

DAWKINS IN THE HOSPICE

I was midway through my life's journey. When it happens. The realization that the journey is finite. That it is no longer a limitless horizon opening up for you like an endlessly spooling highway, but a fixed schedule that is already half over. You never think it could happen to you, and then you realize: yes, it can and will happen to you, as it does for everyone else.

I was back home in Calgary, just before Christmas. I was there because my father was in the hospital, getting treatment for what was then thought to be seizures but was later discovered to be terminal esophageal cancer. My dad was having a rest in his room upstairs. I was in the cafeteria downstairs, taking a breather of my own. I remember taking a skeptical tour of the offerings on the counter at that time of night. Stale buns that looked cast in concrete. Flaking pieces of pie with flies buzzing on the crust. Green jello jiggling under the heat lights. I went with just a coffee. I think it was the jello that killed my appetite. Looked too much like cold dead flesh jiggling without animation.

I got a table beside the sweeping angular windows of the Calgary General Hospital ground floor. Outside it was dark and snowing, white light on a black void. The other tables were occupied by other nighthawks like me. Frazzled friends or family taking a minute for themselves. Doctors or nurses on a break from the twelve hour night shift. Cleaning staff resting their legs with a cup of bitter. The sweet smell of powdered milk and fluffy gluten mingled uneasily with the sour odor of the antiseptics designed to exterminate every stray bacteria in the place. It made me feel a bit sorry for them. Were we not once mere bacteria ourselves, billions of years ago?

I was reading a book by Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a sort of layman's guide to his views on evolution. In one of the chapters, Dawkins discusses the evolutionary purpose of pain. It is a question that perplexed even Darwin himself: why does pain have to be so, well, painful? Wouldn't a sharp wince be enough to teach us that fire burns? A quick pang enough to tell us we had better check out that sprained tendon? And why the infinite varieties of pain, like a sadist's

feast of medieval torments of hell? Every kind of pain you can imagine can be superseded by an even more unimaginably painful pain. Every organ of our body has its own special recipe of hurting us to tell us that it is hurting. As a case in point, Dawkins presents the example of the ichneumon wasp, which first paralyzes its host, then lays its eggs on the host's body. Once the eggs hatch, they nourish themselves on the unfortunate victim's inner vitals - which, though unable to move, are certainly able to feel themselves being devoured. As if this wasn't cruel enough, the wasp's brood shows a fiendish sense of economy, by starting with the least essential organs, then gradually moving on to the choice innards, so that the nourishment of the parasite, and the suffering of the host, is prolonged to the utmost. Even Darwin, with his tenuous faith in a just creation of the Lord, was moved to exclaim: 'What a book a devil's chaplain could write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature!' The ichneumon wasp may indeed seem like some devil's creation, but there is nothing particularly unusual about this seemingly perversely destructive creature. As Dawkins points out, as Stephen Jay Gould did before him, there are no morals in nature. Survival is all. If hypersensitivity to pain, to violation of our organic integrity, spurred our ancient ancestors to run a little faster, hide a little quicker, than their number dumber cousins, those traits would be passed on. 'Natural selection is indifferent to the intensity of suffering - except in so far as it affects survival and reproduction'. It should not be forgotten that natural selection is not a cause - some grand design imposed by the universe on the natural world. Natural selection has no plan, no goal, no intent. It is simply a result: the strong survive. How or why may be of utmost importance to us, but it is of complete irrelevance to nature. Nature just happens, and the chips fall where they may.

As I read my Dawkins, watching the pretty snowflakes outside dance in the forbidding void of Calgary winter, I found myself thinking of the peculiar nature of cancer. Unlike most of the ailments that drive us into a facility like this one - the car that smashes into our flesh, the bacteria that colonize our wounds, the wasps that sting us and paralyze us and lay their eggs to devour our inner organs - cancer is not an invasion from the outside. It is something we bring with us, something we might

carry unknowingly our entire lives, a timebomb buried in our genetic code, as unique and essentially us as our DNA. It *is* our DNA, our DNA run riot. As part of us as our looks, our height, our hair color, our eye color, and yes, our family. When our parents pass away, we don't just inherit the treasures they have left us - sometimes we also come into that which killed them. A legacy that we will one day have to accept, like it or not, just as we accepted the kitchen utensils or furniture set years earlier.

A few months later it was summer (only in Calgary). I was once again sitting beside a window, this time the window of a hospice, where my dad was spending his final days. On the wall was a quilt (perhaps knitted by the relative of a past patient) depicting two figures on a beach. Why did you leave me? asked one. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then I carried you, answered the other. A comforting image, even if I didn't believe in it. I thought back to Dawkins, and his fervent defense of atheism. There were no cozy quilts about Jesus piggybacking us in our weakness in his cosmology. While I shared his skepticism, I wondered why he cared so much if others took solace in such images. The cold hard facts of science are cold comfort to one suffering from the cold hard facts within their very flesh. Even the chilled clinical design of the hospital compared unfavorably to the warm homey hand-knit feel of the hospice. Was it so terrible to have a few illusions? Was not the idea that man can live on science alone also an illusion? I thought of my dad, terminally ill, his clock ticking, yet placidly unaware of it due to the dementia ravaging his brain in tandem with the cancer ravaging his body. Would knowing the cold hard truth be a better way to go?

Death, in our day and age, is viewed as a tragedy, a cosmic injustice, something wrong. And so it certainly feels for the one on the receiving end. But in earlier times - for most of human history - death was not seen this way at all. It was something that could - and often did - come at any time. 'Death, thou comest when I least expected thee' says the Everyman of the late medieval morality play Everyman ('the first great line in English literature', according to Philip Roth). People expected death to come when least expected. Life was not viewed as a package deal of youth, middle age and peaceful retirement. Youth might be all you get. The skull on the

mantle, the broken string on the lute, the many faces of memento mori, were there to remind us that we might be next. So better get your house in order (in *Everyman*, the titular character pleads with Death to come back later, when his (Everyman's) papers are more organized). It is a reminder to be prepared, to steel yourself for the possibility, so it is not the existential shock (Why me?) when it does come. Who knows if any of this actually made the experience any less traumatic, but at least people then were not taken unawares the way we are now. Thinking to oneself, what if I only had a month to live, a year to live, five years, ten years, can be a powerful organizing principle. If I only had a year, or five years left to make my one and only impact on this earth, how would I choose to spend it?

'The undiscovered country', Hamlet called it, and with good reason. The famous 'To be or not to be' speech hinges on the inescapable uncertainty: what happens after? Is it lights out for everyone? Or heavenly hosts for some and hellfire for others? Four hundred years later we are no closer to an answer. For all our modern talk of pluralism, the fact remains that one side has to be right and one side has to be wrong. God can't exist and not exist. Heaven can't be real and not be real. Somebody is lucid and somebody is completely deluded. The other fact is we can't know who is who, because, as Hamlet points out, no one has come back from the 'undiscovered country' to tell us. Pascal, in his famous wager, tells us that, based on these probabilities, it is safer to believe than not to believe, because, if you are a believer and you are wrong, you merely disappear, whereas if you are a non-believer and you are wrong, you burn in hell forever. Not the most convincing argument for a religion that demands sincerity in its believers, but it gets to the heart of the dilemma.

But maybe the terms have to be defined differently. Perhaps, when it comes, it *is* lights out, a 'quick chaotic bundling into eternity', as Melville puts it. But even if that voice that lives within our skull (soul, consciousness, whatever you want to call it) is snuffed out like the candle so beloved of the momento memorialists, no one can deny that we live on in other ways: in the people and the legacies we leave behind. Of course, we won't be around to witness this resurrection of our good works. But the minds of the living will be around to witness it, and insofar as we live on in their

minds, we might be there to witness it too. Somewhere up there, so they will say, we are smiling. And perhaps in some prescient way, we already are.

A few years after my dad died, I had a dream (I dream of him often, especially when I come back home to visit, as if his ghost still inhabits the house). In the dream we were driving home. My dad was at the wheel (which was strange, as in his final years he was not allowed to drive), and I in the passenger side. I was excitedly filling him in on all that had happened since he'd been gone. I remember thinking: there's been some mistake, Dad never actually died, it was all a misunderstanding, he just went away for a while, I have to tell my mother and brother as soon as we get home! Of course, before we got home, I woke up.

Andy Warhol once said that death was too abstract for him. He could never imagine someone being gone forever. Whenever he heard someone died, he always imagined that they had just gone away, that they were off on a holiday somewhere. Maybe we would run into them again sometime, maybe not, but we could imagine them wherever they were, doing their thing as they always did. That's how I like to think about that dream of my dad. He is taking a drive somewhere, in the car he was not legally allowed to drive, and one day when it is my time he will pick me up, and we will pick up our conversation where we left off. Maybe just a dream, but what are dreams, but what evolution has devised to keep us keep on living?