

Nearing Death: The Terminal Years

by [Carl Nelson](#) (December 2022)



Gangster's Funeral, Jack Levine, 1953

Aristocracy is just a prop for the lovely romance of decay.
—Waverly

My End of Life Care, Unlimited Offer

A DIY Manifesto

With an inability to care for myself,
like an old dog dribbling shit,
I'll take a whatever view a total disregard would be,
if possible. Say, I leak a little? I'm good with that.
If triaged, assessed, and after financials checked,
I'm carted off to a cot in the urine scented, musty realms,
I'll likely wander off, anyways.

When me and my soul part ways
we'll do so on the cheap.
I'll strike up that conversation with Death
under a city bridge or in a WalMart lot,
where we'll chat, sitting on a package of Depends.
I won't revel in my extremis or fulminate with resentment,
but explain that I'm down here picking up—(Divine Events
need practice,
and the good Lord hates a hook or a slice.)—
driving the mesh cart on God's Driving Range
collecting Mulligans.

While working on the preceding snatch of poetry I wondered why I enjoy writing about death, or at least the prospect of it. The lines feel as if I were slipping into an old sofa, comfortable as putting on a pair of worn shoes, easy as eating cold pizza with those still spicy lumps of greasy sausage and following it with cold beer. A characteristic place to be is how I would envision my decline, like wiggling my toes in cool dirt on a warm day.

Death doesn't present a big challenge. There's no fee, no qualifying exam. It will just happen, like a participation trophy received after I will have graduated sine laude. The destination will have been reached. Graduation ceremonies completed or not. Job done. Whether or not I have acquitted

myself well? Who's to be concerned? The eulogy usually states you did the best you could, or that you gave all that you had in you, or that you knew to do. Or they are silent. They are generally charitable. Most everybody grant the dead a bit of slack – or not. But what's to fear? You're dead.

A fellow warehouse teamster was once telling me of his Uncle who committed suicide. "Don't you think that's selfish?" He asked contemptuously.

"I don't think he cares what you think," I responded.

Along the road to death, there is nobody chafing to beat you to the exit. Nobody is racing ahead to nudge you out, steal your spot, claim the glory. The decaying, disintegrating, aging and terminal are not competed for. In this respect, it's a lot like failure except without the rejection and ostracism you must live with. Whereas they don't always live and let live, everyone lives and lets die.

I'm not looking forward to, nor do I pursue death. "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out." No thank you. But I'm a practiced believer that the journey is the destination – albeit this life at times has taken an awful long time. My difficulty is that life is also a narrative, a sentence if you will, and there are very few places to stop, very few scenic vistas. Or, how about none? Whereas death is the period. Time waits for no one. But since poets are aesthetes of the still and expanding consciousness, we must do the best we can to realize a place in this existence to pull over and sniff the flowers, if we find them. Perhaps I just love the Golden Years.

Life, as I've experienced it, is like the two lane country roads east of Seattle where we used to live. No matter how I managed them, there seemed always to be someone crawling up my ass. Doing the speed limit wouldn't shake them. Going over the speed limit wouldn't shake them. In trying to appease them,

they could intimidate a person into driving faster and faster until literally careening off the roadway.

I remember another time when touring Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. It's was a four lane quiet evening thoroughfare, and I was in the curbside lane slowly ogling the luxury shops. A fellow came up behind in his Mercedes and started honking. There was no one about. He could have easily gone around in the vacant lane. But for some reason he insisted that I was moving too slow. What in the world propels these people?

I don't know, but it is very easy to see why there are so many lawyers in the world. Just motor down any freeway going the speed limit and see if there is anyone who isn't passing you. Nobody obeys the law! And one sure way on a crowded thoroughfare to have a clear roadway ahead free of the automotive bickering is to go a bit slower than everyone around. (This would be the speed limit, no doubt.)

My Footprint in the Sand

I used to leave a swath through traffic
in my sixty foot articulated bus,
moving across five lanes of traffic
to travel from entrance to exit
in about one eighth mile.

The thing was to estimate a clearance
in the first two lanes, insert myself,
then keep moving smoothly to the right
across the three other lanes
at a constant speed without hesitation.

The oncoming cars adjusted
to the seemingly blind moving wall of bus,
drifting from harm's way,
until at completion, this thing of beauty manifest

in my rearview out of time and motion:
a perfect moving diagonal of bare roadway.

And so existed my little footprint
in the cacophonous sands of modernity's flux,
claiming its shape for a time as a bus driver's creation,
short-lived, but sassy and clear.

So likewise, when I write about death or failure—the traffic clears for a few clear moments. No one is trying to get there ahead of me. No one is cutting in front. No one is protesting that I am doing it all wrong or that they could do it much better. No one is crowing that they have gotten to death before me. Perhaps no one even listens. Or, if they do, I'm like the stupid person acting stupidly which makes the audience smile.

No one crows about dying sooner, or brags about finding a worse doctor. I'm not drowned out in the cacophony. And I hate crowds. So "it's all good". I'm left pretty much to get there on my own pace, though my wife at times will put in an effort to slow me down even further—which is appreciated as I really don't want to arrive. I just want to pull off at a scenic spot to enjoy the vista and ruminate. Is this too much to ask? So that writing about death is as near as being in the still moment as it seems I can muster. It's really a quite pleasant way of appreciating life and the present and just second to writing about retirement.

The Narrative Illusion

Poetry is a kind of language that wants to happen all at once. It wants to be self-simultaneous. –Jeff Dolven, poet/professor

Call it the narrative illusion,
with time being the illusion it describes.
An illusion only described by its passing—
as in its essence when stopped,
it is always and again, just this and that.

I'm afraid life as it is – just that and this,
frozen, as if caught naked in harsh light—
like poetry, bores us ... doesn't 'happen.' Won't move!
While life moving more or less as it isn't,
has a lot happening, is an endless tale,

a mobius strip which proceeds with much abandon,
and on and on ...

“full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“And all the men and women merely players ...”

I mean, people are hanging themselves from trees, jumping from bridges, taking too many pills, slicing their wrists, drowning, asphyxiating, drinking lye... the list goes on and on, but all in an effort to get themselves some peace... and possibly just to slow. things. down.

If there were no humility in the world, everybody would long ago have committed suicide. Humility is our only defense against despair. –Thomas Merton

I wouldn't doubt that previously, prior to the access of a little humility, many of us just couldn't get a good night's sleep. Insomnia can certainly place a person over the edge.

It is said that the suicidal exhibit a surge in their feelings of well-being once they have finally made their decision to end it all. That they are not necessary, that no one would

miss them nor care. What a weight off the shoulders! And they are back in the traces cleaning up business affairs, vacuuming the house, giving away keepsakes to their friends and relations, being pleasant and optimistic. Truly contemplating death's dominion, handing over the reins, can be a cheerful enterprise. So can anticipating financial ruin, or just giving up in general. Humility can be freeing. Failure can be releasing. Quitting can be fantastic, like falling into bed after a hard day. A lot of tasks fall away, the day lengthens, reality reveals itself as our designs upon it peel away. Life becomes more vivid and fragrant and tactile. It's a nice place to be and a comfortable place to write from—especially when you don't anticipate it, actually.

But isn't it interesting that to get any peace around here, you need to practice being nearly dead. I'm reminded of the Broadway playwright during production who just wanted "to be a carrot in the ground."

As a poet it's unlikely you'll be rich, successful, admired, read or even listened to. But as an antidote to the despair, when one absorbs the humility of it all the upside is that it is very vivid and real. Not the despair, I mean, but the "sun in the morning and the moon at night". And I like sending my little postcard/poems – from stops in my mental travels along the way as life with its successes whizzes past. I used to hitchhike a lot. I think it was practice.

Thomas Merton noted further that,

In humility is the greatest freedom. As long as you have to defend the imaginary self that you think is important, you lose your peace of heart. As soon as you compare that shadow with the shadows of other people, you lose all joy ... Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.

I sometimes wonder about my friends who are dead, and what they would say if I spoke to them now? Would they agree with what I've written, find me a fool and tedious – or realize that I'm on a fishing expedition.

Thought for the Day

If you read enough self-help books, you'll realize that every aspect of your character is a flaw. You are holding yourself back, but must recognize this to admit it. Take off those horn-rims. Get into that phone booth and remove some clothes!

We are marbled in Original Sin, basically. Eve bit the Apple, but you married in, so ... get ready for some gimpy offspring, also. The Bible offers no well-being, self esteem, or selfhood exercises, so we've added that.

In your prayers you might suggest that God react to you more positively. Instead of sin, He might call it a challenge and refer to temptation as a choice. Life is full of possibilities and most of how we feel lies in how we react to the situation around us. You might tell God, this. A lot of his ire with his creations might be simple misperception. And, if He'd like, you might delve into this more deeply at a later time.

[Table of Contents](#)

Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled Become Remarkable. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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