

Inquiring Minds: Facing One's Mortality

Issue #39 Aug-Sept, 2016 "I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens." Woody Allen

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Being Mortal, a Doctor's Classic Book Going Viral

Former church member, golfer, retired Stanford Professor, MD, ophthalmologic (eye) researcher, and member of [The Royal Society](#) (of science); Denis B is probably the most famous and accomplished person I know, yet he is humble enough to consider me a friend and introduce me to the Stanford GC. When he highly recommended a book "all (his) doc friends are talking about," Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, I listened up. When in the same week a tennis buddy also recommended the same book as a "must read" I overcame my fear of the much avoided topic and reserved my copy at the local (Redwood City) library.



Atul Gawande

Being Mortal seems to be becoming a classic for anyone in health care, as two former classmates also confirmed, but it's also very readable and interesting to the lay person.

Gawande confronts the common issues of death and dying from his experiences as a doctor (a surgeon) and his own personal experiences. Peppered with interesting medical facts dealing with the aging body, the author addresses key medical questions that should be clarified before one admits he/she is in need of assisted living and/or is dying.

Death and dying isn't an option, but choosing how to live and die is. Determining what one wants to live for will determine what medical interventions the patient will be willing to undergo. Reading this book is helping me face my fear of the inevitable and be more in control of letting go, not that I

plan to in the near future. It's also a book for the middle aged so they can have these very important conversations with their aging loved ones. I recommend it.

WONDERING ABOUT AN EXISTENCE AFTER I DIE

The quote "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die" is attributed to Joe Louis, the boxer. As a fighter he knew the value of survival.

The exceptions to the survival instinct might be those who are martyrs for a belief, a cause, for fame, or for heavenly rewards. Others might welcome death, even oblivion, than to suffer extreme physical or mental pain. They just know it's time to go.

I am curious what percent of the present day population in various countries believe in an afterlife? And of what sort: reincarnation, some sort of spiritual existence, the resurrection of the body, living on as a memory of loved ones, as a legacy for lasting contributions to humanity, (art, science, business, Stonehenge, the pyramids), or just being a part of nature's recycled compost? [wikipedia](#) tells of many theories and/or beliefs even within the Christian tradition.

Even more interesting to me is why so many modern cultures believe in a personal immortality: fear of the unknown, hope to be reunited with loved ones, not being able to imagine our non-existence? I wonder if the scientifically minded more or less inclined to hold beliefs of an afterlife?

Today's revival of atheism and the less dogmatic agnosticism make coming out of the religious closet liberating. Some think that to believe we are immortal is egoistic and self-centered. Would non-believer have reason for a moral code? Is justice and fair play right because of heaven or hell or

can conscience stand on its own two feet?

Am I OK with having had the wonderful gift of this life? Am I willing to accept whatever comes after my death, being pleasantly surprised at an afterlife if there is one, or if there isn't one, not feeling anything? Many interesting and unanswered questions. It's both humbling and invigorating not to have all the answers.

An Agnostic's Would-Be Prayer

Oh God, my weak god, how does one pray?
Whom does one thank at the first light of day?
When the mind fails to fathom your sway,
Whom does one praise at the end of the day?

My prayers are a yes to all that abounds:
The ocean of light, the wonder of sound,
The hug of my wife, bacon and eggs,
The daily crossword, my once-strong legs.

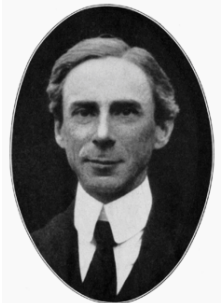
Faith of our Fathers and that my youth
Grows dimmer with time and all that's uncouth.
To find you, *love life*, for that's where you hide,
Not in heaven above but right by my side.

Is the rest but a story to soothe the child within,
Full of hope and glory to keep us from sin?
The more that I learn from science 'n history
The less I question life's great mysteries:

Like why we are here? Does life have a plan?
And will we live on at the end of our span?
Dare we admit that we really don't know
But secretly hope there's more to the show.

JB - 4/24/16

Bertrand Russell, a confirmed agnostic and sometime devotee of the utilitarian ethic, warned that "Our conduct, whatever our ethic may be, will only serve social purposes in so far as self-interest and the interests of society are in harmony." He added, "It is the business of wise institutions to create such harmony as far as possible."



Thanks for witnessing my search as I welcome thoughts on yours (below). --Joe

**Some responses to Inquiring Minds#39:
Facing One's Mortality:**

One of the many responses I received on the timely subject of our mortality is this poem below written by 80-something Anita Leplin, a teacher friend of mine with whom I carpooled in the gas-rationing days of the late 1970's. She along with Florence, Gene, and a few others were some of my many mentors. Anita now lives on the east coast near her sons. (permission to share sought and given)

Prediction

**When I see dry leaves
scattered over the forest floor,
their edges all tattered, and under my
footsteps
I hear the crunch that signifies their
timely demise,
I need no solace and hear no cries,
for in the spring they will re-appear in
new glory,
vastly changed in shape and scent,
I know that I am just another leaf,
obeying nature's grand intent.**

One former classmate asked that I not just report on death, but that I give my personal views, which I had in my little poem, which he apparently missed or discounted.

Another friend (probably trying to keep it light) said, "I don't understand a thing you're saying, but sounds like you're having fun." Yeah, I thought, thinking about death and dying is a real hoot.

Pat, a friend and classmate, who's being physically challenged himself, thought what I sent was clear and timely for those of us who are approaching 70.

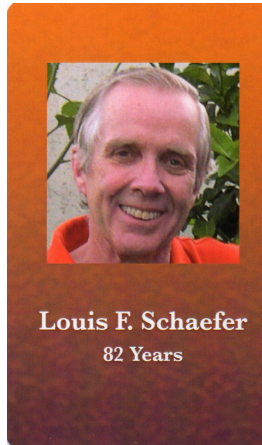
Paul sent me [Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy](#) which I am, once again, in the process of deciphering.

Lance responded to queries about the afterlife as "the ultimate imponderable."

Dr. EJ responded: " Thanks, Joe. Atul Gawande has been one of my heroes for many years, ever since I started reading his thoughtful, sensible and sensitive articles in The New Yorker, which to my initial incredulity, he began writing while he was still a surgery resident at Harvard. (When I was a surgery resident, I couldn't seem to find time to read my mail. Now, thanks to the leisure of retirement, I've had

time to read, and appreciate, *your* personal catharsis in the archives of Inquiring Minds.)

Denis B. at Lou's memorial told me to check out what Emerson had to say about the Immortality of the Soul in 1861. Here's that link: <https://somanycbooksblog.com/2007/09/16/emerson-on-the-immortality-of-the-soul/>



Thanks, my dear responders, not all of whom are in print here. Your responses confirm my sanity even in the face of such sometimes-imponderable questions. I miss not having Lou to discuss them with. -Joe