



The Cud...a little something to chew on.

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9/11 – One Year Later

The terrorists of 9/11 didn't manage to tear me from my family or friends. I haven't spent the past twelve months grieving a murdered child, spouse or co-worker. I suffered no immediate, tangible losses on account of their evil.

Nevertheless the malevolence of the day impacted me. The events of that morning synchronized a moment of mental and emotional clarity. The same kind of clarity that follows an earthquake, a near fatal car collision, or a dark mass on a chest x-ray. The events of 9/11 made me *feel* what I already *knew*. I'm mortal. I'm vulnerable. I'm a perishable item with an expiration date. And I might expire today.

It's one thing to ponder mortality; it's another thing to genuinely feel mortal. To do both at the same time is to meet with a bittersweet sanity. It's unsettling. It's riveting. And it's invaluable. Unfortunately, it's also rare. And since I can't force feelings of mortality, mostly, I just ponder its certainty.

But even the pondering is a discipline. I have to make a point of scheduling imaginary visits to the morgue. Morbid as it sounds, anticipating room temperature has an auto focus effect on my outlook. It's not fool proof, but when I imagine counting off my last fifteen minutes of oxygen under a thousand tons of rubble, I quickly tune in a high definition picture of what matters – I can see exactly who and what I care about.

King Solomon wrote, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart" ([Ecclesiastes 7:2](#)). They say Solomon was smart, not necessarily a hoot to hang out with. But I get the point. Our inevitable death brings clarity to our lives. So on your way home from the gym - stop at a funeral home.

I realize I'm not breaking any new philosophical ground here. I'm merely trying to cut back the underbrush of presumption that inevitably grows in my sheltered world.

If I imagine that today is the last day of the rest of my life, not only do my priorities shuffle into position, but I notice there's a reduction in my personal acidity. I think I actually become a little easier to live with. (But let's not take a vote.)

The thing is I can't think of an argument, a rivalry or a grudge that passes the "worth it" test from the vantage point of my last day on earth. I don't want to mark my final hours counting someone else's items in the express lane, complaining to customer service, picking at my wife or criticizing my kids. I'd like to exit stage right having said, "I love you" to those I do and, "I'm sorry" to those I didn't. It would also be nice to leave a clean kitchen.

I used to aspire to this lyric from a Rich Mullins song:

"Live like you'll die tomorrow, die knowing you'll live forever. Live right."

But I've found that I can't actually live like I'll die tomorrow. Not without destroying my credit rating. I have to prepare to die *at the same time* I'm planning to live. That's why the exercise has such a high degree of difficulty. It's mental gymnastics on the paradoxical bars: Think about dying while you think about living and then stick the landing.

Living while simultaneously embracing the inevitability of death is not a uniquely Christian strategy. The conscious prospect of dying can bring focus and clarity to anyone's life, even an atheist's. It can lead to reformation, redemption or merely resignation to "eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

As followers of Christ, our distinction is our hope. We don't consider death to be the greatest tragedy. Death is the greatest inevitability. The greatest inevitability cannot also be the greatest tragedy. Jesus taught that the greatest tragedy is not to die, but to die *unprepared for eternity*. To be unprepared for eternity is to be, in the Lord's words, "a fool" (Luke 12:16-21). Which may turn out to be the understatement of all time.

Jesus frequently framed our preparation for eternity in capitalist terms. He said we can die rich toward God; we can die impoverished toward God or worst case, we can die alienated from God. Those are Jesus' categories not mine. And the Scriptures are clear that finishing in the "rich toward God" column requires a disciplined investment strategy. It requires a daily focus of mind, body and spirit toward His kingdom and righteousness. But I get sidetracked. I mix up my priorities. My temporal responsibilities eclipse my eternal hope. And I quickly forget that I cannot waste time without impacting eternity.

The events of 9/11 exposed my presumptions, jolted my mind and clarified my hope. Reality didn't change on that morning, it was underlined. Death arrives for us all. What differs is the shipping method. Terrorists, drunk drivers, cancer cells, and old age – they all deliver. We may succeed at delaying disease or nullifying the terrorist threat. But one way or another, the package is in the mail.

On the Cudding edge,

David

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