

On Dying  
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Bearing in on 80 as I am, death most certainly comes to mind, and often. Today, actor Peter Fonda of the movie “Easy Rider” fame, who is, or was, exactly my age, died; that got me thinking. The idea of oblivion for eternity, and that it’s not if but when, and that it’s coming right up, is downright scary to contemplate.

I’ve been old all the while I’ve been compiling this site--I was 67 when I started it twelve years ago--and I’ve done a lot of thoughts on death over the time. I titled them “On the Death of . . .” and then the name of whoever it was. I just now went back through all the thoughts and here’s the on-the-death-of list: the film director James Whale (a couple of months ago, I did an update on the 2008 thought on him); the country singer Faron Young; the baseball player Eddie Waitkus; the writer/philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre; the film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder; the musician Artie Shaw; the playwright Lillian Hellman; General Dwight Eisenhower’s Scottie dog Telek (yes); and the ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein.

As I went through the thoughts over the years, it struck me how frequently death came up in others besides the on-the-death-of’s. For example: “On Gorgeous George” (a prominent wrestler back in the 1950s and ‘60s) was very much about his death. “On ‘The Mower’” (“The Mower” is a poem by the British poet Philip Larkin) was about the death of a little hedgehog. “On Chuck Berry,” about the musician, was on the occasion of his death (I was very moved by again reading through the lyrics of his song “Memphis, Tennessee,” which comprised that thought—they have strong meaning to me personally). “On a Sparrow” was about a dead sparrow. Until I looked back through the thoughts just now, I hadn’t realized how much death has been in my consciousness these past twelve years.

As I was going through the thoughts, I took note of “On Mortality” from July of 2015. Even though it was quite long and

detailed, I'd forgotten I'd written it. I re-read it and came to the conclusion that much of what I'm thinking about getting into here is in that thought. It strikes me I was much more articulate back then, four years ago, or had more energy, or motivation, something, than I do now, and that you'd probably be well advised to stop reading this meager effort and instead read "On Mortality." But I'll finish up this one in case you want to continue with it. Perhaps it will add a little something new to the mix, we'll see.

The past couple of days, I was caught up with a book, couldn't put it down, that led to writing up this thought: *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End* by Katie Roiphe (Dial Press, 2016). From the book jacket:

In *The Violet Hour*, Katie Roiphe takes an unexpected and liberating approach to the most unavoidable of subjects. She investigates the last days of six great thinkers, writers, and artists as they come to terms with the reality of approaching death, or what T.S. Elliott called, "the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea."

The six people Roiphe deals with in the book are the writers Susan Sontag, John Updike, and James Salter, the psychologist Sigmund Freud, the poet Dylan Thomas, and the illustrator and writer Maurice Sendak. Except for Salter, Roiphe detailed the last two weeks of their lives when they and those close to them knew death was imminent. Roiphe interviewed Salter when he was in his late 80s but not ill with anything terminal. He died a year or so later at 90 of a heart attack.

A side benefit for me of reading *The Violet Hour* is it prompted me to begin reading Salter's writing. What a wonderful writer, both in his fiction and memoirs. Check him out on Amazon. His big book is an early novel, *The Sport and the Pastime*, but you can start anywhere with him. At the moment, I'm loving a collection of his short stories called *Last Night*.

The Rolphe book has helped me distinguish death—the moment of the cessation of life—from dying, the illness and events that immediately proceed death, that lead up to it. Rolphe recounted the process of dying. Such a rich, layered book. A couple of the many things I picked up on that were food for thought: Rolphe quotes Updike as writing, “I feel in her presence the fear of death a man feels with a woman who once opened herself to him and is available no more.” I can relate. And this about the book by Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Illich*, which now is on my to-read list: “There is in that book a slow falling away from the world, a brittle aloneness.” Yes, a brittle aloneness, becoming isolated in one’s own head, is a form of dying, really, and I can relate to that too. Rolphe has a first-class mind and is very informed and sensitive, and she is a fine prose stylist. I recommend her book to you.

The big concern for me, I now realize at an articulate level—I have words to describe it and give it meaning--is not death but rather dying. Death, that inevitable upcoming occurrence, that instant in time, gives me the shivers when it pops into my consciousness as I lay in bed at the end of the day waiting for sleep to come. But nevertheless, and I see it now in the thoughts over this past decade and more, including in “On Mortality,” it is dying that is the most pressing concern for me, and more, that it deserves to be—those months and weeks and days, or years (I recall so vividly the last eighteen months of my father’s life with the prostate cancer), or moments (in Faron Young’s case, the decision to fire a bullet into his head right then and there), the pain and fear and hope and hopelessness that so often proceeds death.

I am drawn to a phrase in the first sentence of the book jacket blurb for *The Violet Hour* quoted above, “...the most unavoidable of subjects,” particularly the word “unavoidable.” Death is, absolutely, unavoidable. But dying on the other hand, at least the form it takes, is to some extent within our control. That was a central point in the 2015 “On Mortality” thought.

With Rolphe’s examples in mind, Freud, who endured thirty operations for mouth cancer and unimaginable agony and dread for

years and years, really didn't have to smoke all those cigars. Updike with his lung cancer didn't have to smoke all those cigarettes (Fonda died of lung cancer; I wonder if he was a smoker). Dylan Thomas, dead at the young age of 39 from the effects of acute alcoholism, didn't have to drink that much. Sendak, who had to live with the effects of several strokes, looked very out-of-shape to me in an excellent documentary on him I just watched ("Tell Them Anything You Want"). It could be that Sontag's cancer, which she battled for decades, resulted from her lifestyle and habits. In a documentary on Salter I saw as a result of reading about him in the Roiphe book-- "James Salter: A Sport and a Past Time"—while he looked somewhat overweight, he seemed basically in good physical shape, and he came off as calm and centered and engaged with the world in a healthy way. I speculate that helped him avoid the terrible ordeals the others Roiphe wrote about had to endure at the end.

My basic posture on death is that it's going to happen, and we won't know when it does any more than we know when we fall asleep at night, and we won't regret it after it happens. Really, for us, death is a non-event; all we'll ever experience is life. For sure, it's impossible not to regret and dread our death. Those thoughts and feelings and images are bound to come up. But we don't have to work with them, dwell on them, extend them. We can choose not to give them energy. We can get on with making dinner or whatever the next to do is for us. To the extent I can manage it, I'm going to give death no energy. Death can take care of itself, and it will. Death will happen when it happens, and really, it's none of my business.

What is my business is dying. I'll try my best to put it off as long as I can, and to make it the least prolonged and agonizing and traumatic as possible. I'll do my best to be fit and healthy, keep my stress level down (living in a tense, agitated, hyper state paves the way to illnesses of all sorts), and avoid "falling away from the world," which is my tendency. The ideal, to check out quickly from "natural causes," as they say, at 90.

After getting in the best physical and mental shape I can and “keep on keeping on” with life the best I can, I’ll just hope I’m lucky, that I don’t have the genetic predisposition to get cancer or dementia, or catch the fatal disease, and that nobody comes into my lane and hits my car head-on as happened to my dear sister while driving to school one morning to teach her class of third-graders.

For me, it all comes down to deciding what’s best to do with the rest of this Friday in August—it’s now 1:40 in the afternoon—for myself and for the people in my life, with the realization that this day will happen just this once, the opportunity it holds will never reoccur, and how truly marvelous it is to still possess the incredible gift of life.