

Remember Dr. Hodges!



by Theodore Dalrymple

The most affecting e-mail I ever received was from a distinguished philosopher of my acquaintance. “All is well,” he wrote, “except that I am dying.”

He was not the kind of man to write such a thing unless it were true, and he did indeed die three months later, of cancer. He was a few years older than I, and died seven years younger than I am as I write this. He died without fuss, in a dignified fashion, as I hope to die; the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, is not much studied these days.

Nature does not always award longevity like a medal for meritorious service. I, for example, have done nothing to deserve at least seven years more of life than my philosopher acquaintance, nor did he do anything to deserve at least seven years less. “Why me?” is a question that people who have been careful of their health, in particular those who have followed the latest dietary advice (and moreover imbibed often heroic quantities of turmeric, blueberries, fish oil, nuts, broccoli, vitamin C, etc.), ask when struck down, seemingly at random, by some fatal disease. They have always lived healthily and yet are unjustly attacked by fatal disease! The only answer that can truly be given in the present state of knowledge to the question of “Why me?” is “Why not?”

I have been close to death on a few occasions, but on the whole have been lucky. There are people who seem to attract bad luck as jam attracts wasps. I have had at least two examples recently. One was a former colleague of mine who died, again at an age seven years my junior, whose wife had developed rapidly advancing dementia at an early age and whose daughter was mentally handicapped. The son of another acquaintance of mine has just died in his 40s of a second cancer, his first having been in early childhood. Her husband had died in his 50s of a brain tumor, and she is left alone.

No doubt there is a normal distribution of good and bad luck of this kind that disregards desert. Of course, there are those who go out of their way by their inadvisable habits to make themselves ill, but the strictest adherence to health-giving *nostra* (which, of course, are liable to change, according to fashion if not to evidence) does not guarantee long survival. Above all, it is advisable, though this cannot be arranged by those who might benefit from it, to be born to long-lived parents, for longevity—and its opposite, early death—runs in families. We have to learn to distinguish between what can and cannot be altered, for though the frontiers of the unalterable recede gradually, and what once seemed inevitable is so no longer, these frontiers, unlike those of the Schengen Agreement in Europe, will never altogether cease to exist. Acceptance of what must be borne is as important as not to accept as mere fate an avoidable evil. The difficulty is in distinguishing the avoidable from the unavoidable, to do which requires both knowledge and wisdom, which are not always found together.

Be that as it may, when I come across one of those persons who seem to attract serial misfortunes through no fault of their own (how often I met them in medical practice!), I felt a peculiar kind of guilt, not that I was responsible for any of their misfortune, but that I continued to complain, sometimes bitterly, of the minor inconveniences consequent upon human

existence.

Years ago, my wife and I traveled to Haiti. It was my second time in that tragic country, and though it had seemed scarcely possible to me during my first visit, general conditions had deteriorated in the meantime. By all accounts, they are infinitely worse now.

On my first visit, I met an American missionary doctor, Dr. William Hodges, who was also an amateur but accomplished archaeologist who, among other things, had found an early landing site of the Spaniards on Hispaniola, and had founded a small museum of early artifacts. Dr. Hodges had devoted his life to Haiti.

I had turned up at his mission uninvited and unannounced, but he and his family offered me generous hospitality, and the next morning, Dr. Hodges showed me round the museum. On my second trip to Haiti, I thought it would be a good idea to visit him again.

It was not a good idea. Dr. Hodges, now 70 years of age, had hoped to retire, but so desperate was need now that we found him surrounded by hundreds of patients, from whom he was trying to select those in most urgent need of attention. Our arrival was an unwelcome intrusion, and we retired from the scene, somewhat embarrassed by our own levity.

Dr. Hodges looked thoroughly, chronically exhausted by his work, gray under the tropical sun, and, alas, had not long to live, dying of a heart attack I assume brought on by overwork at an advanced age (though less advanced than mine now).

I did not share his religious convictions, but I admired his work and his self-sacrifice, and I was outraged when I read in a book about Haiti a casual accusation that he was an American agent. How easy it is for those who do not sacrifice anything for the sake of others to accuse those who do so of ulterior motives!

When we returned from Haiti to resume our normal lives, my wife and I would say to each other, "Remember Dr. Hodges!" when we were faced with some irritating little problem. This would put the matter into perspective for a moment, and we would feel ashamed of the ridiculous strength of our emotional response to something trivial by comparison with Dr. Hodges' problems. Though remembering him had a salutary effect, it lasted only a moment and there would always be a next time when we would have to remember Dr. Hodges all over again.

It is difficult—impossible would probably be a more accurate way of putting it—to be always counting one's blessings, however great they might be. Nevertheless, it is important to try to do so at least intermittently, or else one would lose sight of them altogether and give in to self-pity, one of the few emotions that can, and often does, last a lifetime.

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