

Tender Death

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (January 2024)



Old Man's Death— Ladislav Mednyánszky, 1890

And wherefore say not I that I am old? —William Shakespeare, Sonnet 138

I have seen the future, and it is death.

Of course, it always was the future, since the very moment of conception, but more recently I have seen it close-up because of its greater proximity to me personally on account of my age. I have also recently visited two friends, only very slightly older than I, who have illnesses that mean that the duration of their lives is now to be measured in months rather

than in years. Of this, both are fully cognisant, and they bear their knowledge and their suffering with the most admirable stoicism. They do not rage, rage against the dying of the light, but rather are preparing to go gentle into that good night: and I think it is better so. My father and my mother did the same, and I was grateful for it.

The strange thing is, however, that my theoretical understanding notwithstanding, and with these examples before me, I get up in the morning as fully convinced that life—*my* life, that is—will continue, if not for ever, at least for a long time yet, under more or less the conditions that prevail now. What I think and what I feel might as well belong to two different creatures, two different brains, so little do they coincide.

For example, antiquarian booksellers send me their catalogues, which I continue to read with excitement, still planning purchases as if I will enjoy the possession of any book I buy for a very long time to come, almost forever. This, of course, is absurd; if the fortune teller in a funfair whom I consulted when I was about fifteen or sixteen is correct (and she has been correct so far in two of her three predictions for me, I could not afford to pay for more predictions) I have but ten years more to live. This was not a bad guess on her part, being the average of my parents' age at death, which is often used to calculate a rough personal life expectancy—it cannot be more than rough, for the life expectancy of a population changes. After all, my father's life expectancy at birth was 47; mine was 66; if I were born today, it would be a little over 80.

No doubt many of the books that I am excited to buy have been digitalised, but the passion for books—almost entirely, or at least overwhelmingly, a male phenomenon—has always been somewhat irrational. The story is told of an early nineteenth century bibliophile who sent out on his very deathbed to buy books that he saw advertised in a catalogue, though he knew he

was dying and that his library of 50,000 books would be sold after his death (at a loss, incidentally). Mad as this no doubt was, it points to a life with a passionate purpose; in this case a relatively harmless one.

My books are a biography that only I can decipher, a record of serial obsessions. They will be dispersed after my death (it is actually quite difficult to dispose of books these days, so few people want them) as surely as the ashes of my cremated body will be dispersed. I used to have a preference for burial, but contemporary tombstones are in such bad taste that I have given up on that idea. Besides, one can't be buried higgledy-piggledy as in charming old churchyards or Victorian cemeteries (there are too many of us for that, we have to economise on space) and I don't want to be buried lying to attention, as it were, like—if this is not to mix the metaphor too violently—a pea in a pod. I should add, moreover, that one is no longer buried *sub specie aeternitatis*, but only provisionally, generally for 99 years (though even this might be shortened under pressure of circumstance), being removed to make room for someone else, unless a descendant or other interested party is willing to pay for your continued residence, which in my case is highly unlikely, the only person willing to pay for it being what Victorians would call my relict, who herself will not survive me by many decades, let alone by 99 years.

Absurd though it might be, one has to live as long as one is able as if there stretched before one a substantial period of time, as if one's present concerns were of genuine and lasting importance. I admire those who can maintain their interest to the very end. There is a councillor of my town who is aged and very ill, who has been on the council for many years but who is nevertheless as absorbed in the welfare of the town as he was many years ago when he first joined it. He must know that anything that he decides with the other councillors cannot affect him personally for long, but this of no moment to him.

An uncle of mine aged ninety who had but a short time to live was still deeply interested in sport, an activity whose triumphs are among the most fleeting of all human triumphs, and which I had, and still have, a tendency to disdain. But in the face of eternity, even the greatest of human triumphs is fleeting. Civilization has so far lasted on earth about one seven thousandth as long as did the dinosaurs. I doubt that it, civilisation, will equal the dinosaurs in longevity. The way things are going, it might not even last another generation or two—though this depends on what one counts as civilisation. The dinosaurs, of whom we are told these days that birds are but a feathered and winged variety, will have the last laugh. 'Look how badly adapted humans were,' they will be able to say, 'who lasted not a fraction of our time on earth! Survival of the fittest, indeed! By *that* measure, Mankind is the illest-fitting creature that ever was. Think of another species that died out so quickly!'

My uncle was the best man I ever knew, who had that strange quality of making everyone feel affection for him at once, on first meeting. He never spoke ill of anyone, and I suspect never thought it either: he was always eager to make allowances to account for people's failings. This not to say that he was stupid—very far from it, he was of high intelligence—though he was not educated, nor was he handsome, and his manners were not refined. Whenever I think of him, however, I become more tolerant, less censorious. He exerts a civilising effect on me from beyond the grave. Perhaps I should think of him more often.

He had his faults, though, like everyone else. His principal defect was that he was a gambler, mostly on the horses and dogs. I vaguely remember departing his flat in the evening to go to the White City stadium to watch (and bet on) the dogs, which is to say greyhounds which were trained to chase a mechanical hare and which never appeared to learn the futility of their chase. I suppose there is some kind of lesson for

humanity there.

The stadium, which was very large, closed in 1984 and was demolished in 1985, and for the last sixty years of its existence was devoted mainly to dog-racing, at one time attracting crowds of up to 90,000 to what the Greyhound Derby. My uncle, a regular, wasted quite a lot of his substance on the dogs and I heard it said that if it had not been for his betting, he could have been quite a rich man.

There were two publications in his flat, a racing newspaper and the *News of the World*. He pored over the results reported in the former, much as lone investors pore over stock market prices, in an attempt to predict future results. The tables of racing results looked highly technical, and were indecipherable to my young eyes, as the stock prices are to me now, and my uncle's powers of concentration as he sucked the meaning out of them on them seemed to me admirable. He sat at the dining table, the racing newspaper spread out before him, making marks on it with a pencil. His memory for what he called 'form' was highly developed, but 'form' never seemed to run true enough to prevent him from losing money. Occasional wins, however, sometimes very large, kept his hope alive. But did he ever really expect to become rich by betting? I doubt it.

In those days, off-course betting on horse racing was illegal, but my uncle knew how to place bets illegally. Before off-course gambling was legalised, there was a network of illicit bookmakers. The barber to whom I went for my haircuts as a child doubled as an illegal taker of bets, my haircuts often being interrupted by urgent telephone calls from such as my uncle, conducted in an impenetrable jargon which I still would not understand. It was a world apart.

As for the *News of the World*, it was not deemed suitable for the eyes of a child as young as I, since it was a scandal-sheet, albeit very tepid and even respectable by today's

debased standards. In those days, the innocence of childhood was thought worth preserving rather than ending as soon as possible.

My uncle was the only gambler in the family, and his addiction to it was disapproved of, though only mildly because of his manifest virtues, more an eccentricity than a vice. In the latter years of his life, he gave up gambling without apparent difficulty or sense of loss. His wife was never heard to reproach him, though his gambling could not have made her life any the easier.

I now think of my uncle whenever I think of poor people who buy lottery tickets. It used to irritate me that poor people would waste money that they could ill afford on a chance of winning that was very close to zero. Did they have no idea at all of probability? As Doctor Johnson put it, lotteries are a tax on stupidity.

For once, however, I think that Doctor Johnson's humanity and wisdom deserted him. It is the memory of my uncle that made me realise reflect on what the poor person receives in return for a small amount of money that would not have relieved him of his poverty in any case! He lives in hope for a week—or however long it is before the lottery's draw—and he is enabled to daydream happily for that time. It relieves him from despair. It gives him a pleasure that is renewable with every new lottery ticket, and it harms no one. A lottery ticket is cheap at the price.

But this stimulated hope is false, I hear you object. True; the statistics are overwhelmingly against its fulfilment. For every person whose hopes are fulfilled, there are nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine persons whose hopes are dashed. But in the face of the inevitability of death, what hope is not illusory, or at least not of fleeting duration? And yet, who would, or can, live without hope? Better a false hope than a realistic despair. La Rochefoucauld

said that we can stare for long neither at the sun nor death; T.S. Eliot said that humankind cannot stand very much reality. Illusion is essential to human existence.

That my uncle was so good a man, but flawed, later helped me to understand the limitations of human nature, and that someone could be good and loveable without being perfect. One must not demand too much of one's fellow beings. I think I might have loved him the less if he had been perfect: for perfection of character and conduct intimidates rather than charms.

This helps to explain why the idea of heaven is so contentless. It is the imperfection of life that makes it worth living, though the precise dose of imperfection necessary to make life worth living is not precisely computable.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*Neither Trumpets nor Violins*](#) (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and [*Ramses: A Memoir*](#) from New English Review Press.

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