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Dying – and Our Epidemic of Immortality

The goal of Radical Decency is to be decent to ourselves, others, and the world, at all times, in every context, and without exception. But across-the-board decency – as opposed to pick-and-choose decency – is impossible if our habitual beliefs and behaviors are not in tune with our biological realities.

When such a disconnect occurs, the physical realities that define us – and limit of our possibilities – will inevitably emerge either directly or as unintended consequences in a flawed system. The obvious historical example is the suppression of female sexuality. Think of the incalculable damage that our biologically unsound beliefs have caused in the lives of countless generations of women?

In this Reflection, I discuss a pervasive and deeply consequential distortion of our innate biological nature: The way in which we view dying and incorporate it into our lives.

There are two events that define us more than any others: Birth and death. The first just happens, with no awareness or anticipation on our part. Dying, however, is different. An awareness of our mortality is inescapably with us throughout our lives. And how we deal with it is vital to our quality of life. As Irvin Yalom, one of our foremost clinical theorists, flatly states: Whether acknowledged or not, mortality is a key issue in every psychotherapeutic relationship – every one.

Unfortunately, the values that drive our culture, and mold our choices, deeply marginalize this reality. If asked, we agree that death is inevitable. But the ways in which we compose our lives speak to a very different, if unspoken, operative reality.

We live in a world where the fantasy of dominance and control is pre-eminent. We can do anything if we try hard enough and are “less than” – losers – if we don’t. Thoroughly interwoven into this larger message is the implicit belief that, through shrewd choices and sheer force of will, we can make ourselves invulnerable to the effects of time. The right combination of food, vitamins, supplements, exercise, and stretching will allow us to always feel great and never get sick.

And we supplement this fantasy of actual invincibility with an increasingly mainstream regiment of artifice. We dye our hair; surgically alter our faces, breasts, and thighs; inject botox; and consume viagra – all strategies designed to maintain the illusion of perpetual youth, not only for others but for ourselves as well.

Moreover, the mainstream medical profession is fully complicit in promoting this illusion of immortality. We will find a cure for cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer’s – indeed for every malady that can kill us. Patients in their 80s and 90s – in the last stages of their

biologically programmed deterioration – are put on experimental drugs. Death isn't the natural endpoint of life. It is an enemy to be defeated.

Regular exercise, sensible diets and good medical care are, of course, positive things. But this motivating mindset is not. The unstated goal is never to get old, never to die. Our idealized 40 year old feels 25. Our 60 year old role model looks and acts 40.

In this way, the reality of dying never arrives. It is always out there in the future – 10 years further down the road from wherever we are now. Somewhere in this process, of course, we die. But by virtue of this cognitive sleight of hand, it is always premature – an unfortunate stroke of bad fortune. Emblematic of this habitual outlook on death and dying is the 87 year old woman who, diagnosed with cancer, asked “why me?”

The price we pay for this chronic state of denial is high. A natural rhythm of living is built into our nature. Fully embraced, each stage of life has its own special challenges and rewards. But all that is swept aside when we reflexively seek to freeze our outlook and choices; struggling to maintain the ambition and sexual allure of a 35 year old into our 60s, and beyond.

Chronic denial of aging also leaves us unprepared when life's natural end point – death – becomes imminent. We typically react to a terminal diagnosis with disbelief which, when you think about it, is truly funny. Did we really think it wasn't going to happen to us? What is less funny is the fact that we then face this final challenge with little or no psychic preparation. The result? Too many of us die badly, railing against our fate and filled with complaints because our bodies no longer work as they are “supposed to.”

The more sensible approach is to embrace death and dying in ways that empower us to live more fully and vibrantly. My particular take on how to do that is framed by two stories.

Not long ago I listened to an interview with a famous poet who, living with a terminal diagnosis, struggled with the fact that all of her wisdom would die with her. Hearing her anguish, I remembered a second story, of the woman whose house burned down in Berkeley Hills, destroying all of her possessions. Shortly thereafter, people started contacting her.

Years earlier she had copied her favorite recipes and sent them to a friend. That friend called to say that she was re-copying them and sending them back to her. Her children also called to say they were making copies of the family photos she had faithfully sent to them over the years. As these calls continued, the woman realized this: The only thing that was safely hers was what she had given away.

So here, it seems to me, is the answer to the poet's dilemma. One way to look at the rhythm of our years is to think of it as consisting of two interwoven but distinct paths. The first is acquisitive and one starts at a high level, exemplified by the infant who is constantly exploring, touching, experimenting, testing, learning. This remains our

dominant preoccupation into young adulthood as we hone our romantic and social skills, build careers, and establish homes and families.

The second path – of giving and giving away – is always there as well. Indeed, Radical Decency teaches that mutually nourishing relationships – loving and being loved – are completely intertwined; the key skill we acquire as we emerge as seasoned adults. But while giving away is an important subtext in the earlier years of life, there comes a point when it needs to become our central focus.

Even into our 60s and 70s, the culture invites us to continue our acquisitive ways: To go on striving in our careers; to gorge ourselves on trips, games and new toys; to remain competitive with younger people, both professionally and socially.

The obvious problem with this approach is that it is doomed to failure. Even Hugh Hefner eventually becomes a pathetic and laughable caricature; a doddering old man in pajamas.

The more serious problem is that it crowds out the more nourishing promise of our later years – the ability to give away what we have acquired. Properly conceived, these years can be an incredibly sweet race against time: To give away as much as we can – while we can.

In making this our priority, we replace the doomed goal of “staying in the race” with a more sensible and ennobling purpose. Note, moreover, that effectively giving to others is a big challenge. It requires the gifts of an inspired teacher and role model: Sensitivity, imagination, patience, and persistence. So, “giving it away” actually revitalizes our acquisitive pathways, but with an emphasis on our most humane and nurturing qualities.

Finally, a serious commitment to “giving it away” invites us to die really, really well. While it is seldom acknowledged, everyone who loves us is exquisitely aware of death’s approach and will be deeply attentive when it finally arrives. This will be an absolutely vital and formative moment in the last part of our lives; our final, really big challenge.

So what greater gift can we give to our love ones than to handle this last and greatest of life’s mysteries with equanimity, acceptance and, even, curiosity and anticipation? Dying well, we give the people we love an invaluable role model that, hopefully, will nourish them as they age and ease their own dying. What a great gift to give to our children!

As I write this Reflection I am 64, ridiculously healthy, feeling great. Knowing that dying can be really tough, I worry that I might sound glib or Pollyanna-ish. When my own death arrives, I may not live up to my brave words. But I also know that giving away what I have – now – is not just a nourishing way to spend my next years. It is also the best way I know to prepare for the big moment – when it arrives. When I die, I really hope to kick some ass!