

On John Updike
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The writer John Updike died of cancer on January 27, 2009. He was 76. The evening I learned of his death, I retrieved my copy of his memoirs (entitled *Self-Consciousness*) from the bookshelf and paged through it, pausing to read a few pages here and there. A couple of passages particularly caught my eye, the first one about happiness and the other one about the “once-and-doneness” of life.

A Sunday morning, around nine, walking back up my driveway in my churchgoing clothes, having retrieved the Sunday *Globe* from my mailbox, I experienced happiness so sharply I tried to factor it into its components. (1) The Christmas season was over—the presents, the parties, the “overshadowing”—and that was a relief. (2) My wife and I had just made love, successfully all around, which at my age occasions some self-congratulation. (3) It was a perfect winter day, windless, with fresh snow heaped along the driveway by the plow and a cobalt-blue sky precisely fitted against the dormered roof-line of my house. (4) Earlier that weekend I had mailed to New York a rather tedious critical piece I had reluctantly undertaken, with much procrastination; after getting out of bed this morning, I had glanced at a page of the photocopy and it seemed more interesting than when I was writing it. It would do. Good riddance. (5) I had the easy beginnings of preparing the final draft of this long-savored and -contemplated book ahead of me. (6) A visit from my daughter and son-in-law and two grandchildren was scheduled for that afternoon. I take an idle aesthetic delight in my grandsons I was too busy to spare my children, except when they were asleep. (7) Or was it simply that I was walking back to enjoy the *Globe*'s sports headlines, Arts section, and Spider Man (the only one of the “funnies” I still follow, as he juggles his tingling “spider sense,” his improbable career as a student and professional photographer, and now his marriage to the voluptuous Mary Jane), while I consumed my invariable breakfast of Erewhon New England Style Honey Almond Granola and orange juice? Can happiness be simply a matter of orange juice?

Is it not the *singularity* of life that terrifies us? Is it not the decisive difference between comedy and tragedy that tragedy denies us another chance? Shakespeare over and over demonstrates life's singularity—the irrevocability of our decisions, hasty and even mad though they be. How solemn and huge and deeply pathetic our life does loom in its once-and-doneness, how inexorably linear, even though our rotating, revolving planet offers us the cycles of the day and of the year to suggest that existence is intrinsically cyclical, a playful spin, and that there will always be, tomorrow morning or the next, another chance.