

Michael Milburn

Thoughts on Life Span

Waiting for the end, boys, waiting for the end.
What is there to be or do?

William Empson

I trace the start of my preoccupation with mortality to the year 2000, when my father died at age eighty-two. Two years later I turned forty-five, and the combination of these events—my first significant death and arrival at middle age—left me in a permanent state of worry about life squandered and life slipping away. Since then, my fear of the future has not been dread of pain, debility, or no longer existing, but panic at having so little time. Time for what, I don't know. I tend to wish my days would pass more quickly, hurrying me to the week-end, vacation, a warmer or cooler season, the next promising experience, book, movie, CD.

Yet if I were given six months to live, I can't think what I would do differently from what I'm doing now. To some extent I already live as if condemned—I try to minimize the amount of distracting (alas, paying) work that I do, thereby maximizing my time for things that are important to me, like writing, and I tend to my relationships in part out of fear that I will one day look back and regret neglecting them. In both of these areas, I'm motivated by an awareness of life's brevity. Yet as constructive as these attentions are, I would also love to forget about my impending death and enjoy the

present. But how does someone my age—fifty-three—ignore the clock winding down, the finish line in view? Contemplating my middle-aged peers, I hear Philip Larkin's question about the elderly: "Why aren't they screaming?"

Presented with the six-month countdown, many people would choose to travel. I'm a cranky traveler, and anyway, what's the point? To take in as many new sights as possible before the end? I see no reason to stock up on memories if I'm going to die. If *carpe diem* is the plan, why not just increase my helping of the pleasures at hand—eating, drinking, smoking, sleeping late? I might spend extra quality time with my loved ones, but is life best savored by being concentrated into something unlike one's life—in my case, pumped full of company and new experiences? Besides, if my loved ones are such a priority or there's relationship building or repairing to do, why wait until I'm dying—why not act now?

There would appear to be something ill-conceived about our approach to the human life span if we start eyeing its end midway through. Half a life is a long time to spend waiting for a life to run down. It's not the total of years that bothers me, but knowing that there are fewer ahead than behind. Assured the longevity of Hanako, a koi who lived for 226 years, I could wait until age 113 to start fretting about my mortality; people cut down in their twenties may never feel finite at all. The current life expectancy for American males (77.5 years) looks generous or skimpy depending on one's perspective—infinite to a third grader, small change to the guy turning seventy-seven.

From my present vantage, my twenties are so indistinct they could have belonged to a different person. The decade they occupied, 1977-87, flickers in my mind like a nostalgic VH1 documentary—Ronald Reagan, disco, and *Dallas*. As for my thirties and

forties, if not for photographs and my vivid twenty-four year old son, I would doubt I had lived through them at all. Which leaves me a only few more decades until my whole life will seem to have passed in an eyeblink. Perhaps my inclination to brood over these late years will preserve them better than my overlooked youth—“We feel our lives most when they are running out,” the novelist David Grossman wrote. Inconveniently, the particulars of my life right now are less salient than ever before. For example, I spent Christmas Eve 1980 snowbound in a hut in Finnish Lapland, whereas my last seven Christmases took place in the same house on the same suburban Connecticut street with the same people and the same plastic tree—hardly the stuff of colorful deathbed reminiscences.

I don't mean to sound valedictory. People born before me are considered youthful in many cultures and contexts. The only thing that makes me feel mortal is my obsession with my mortality. Chronologically speaking, I'm like a sailor just past the midpoint of an ocean crossing, with open water ahead and behind, tired from the trip but still a long way from landfall. Looked at this way, the human life span is just right; if one lives out one's projected days, one will have had one's chances— to screw up and rebound, to be precocious, to develop slowly and blossom late. There's time for everything and then some. In fact, I'm often amazed by how long life is, long enough that I can walk into a classroom and hear a computer programmed by my students wish me good morning, then read in that same day's newspaper a letter from a woman arrested in 1936 for conspiring to kill Stalin.

My mother was forty-six when I was born; four years later, she suffered a stroke that impaired her hearing and equilibrium for the rest of her life. I think of her has having

had two lives. By the time of her stroke she had enjoyed as many healthy years—fifty—as I have now been alive. For the next four decades, which supply all my memories of her, she was chronically dizzy and tired, conducting much of her family and social life from her bed. At her funeral, it occurred to me that I might be embarking on my own second act, free of the naiveté of youth. Yet all I could think was that with nearly half a century under my belt, my time was running out.

It's not just worrying about mortality that wastes my time, but worrying about worrying about it. I envy people my age who just plain live. But if they aren't thinking about the transience of their lives, aren't they sort of squandering them? Can one take full advantage of an opportunity if one does not acknowledge it as such? Carefree people get on my nerves, though it's my lack of this quality that keeps me from enjoying life. Whenever I try to savor a moment, it's immediately overrun by anxieties: Vacation ends tomorrow! Did I leave the stove on? Is my companion unhappy? Maybe life, for some, is meant to be just o.k., like a warm bath that never gets hot enough to be truly pleasurable.

When I hear the term “life span” I think of a bridge arching over a body of water, or an outspread hand used as a unit of measurement, precise in the sense that the fingers can only reach so far. I'm reminded of how worn my father's teeth looked on his deathbed, as if manufactured to last the length of a human life and no longer. Though the word “span” implies fixity, when applied to a life it varies according to longevity and the point from which we contemplate it. As the amount of time behind and ahead of us changes, so does our sense of time wasted (or fulfilled) and running out (or available). Both portions look different at different ages—until I turned forty my future shimmered

ahead with the abundance of a million dollar bank heist of which I'd only spent \$500 on a new TV so far.

Technically, a life span connects birth to death, representing the transit of someone who has died. Maybe my obsessing about mortality is an attempt to gauge the length of mine before it has reached its opposite shore. If I could just desist from measuring and focus on what fulfills me now, I'd accrue a span to be proud of. As for the spans of others, I think of my son's as a quarter of the way along, still rising and reaching, with the cresting and descending rest of it filled in by my own experience. So much of what I think about and say to him is based on this projection of his future, as I predict what he will eventually know, feel, want, or wish he had done. Mostly I envision the arc of peoples' lives according to the seventy odd years average, but when my former student died at twenty-four, it turned out my imagery was all off—Jon's midpoint was back *there*, his college years not prelude but denouement. I pictured an arch truncated, abandoned, its funding withdrawn.

Although my father's dates are long fixed (1917-2000), my perception of what lies between them keeps changing as my memory remixes his life. Gradually, though, his span is becoming a solid bar for me to caress, kick at, hang from, slither up and off like a greased pole. I wish I'd had more of this span-sense when he was alive, but he was too much a part of my forging of my own life for me to have perspective on his. Saul Bellow wrote, "Losing a parent is something like driving through a plate glass window. You didn't know it was there until it shattered, and then for years to come you're picking up the pieces—down to the last glassy splinter."

Funerals and obituaries document that a life has ended, but for the survivors time alone completes that life, and the more it has blended with and flowed alongside our own the more time we need. Two years ago, my brother Frank, a writer, died of complications from diabetes at sixty-three. I don't yet think of him as at rest; his life remains unfinished in me like a draft of a life left behind with a note asking me to revise it and make it cohere. Things keep coming up that I need to discuss with him: J.D. Salinger's death; an article by a professional baseball player describing with lyrical precision how it feels to track a pop fly. Frank adored such topics, and for me part of thinking about them is still thinking about talking to him about them.

In my father's last year, when he was blind and succumbing to cancer, I mentioned to him a review of a new book by Jimmy Carter entitled, *The Virtues of Aging*. "There are none," he muttered. He would have thought Frank fortunate to be spared the debility of old age, but I still wish my brother had been granted his remaining years. Though Frank's span was nearly complete when he died, my worldly middle school students are proof of how much life can be fit into the decade or so the actuaries say he had coming to him. I never used to think of time as a gift or of myself as a *carpe diem* kind of guy, but today, thanks to my preoccupation with mortality, I do and I am.