

# Living Like it's Your Last Day

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (November 2018)



*Message From A Friend*, Joan Miró, 1964

You should live each day as if it were your last, but also as if you were going to live forever. The latter is easier to do, perhaps, than the former because, as Voltaire is said to have

replied when asked on his deathbed by a priest to renounce the devil, your last day alive is no time to be making enemies. However, it is very difficult, especially in these times of inflamed sentiment and opinion, to avoid making enemies. It often seems as if you have only to open your mouth to do so.

Of course, the idea of living each day as if it were your last becomes somewhat more realistic or pressing as one grows older, as death circles ever closer to you. One's friends and acquaintances begin to die, as they never did before. One looks back, not forward—although I must admit that the past has always interested me more than the future.

When I look back, I realise how fortunate I am to have known so many remarkable people. Perhaps everyone could say as much, I don't know. What, after all, distinguishes a remarkable person from an unremarkable one? Fame is often capricious, and the most famous are not necessarily the most interesting or remarkable. In any case, my personal knowledge of the famous comes almost exclusively from brief acquaintance rather than intimate friendship. Besides, one has one's personal canon of fame. Not having watched television for half a century except fleetingly and often only under duress, and subscribing to no social media, so-called, people who are world-famous and so instantly recognisable that they are known on my e-mail server's home page by their first name alone, or even by a diminutive of their first name, are completely unknown to me. Furthermore, I don't care if they divorce one another or check into a rehabilitation clinic to cure them of their promiscuity. The people I regard as famous, by contrast, are often unknown to millions.

I want to recall two of my acquaintances, one anonymously and

the other by name, who strike me now as having been more remarkable than I ever thought them while they were still living, perhaps because one never stops to think about such matters and assumes that they, like oneself, will live forever.

The first of them was a German who came to England in about 1961. His father had been imprisoned by the Nazis. He remembered the dignitaries of his town being taken off by the occupying forces at the end of the war to see the nearby concentration camp of whose existence they preferred or pretended to be ignorant.

He was raised in the East but always hated the regime and rebelled against it by refusing to learn Russian. He managed to get away to the west not many years before the wall went up and studied physics in West Berlin. Of course, his defection meant that he was unable to see many of his relatives for many years. He did not feel it safe to return to the East.

When he came to England, he very soon made quite a lot of money in property. He could turn his hand to many things and refurbished houses himself (there was a lot of dereliction at the time awaiting refurbishment). But once he had made quite a lot of money, he stopped. For him, money was a means to an end, not an end in itself. Most people who are good at making money go on to make even more money; money had no further allure for him, and this in itself was remarkable in a person who obviously had a talent for making it. He was by then in his early thirties, and that was when I first met him.

He spoke perfect English—much better, in fact, than 99 per cent of native speakers—and he never made a grammatical mistake. He read Shakespeare as if Elizabethan English were his native tongue. He had an unmistakable German accent, however (in my estimation attractive), and it was only much later that his wife told me that he was very sensitive about it. When he arrived in England, there was still strong anti-German feeling, at least among the unreflective, kept alive no doubt by the continued presence of bomb-sites that the British were so slow to repair (I loved them as a child, as well as the still-open bomb shelters in which one could be naughty). This nervousness about his accent restricted his social life to those whom he could be sure of absence of prejudice: and of course if you are socially retiring for any length of time, it becomes habitual.

What he was really interested in was philosophy and having made enough money to live in the style which he desired, a kind of austere luxury, he spent many years—decades—studying it. He was a firm and uncompromising materialist (in the philosophical, not moral, sense) and a strict determinist; he wrote a book about it and we used to discuss his point of view. I took the line that, if true, his determinism could not be known to be true, since anyone who held it to be true was determined by circumstance to hold that it was true irrespective of evidence or argument, and anyone who held it to be untrue was likewise determined by circumstance to hold that it was untrue irrespective of evidence or argument. I held that strict determinism could make no difference to human existence as it is lived, even if true.

It was enjoyable to disagree with him because disagreement caused him no annoyance or bitterness. In fact, he was a man who was among the most uncensorious I have ever known. I never

heard him say an unkind word about anyone. I do not even think he thought unkind thoughts, whether by good nature or because he had trained himself in the discipline of not thinking them. But this lack of unkindness (which translated into action also) had none of the unctuous righteousness that the professionally forgiving or understanding often have.

He was thin and wiry, and well into his seventies went up on to the roof of his mansion to fix it, so that I had come to think of him as indestructible. In fact, although he was twelve years older than I, I had always assumed I would die before him (I am not thin, wiry or active). His fatal illness therefore came as a shock to me.

He was generous and was willing to spend money on pictures (for which he had a very good eye), but on occasion he was eccentrically and endearingly parsimonious. He would not, for example, fill his car's tank fully with fuel because he said that the added weight reduced the mileage per gallon of the car. This meant that any long journey with him in his car was punctuated by stops at fuel stations, which was both hilarious and infuriating.

He made no enduring mark on the world, perhaps, except on the people who knew him, for it was impossible to meet him without immediately grasping (even before you knew why) that he was out of the ordinary—in a good way, and without any affectation of eccentricity. He was a genuinely free man in the sense that he always ploughed his own furrow without demanding that anyone should follow in his footsteps.

The second remarkable person whom I now wish to recall was a man named Mike Shawcross. He was an Englishman living in Guatemala and I had his address from someone who knew him. I was warned that he could be a little prickly or ursine, being a blunt Northerner with a prophet's beard, but when I turned up at his door in the beautiful half-ruined town of Antigua, Guatemala, he could hardly have been more welcoming in a non-effusive way. (I have never found people who are reputed to be prickly nearly as prickly as they are painted, if that is not a disastrously mixed metaphor.) Our meeting was not quite in the same league as that of the painter Stanley Spencer who came to tea at Sir John Rothenstein's and stayed twenty-six years, but I did knock on the door and stay several months. His postal address is still engraved on my memory: Apartado 343, Antigua Guatemala, C.A. (Central America).

He was a bibliophile with a large collection of books about Guatemala, many of them very rare, but he was also a speleologist and ran a programme to assist Mayan villages during this grim period of Guatemala's history (I am not sure that there have been many periods of its history that were not grim). He took an unusual view of the civil war then raging in Guatemala—unusual, that is, for a European or North American who took an interest in it. While under no illusions about the massacres carried out by the government forces, he was not an admirer of the guerrillas who, he thought, had knowingly and predictably stirred up the violence of which the peasantry was now the victim, and were totalitarian in intent. You didn't have to know much about Guatemalan history to know that the genie was easy to release from the bottle.

He ran a bookshop as a means of livelihood, though without enthusiasm, at least by the time I arrived, but I admired a man who had arrived in a country that was hardly a destination

for many emigrants and started a business there. As I was soon to discover, the Guatemalan bureaucracy was not always easy to deal with, at least until one utilised the *tramitadores*, the agents who dealt with the bureaucracy on one's behalf, keeping part of one's bribe for themselves as commission.

There is a certain kind of person who covers up the strength of his benevolence by a certain gruffness, and Michael Shawcross was one of these. I think he did so because he would have been overwhelmed by his emotions if he had not. He was of a generation and culture, moreover, that did not wear its kindness on its sleeve. Profoundly marked by, if not still believing in, the Bible, it took seriously St Matthew's injunction, 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them.' This is something of which I very much approve.

I was in Guatemala to write a book and he opened many doors for me and guided me to the places I should go. Under his guidance, I met everyone from peasants to ex-dictators. He took me with him to the highlands where was the focus of his charitable work, and where he shared the discomforts of the people. He had a rare quality of benevolence towards large numbers of people that was not merely abstract.

After I left Guatemala, I lost contact with him apart from the very occasional letter, some e-mails and a couple of his visits home to England. I felt guilty about this; and the other day, on a sudden impulse, I looked him up on the internet. I wanted to get back in touch with him. As one grows older, one returns to the people one has known.

Alas, I discovered that he had died three years earlier. He had always had high blood pressure, perhaps exacerbated by his gruffness, and had suffered a stroke from which he had made a partial recovery until a further stroke killed him. He was in his early seventies, which no longer seems a great age to me.

Naturally, the news (to me) that he had died three years earlier only served to increase my guilt. As I had supposed that there would always be world enough and time to resume our acquaintance and that, in Marvell's words, we would sit down, and think which way to walk. It was not to be; and he joined the lengthening list of my acquaintances who died before I contacted them again.

But there was another way in which my recollection of Michael Shawcross induced a sense of guilt in me, namely that he was a better man in the moral sense than I. He really had devoted his life to the service of others in a way in which I never have. His benevolence did not arise from a sense of duty, as my severely intermittent benevolence does, but from a kind of inextinguishable inner light, a real goodness of soul all the more inspiring because it was not incompatible with eccentricity and genuine individuality that likewise was completely unselfconscious.

I cannot say that we shall not see his like again; but I think that *I* will not see his like again.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [@NERIconoclast](#)