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Meditation on Mortality

by Nancy Pace - October 23, 2016

I have a pretty relaxed, friendly perspective on death. Of course, I don't know what happens. Nobody does. But maybe, when we die, we all just go out like candles.

The originator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening, put it this way: "Today is the first day of the rest of your short brutish existence as a sentient creature before being snuffed out into utter nothingness for all eternity."

My favorite fantasy of a potentially delightful spiritual immortality is getting to spend my "forevers" in multiple parallel universes, kind of like the movie *Groundhog Day*, but with every imaginable version of myself pursuing for eternity all the many forks-in-the-road and paths and passions I didn't choose the other times around. I think a good God might arrange that kind of infinite growth opportunity.

But sometimes, the idea of death as possibly being the end of everything—mortality as finality—can feel like a tough gig.

Especially sudden reminders of mortality; they can be gut-wrenching. I felt sad all day after running over a tiny squirrel on the way to church a few weeks ago. Watching him flop around behind my car.... Can you imagine living in a war zone? Whenever death randomly strikes any

sentient being—especially a cherished innocent—all of life can seem terribly fragile, unkind, unfair.

Or, as Calvin said to Hobbes when his rescued baby raccoon died: "It's either mean or it's arbitrary, and either way, I've got the heebie-jeebies."

I used to think—quite smugly—that if I created the world, I wouldn't have put death into the mix—at least not young or grisly death. But the “givens” of Nature, the implacable axioms of change, impermanence and mortality that make life feel so precarious? They're also the necessary, essential requisites of life's “good side”—its capacity to delight and surprise us with joy, humor, insight, tenderness, awe, and gratitude. You can't have the one without the other. Life is what it is.

Mark Twain said: “I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.”

Our congregation's atheists may share the views of mortality of self-described “earthiest” Edward Abbey, who said: “If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture—that is immortality enough for me.” Too bad atheists can't someday also tell believers, “I told you so.”

Maybe death jokes aren't a proper meditation. But my meditations often run dark and deep, so I'm lightening things up a bit today.

Although I'm often anxious about the details of living, I'm very lucky to have little fear of death. Of course, I'd rather not be there when it happens....

I don't fear hell either—thanks to a simple kindness from my war-battered, atheist father. Late one night, when I was a little girl, he found me weeping quietly and guiltily in my bed, broken-

hearted because my best fundamentalist girlfriend had helpfully explained how he, my sweet, loving, non-church-going Dad was going to burn in hell forever.

Dad sighed. Then he asked me a few reasonable—but important—questions.

Did I, Nancy, think he, Dad, was a good man? Did he do his best to work hard, to be a good father and husband? (Me: blubbering): Oh yes, yes....

And was God good? (Me, indignantly) : Well of course!

So—would a good God send a good man to hell?

At that moment, the scales fell from my eyes and the sun rose in the heavens. And I've never been afraid of either God or hell since.

Thanks, Dad!

By the way, although I'm not afraid of hell *after* earth, I *am* frightened of ending up in hell *while I'm still here*. Our current eldercare approaches simply do not protect vulnerable seniors from profiteers. Personally? I sometimes feel like the whole healthcare establishment is bent on preventing me from dying a quick, quiet, cheap, tolerable, natural death. My current notion is to die young—as late as possible. Until then, I hope to live as Mark Twain suggested, “so that when I die, even the undertaker will be sorry.”

The film critic, Roger Ebert, nicely summed up my views on the fear of death. “I know it is coming,” he said, “and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear.... I was perfectly content before I was born, and I think of death as the same state.”

“What I *am* grateful for,” Ebert continues, “is the gift of intelligence, and for life, love, wonder—and laughter. You can't say it wasn't interesting. My lifetime's memories? They're what I've brought home from the trip. I will require them for eternity no more than that little souvenir of the Eiffel Tower I brought home from Paris.”

In the silence that follows, let's meditate on our lives' most precious souvenirs.