

# Of Our Living and Our Dying: Building One's Own World in an Age of Denial

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John Donne, incomparable English poet of the 17th century, is renowned for his 17th Meditation on death. All humankind "is of one volume," he writes. To paraphrase his eloquence prosaically: we are all implicated in one another; anyone's death diminishes each of us because of that fact. So whenever the bell tolls for someone, it is well to remember that it will eventually toll for each of us, too. We can deny death, but we can't escape it, so we may as well claim it and thereby neutralize its terror.

I have a color photo I took some years ago of the modest tombstones marking my parents' graves in Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They're buried side-by-side; my father died in the late 1970s, my mother in the late 1980s. That photo is imprinted on my memory, so I don't have to look it up in the family photo album. I recently conjured up that picture, as well as the day I snapped it some years ago, which caused me to ruminate about the hard-working, hopeful, ordinary, emotionally turbulent lives they led; and at the end of my musing I recalled again how they died, my mother slowly shrunken and disfigured into a parody of herself by Alzheimer's, my father by an extended decline in his general health capped by two unrelievedly agitated days at the end of which he died of massive heart failure.

This remembrance of my parents' passing didn't occur out of the blue. It was stimulated in part by several events in my professional life during the past year, not the least of these being, memorials I conducted for an unusually large number of some of the oldest and most devoted members of the Minneapolis Society. The suffering of those who died lingering painful deaths from cancer are particularly etched in my memory. Nonetheless all these

folks had time and opportunity, as did my parents, to give thought to the meaning of their lives and the likely impact their impending deaths might have on loved ones left behind.

But what about the 13-year-old boy, an eighth-grader at Franklin Middle School in North Minneapolis who unselfconsciously stuck his head out a school bus window to shout to friends, only to have it fatally slammed against a tree as the bus pulled away from the curb? He didn't have any time to put his life in any kind of order. Still, didn't his life have meaning? And what closure could Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, his business and government friends and pilots of the plane that went off course and suddenly crashed into a Croatian mountainside in April 1996, bring to their lives? And was not the tragic nosedive in May of the Atlanta-based ValuJet plane into the treacherous, murky waters of the Florida Everglades particularly terrifying? Everyone aboard, over a hundred, had all of 45 seconds to contemplate their prior life and prospective death if, indeed, anticipation of it wasn't totally numbed by unimaginable fear before the plane hit the earth, to be immediately swallowed up by the waters. Contemplating this horrible accident illuminates more than just the element of gallows humor in Woody Allen's celebrated admission that he doesn't mind dying, he just doesn't want to be there when it happens! The problem is, death sometimes creeps up on us unawares, or suddenly smacks us full force with no warning at all.

In view of such considerations, how ironically appropriate that Memorial Day was due to arrive a week later than the events to which I've alluded. That Memorial Day happens to commemorate the dead of wars past is incidental to our inquiry. Any religion worth its salt needs to explore our dying in the light of our living and come to some convincing if open-ended conclusions. We don't need a special day for remembrance, anymore than we need a specific place, such as a cemetery. Nonetheless cemeteries are necessary; they're meant as much for the living as for the dead; for they represent the drama of our lives. Indeed, there would be no drama

at all to our lives-and no meaning, either-if death were not in our future.

Cemeteries are history's repositories. Apart from the names and dates incised in stone, between birth and death much transpired, and much was recorded, though not everything. A cemetery is history made real: it can help us know ourselves better in acknowledging those who were our forebears. It can also help us to know ourself in broader historical terms in remembering the lives of exceptionally significant individuals we admire, a feeling I happened to experience powerfully the day long ago when I wandered about the sunlit cemetery in Concord where Emerson and Thoreau and so many others of that splendid New England circle of luminaries once lived and moved and had their being. A cemetery becomes holy ground when we remember the important connections we still have in spirit with those buried there. It's a place for considering not only one's own mortality but the very meaning of our own living and our own dying. A cemetery, like a memorial service, can thus serve as a signal to get on with important things we yet need to do in the time that remains. Every moment counts in the remains of the days we still have; we never know how many.

Since living can at exceptional moments strike us as so dear, we human beings are understandably reluctant to part with life, whatever the circumstances. Many of us are in virtual denial of the inevitability of our end. There's, of course, Ernest Becker's moving classic, *The Denial of Death*, to help us understand why. Even without his insightful assistance we all know that since we alone among living creatures have an acute awareness that we're going to die some day, we're naturally given to fending off this final experience as long as we can, sometimes being willing to hang on to every shred of consciousness even as inexpressible pain wracks body, mind, and spirit. Even though we might seek surcease from the pain of staying alive, as have those who've sought out Dr. Kevorkian's help in committing suicide, the fact is, I suspect, that something deep down in us-the life force-makes us resentful, if not downright hostile to the notion that our life isn't forever. Surely this pro-

found egoism and resentment, mixed with hope, has something to do with humanity's myriad notions of an afterlife. It's very hard for most people to appreciate that our lives, however long or short, have infinite value precisely because we are finite. Is a rose any less valuable because it will shortly wither and fall to the ground, and is this no less true of every human life that comes into being and eventually flickers out or is otherwise abruptly or terribly terminated? Life may be hard, dying can be even harder, nonetheless our living and our dying infuse each other with measureless value.

Surely it must have been heartbreakingly difficult, for instance, for the followers of Jesus to accept his crucifixion as final; as a matter of fact they didn't. In time Paul provided a theological way out of their despair and devastating sense of loss by proclaiming that Jesus, soon to be known as the Christ, was resurrected to heaven with God the Father. Whereupon followed centuries of heated and intense debate in the early Christian Church over the supernatural as opposed to the human and therefore finite nature of Jesus. Did he merely appear to be crucified? If he was also God, and thus eternal, how could he possibly be dead or have experienced pain? If God assumed the person of Christ, was Jesus' apparent death part of a grand plan of salvation for the wayward human race? And on and on went the debate, and still does to this day in one form, one guise or another.

No wonder it has been so daunting for people in the West to accept the essential truth of Darwinism, the whole idea of the organic evolution of life on earth having been regarded by many ultraconservative Christians, especially fundamentalists, as the very antithesis of their religious belief in creationism, namely-that God created humanity in his own image-therefore God must somehow be personal-having first brought forth the universe in a matter of some thousands, rather than billions, of years. On this patently unscientific view, the natural world is but the fallen antechamber to heaven: one dies to one's unique self only to be reborn to Christ, thus meriting the certainty of ultimate rapture to heaven, which logically implies that dying is more valuable than living. So all

philosophies of naturalism that teach we are but creatures of the earth to which we return when we die have to be denied-and denounced. One can easily see how secular humanism or its equivalent expressions can be conceived as a lethal threat to some forms of traditional religion.

Denials of essential truths occur in every age, but some eras have more than their normal share. Ours of the 20th century, for example, has blinked away a great deal of human evil, probably because so much of it has abounded. There are those who still insist that the Holocaust is a fantasy, just as we've witnessed the unwillingness of many Bosnian Serbs to acknowledge the horrendous crimes committed in the name of ethnic cleansing. In all such cases of Orwellian doublethink, it's as if something murderously terminal happened but no one did it! Such attitudes of cosmic denial constitute a veritable war against human memory itself, and without memory there can be no redemption. Unless crippling denials of the past are transcended rather than denied, the future remains unborn.

Recall, here, too, in this regard last year's astonishing auction at Sotheby's in New York of the artifacts of the estate of Jackie Onassis, widow of John Kennedy. The event struck me as an extended exercise in denial that John and Jackie are really gone. Why would someone in their "right" mind pay \$445,000 for a rocking chair, or \$520,000 for a cigar humidor, or \$33,000 for a small footstool, or \$772,000 for a set of Kennedy's golf clubs? Did the fashionably wealthy folks of New York City buy such items because of their investment potential or because they felt they were making personal contact with history, more deeply perhaps, with the myth of Camelot? If Camelot proves to be an enduring myth, then Jack Kennedy may live forever in people's memory.

Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Before the century was out, the evolutionary hypothesis he put forth would turn traditional thinking upside down. Impressed by the generalizable applicability of that hypothesis, the great jurist,

Oliver Wendell Holmes, would pronounce that the life of the law is not logic but experience. The idea of the organic evolution of the law helped precipitate a robust new nationalism after the Civil War. Darwinism thus made for a dynamic approach to history, religion, ethics, law and politics: everything was seen in the light of social development, not some static revelation of unchanging truths. Government was seen not as divine but as a human creation capable of undergoing many changes in its ever-evolving development.

Now consider how application of the evolutionary hypothesis, which offended conservatives of several stripes, contributed to the growing strength and expansion of the federal government, which strikes many conservatives today as a scandalous and sinful transgression of eternal law. If the relation of the states to the federal government was to be fixed according to legal attitudes regnant in 1787, then John C. Calhoun's theory of the primacy of states' rights-idiotic echoes of which we're hearing again today-becomes acceptable. The American political context created by modern society after the Civil War, however, became more national than local. Thus if the character of the federal government was to be determined by current facts rather than original intent on the part of the founders of the Republic-as if such intent could be accurately inferred or documented as sacrosanct-then Lincoln's more expansive view of the future of the nation as a whole was more nearly a valid, because pragmatic interpretation of constitutional history. Lincoln was thus the first truly modern President of the United States; he understood that change is the basic fact of life, that the pursuit of truth means that no truth is absolute, and that we cannot escape history.

In the wake of Darwinism's rapid advance in the late 19th century, many Southern states forbade by statute the teaching of evolution in the public schools. One of these was Tennessee where the famous "monkey trial" took place in 1925. As a sidebar it's mind-boggling to note that the state of Mississippi didn't actually ratify the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery until March 21,

1995! Somebody at the Statehouse must have misplaced a copy of the Amendment!

Let us note that the dynamic post-Civil War era, with the new doctrine of Evolution leading the way, helped produce the soil in which humanism as we know it today would sprout, a generation or two later. Humanism saw no conflict between Darwinism and human dignity, between Darwinism and truth-seeking. Philosophically and spiritually the ground had been prepared earlier by Emerson, who had proclaimed the inherent divinity of human nature, proposing against institutional religion not the negative stance of atheism but the free religious consciousness of the individual. Emerson's faith in the human capacity to keep progressing, growing, changing, was notable.

In this connection I remember reading, some years ago, story by the celebrated Roman writer, Pliny the Elder, the story of a boy and a dolphin. The story simply has to do with a young kid who rides a dolphin across the bay to go to school. The real point of this ancient tale is not the dolphin, smart as it is, but the youth who's riding it-an exuberant image about taking charge of one's life early on. Moreover, human fulfillment, this story suggests, takes place only in the natural and historical world, it being utterly up to us to figure it all out-why we're here, how we got here, where we're going: using our own brains and freedom to make a variety of responses to life's questions, challenges, dangers and opportunities. As my UU colleague, the Reverend Kendyl Gibbons, puts it in an outstanding recent sermon: "What greater urgency is there for wisdom and courage than the knowledge that what meaning our lives will have is what meaning we make?" Surely a humanist conclusion.

Spirituality in such a naturalistic scheme of reference becomes a function of the depth of the secular out of which human meaning is to be extracted and shaped because the secular realm, the natural world, is in fact where we all live. It's the only place we humans experience in common. The real test of a religion generated

in such a milieu is its ethical power and pertinence; ethical religion therefore isn't just a matter of private refinement and rhetorical proclamation but, more importantly, needs for its fulfillment to ex-foliate into an active public response to the significant issues of the day.

And when the spiritual foundations of such a humanism are spelled out in light of this moral imperative, it becomes deeply religious in character. Until then, however, humanism remains a secular attitude and life stance.

For most of its history, humanism has been admittedly a defiant secular option whose main passion has been to demystify arrant ecclesiastical and rigid theological nonsense and to assert the power of independent thought and the importance of the human individual expressing it. Only in the last 175 years has it been possible to conceive of it as a religious venture as well. I believe that a full humanism, wholly naturalistic and non-theistic in its assumptions, can help effectively relieve human beings of fright at the prospect of being in charge of their own lives-as that wonderful Hellenistic story from Pliny typifies. To be afraid of dying is to betray one's fear of being completely responsible for one's own living.

Consider the last days of the late French President, Francois Mitterand. A public figure with a very private side, Mitterand was not only an intellectual in politics but an agnostic humanist and, implicitly, an atheist, in personal philosophy. Could any American with such an outlook be elected President of our own country?

Suffering from advanced prostate cancer, Mitterand decided he was ready to face death the nature of which he had long pondered. Two days before he died in January, 1996 he stopped taking his cancer medication, spent his remaining hours completing his memoirs and writing three pages of instructions for his funeral. When asked months before if he believed in the immortality of the soul, Mitterand was reported to reply, "Not especially, but I be-

lieve in the power of the spirit. Without that, what would a [person] be?" Asked the next inevitable question, whether he believed in God, Mitterand remarked with worldly Gallic ambivalence: "Let's say I have a mystical soul and a rational brain and, like Montaigne, I am incapable of choosing between them." Agnostic humanist par excellence, lucid to the end, Mitterand didn't shrink from being in charge of his dying as he was of his living. He built his own world, leaving it on his own terms, lovingly and intelligently, without apology or remorse.

Emerson's invitation to each of us to build our own world thus continues to have merit. But even if we die leaving behind lots of proverbial loose ends, the fact remains that in a certain sense we all live a full and complete life each moment, otherwise the life of that young boy whose head was slammed against a tree has no meaning. Furthermore, would that when we come to die in the normal course of events-as opposed to sudden accidents-we could console ourselves with the thought, not that some putative eternal part of our being will somehow go on, but that the world of space and time where we once lived, loved, laughed and labored will go on- not merely without us but also because of us-because we lived and gave and didn't just take. Isn't such an attitude the real thing, signifying something far bigger than ourselves of which we are a part? This earth is the true land of our dreams, the realm of the only transcendence we'll ever experience.

In 1960 choreographer Alvin Ailey created a modern dance masterpiece, "Revelations," an unpretentious and inspiring undertaking for both performers and audience because it exalts the human spirit. Someone has said that "Everything in 'Revelations' is about trying to rise up... that's why people relate to it. You rise above your problems in the end. You're always pulling yourself up." Ailey's magnificent ballet is thus about earthly transcendence.

"This is how I see it," concludes UU Minister Kendyl Gibbons from whose sermon I quoted before:

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If there is no personality governing the universe and promising us love, justice and meaning on some ontological bottom line, then it is all the more necessary for us, flawed and finite as we are, to give love, to enact justice, and to build meaning here and now. Let there be only the cold whistling of the solar winds out to the ends of space; let the past and future merge into a moebius strip of endless, beginningless flow; let there be no everlasting arms, no judgment, either indulgent or severe; let there be nothing, nothing, nothing at all but what we are and what we have in this moment, in this matrix of energy/matter, in this movement in the dance of entropy. It is enough, more than enough; full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over. It is marvelous enough and terrifying enough, mysterious enough, holy enough to fill me full and overflowing with wonder.