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Fall 2019
USD\$10.99
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Spitting in death's eye

As a philosopher I have read reason's response to death, and my mind is convinced by the Epicurean rationale that says death is nothing before it happens and we are nothing while it happens. It's too bad that philosophers are also made of *carne y hueso* (flesh and bone), as Miguel de Unamuno liked to point out, because it's not my mind but my intestines that kink up when I imagine watching my father die. He's 85 and healthy, but the elderly are susceptible to small infections that younger folk easily fight off. Epicurus's brain is no match for my eyes, which will likely watch one or both of my parents give up the ghost, and soon.

I've seen two human dead bodies, but only remember one. There was my warm priest gone cold, stationed at the front of the church confirming the legendary "return to dust". I was young but unafraid, and I later concluded that it was because I hadn't watched him die. A warm corpse would render my reason useless. How can anyone stomach seeing a living being become an

object, especially when the body looks the same in the moment after death as it did the moment before? The medical professionals do us no favours with this cognitive dissonance, like when my veterinarian matter-of-factly began turning Christmas's mouth inside-out seconds after her lights went out, to reassure me that we'd bet right on the cancer. The vet was busy cogitating a death-idea while manipulating a cadaver, and I was busy choking on my first puff of unfiltered death. Watching my cat lose her life was indecent, and it foreshadowed the future deaths I will witness. But was this encounter with death enough to prepare me to watch my father perish? Can philosophy help any of us face the grave?

Socrates cheated when he called philosophy training for death. He meant that good philosophers spend their lives practising separating their bodies from their souls, after which death – the ultimate separation of body from soul – should come easy. But Socrates could take death in his stride because he did not consider it the end. He believed that souls are immortal, so his philosophy doesn't train us for death so much as for the relocation of souls.

The Stoics got around dying in another way. To prepare for death,

they suggested practising *memento mori*: remembering, daily, that we will cease to exist. This includes imagining loved ones as though they were already deceased, which should spark gratitude in us that they were still alive. The Stoics believed that what upsets us isn't death but the cognitive mistake we make by thinking our loved ones are unbreakable. Once we accept that their days are numbered, we'll be mentally prepared to grieve well. Now, every time I leave for the airport, I capture a mental image of my children as though it will be the last time I see them, and I count it as a miracle if they and I survive my trip so we can get back to pretending death doesn't apply to us. Although the Stoics don't stress the immortality of the soul as heavily as Socrates did, they focus on intellectually withstanding what Seneca called the "storm" of life. Stoic philosophy assumes that if we tie our beliefs down tightly enough, we will be tranquil and resilient when needed. It's a training in grief, not death, and although studying Stoicism has helped my mind puzzle out my father's mortality, it hasn't prepared my stomach for the big day.

Almost 2,000 years later, the Existentialists weighed in on immortality. They advocated staring at death



without blinking, and the atheists among them committed to death ever after. They believed that a return to dust was our only certainty, and that a radical submission to it could incite a genuine *joi de vivre*. For the non-believer, death offers no take-backs; belief in immortality is a cop-out. Like the Stoics, the Existentialists gave a heady answer to a bodily question.

Intellectually, I don't expect my father to live forever. But when I picture him dying, someone starts jostling my insides. If there's no afterlife for him, then my father's demise will proclaim that life doesn't beat death, that good won't destroy evil, that light can't outsmart darkness. It will be my first exposure to the death of God. If Gods die, then sin reigns and we lack redemption. This must be why Jesus Christ had to resurrect, and why so many religions endorse immortality. Believing in life after death is the only way to set the world right again, to give us a why in the face of finality, to buoy God up. But even Lazarus, who Jesus resurrected, had to die again, only to get resurrected again. The non-believer might laugh at the intellectual sleights of hand that religions perform

to ensure that the coin always lands heads-up. They might also take it as evidence that death wins and God loses.

Unamuno, an Existentialist Christian of sorts, agreed that death looks pretty final. But he also held that all humans have a gut-level longing for immortality. Atheists notwithstanding, Unamuno couldn't accept that there existed a soul who did not long to persist. He was incredulous that even a philosopher's flesh and bones could refrain from violently rebelling against their end. Finally, Unamuno's guts triumphed over his reason, and he spent his remaining time defending what he called a contra-rational belief in immortality. Unamuno didn't think he was cheating or copping out, but I suspect he'd concede that a belief in life after death is born of fear, of nausea.

Could a person train themselves to witness mortal death without vomiting? If death wins and there are no cosmic take-backs, what are we training for? Training is a hopeful endurance, it's the capacity to withstand danger until it passes. Training relies on an optimistic belief that you can win, or at least finish. But how do you train to lose?

In response to these philosophical positions, I've concluded that training for death has more to do with embracing ignorance than with battering down the intellectual hatches. There is no knowing ahead of time what's true or even what we believe: only in the moment of my father's passing will I find out where I stand. Believing in immortality isn't cheating, but denying that we're clueless about the afterlife is. Intellectual certainty is no match for a warm corpse, so it's best – and most philosophical – to admit that we don't know.

If, on my father's deathbed, I find myself incapable of believing in the afterlife, I will befriend the small club of pessimists who have learned to love perishing things. I will learn from them how to grow in the midst of unrelenting decay. I admit that it's heroic to live without the comfort of immortality, to carry on when God dies. Still, I hope that my father's passing will galvanise my belief in immortality. It's not that I can't stomach temporality, it's that I want to spit in the eye of death. As a quixotic philosopher, I think it's good if we can occasionally be moved to believe in implausible things. ▣



"Sorry about the wait. The server's down."