

*This piece in the Salon of last Friday March 11 by Katie Roiphe made me think that the topic of dying an atheist might be something we could discuss. If you agree, please forward this to everyone so they can come prepared. John.*

## **'I want to stare death in the eye' ... or how Christopher Hitchens, Susan Sontag, John Updike and other great writers confronted their mortality**

When thinking about dying, several thoughts come to mind, including how we die, but more just how we ourselves will die. The author of this piece apparently had an experience as a twelve year old being taken to the ER with pneumonia and thought she was dying. She obviously was obsessing about death.

- This is not unique.
- [Maurice Sendak](#) sat with the people he loved as they were dying and drew them. Others have put the confrontation with mortality into words, for instance:
- [Sigmund Freud](#), who in great pain, refused anything stronger than aspirin so he could think clearly, and chose the moment of his own death.
- [Susan Sontag](#) fought her death to the end.
- Sendak worked his whole life on death, taming his fear and obsession through drawings.
- [John Updike](#), ready to give up, found the strength to finish his final poems.
- [Dylan Thomas](#), who was hurtling along with a peerless mixture of vitality and self-destruction and burned the candle on both ends, died at age 39 after a heavy drinking bout. His most famous poem is about dying and death:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Death brings out glimpses of bravery, beauty, crushingly pointless suffering, rampant self-destruction, truly terrible behavior, creative bursts, superb devotion, accurate self-knowledge, magnificent delusion and many other things one could never guess, theorize or anticipate.

Why did Maurice Sendak draw death? Why did [Annie Leibovitz](#) take photographs of Susan Sontag as she lay dying? Why did the Victorians photograph dead babies? Why did the Romantics make death masks? Said Sendak: "I do it because - if I can capture death on the page - I'll repair or heal something and I'll feel better.

Today "dying takes place in hospital, hidden, aseptic and packaged for burial, so we can deny the power of death and nature." It used to be that we'd see death all the time - a mother in childbirth - but now we do not see people die in their home and death is something we don't think about. But the curiosity is still there. Sontag wrote, "The appetite for pictures showing bodies dying is as keen as showing bodies naked".

We also know details of many deaths, there is:

- [William Blake](#)'s happy death, who sat up in bed and saw angels;
- [Honoré de Balzac](#) killing himself through work and coffee;
- Primo Levi's probably suicide by falling down the stairs;
- [Christopher Hitchens](#) reported on his own death below (edited):

He wrote that he had more than once woken up feeling like death, but nothing like that early morning last June. He became conscious of feeling as if he were actually shackled to his own corpse. He'd called 911 and describes the experience as a "very gentle and firm deportation from the country of the well, across a frontier, to the land of malady. Within a few hours, the physicians at this border had shown him pictures of his interior and told him that his I next stop would be an oncologist. He recalls that," The previous evening, I had been launching my latest book at a successful event in New Haven. The night of the terrible morning, I was to go on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and then at a sold-out event at the 92nd Street Y, on the Upper East Side and a conversation with Salman Rushdie. I would not cancel these appearances, let down my friends or miss the chance of selling a stack of books and managed to pull off both gigs without anyone noticing anything amiss, though I did vomit twice. This is what citizens of the sick country do while they are still hopelessly clinging to their old domicile."

He then observes:

The land of malady is quite welcoming in its way. Everybody smiles encouragingly, a generally egalitarian spirit prevails, humor is a touch feeble and repetitive and there seems to be almost no talk of sex. The cuisine is the worst and this country has its

own language that manages to be both dull and difficult and contains names like Ondansetron, an anti-nausea medication. Then there are the unsettling gestures to get used to, like someone abruptly sinking his fingers into your neck that made me discover that my cancer had spread to my lymph nodes and was “palpable” from the outside. There’re also many needles sunk into my clavicle area. He realized that whatever kind of a “race” life may be, he had abruptly become a finalist.

The notorious stage theory of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whereby one progresses from denial to rage through bargaining to depression and finally “acceptance” hadn’t had much application in my case. I suppose I have been “in denial” for some time, but I can’t hear myself whining about how it’s all so unfair! But I have been taunting the Grim Reaper into taking his scythe in my direction and now I have succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores me. Rage would be beside the point for the same reason. Instead, I am oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste.

I had real plans for my next decade and felt I’d worked enough to earn it. He asks: Will I really not live to see my children married? Watch the World Trade Center rise again? Write the obituaries of elderly villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger? But I understand this sort of non-thinking for what it is: sentimentality and self-pity. Of course my book hit the best-seller list on the day that I received the grimest of news and the last flight I took as a healthy-feeling person was the one that made me a million-miler on United Airlines. But irony is my business and to the dumb question “Why me?” the cosmos replies: Why not you?

The *bargaining* stage might be a loophole. The oncology bargain is: in return for at least the chance of a few more useful years, you agree to submit to chemotherapy and then - if you are lucky - to radiation or even surgery. So you’ll stick around for a bit, but in return they need some things from you, like your taste buds, your ability to concentrate, your ability to digest, and your hair on your head. This certainly appears to be a reasonable trade. It also involves the most appalling cliché in our language: “People don’t *have* cancer: they are *battling* cancer”. I love the imagery of struggle, but I wish I were suffering in a good cause, or risking my life for the good of others.

Instead I am a gravely endangered patient who, sitting in a room with other finalists get a huge transparent bag of poison plugged into my arm, and--as the venom goes gradually into my system--the image of the ardent soldier or revolutionary is the very last one that occurs. You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water. It has caused me to lose about 14 pounds, but it cleared up a vicious rash on my shins that no doctor could cure. It also made me strangely neuter. I was fairly reconciled to the loss of my hair, but I wasn’t quite prepared for the way that my razorblade would suddenly go slipping pointlessly down my face, meeting no stubble. The loss of Eros is a huge initial sacrifice.

These are my first reactions to being stricken. I am quietly resolved to resist as best I can and seek the most advanced advice. My heart and blood pressure are strong again. But I am facing a blind, emotionless alien. Fortunately, on the side of my continued life is a group of brilliant and selfless physicians plus an astonishing number of prayer groups. I hope to write on these if—as my father used to say—I am spared. So wrote Christopher Hitchens.

The author of this piece offers a few more examples:

- [Virginia Woolf](#)'s descent into the river, with stones in her overcoat;
- [Franz Kafka](#) starved himself, like his hunger artist, in the sanatorium;
- [Leo Tolstoy](#) left his wife and died near a train station at the stationmaster's house;
- [F Scott Fitzgerald](#)'s had a heart attack in Hollywood.

All of them seemed to call to me.

I found the portraits of these deaths hugely and strangely reassuring. The beauty of the life comes spilling out, the power of inspiring minds working on the problem. Somehow these sketches were freeing, comforting, exhilarating, in part because the people I was writing about lived great, vivid, gloriously productive lives. There is something about the compression of the final moments, the way everything comes rushing in and the intensity of it that is beautiful, even though the death is not.

Sendak [owned Keats's death mask](#). He adored it, would stroke its forehead. Why would anyone want to own a death mask? But I knew, in a way, I am writing death masks.

Freud said: "Our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causation of the death – accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event."

There is, of course, in all of this fascination with death, with extremities, a primitive, ritualistic dividing of the well from the sick, the alive from the dead, and the lucky from the unlucky.

Updike's Rabbit Angstrom has a heart attack on a sailing boat with his granddaughter: "His chest feels full, his head dizzy, his pulse rustles in his ears, the soaked space between his shoulder blades holds a jagged pain" and the sense of doom hovering over him these past days has condensed into reality, as clouds condense into needed rain. There is a lightness, a lightening, that comes along with misery: vast portions of your life are shorn off, suddenly ignorable. You become simply a piece of physical luggage to be delivered into the hands of others."

How does it feel to come so close to death you can breathe its atmosphere? I want to come as close as I can.

Before being diagnosed with esophageal cancer, healthy but maybe a little worse for the wear, Hitchens wrote in his memoir: "I want to stare death in the eye." And it is

that staring that is rarely granted to us. Sontag once wrote, "One can't look steadily at death any more than one can stare at the sun." And Freud argued, "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators." And when people we love die, we are so steeped in loss and love and dread that we can't see, much less stare. Then imagination turns death into something else, quickly, cleverly, resourcefully. When the terror of death blows through you, what do you do? Do you reach for a drink or another person? Updike kept *The Book of Common Prayer* next to his bed and prayed with his wife Martha and the reverend that visited him. Even Sontag, the passionate atheist, called her assistant to pray with her one morning. Not that prayer comforted her or that she believed it for a second, but even she seems to have said a prayer. In an interview with her son, David Rieff, he said that, "It wasn't just that she desperately wanted to live, but that she was terrified of dying. There are lots of people are terrified of dying, many who aren't, but she was one to whom it was just terrible news. Of course, some people of faith find it easier, but my mother wasn't a person of faith, she was an atheist. She refused to accept any consolation from the hope of an afterlife."

Q. How much did that contribute to her dread?

Well, I'm an atheist too; if anything, more militant than my mother. I think it would have been grotesque of my mother to have become a person of faith purely in the interest of consoling herself. Surely, that would have been the most terrible therapeutic use of faith, and a disgrace in terms of faith.

Q. But without the consolation of religion, does the prospect of dying lead to dread? Well, it sure doesn't help. I don't know. There are certainly religious traditions that don't believe in an afterlife. So I don't think we can just take the Christian or the Islamic model and say those visions of a personal afterlife are what religious faith is. If you look at Buddhism, if you look at Judaism, neither has an afterlife in that sense. So I'm not sure it's faith vs. atheism.

To me, religion has never been consoling. I can't get anything out of even the cadences of it. It feels like a foreign language. I sometimes find the reassurance in passages of novels, in poems. The world alters a little, for a few moments, to make death bearable or almost bearable. Sometimes if I read bits of poems I feel stronger, shored up. Like [Thomas](#):

*That the closer I move to death, one man through his sundered hulks,  
The louder the sun blooms and the tusked, ram shackling sea exults*

or [Updike](#):

*God save us from ever ending, though billions have.  
The world is blanketed by foregone deaths, small beads of ego, bright with appetite.*

The year I was sick, the author continues her own story, and I was in and out of the hospital, there was one poem in particular that comforted me: WB Yeats's "[Sailing to Byzantium](#)". Even though I was 12, I strongly identified with his line, "That is no country for old men". The young are in one another's arms, the poem said, but you, you are outside all of that.

*An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick,  
unless Soul claps its hands and sings, and louder sings."*

I wrote an unnaturally impassioned English paper on that poem. I really saw myself as that aged man when I was coughing up blood and telling doctors I was fine. Yeats seemed to be speaking directly to me:

*Consume my heart away; sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me into the artifice of eternity."*

There is a photograph Leibovitz took of Sontag after she was dead, in the Frank Campbell funeral home; it is like a triptych, with three different photos that look almost stitched together. With a gentle light coming from below, her cropped white hair smoothed back, Sontag is lying on a table in an elegant pleated dress from Milan, wrists bruised, hands folded over her stomach, as if she had died serenely. I know this tranquility is highly constructed – the lighting, the careful labour of the funeral home, the dress from a designer that Sontag loved, the necklace draped around her neck, the stirring, wishful vision of the photographer – but it's still tranquility. The struggle, once it's over, doesn't exist. The fight is calmed. These death stories are not really OK, because in each case someone dies, but if you have to let go, you can. You can find or manufacture a way to. The fear returns, or it never goes away. It remains in the form of some fierceness and I would not be who I am without the fear. I have this idea that I can work through the problem of death, the way Sendak did in drawing after drawing, and be less afraid, but maybe you are never less afraid; you are just better able to get along with the fear. Maybe the whole idea that I need to find a way to be less afraid is wrong. Maybe even the fear is tolerable. Maybe that fear is not impossible. Maybe you get through the terror because you have to get through the terror. For some reason I have unconsciously been thinking of death as something you let happen, as a partnership, an agreement you enter or wrangle your way into, which is wrong. In the actual moment, you do not have a choice. Grace finds you. Acceptance hunts you down. I think of the letter Sendak wrote about visiting the old family friend who is dying. He is terrified of this visit. He can hardly bear the idea of it. But when he finally goes to see her, he writes about how strangely great it was. He writes that it was like gazing into something you've always been terrified of and finding it magnificent. The beauty I found in these deaths was what surprised me, the life rushing in, the vastness of the work, the great, sometimes deranged-seeming courage, the mad love in the last moments. I think of Updike's first wife, Mary, holding on to his feet in her last visit to him; of Caitlin hugging Dylan Thomas in his hospital bed, until the nurse

pulled her off him; of Annie Leibovitz climbing into Sontag's hospital bed. Part of the creative work these people did, their art, was their lives themselves. There is something glorious in the conflagration of everything at the end. The beauty was what ambushed me.

Note:

I edited this story but little, I thought that there was some poetry in the narrative. Anyway, it should give us some background if or when we want to talk about our own dying as atheists or agnostics or as persons who do not believe in a life hereafter.