On becoming too old to die young

Edward Langerak

When I first became a college teacher, some eight years ago, I taught an interdisciplinary course with a somewhat older colleague. I especially enjoyed a day that I celebrated, and he commemorated, his 35th birthday. Still in my twenties, I smugly observed that he was halfway to seventy and should start thinking about retirement. Alas, I recently turned 36, and it's dawning on me that I, too, am gradually but surely becoming too old to die young. It's not that I prefer to die young, or even to die young as late as possible; it's that I prefer to be too young to die. When you are healthy and not yet in your thirties, you can read in Ecclesiastes that there is "a time to be born and a time to die" and feel as if you are closer to the beginning than the end. After 35, when students begin calling you "Professor" and they are not grinning, when you will still feel that weekend pickup football game on Tuesday, and when you finally understand why there are so many Preparation H ads on TV, then you read that verse more slowly.

Actually, of course, we are never too young to die. This is one message of Ecclesiastes 3, verse 11: "God has given us a sense of time past and future, but no comprehension of God's work from beginning to end" (NEB). Our sense of time past and future—our radical temporality—makes us the only creatures that *know* we will die. But along with this bracing knowledge we have an equally bracing ignorance: most of us don't know *when* we will die, though we do know that we could die at almost any time. Most of us know this remarkable combination of certainty and uncertainty, fewer of us feel it, much less live it.

What would it be to live what Martin Heidegger calls "beingness toward death," to live with the felt recognition that you will die sometime, that you could die anytime, but you don't know when? Would it be, as Ecclesiastes is sometimes interpreted, to eat, drink, and enjoy yourself, grabbing all the gusto you can? Would it be a brooding melancholy with tendencies toward suicide, as Leo Tolstoy thought during one period of his life? Or would it be the defiant revolt that Albert Camus commends, a refusal, with Dylan Thomas, to go gentle into that good night and to rage against the dying of the light?

Let's back into the question by changing it somewhat. If we were to find out right now that we have just one month left to live, what would we do that is different from what we intend to do this month?

Sadly, a few of us might be thought to be better off under this hypothesis. If we define ourselves, and allow others to define us, simply as athletes, for example, A. E. Housman gives some comfort to an athlete dying young:

> *Smart lad, to slip betimes away*
> *From fields where glory does not stay*
> *And early though the laurel grows*
> *It withers quicker than the rose*
> .....
> *Now you will not swell the rout*
> *Of lads that wore their honors out.*

One of the members of the U. S. Olympic hockey team in effect agreed with Housman when, after beating the Russians, he said his whole life would be downhill from now on. I hope he was misquoted and that he didn't say his *whole* life would be downhill, but I fear that he may have meant what was quoted. Recently, I saw an interview with one of my childhood heroes, a baseball star recently retired. He made it clear that he now is, essentially, nothing but a *former* baseball player, albeit a great one. He passes his time away playing golf, eating heartily, and, in short, living off his former greatness. What a difference, I thought, from, say, Alan Page or Eric Heiden, who, so far at least, refuse to define themselves or let others define them simply as athletes, but insist on pursuing careers in law and medicine. Of them we can say that their athletic abilities are probably on a downhill slide from now on (one of these fall seasons has to be Page's last, and even Heiden lost the world speed-skating crown), but they would take deep and justified offense at the suggestion that their *lives* have peaked.

I use athletes only as an example, and then only because A. E. Housman didn't write a poem to teachers, or sex-symbols, or anything else dying young. In fact, if we define ourselves in terms of some other kind of career, such as law or medicine, there would be nothing to say in a poem about dying young except that we never got the chance to become what we define ourselves to be. In fact, the analogous poem would have to be "To a Lawer Dying Middle-Aged"—dying, that is, before very many people begin to wonder whether we have kept up with our field. If we define ourselves and let others define us as mere *functionaries* in the economy or social structure, then the point will

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be reached when we as functionaries reach our peak, and it is downhill thereafter. That, of course, is why I went into philosophy, since examples like Immanuel Kant lead people to think that, qua philosopher, you only get better as you get older. The trouble with this reasoning, alas, is that clever students would immediately infer that there is no sense in bothering with me now when I'm only halfway to my peak.

So here's the melancholy conclusion: if you define yourself in terms of a function that peaks early, most of your life will be downhill; if in terms of a function that peaks late, most of your life will be preparatory, and if in terms of one that peaks in middle age, half your life will be preparatory and half downhill.

Now I hear an optimist say, "Why is this man hung up on singular peaks? Surely one can choose a function that has one long and high plateau—Picasso, for example, comes to mind." O.K., I admit exceptions—but that's all: *exceptions:* a few of us may find an occupation that allows us to flower early and well and in which we are delectably ripe for our whole, long life. But most occupations with a long plateau have a low plateau, and too soon become boring. On the other hand, in most of those occupations that remain fascinating and challenging, we too often feel or are perceived to be either a bit green or, what is worse, a bit overripe.

"But," says the unrepentant optimist, "why not define yourself in terms of many functions, all with different peaks and plateaus, and thus live a rich and varied life—like that of the businesswoman who, between jogging and bird-watching, helps build her own log cabin, raises her family, coordinates the hospital book sale, heads the local Jones for Congressman committee, and does church work two nights a week?" Fine, sometimes such busyness is integrated into a coherent way of living; or sometimes a useful alternative to solving a problem is being too busy to raise it in the first place. Still, I wonder if the hectic, even cluttered, character of our lives isn't due to our defining ourselves in terms of various functions, and not wanting to define ourselves too narrowly.

At any rate, I believe that the ideal of Christian vocation, or calling, can help us. At a minimum, it can help us set priorities among the things we find ourselves caring about. The importance of Christian vocation was underscored for me last term, when I asked one of my classes to write a paragraph on the question I posed earlier in this essay: "If you were to find out that you had just one month left to live, what would you do that is different from what you intend to do this month?" I received many very thoughtful responses, and the majority said that the first thing they would do is leave college. This neither surprised nor bothered me—I didn't feel rejected in my vocation—but I was troubled at the *reason* many of them gave. Here, verbatim, are two typical answers: (1) "Since I am in college for the sole purpose of obtaining the background I need for the line of work I will enjoy, quitting school would be the first thing I would do." (2) "To me, college is an investment in the future, and since I would have relatively no future left, to stay in school would be pointless."

One interpretation of these quotations is that my college had failed to overcome the impression that a Christian liberal arts education is primarily, if not solely, an investment in a future occupation. The gift that God gave us—a sense of time past and future—is being at once overemphasized and narrowed. This is what causes us to define ourselves and others as present, future, or past functionaries, and is one bad reason for thinking of one's death as coming too soon—or too late.

Consider instead a Christian view of vocation. Throughout his epistles, St. Paul makes it clear that we all have the same calling—or vocation—regardless of present, future, or past occupation. In fact, in I Corinthians 7, where Paul answers some very practical questions about the implications of the Christian calling for everyday living, he seems insensitively casual about occupations: if you are a slave, so what? That occupation is in a logically different category from our Christian calling. The latters frees and binds in a way that transforms and enriches whatever social functions or economic niches we may happen to fill. As Paul puts it, a slave is Christ's freedman and a free man is a slave to the service of Christ.

Granted that Paul's almost complete indifference to occupation may be one slightly embarrassing aspect of his expectation that Christ would return soon. But let us not ignore the advantage of "eschatological ethics"—it often seems to take the expectation of an imminent ending to impel us to put our finger on what really counts in our lives. "Close calls," for instance, often transforms lives in remarkable ways, which is why the question about one month left to live can be a good values-clarification exercise, in spite of its obvious limitations. Paul, at least, believed that living with a strong sense of an ending should make us concentrate on our essential and unchanging vocation rather

. . . regardless of present, future, or past occupation.

than our accidental and changeable occupations.

Our Christian vocation is to be a child of God; it is characterized by such categories as stewardship, reconciliation, service, and celebration. However we translate these categories into action, they cut across occupations, cut across levels of education, and, within limits, cut across age groups. We are to be stewards of the earth's resources, reconcilers of the world's divisions, and celebrators of God's gifts, regardless of whatever else we do or don't do, can or cannot do, with our lives. It is seldom too soon and never too late for Christian vocation. Though it is something we grow into, it is not something with a mandatory or even a voluntary retirement age. And our physical and mental condition, though it can affect just *how* we fulfill our calling, need not affect how *well* we fulfill it. So why not define ourselves essentially in terms of Christian vocation, and see our function in the economy or our niche in the social structure, whether present, or future, or past, as one (important) way to live out our ongoing and essential calling.

Then if we have one month left to live, it might not matter much if we stayed in our current occupations or not. What would matter is how we lived our calling to stewardship, reconciliation, and celebration, wherever we might be. Many of my students, including those quoted above, gave very insightful lists of things they would make a point of doing in the next and last month—things like helping some specific people whose special needs they had put off meeting, telling friends and family how much they were appreciated, working through old conflicts with old adversaries, enjoying nature, sharing their faith, and thanking God and others for all their gifts. But, concluded one student after her list, "All this seems rather ridiculous because I should be doing these things whether I'm going to die soon or not."

She, I think, answers our original question: how should we live, knowing and feeling that one day we will die, but not knowing when? It would be to not delay being a steward, a reconciler, a server, and a celebrator—in short, a disciple of Christ—no matter what else we did.