

An Ars moriendi for our Time: To Live a Fulfilled Life - to Die a Peaceful Death

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Among all living beings, humans are the only ones who could also be sensible dying beings. For most of us, however, such a position is difficult to take. There are two main reasons for that, I believe. For one, we have lost our immortality. Only a very few among us still have an unqualified belief in resurrection from the dead and in eternal life. Secondly, even our gradual demise in stages is problematic, since the number of our descendents has so dramatically shrunk and many among us do not have children at all. How then can we live on, at least for a time, in their memory, as it once used to be?

Furthermore, our long, collective memory makes certain that most of us still are aware of what we have lost only in recent times. Yet for quite a few among us it is unbearable to own up to the fact that there will be neither continuation in another life nor a mourning over generations by dozens of progeny. Most of us are unwilling to think rationally about this situation and come to terms with it. How could we have gotten into such a difficult situation?

If we want to change it - and there are indeed many who feel uncomfortable with the state of affairs - we need to know how it came about. It is not enough to just decry that our society represses death and dying, that it idolizes youth and easily writes off older people. Such complaints change nothing. Moreover, we all are part of this society. Thus we have to begin with ourselves if we want to change anything.

Upon reflection it is not difficult to find the reasons for our repression of this situation. In general we are very proud of the fact that our average life-expectancy has doubled, even tripled within a few generations. Indeed, for most of us life does not last thirty or forty years, as it still did by the middle of the nineteenth century, but seventy, eighty or even more years. And we can actually *count* on having these years, as our forebears never could.

The average age of death has not only increased, it has in general reached a level that has never before existed and does not exist anywhere outside the "First World". In comparison to our own ancestors a hundred years ago, everyone of us has *two* lives available; in comparison to even earlier times it is *three*. If something happens to one of us prematurely, he or she can usually be promptly repaired. We almost have the right to feel nearly immortal during our "best years." A slew of prevention campaigns often insinuate that we may indeed soon attain immortality: with a little more jogging, no more smoking, rigorous stair climbing, consumption of low-fat milk, regular check-ups it might become possible to put death off altogether. Once upon a time illnesses carried meaning with them. They were taken as a benign hint from God to stop in time and turn from a sinful way of life. What, if any sense could health problems make nowadays? They certainly do no longer have the old meaning. And yet, they often provide the only chance in our hectic lives to turn inward and reflect. Are we afraid not to find anything within ourselves?

Paradoxically, what contributes to the sterility of death is its permanent presence in the media. They always deal only with the death of others, never with our own death. In fact, few of us will die a media-effective death, for example at a plane crash, during an earthquake, the collapse of a skyscraper or a mine, or during a terrorist attack. But even if our own death in all likelihood will be very banal, we should not ignore it or consider it insignificant. For who among us would want to trade for one of those millions of horrible deaths inflicted by human hands during two world wars, in concentration and prison camps, in bombings and firestorms? Today, at least most of us die our own natural death.

The Death of our time has become a more modest presence. Death leaves most of us in peace for decades, as never before and nowhere else in the world, even if ultimately he remains the mightier one. Yet even under these totally new conditions we find it hard to achieve a balance in our lives, for living means to accept the tension of becoming, being and decaying which is in us from the start. Balance means not only to accept and endure this tension but to give it meaning and shape. Moreover, for laymen and health professionals alike it means to accept a natural death at the right moment, and not to prevent it which, technically, has become possible to a certain degree. The old dream of a fulfilled and completed life goes back in our own culture to the philosophers of antiquity. That this dream is now suddenly becoming true for more and more people, is something totally new. No wonder that many still have problems with it.

If, as they say, the one life we have is our finest possession, and it used to last thirty or forty years, what shall we do with the additional thirty or forty years we now have? Not everybody seems to know. Certainly there is suicide in all stages of life. But suicide increases with people over 70, as the suicide researchers and gerontologists confirm. Gained years are not necessarily fulfilled years. We have to fill

them with meaning. If someone spent his life interested only in physical activity but not in spiritual-cultural matters, he should not be surprised that he finds himself confronting a great spiritual emptiness when his physical powers wane in old age and he does not know how to fill the extra days, months, years. That need not be so: it could be prevented with a life-long cultivation of spiritual and artistic interests.

Our dilemma is this: the doubling, even tripling of our life expectancy is only one side of the coin. The other side is that, concurrently with the increase of our earthly life expectancy there has been a totally different, countervailing development. Its result is that over the last generations our life has by no means become longer, but has - because of the loss of faith in the Beyond - instead become *infinitely* shorter. Doesn't then the doubling of our earthly years mean little in relation to the loss of faith in an eternity?

Against this background we needn't be astonished that most of us go through life in reverse, as it were, with our backs turned on old age and dying, and that we worship youth because it is the furthest removed from the final exit. And we can understand that the body as the only guaranty of our remaining earthly life is being valued so highly, now that an afterlife has been rationalized away. If our body is no more, we are no more. Therefore we watch our bodies incessantly, cultivate and pamper them, do bodybuilding and everything else to insure a smooth functioning. Instead of our ancestors' huge cathedrals for praying we have immense hospitals, and instead of our former God we now have the Gods in white lab coats. To them we gave the mandat to put the reins on Death, who once would hit everywhere indiscriminately, and to bring under control the mortality of infants, mothers, and adults. They have done that with such success that a new faith is taking hold, a trust in the immortality of never-degenerating, of continual triumphs of repairs.

Even if most of us live out the full extent of the lifespan given us by nature, we remain mortals, and that is not a *medical* problem. It is not a problem at all, but a part of our humanity. Who are we, that among all living beings we alone claim immortality? If medical science nonetheless would attempt to prevent death, it would be inhuman. The problem is that many of us think that medical science should still take charge even where nothing can be done anymore and nothing further should be done. Death is *not* a medical teaching subject, and dying right is not part of medical studies. Here a vacuum exists both with professionals and lay people, because instruction in dying right is not a learning requirement for anybody, in whatever discipline. We are all alone there. Although all of us will die, hardly anybody is preparing to die right. That used to be different!

Let us look back to the second half of the fifteenth century. By then printmaking techniques permitted the relatively inexpensive production of woodcuts in large editions. Therefore they could be distributed cheaply to people. It had long been the task of priests to help the dying through their last hours. The problem was, however, that during the frequent epidemics - plague, typhoid, smallpox, malaria - many people died at the same time. There were not enough priests to assist everybody. The priests also knew from experience, just as the "loved ones" of a sick person, that contagious diseases were extremely dangerous. Whoever could flee, did flee, the farther the better. In short, nobody could be certain of not having to die alone.

What did our forebears do? They *learned* to die, everyone for him- or herself, already in young years. Even if they could not read they were able to look at woodcuts. In the view of the time a soul's fate was often only decided during the last hour on earth. It was thought that the devil's forces would try everything to get hold of the soul about to depart. It was easily imagined what these final temptations would be: tempting the faith, tempting into despair, tempting into impatience, into pride arrogance, and earthly materialism. Whoever succumbed to one of these hellish temptations in his last hour, was certain to forfeit the heavenly splendours and suffer in eternal hell.

The small educational brochure always consisted of eleven woodcuts. In each picture the dying person was shown in his bed, an Everyman of about forty, with whom all could identify. Woodcuts one, three, five, seven and nine illustrate the five great temptations already mentioned. Terrible devils's faces bear down on *moribundus* from all sides. They show him his register of sins and let all his life's misdeeds parade by him. As perjurer, adulterer, miser, drunkard, glutton, thief and murderer he would stand no chance of God's mercy. Turning tables, they would appeal to his vanity, would flatter him, remind him of his life's accomplishments, the honors, heroic deeds and fame. They would mention all his possessions to distract him from concentrating on dying in a way that would please God.

The responding images on woodcuts two, four, six, eight and ten, however, show the heavenly forces hurrying to his side: angels, saints and the Trinity. They supported the dying person in his struggle for the soul. Five times he would resist with their help. Then he died. The eleventh woodcut would show the happy end. An angel would stand ready to receive the expired soul in the shape of a small naked child and lead it into God's heavenly splendour.

Dying, the *right* way of dying, could be learned. If one had absorbed this *Ars bene moriendi*, this "art of dying right" at a young age, one did no longer have to fear dying, not even dying alone. One knew what the last hour would hold in store, and one only had to copy the Everyman on the woodcuts to be assured eternal bliss.

As a historian I am always tempted to look how our forebears dealt with problems similar to our problems today. *Similar* to the past is our point of departure. Among us, too, there is nobody who can be sure that he or she will have to spend their last hour without spiritual help and die alone. *But who teaches us to die?*

Nobody is so naive to suggest that we should republish the old *Ars Moriendi* and distribute it on large numbers among people that they may relearn the "art of dying right". But if we agree that in our day we once again need an "ars moriendi", - and I believe we do - there are some good lessons to be learned from the old picture "ars moriendi".

1. If our time really wants to develop a broad-based "art of dying", it can be done. Our forebears demonstrated that successfully some five hundred years ago.
2. Each "ars moriendi" is rooted in its time. Half a millenium ago it was rooted as a matter of course in the Christian world view and its belief in a Beyond, in resurrection and eternal life. It prepared for the struggle for the soul in the last hour and guaranteed a successful outcome if one followed its precepts.
3. A decisive factor of its success was the concentration on the essential. Eleven expressive, understandable woodcuts sufficed to make the point.
4. The "art of dying alone" addressed *all*, and from their young years on, for nobody could be certain about not having to die alone the next day. Thus the "ars moriendi" was also an "ars vivendi", an "art of living right".

The inferences from this for us are:

1. For our time, too, an "ars moriendi" can be created, if we really want it.
2. For most of us life consists only of its earthly part. The process of dying rings in the final chapter.
3. A contemporary new "ars moriendi" has to be just as concise and poignant, as well as generally accessible. It has to speak to *everyone* today as well, for once again nobody can be sure of not dying alone.
4. More than half a millenium ago our "ars moriendi" is an "ars vivendi", an "art of living right". By that I mean the art of living such a fulfilled earthly life that at its natural end we are willing to let go even without the prospect of a continuation.

If we begin with this learning process only with the loss of health in the face of death, we usually are much too late. Just like 500 years ago, the practise has to begin in youth. This new "ars moriendi" is thus not a manual for the intensive care unit, the hospice or the dying room at home. The motto of this "ars" is to "live fulfilled", to do so *all* one's life and as a result "to die in peace." The last weeks, days, hours may turn out to be whatever and wherever; no matter what illness leads to my end and no matter if I die with our without help in a hospital, a nursing home or at home. I have lived my life and did not just become older. Fulfilled by life, and not just tired of it, I can give it up.

If we are open-minded about our situation today, we will find it easier to find solutions. Open-mindedness means to not only take note of the following facts, but to draw conclusions from them. In any relevant handbook we can read that the average life expectancy in Germany, for example, was 37.2 years in 1855, whereas it was 74.6 years in 1985: an exact doubling. Not only do we have twice as many years, we also have twice as good years, qualitatively speaking. Our nutrition is more assured and better than ever before. Infectuous diseases are largely under control. We work half as much as our ancestors - and generally under better conditions. Economically, with some exceptions, we can afford many more things. Information of all kind, education, culture, numerous television and radio channels, not to mention the overabundance of print media, are available to all of us, just as are museums, libraries, concert halls and unversities, all over the world as they have never been before.

Is all that perhaps worth nothing to us? Dozens of generations before us have striven for a long life. We have it. We are living a dream come true for humankind. Never before have so many people been spared the century-old triad of scourges: Plague, Hunger and War. And yet we are insatiable and want more and more, quantitatively and qualitatively; more years and better ones, and if possible, the whole eternity as well. Whatever has happened to our humanity which includes its decay?

One thing is for certain. The current control over "plague, hunger, war" and the resulting fixation of the average age of death at a never-achieved level, is not guaranteed for either the individual (we often read "why so soon?" in death notices) nor for society as a whole. New plagues threaten us, such as AIDS, or wars, as in the former Yugoslavia. How long this unusual state of being will last, depends in large measure on our vigilance and all of our willingness to contribute. The historian knows plenty of examples of stagnating, even regressive life expectancy. I don't want to paint horror visions, although such visions qualify for some contemporaries the change from an insecure to a secure lifetime and bring about a free-floating anxiety which is hard to conquer. It is a mistake to let fear paralyze you.

The fact is that of today's circa 80 million Germans more than half were born after 1950. Thus for the first time a large stratum of German society has not experienced the immediate life threat of "plague, hunger, and war" which reigned for millenia. For the first time the majority of the German population has been given the astounding opportunity of living and shaping their lives in terms of a quasi calculable end. This offers amazing opportunities for realizing a lifeplan. For the first time we can weigh and coordinate the strengths and weaknesses of each phase of our lives. It no longer makes sense to just live from one day to the next. Given the already mentioned weakening of our physical abilities, it is important to cultivate from early youth not only physical but also intellectual and cultural interest, both in oneself and in others, so that one finds pleasure in each phase of life and makes the last years worth living. Do not scold my concept as too intellectual. I am not to blame for the fact that the physical powers often wane before the spiritual powers in the last years. What I can do, is prepare myself for it.

Even for those, who as victims of accidents or incurable diseases still die early, the realisation of a lifeplan makes sense, I think, even if it is cut short. Everything would have happened for them, too, at the

right time. Dying young or old, nobody should berate him- or herself on the deathbed for having missed something. There would be no last minute panicked attempt to catch up on what cannot be recouped. "To live fulfilled - to die serenely" - at whatever age!

There is still a quite considerable minority among us which did not have the opportunity to live according to a lifeplan from the beginning. Those are the people who lived through the first and second world war, who experienced the Great Depression, the hunger winter of beetroot, the influenza epidemic. How could they have expected to count on a long life in the face of such calamities! To live in an era, free of "plague, hunger, war" and to be able to count on a third age is a recent phenomenon. But it now concerns most people.

Have we been assuming that the change from an uncertain to a certain life expectancy will bring with it the earthly paradise? Only naive people ignore that there are two faces on a coin. Thus the "increase in life expectancy" and the "increase of life expectancy in good health" are two different things. With the reduction of infectuous diseases we live longer but we have not become immortal. Chronic health impairments have come to the fore and play a new role in the spectrum of causes for illness and death. The closer we get to our life edge of eighty or ninety years, the greater is the likelihood that we will need help and care, even before finally being put into a care facility until our death.

A further consequence of the shift from an uncertain to a certain lifespan is the breaking up of traditional forms of community. Formerly, the permanent presence of "plague, hunger and war" forced our forebears to insure their survival by subjecting themselves to a communal structure: family, household, monastery, guild or military. Those were *forced*, not voluntary communities. And many were quite horrible. We no longer need such communal structures for our survival. Small wonder, then, that the number of those living alone is growing, and that men and women satisfy their needs with part-time communal arrangements, and for the rest "realize themselves".

Let's weigh the facts. The developments since World War II have brought us much that is positive, particularly the shift from the uncertain to the certain life span. We have twice as many years, we have twice as good years, we can afford more things than ever and have more access to the world than ever before. But the same development has brought us gravely negative changes: the widespread loss of faith in eternity, the separate developments of life expectancy per se and "life expectancy in good health" with the consequences of often long illness and the falling apart of our communal structures, to name just a few.

I doubt that anyone would like to rescind these negative developments by returning to the bad old days of "plague, hunger and war". We are free to do so. The old infectuous diseases have not disappeared from the face of the earth. Hunger and war still exist. Everybody is free to travel without prophylaxis into malaria-infested areas, to go without preserved foodstuffs into the African or Asian hungerzones, or to visit the war theaters. He or she would find the desired premature death and would never have to think about lifeplans or a new "ars moriendi".

Most of us, however, do wish for the long life that has finally become possible, and we must accept the concomitant negatives. Let us make the best out of the long life we have so much desired and which we are privileged to have. Let us transform *every* one of our gained years into fulfilled ones, taking advantage of our immense technical, economic and cultural resources, and then let us die a natural death at the right time.

To be human, I said at the beginning, is to accept and meaningfully endure the tension within us from the beginning, the tension between becoming, being and perishing. Is that so hard to comprehend? Concise and brief, like the old "ars moriendi", this is the essential point and should be understood by all.

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More food for thought:

Callahan, Daniel: The troubled dream of life. Living with mortality. New York: Simon & Schuster 1993. 255 p.

Arthur E. Imhof & Rita Weinknecht (Eds.): Erfüllt leben - in Gelassenheit sterben [= To live a fulfilled life - to die a peaceful death]. Geschichte und Gegenwart. Beiträge eines interdisziplinären Symposiums vom 23.-25. November 1993 an der Freien Universität Berlin. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1994. 507 p.

