lloyd suggests that we might greet death with more gusto by following the advice of Hunter S. Thompson:

Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming “Wow! What a Ride!”

Selah, amen, and farewell, Edwin

Incomplete References

- Pamphlet design by E. Andrew Taylor
- Great Pyramid: National Geographic DVD “Engineering Egypt”
- William Cullen Bryant: The end of his poem “Thanatopsis”
- Thanks to Kirk Israel, who has thought about death for a long time, and to Downing Cless, a professional dramaturge, who had many suggestions and showed me how to turn this into a performance piece.
- Free download of complete special relativity and general relativity textbooks at spacetimephysics.org and exploringblackholes.org respectively.



Edwin F. Taylor and Carla Kirmani-Taylor, 1991

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