

7 Endspec (2011-2019)

The conflict of duty and will revisited:



On the latest walk back around Minnekada park, I thought of the scene from the Netflix movie, ‘*Insomnia*’, in which the detective (played by Al Pacino) falls into the icy Alaskan river after running across rolling logs. He has to swim underwater for close to three minutes before finding a gap in the logs that is wide enough to squeeze through. He surfaces gasping, yet hardly shivering. Of course, few can really hold their breath for a longer period than most would take to die from hypothermia—panic aside.

Even in dismissing such a scene as highly unrealistic, it brings to mind a taunting old question: In such a desperate situation, how many people really are capable of avoiding panic while fighting to the last breath?

I recalled that in adolescence I was troubled in wondering just how hard I was prepared to fight for my life. The grim intuition at that time was that in any desperate situation I was inclined *to give up*... Although I knew nothing of Darwin then— I had some sense that in any survival of the fittest struggle, I stood little chance.

From adolescence well into maturity, I had recurrent dreaming sequences of fleeing malevolent forces. When exhausted or trapped I would typically stiffen, close eyes and *succumb*... Still, in waking and reflecting on the dream— I was always disturbed in having *failed* to struggle.

Perhaps that deep-seated uncertainty had an even earlier genesis. In that, I recalled a tidbit about ancient Sparta, learned in an elementary school social studies textbook. A comparison of the differences between the warlike Spartans and the peace-minded Athenians included the detail that the Spartans left handicapped babies to perish on the mountainside. It was a disturbing thought— but for a boy whose favourite movie was ‘*Hercules Unchained*’, not the least shocking. It was understandable that there could have been no place in place in Sparta for those incapable of becoming soldiers or athletes. It followed that for being born in in an Athenian-like country, I was obliged to feel grateful— however begrudgingly so...

In another version of the anxiety dream that recurred even into my thirties, I was condemned by a jury of Nazi eugenicists after which I was caught between the social *duty* to succumb and the individual *will* to struggle.

Neither in nor out of dreaming has the conflict ever been resolved...

2011, September

Unneeded reassurance:

As customary on Christmas Eve, I sent off several emails— several of which extended annual best wishes to old friends long out of touch... In one to a boyhood chum, JL, who has spent his working life as a town manager in a New Brunswick border town, I had asked if he also felt he was “nearing decrepitude” in passing his 60th birthday.

His reply: ‘*Don’t be depressed. Remember you’re only as old as you feel!*’ left no doubt that my attempt at humour had not been grasped... Indeed, JL went on to attest that he was much looking forward to joining the septuagenarian snowshoer club in his community...

I was tempted to fire back a rejoinder. I would like to have clarified with my boyhood chum that no matter how fit one may feel at sixty— he still cannot deny the fact that he is chronologically *old*... Indeed, just by reaching this age one has joined the select .5 of 1% of all *homo sapiens* ever born on this planet. Even if one drops dead in blowing out the candles on a 60th birthday cake, he has already claimed the jackpot in the lottery of longevity. Much more significantly, if one can claim rich and varied experience in those sixty years— he belongs to an even more select subset of cosmic jackpot winners...

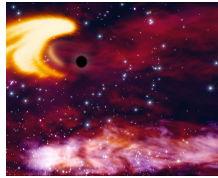
In the breadth of history, how many humanoids have glimpsed the world from coral reef to mountaintop, dabbled in arts and crafts, gorged on a host of sweetmeats—not to mention having gasped in the fireworks of innumerable orgasms? How many have had second, third, fourth and fifth helpings of such delights? If a person can claim a good measure of all that and still reach sixty— isn’t an expectation of an indefinite continuation of the same— *greedy*?

In any case, I failed to make those points with J. For that, I got a pat on the head from a villager who’s timorously lived out his days not forty kilometers from his birthplace.

It stung.

2012, January

In absence of consolation:



The Wikipedia entry about the time scale of evolution read last evening, was disquieting. The upshot was that there is little consolation in the world's continuance beyond one's permanent absence.

Of course, there is consolation that the lives of one's children will go on. For those who have no children if their own— there can be consolation that replicas of one's genes will persist in other relatives. Even for those without relatives, replicas of one's genes will go on in humanity at large— however diffusely spread. They will go on until the human species eventual (many would claim inevitable) extinction.

The implications of human extinction, I recalled, were passionately addressed in *'The Fate of the Earth'*, published in the early 1980s at the height of the resurgent cold war. According to the author (Jonathan Schell), the prospect of human extinction in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust would break all links with the future. At the very core of our being, a broken link with the indefinite future is far more fearsome than that of personal oblivion.

Of course, others have offered optimistic predictions of humanity prevailing beyond the present existential crises. Among such speculations is the idea that humanity will avoid self-destruction and will acquire ever more marvelous technology along with the wisdom to use it wisely. Perhaps we can even spread our species beyond the earth. Such propagation could be in the form of tiny probes floating the seeds of planetary life into the cosmos. Perhaps after some inconceivable span of time, in an inconceivably distant yet habitable niche of the galaxy, spores from the long-disappeared earth could evolve into intelligent life.

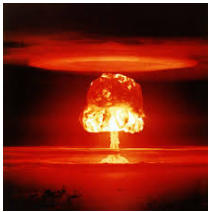
Still, from what we understand of evolution, such intelligence would be unimaginably alien. To what extent can the prospect of seeding unimaginably strange aliens satisfy our need for a link with the future?

In a more tangible sense, we might envision our link with the future by comparing it with our link with the past. The latter exists only in living memory and beyond that— only in recorded history. Even our links with ancestors (despite certain religious beliefs) are tenuous. Few of us have knowledge of direct ancestors beyond a few generations. Would an individual of a species evolved from human genesis in the distant future be any more alien than an actual Neandertal ancestor? When all memory and history is obliterated and forever irretrievable— what 'spiritual' link remains in the mere survival of replicant strands of our DNA?

In a cosmological perspective, every molecule of this planet will eventually be swallowed when our dying sun expands to a red giant. Perhaps all matter in our galaxy will eventually collapse into a cosmic vortex and disappear beyond spacetime. In such imagining we lose not only our link with organic life— but even with a link with the inorganic material which gave it rise... Mind-stretching theories of cosmology suggest that the universe itself— operating under the laws of physics as we conceive them— is finite.

In the much shorter term, such speculation does nothing to ease the prospect of personal non-being...

2014, February



fwl

Warnings from the departed:



A change had been recently noted in the recurrent dreams of '*separation*': For upwards of a quarter century, such dreams have centered on images of exile in remote tropical islands or entrapment in the dark emptiness of the natal village in mid-winter. Trains or buses needed for rendezvous with my children are missed. Often there is gnashing of teeth in being unable to reach loved ones hurtling past on adjacent train tracks...

Now the nightmare images have shifted from the agony of separation to the anxiousness of *missing* a train or bus. Recurrent sequences of the last two years involve situations in which I am without transportation to a station or airport with too little time to pick up luggage needed for the journey. Another more recently recurrent scenario involves waiting in vain for the planned arrival of my late mother/ sister/ friend while the time needed to make the plane/bus/train runs out...

Perhaps with my children grown, there is no longer such agony in leaving them alone and vulnerable in my *sudden* 'departure'.

Yet at 64 and retired, the ebbing away of the remaining *prana* [breath] becomes ever more precious. Of course, it is a rare person who can die in the contentment of having lasting accomplishments that satisfactorily define his passage. On the other side of the continuum, it is a justly haunted person who shirks to the bitter end the completion of even a single piece of meaningful work....

2015, August

Distracted by Rush Limbaugh:

Driving out of our complex at 9:45 AM feeding righteous indignation with the radio voice of Rush Limbaugh, I signaled for the left turn.

Two parked cars on the left blocked the immediate oncoming view and cars parked across the street made the turn tighter. Far down the street on the left, a black SUV was rounding the corner leaving about four seconds to turn. With a final glance to the right, I make a tight turn. Immediately there came a screech of brakes.

The heart leapt to throat. Unseen in the blind spot had been a black compact ahead of the SUV! By no more than half a second, I had missed getting T-boned— directly on the driver's side.

In the rear-view mirror, the black compact was stopped in the middle of the road, the driver likely catching his breath. Shaking, I drove to the four-way stop, eyes darting to the rear-view mirror. In the five-minute drive down Lougheed highway, I might well have had a road-test examiner beside me with clipboard on lap. Turning into the mall at Shaughnessy, I carefully parked in the stall before my destination, Bosley's Pet store.

After turning off the ignition, I sat for a minute, trembling. Imagine it— the sirens. The Mountie neighbour and others rushing out— C. possibly even hearing the smash! Imagine the effect on poor TE, eight months pregnant!

Still, it occurred that almost any driver might have made the same error. Cars parked immediately to the left of the driveway obscure the left view. There should be a 'No Parking' sign there... I resolved to write an email to the strata manager or even one to the city traffic department.

Still, that was not an excuse. I could have been more careful. Whether it had lasted only a second or two— I could not deny that I had been distracted. That tiny lapse of due attention was effectively the second of the three double dice throws that could have manifested as a deadly 'accident'. The first was the distraction of the talk show in the instant in which the black compact was just entering the blind spot. Only by that driver's quick reaction was the third double throw of the dice— the snake eyes— avoided...

Wiping my clammy brow, I had to wonder whether at sixty-six, my reflexes were dulling.

Never, I resolved, *never* will I be one of those codgers who stubbornly resist giving up their license when I begin to pose a danger to others. I will not wait for it to be taken away— at the first clear signs of deterioration— I will gladly become a bus passenger again... In the meantime, I will program that dangerous left turn into the mental hard drive. Beware the parked car blind spot!

I pulled out the keys and opened the door. Unlike a head-on crash with air bags (like the collision in Port Angeles) a direct-driver's side door impact would have been almost certainly fatal. That crash was missed by a ½ second when I was starting out on the errand of replenishing Pancho's supply of kibbles.

With a chortle, I felt for my wallet. How instructive that the Reaper should try to catch me distracted by the voice of Rush Limbaugh!

2017, July



fwf

At the Muri night market:

At the Muri night market, C. and I sat at the picnic tables surrounded by the food stalls. Along with a few other elderly tourists, we poked plastic forks into our Styrofoam containers as if scraping for something more than morsels of fried rice.

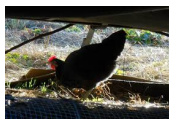
A scattering of older islanders (a preponderance of bulging tattooed arms) sat among us— apparently the food fare being the Muri hamlet’s highlight of the week. However, the locals looked restrained— as if shy to reveal table manners in the presence of tourists. Even the blaring music (early Beatle-like crooning with ukulele accompaniment) from the portable Karaoke stirred no tapping feet or wagging hips. All such display, apparently, was confined to the rollicking Sunday church services.

With the median age around the tables looking closer to seventy-five than sixty-five, I felt the rare relief that for once C. and I were not the oldest on the scene. Most of the tourists were New Zealanders— comfortable in a holiday destination only four hours from home where they can use their Kiwi dollars. Dutifully nibbling the local fare, they could have been ingesting their daily medication.

It occurred that for many tourists of our age, travel is an inconvenient fulfillment of promises made before we lost the capacity to fully enjoy it. For those oldsters who still need to go economy, merely dragging oneself on a cramped flight (10½ hours to Rarotonga from Los Angeles) may seem in a small way, heroic.

In the scrape of plastic on Styrofoam, I thought of the line from a Leonard Cohen poem: *‘There is still pleasure to be squeezed from these old leather bags...’* For old bodies worn down by soul-killing routine, it takes ever more effort to wring out a few drops. Yet even in the diminution of sensuous response— its echoes can haunt like twinges on the fingertips of a phantom limb...

I also recalled a story of a chicken on its way to an East Vancouver poultry processing plant. It miraculously fell out of its cramped cage in the back of a transport truck onto the road. However dazed, the creature flopped and flapped around traffic and made for the bushes... How many other chickens, hurled suddenly into an alien environment, would have just lain there, terrified?



Still peeking around at my fellows between bites, I wondered how many regularly check the obits—a guilty habit that I cannot deny. It occurred that in specific obits of the not-too-distant future—ones which those of us at the Muri Night Market this evening will *never* see— there may be a reference to this very ‘adventure’:

‘X’ lived his/her retirement years to the fullest. He/she loved to travel and in the last few years visited a number of exotic destinations, including the Cook Islands...’

2018, February (Rarotonga)

A somber reflection on the dyke:

Last evening MH texted that the father of one of his law school friends has passed. He was just sixty-one. In the sadness of that news, the pre-dawn walk with Pancho towards the Pitt River dyke began with a somber reflection:

MH and I had stayed at his friend's dad's house in Ottawa during our road trip in 2017. Although we had planned to stay at an Airbnb, the dad insisted that he had room for both of us. Even in the awkwardness of arriving as a stranger an hour before a Canada Day barbeque, the dad endeavoured to put us at ease.

Unforgettable was the pain in the host's eyes when he informed that he had recently lost his wife to cancer. He was clearly struggling with living alone. I had to wonder whether it was loneliness that somehow gave rise to the same disease that would kill him just eighteen months later.

He had been a well-known physiotherapist who established his own Ottawa clinic with numerous employees. He was notably generous—having left considerable sums to charity. He was deeply devoted to family and widely respected by friends and colleagues. His obituary (seemingly written by one of his two children) was a glowing tribute to a bountiful life.



Further along the river, I thought of Orwell's observation only the rarest of people move from strength to strength throughout their lives. By Orwell's unsentimental reckoning, the average life is marked a series of "small humiliations..."

Whatever hard grain of truth lies in that opinion, I felt that it does not acknowledge the strengths that even "average" mortals often draw upon—if only to endure the humiliations...

It is not hard to imagine the solace of many who believe in the presence of the spirit hand of Jesus on their shoulders: *'There there, my child... You are special! You have a special purpose and eternal reward beyond this vale of tears...'*

I have always been among those who believe that a willful stifling of reason is far too great a sacrifice for the comfort of magical belief... Yet in the face of claustrophobic darkness—might even a life-long commitment to reason falter?



While Pancho sniffed the dead grass, I stopped up to marvel the orange glow smudging the horizon beyond the opposite Pitt River shore. At the same moment, it occurred that I have I already lived seven years longer than the dad of MH's friend in Ottawa. How well have I used that time?

In that question I recalled words of Mr. Limo, the Shona principal and lay-preacher of the Methodist boarding school in Zimbabwe where I worked in the 1980s.

However resistant to the gospel at the Methodist mission, I regarded Mr. Limo as a man of exceptional integrity which was in large measure— nourished by his faith. In one particularly memorable exhortation to the students at the close of the compulsory morning assembly, he said:

“Live every day so that you at the very end of your life you will hear a whisper: ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant!’”

That piece of advice was as humbling this morning as it was when heard at the back row of the Chibero Mission school assembly, more than thirty years ago...

2019, February