

NO QUALMS

By James A. Haught

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I'm quite aware that my turn is approaching. The realization hovers in my mind like a frequent companion.

My wife died five years ago. Dozens, hundreds, of my longtime friends and colleagues likewise came to the end of their journeys. They number so many that I keep a "Gone" list in my computer to help me remember them all. Before long, it will be my turn to join the list.

I'm 81 and still work full-time. I feel keen and eager for life. My hair's still dark (mostly). I have a passel of children, grandchildren and rambunctious great-grandchildren. I love sailing my beloved dinghy on our small private lake, and hiking in shady forests with my three-legged dog, and taking a gifted grandson to symphony, and seeking wisdom in our long-running Unitarian philosophy-and-science circle. I now live with an adorable woman in her 70s, and we relish our togetherness. But her health is fragile. Her turn is on the horizon too.

I have no dread. Why worry about the inescapable, the utterly unavoidable, the sure destiny of today's seven billion? However, sometimes I feel annoyed because I will have no choice. I'm accustomed to choosing whatever course I want -- but I won't get to decide whether to take my final step. Damn!

I have no supernatural beliefs. I don't expect to wake up in Paradise or Hades, surrounded by angels or demons. That's fairy-tale stuff. I think my personality, my identity -- me -- is created by my brain, and when the brain dies, so does the psyche. Gone forever into oblivion.

I'll admit that some reports of "near-death experiences" raise tantalizing speculation about a hereafter. But, in the end, I assume those blinding lights and out-of-body flotations are just final glimmers from oxygen deprivation. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

It takes courage to look death in the eye and feel ready. So be it. Bring it on. I won't flinch. Do your damndest. I'll never whimper. However, maybe this is bluster and bravado, an attempt to feel strong in the face of what will happen regardless of how I react.

Unlike Dylan Thomas, I won't rage, rage against the dying of the light. Instead, I plan to live as intensely as I can, while I can, and then accept the inevitable. I find solace in wisdom I've heard from other departees. Just before she died of ovarian cancer, one of my longtime friends, Marty Wilson, wrote:

"I often think of humankind as a long procession whose beginning and end are out of sight. We the living... have no control over when or where we enter the procession, or even how long we are part of it, but we do get to choose our marching companions. And we can all exercise some control over what direction the procession takes, what part we play, and how we play it."

In "The Fire Next Time," brilliant writer James Baldwin said:

"Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the root of our trouble, the human trouble, is

that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have."

Legendary lawyer Clarence Darrow, wrote:

"When we fully understand the brevity of life, its fleeting joys and unavoidable pains; when we accept the fact that all men and women are approaching an inevitable doom; the consciousness of it should make us more kindly and considerate of each other. This feeling should make men and women use their best efforts to help their fellow travelers on the road, to make the path brighter and easier... for the wayfarers who must live a common life and die a common death."

My journey on the road has been proceeding for eight decades. Actuarial tables make my future so obvious that I can't shut my eyes to it. Life proceeds through stages, and I'm in the last scene of the last act.

I have a Pantheon of my favorite heroes: Einstein, Jefferson, Voltaire, Lincoln, Carl Sagan, Shakespeare, Martin Luther King Jr., Tolstoy, FDR, Beethoven, Epicurus, Gandhi, etc. They fill a different "Gone" list. They uplifted humanity, even transformed humanity, in their day -- but their day ended, and life moved on.

My day was the 1960s, and '70s, and '80s, even the '90s. I was a Whirling Dervish in the thick of everything. Life was a fascinating carnival. But it slides into the past so deftly you hardly notice.

While my clock ticks away, I'll pursue every minute. Carpe diem. Make hay while the sun shines. And then I'm ready for nature's blackout, with no regrets.

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