

DA on Death (from his *Commonplace Book*)

A Thought on the Dead

A dead man is alone when he is dead and more alone when he is forgotten. I should like to renew my friendship with the dead, to think of them frequently and to speak to them. And I should like people to think of me in that way when I am dead. I hope I shall be available to my children and to my surviving friends and they will think of me in a friendly way when they are having a good time.

On Death

I'm not one of those who, according to William James, want to "cuddle up to death," but I should like to survey Death respectfully, accustom myself to his presence, stand within spying range, live in peaceful coexistence with him during the long truce. Then, when the time comes, I want him to approach me not in the guise of an executioner or a footpad but as a solicitous colleague who will invite me to share his dark and revealing knowledge.

Daniel's Dictionary

Smorzando [lovely word]: a fading away.

Morendo: gradual diminuendo at the end of a movement.

D. A. Reflection: So I should use "smorzando" as a temporary fading with the likelihood of renewal and "morendo" as final death. We have many *smorzandos* but only one *morendo*.

Richard Hofstadter's Last Days

My sense of his resentment and panic, his look of a man deserted and betrayed, of one who had already crossed over and was looking at the stupidly alive from the other side of the Styx.

Such men (I quote Avery Weisman) "are dependent, without trusting in their right to be cared for; they are without confidence in their reality testing because, in some inscrutable sense, they are already gone . . . Even experienced professionals find themselves withdrawing in the presence of death, and many well-meaning people feel a natural revulsion. The sights and smells of terminal disease are just as disgusting as the thought of death is horrendous. There is often an infectiousness about the deadly atmosphere that cannot help but arouse antipathy and aversion. There are no effective sprays and deodorants for the stench of despair."

D. A.'s Reflection: In making one's final exit, don't dash awkwardly off the stage in a panic. Walk. Don't run.

Death from Above

Spinoza: "It is not good to fear death, nor right to long for death. The scales must be so balanced that the pointer is vertical."

Vita/Mors

Si vis vitam, para mortem. "If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death." Or we might add—if you want to enjoy or savor life, prepare for death.

Proverbs

(Spanish) Santayana: “Man has two childhoods, one means life and the other death, but in both he has a jolly time.”

Lucretius: “You may live to complete as many generations as you will; nevertheless, that everlasting death will still be waiting.”

Death

Frances Partridge: “I think a great deal about death and the manner of dying . . . One can only come to terms with death by pressing forward, opening the door, and looking all around the room.”

On Being Old

Charles Tennyson: “Now, at 91, I am undeniably, by prevailing standards, old, though whether such an age will be considered old in 50 years’ time may be doubtful. I wish I could feel that my old age is typical—but I can’t . . . Most unfair of all, I find that the mere fact of having attained the age of 91 is regarded as a distinction and that I receive everywhere a consideration which my achievements in so long a life certainly do not deserve . . . Am I afraid of death? Certainly. I fear the physical moment. I hate the thought of leaving this world which I have enjoyed and still enjoy so much. I hate the thought that I may live to be a burden and a misery to those who love me. As for the ‘something after death,’ that seems too far away to worry about—though it can’t, I suppose, be so very far.”

Time Warp

Tuesday, April 19: Time, 8:20 AM. Place, Warren House. Listening to Berlioz’ *Le Corsaire*. Desk uncluttered, my office my solace and salvation where my life is stored and packaged. Not yet completely restored after my “total hip procedure” but mending steadily as the veins reconnect and the metal connecting rod in my hip nestles into flesh and bone. At odd moments I think of death and oblivion. Last Sunday I listened to a Bach cantata—”Ich steh’ mit einem Fuß im Grabe“—or something like that.

Thought for the Day

I’ve not become a “history” in the sense that Goethe said he had become (that is, in its most flattering sense, so famous that he hardened in his lifetime, long before his death, into an icon) but still I am a “history,” an artifact of history, of time. My very longevity is “historical,” because old people like me are physically and perhaps mentally the consequences of the first twenty years of their lives, of their nutrition and education. I am a ringed tree. The postmortemists scrutinizing my corpse will be “identifying the aging of a human body” but also “tracing the social history of a century” (Raymond Tallis). What is “historical” about me is the totality of my nurturing—the food I consumed, my physical activity from early childhood to now, my physical and mental exercise. So one could write a physiological autobiography, I suppose, replete with family medical records as far back as possible; hygienic accidents, physical exploits; smoking, drinking. This information would be arranged and correlated with the medical practices and theories prevailing during the subject’s life. The autobiographer would also record his social and intellectual development, information related to his psychological makeup, his aesthetic views, sexual attitudes and history, dreams, and his thoughts and theories about death and aging.

Terminal

Santayana: “There is no cure for birth or death save to enjoy the interval.”

Daniel Aaron’s Death

Feb. 17 [1980]: Last night a dream that would have terrified the Ancients. Sitting around a table with friends—how old or new I can’t say. Someone Handed me a card with my picture on it. The card announced that Daniel Aaron is dead, one of four killed in a bomb attack. The incident was described In some detail although I can’t remember what was written. I had two impulses—deny the report or (more powerful) concede that I was indeed dead, although unaware of my new state until that moment. Life drains away as I say good-bye to my friends. Dismay. The party breaks up.

D. A.’s Obituary

Daniel Aaron

Arrived August 4, 1912

Named after no one, in particular

Invented nothing, except in words

Even disposition

Loved a good deal and was loved

Announced early plans for old age

Assisted various and sundry students

Retired at 65

Once released

Never heard of again