

“Like There’s No Tomorrow”

Steven C. Walker

Let’s talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs,
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.
Let’s choose executors and talk of wills. . . .
For God’s sake, let’s sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of . . . death.¹

I SUSPECT YOU’RE LESS INTERESTED IN SUCH TALK than Shakespeare and I. I’m twenty years closer to death than most of you, and poor Will is centuries gone. But you’re closer than you think. And it may be that all of us would do well to get, in some ways, closer still. For a people who manage to watch 251 murders a year on TV, we Americans — and more especially we Mormons — give death short shrift.

At least I have. When, as a child, I was first told people die, I didn’t believe it. The possibility of dying struck me as as unlikely as the tales Paul Brown was telling me behind the barn about sex: Death just couldn’t be; the notion ran counter to all experience.

How could anything so empty and dreary and final as death have anything to do with me, me so thoroughly *alive*? — the kid with afterburners on his tennysrunners and jaw in perpetual motion from Fleer’s Doublebubble gum? My attitude was like Mark Twain’s telegram: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

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¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, act 3, sc. 2, lines 145–148, 156–157, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), pp. 822–23.

"Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies. / Nobody that matters, that is."² Even the things that definitely died in those days did not, for me, really die. When I buried my pet parakeet in the shoebox in the nasturtium bed, I went back a month later to dig it up, sure it wouldn't be there — and it wasn't there — because Mr. Pete the parakeet had already been resurrected. Even when the sheer omnipresence of death pushes us out of that childish perspective, even when circumstances force us to acknowledge death, we refuse to respect it.

At least I have. I moved from childish disbelief in dying directly to adolescent idealizing: My adolescent perception of death was about as realistic as the interior of a \$7,000 casket. I could sigh with John Keats,

. . . for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.³

Painless death. Greatest invention since painless dentistry. In high school I held — as many, I think, hold — a romantic view of death, a grandiloquent vision of dying as a sort of grand stage exit, the sort of death Housman seems to have had in mind when he celebrated the "Athlete Dying Young": "Smart lad, to slip betimes away / From fields where glory does not stay."⁴

We used to think it fine sport, my high school friends and I, to coast down American Fork Canyon in a pickup truck, seeing how far the driver dared go without hitting his brakes. Glenn Warnick, one June afternoon in 1960, went from the Forks — about five miles up the canyon — all the way down.

I can still feel the elation of that joyriding toward death. Others of the fourteen of us piled in the back of that pickup, wiser than I, were screaming for Glenn to stop, pounding on the cab, seeing their lives pass before their eyes. But as that ancient Ford danced sideways on its wheels around increasingly sharp turns toward the bottom of the canyon, I remained numbly comfortable in my attitude toward death: I kept thinking, serenely if a little shallowly, "If you die, you die."

That adolescent perspective of death lasted with me longer than you might suppose, longer than I might have wished: I was over thirty the weekend I died. The doctor who biopsied the lumps on my throat, unable to give me a diagnosis until the lab opened the following Monday, comforted me with the

² Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Childhood Is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies," *Collected Poems: Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956), p. 286.

³ John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 208.

⁴ A. E. Housman, "To An Athlete Dying Young," Poem 19 of *A Shropshire Lad* in *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940), p. 32.

thought: "I don't want you to worry. But cancer of the thyroid is a definite possibility."

Slipping graveward through that weekend, what did I do? Did I set my house in order? Did I write my will? Did I repent of my longstanding sins? I took the doctor's advice: I didn't worry. I just leaned back and didn't do a darn thing — except meditate pleasantly upon how comfortable it would be to do not a darn thing fulltime.

Just before the biopsy, I'd been called as Mutual president; I should have been reading manuals, calling counselors, organizing fall activities. Instead I sat around pondering heavenly blisses. I can still feel the weight of that calling falling back on my shoulders Monday morning when I learned my lumps were nothing but lumps. As the doctor rather gracelessly put it, "You're just a lumpy person."

It's easy in our culture to ignore death. Easy to childishly disbelieve that dying can happen to us. Easy to adolescently underestimate the significance of dying. We're experts at ignoring death.

I always figured I'd sort of grow into it — that by the time death came, experience would have made me ready. Now I'm beginning to think that's about as probable as my plan to walk out of the crowd at the next superbowl and catch the winning touchdown, delighting the Dallas cheerleaders. The idea of "getting in good" with death seems, somehow, less likely than it used to.

Maybe it's just that I'm pushing forty — pushing it really hard — and feeling a sense of my own mortality. As Donald Hall so gently puts it:

My son, my executioner,
I take you in my arms,
Quiet and small and just astir
And whom my body warms. . . .
We twenty-five and twenty-two,
Who seemed to live forever,
Observe enduring life in you
And start to die together.⁵

I expected, as I neared death, that death and I would get friendlier. Instead, I find death increasingly ominous. I assumed death was natural for old folks. Now that I'm becoming one, I'm not so sure it's a good idea for anybody.

William Butler Yeats, world's greatest authority on aging (you'll note I rely not on the Elizabeth Kübler-Rosses, but the people who really know about the things that matter as much as death, the poets), Yeats

heard the old, old men say,
'Everything alters. . . .
All that's beautiful drifts away
Like the waters.'⁶

⁵ Donald Hall, "My Son, My Executioner," *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, ed. X. J. Kennedy, second ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 677.

⁶ William Butler Yeats, "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water," *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 208.

People expect old men to die,
 They do not really mourn old men.
 Old men are different. People look
 At them with eyes that wonder when . . .
 People watch with unshocked eyes . . .
 But the old men know when an old man dies.⁷

It's more than my own aging that has brought me lately face to face with death, with what dying means — and might mean — to us. In the spirit of total morbidity which I am working hard to establish here, I want to share a death with you. "After the first death," says Dylan Thomas, "there is no other."⁸ The death that brought dying out of the theoretical periphery and into the foreground of my life was the death of Barbara Mangrum.

My wife and I met the Mangrums at graduate school in Boston; they seemed to us a better version of Erich Segal's *Love Story* — an honest, believable version. We liked Barbara the moment we met her, liked her the more the more we knew her. Barbara was a sprite of a person, incandescently charming. She was alive as anyone I ever knew, fun-loving, creative: she rode down Capitol Hill in a red wagon with her kids; when she arranged the socks in the sock drawers, she arranged them into rainbows. We still have her art on the walls of our home. But we no longer have Barbara.

One Thursday night two years ago at a Relief Society meeting at Cambridge Ward when Barbara was twenty-eight years old, pregnant with her fourth child, a blood vessel burst in her brain. Eighteen hours later both Barbara and the child were dead. She had been so alive, I found it hard to believe in her death. At her funeral I half expected her to push up the lid of the casket, peek out from under the spray of daisies, and laugh with us at the consternation she'd caused us.

But the casket stayed closed. Barbara was really dead. For the first time in my life I felt personally affronted by death — maybe even a little angry at God. I wrote that day in my journal:

I know, I know
 A light as bright as Barbara can never go
 Wholly out for those of us once blessed to see it.
 But it's too gloomy here, God, with her gone.

Oh my Father
 Did you need the glow of Barbara more than we?
 More than Collin? More than the children?
 More than the need of the new life growing in her at her death?

It seems so shiny up there already —
 All those suns and stars and rainbows —
 I would have thought Barbara's brightness
 Better here to help us beat back a little

⁷ Ogden Nash, "Old Men," *Many Long Years Ago* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), p. 204.

⁸ Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," *Dylan Thomas: The Poems* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1971), p. 192.

This now too-deepening darkness.
 But here in lengthening shadows I can still see,
 God, how your starved hunger for light
 Could long for Barbara.

The day Barbara's casket stayed closed, it crossed my mind that if death can catch up with one so light of foot, so nimble of soul as Barbara Mangrum, death just might catch up with us all.

At Pleasant Grove High School in the fifties — back in *Happy Days* days — we had a saying I liked: We used to say: "Like there's no tomorrow." We used that phrase for virtually every verbal occasion, but mainly it meant *intense*: a singer who sang "like there's no tomorrow" sang with her whole soul; a football halfback who ran "like there's no tomorrow" ran his heart out. Barbara lived like there was no tomorrow.

I know a woman who kisses like there's no tomorrow. When she kisses you, you wish she gave courses in the subject, so that everybody could kiss the way that woman kisses. Maybe that's the way we all should kiss: like there's no tomorrow. Maybe that's the way we should eat cherries and watch Fourth of July fireworks and dance with our smallest daughters and say "good morning" to each other. Maybe we should touch each other today like there's no tomorrow.

Maybe, if we really noticed death, recognizing what it means in terms of terminating life as we have so sweetly known it, we would live like there's no tomorrow. Trouble with us is, we know there's a tomorrow, and so postpone living until then.

Last Memorial Day we took our kids over to the Pleasant Grove cemetery to show them where our family dead reside. It was a fine experience for me, linking generations. It was less fine for my daughter Emily, who had not wandered much, in her six years, around graveyards, and wasn't sure she wanted to start now. Em held my hand tightly, stayed close, and kept asking pointed questions: "Are they really down there in the ground?" "Is it dark down there?"

I didn't admit this to Emily, but it is dark down there.

We get the idea, because we're aware of the infinite in us, that things don't end. Ask my colleagues Marden Clark and Marshall Craig, who retire this year from lifetimes of teaching, if things end. Ask my son Scott, who leaves Provost Elementary this fall, if things end. Ask Reed Walker, my father-in-law: As long as I've known him, Reed has grown the finest vegetable garden in Pleasant Grove. Last week he wept because Parkinson's Disease prevents him now from so much as watering his lawn. Ask Reed if things come to an end. Ask if those endings matter.

Omar Khayyam laments,

The Moving Finger writes, and, having writ,
 Moves on: Nor all your Piety nor Wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
 Nor all your Tears wash out a word of it.⁹

⁹ Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton, second ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 347.

Not all endings have to be tragic. This talk, too, shall pass. A Clinton Larson poem presents perhaps a better perspective on the certainty of passings:

'Twas ever thus: from childhood's hour
I've seen my fondest hopes decay.
I never loved a bird or flower
But the damned thing died or flew away.¹⁰

Not all endings have to be tragic. But things do end. Awareness that things don't stay the same forever, "a sense of the ending," as Richard Sewall calls it,¹¹ may make a difference in the quality of our lives. Emily Dickinson says, out of a day of closer attention to candles and afterglows,

By a departing light,
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.¹²

There's something in departing light that clarifies the sight. Heaven knows our lives are in need of that illuminating something. One of my students, Cheryl Lambert, caught a glimpse in a paper she wrote for our English class of the kind of clarification death can bring:

I live most of my life in a mental fog that protects me from responsibility and painful struggle. I don't need morphine like Mary in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; my fog is quite natural. Very few people ever suspect, either, because I appear to live as if everything is bright and clear. It's simple enough; nothing ever reaches very deep into my soul without passing through the fog. Only dull images reach my full consciousness. But I know how to pretend to be vital and alive on the outside.

In the past six months, my fog has become more like morphine; it takes more and more to keep up the bliss. When my cousin, just ready to graduate from medical school, came to visit in spring break, my oblivion had built up around me a thick white curtain. I rode to Salt Lake one day with him in his truck, and I couldn't escape the blazing rays of life he shot through my fog. Rick means business in living; he takes every experience and lets it fill him and surround him and turn him inside out if need be to learn from it and grow. He is no blind idealist: "Life is a crap sandwich, and you have to take the biggest damn bite you can," he exclaims with a grin.

I have often wished I didn't have any talent or intelligence to worry about—and I could just curl up in a hole and turn into a clod of dirt. Living in a fog comes close to that. Rick lives every moment with such intense enthusiasm that any such fog can't last long around him; it gets burned away. I don't like what I see at the bottom of my fog.

¹⁰ Clinton F. Larson, "'Twas Ever Thus," unpublished. Included by permission of the author.

¹¹ Richard B. Sewall, "A Sense of the Ending," *The Norton Reader*, ed. Arthur M. Eastman, fifth ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 646.

¹² Emily Dickinson, "By a Departing Light," *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 1157.

Rick went back to Charlottesville, to graduate as an M.D., and my fog crept back. Last Sunday as I was wishing I could be a clod of dirt, Rick fell to his death in a pool of icy water at the bottom of a crevasse on Mount Timpanogos. We found out Monday afternoon when rescuers searching for someone else brought his body out. The searing knowledge of Rick's death burned all the fog off.

Rick — alive and shining Rick — is dead. I still have a chance to live.

Something in departing light clarifies the sight. "The terms are clear," Annie Dillard says: "If you want to live, you have to die. A scientist calls it the Second Law of Thermodynamics."¹³ A poet says, "As I was young and easy . . . and happy as the grass was green. . . . Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea."¹⁴

"In the midst of life, we are in death,"¹⁵ proclaims the Book of Common Prayer — even on sunny summer mornings. Robert Browning thinks so, too: "You never know what life means," Browning says, "till you die: / Even throughout life, 'tis death that makes life live, / Gives it whatever the significance."¹⁶

The reason I bring all this morbid stuff up is that I think it matters: Death matters terribly. Not so much in the past tense — it's not so much that Barbara is gone and I miss her. Nor does death matter so much in the future tense: It's not so much that we will all some day be gone and I'll miss us, especially me. Death matters in the present tense: we live with death, whether we recognize it or not, every day of our lives.

"The only religious way to think of death," according to Thomas Mann, who thought about it a lot, "is as part and parcel of life; to regard it, with the understanding and with the emotions, as the inviolable condition of life."¹⁷

Karen Walker, my brother Robert's wife, could tell us about that: Karen lies this moment in bed, ridden with cancer. The cancer I was sure I would get, the cancer any one of us could get, the cancer every fourth one among us will get, Karen has. Stomach cancer — three operations worth, with endless hours of chemotherapy and heat therapy and every kind of therapy but the kind that works. Karen, in increasingly constant pain, said the other day with that impish smile we see less and less: "Stop hanging around here longfaced grieving for me. You have to die, too."

Indeed we do. Something of us dies every day a little with her. There is something in Karen's suffering that brings home my mortality to me. "Therefore never send to know," John Donne reminds us, "for whom the bell tolls. It

¹³ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), p. 184.

¹⁴ Thomas, "Fern Hill," pp. 195–96.

¹⁵ "The Order for the Burial of the Dead," *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of the United Church of England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1839), n.p.

¹⁶ Robert Browning, "Guido," *The Ring and the Book*, in *Robert Browning's Poems and Plays* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962), p. 487.

¹⁷ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 200.

tolls for thee.”¹⁸ Karen is absolutely right: cancer is far less a sentence of death than being born.

My wise brother looked at me last Thursday out of as weary eyes as I have ever seen and said: “I had not guessed what a hellhole this world can be. But you know, Steve, the beautiful things . . . the beauties are all the more beautiful.”

“The beauties.” Life’s beauties. Karen’s beauties. “Not people die,” mourns the Russian poet Yevtushenko, “but worlds die in them”: “In any man who dies there dies with him / his first snow and kiss and fight. / . . . Not people die, but worlds die in them.”¹⁹

Childish views of death, adolescent attitudes toward dying, Walt Disney versions of being wafted away on marshmallowy clouds may make us miss much of the significance of what it means to be mortal.

I teach Victorian literature. We laugh a lot in class at the way Victorians repressed sexuality: We chuckle at Victorian unwillingness to refer to chair legs except as “limbs.” We chortle at skirts modestly covering piano legs for the sake of modesty. We snicker at those indomitable Victorian ladies who insisted the perfect hostess see that the works of male and female authors be properly separated on her bookshelves. Their proximity should not be tolerated unless the authors happen to be married. But no matter how hard they strove to ignore sex, sex did not go away for the Victorians. Nor will death go away for us.

We’ve pushed death as far into the corner as the Victorians ever pushed sex and with more serious results. Death no longer exists for us as immediate physical fact. We have great difficulty coming to intimate, personal terms with death because we no longer see it — no longer see our loved ones die, no longer wash and prepare bodies for burial, no longer sit up near the casket through the night, no longer dig and fill graves. We hide from death. We prettify it, falsify it. We displace it to TV, where we can watch it safely. We exile death to hospitals, to rest homes, to funeral parlors.

We manage simultaneously to be both too afraid of death and not afraid enough, and with our ambivalent fears deny ourselves the experience of death—the experience which may be, next to love, the most profound of human experiences.

In the face of death, my brother Rob says, “The beauties are all the more beautiful.” Wallace Stevens puts it almost as well: “Death is the mother of beauty.”²⁰ Would there be more of beauty in our lives were we more alive to death? I would not have us revel in death, but even if it were possible for us to

¹⁸ John Donne, “Seventeenth Meditation,” *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1975), p. 87.

¹⁹ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “People,” trans. Robin Milner-Gulland and Peter Levi, in *Someone Like Me: Images for Writing*, ed. Sheena Gillespie (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishing, Inc., 1973), p. xv.

²⁰ Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 69.

miss death altogether I'm not sure I would have us miss what death might do for our lives.

"Earth's the right place for love," Robert Frost rightly insists, "I don't know where it's likely to go better."²¹ Life is here. Life is now. And the longest eternity will never make that any different. Perhaps God gave us death to remind us to live. Virgil thinks so: "Death," he says, "tweaks my ear: 'Live,' death warns me, 'for I'm coming.'"²² "Sometimes," as Richard Sewall puts it, "nothing but death will remind us we're alive."²³

There is always a temptation to diddle around in life doing itsy-bitsy duties. There is enormous temptation to diddle around eating itsy-bitsy meals, going to itsy-bitsy meetings, mowing itsy-bitsy lawns, making itsy-bitsy livings for itsy-bitsy years. Annie Dillard won't have it: "The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus."²⁴

I would wish you, as someone told me Crusaders wished one another, a good death — not an easy death, and certainly not a happy death — it takes far too miserable a life to make death happy — but a good death. And I would pray us the wisdom to confront that death honestly enough and soon enough to make a good life.

I used to think being "ready for death" meant welcoming it, like Walt Whitman: "Come lovely and soothing death . . . the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death."²⁵ Now I'm not so sure. Maybe those readiest for death are those least willing to go:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. . . .

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.²⁶

²¹ Robert Frost, "Birches," *The Complete Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 122.

²² Virgil, "Copa," *Virgil With an English Translation by H. Rushton Fairclough*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 474, loosely translated.

²³ Sewall, "Sense of the Ending," p. 645.

²⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, p. 276.

²⁵ Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), p. 335.

²⁶ Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," pp. 207-8.

