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Waiting to Die

Kenneth Ring
Kentfield, CA, USA

"The bright realization that *must* come before death will be worth all the boredom of living."
- Ned Rorem

What's it like, waiting to die? Of course, it's different for everyone. I can only say what it's like for me. On the whole, it's rather boring.

Don't get me wrong. I still have many pleasures in life and—knock on silicon—I'm lucky not to be suffering from any fatal illness, though if I were, that would certainly add some drama in my life. I could then follow the example of the poet Ted Rosenthal, who after contracting leukemia, joyfully called his friends and said, "Guess what's happened to me!" Well, no thanks. I'll take my boring life any day and intone a hymn of gratitude every morning I wake up with only the ordinary indignities of an old man—coughing, wheezing and sneezing, and, oh, my aching back!

But still... I'm used to having productive work—writing books, helping other authors with their books, being involved in various professional pursuits, and so forth. But recently I published my last book, which I puckishly entitled, *Pieces of My Mind Before I Fall to Pieces*, which was a kind of potpourri of stories and interests from my later years, and just after that I wrote what I expect to be my last professional article, the foreword to a colleague's memoir. Now what? More precisely, what do I do with my time now that I have clearly entered the epilogue to my life? Honestly, I feel as if I have stepped over the threshold into my afterlife before dying.

Of course, I can watch films—I've become quite a "film buff" in my later years; I still have interesting books to read. I am blessed with a wonderful girlfriend. Still, since life has become a spectator sport for me, and I can no longer travel, except locally, I find that I am spending more time on my sofa, honing my couch potato skills, watching sports. Yet I must confess that even they have lost a good deal of their zest for me. My home town baseball team, The San Francisco Giants, finished in the cellar last year; in golf, Tiger has gone away; in basketball,

Michael Jordan is long gone; and in tennis, which is now the only sport I follow with some avidity, it is chiefly because of the great Roger Federer. Nevertheless, I can only wonder how long he can at 36 continue to produce one miracle after another? Surely, he, too, will begin his inevitable decline soon, and with his descent from the heights of glory, my interest in tennis will also flag. So what will be left then? I will tell you.

The body. Mine. It has already become my principal preoccupation and *bête-noire*. These days, I can't help recalling that St. Francis referred to the body as "brother ass." It seems I now spend most of my time in doctors', chiropractors' or dentists' clinics, as they strive to preserve my decaying body parts by inflicting various forms of torture on me that would even impress Torquemada, or doing physical therapy in what is most likely a vain attempt to delay the encroaching onset of wholesale physical deterioration. Really, is this any way to run a navy? There are many days when I think the only surgery that will preserve me would be a complete bodyectomy.

Well, okay, I realize this is only par for the course of the everyday life of an octogenarian. Wasn't it Bette Davis who famously said "old age is no place for sissies?" It isn't for wimps like me either, it seems. (I can often be heard crooning, "turn back the hands of time...") Still, I wouldn't go so far as the saturnine Philip Roth who said that old age is "a massacre." I guess at his point I find myself somewhere between Davis and Roth, but the waiting game still seems to be a losing proposition and I might very well come to think of my current boredom as the halcyon days of my decline.

Nevertheless, consider a typical day in the life of this old wheezing geezer.

It begins with the back. Every day does. In the morning, you get up, but your back doesn't. It hurts. Even though you take a hot shower before bed, by the time you wake up your back has decided to take the day off. When you try to use it, as for example, when you bend over to pick up the comb you've dropped into the toilet, it begins to complain. And finally, it gets so bad, you have to lie down on your once neatly made bed,

remove half your clothing, and apply some ice to it while listening to mindless music and cursing the day when some enterprising hominid decided it would be a good idea to change from the arboreal life to a bipedal one. Big mistake. The next one was the invention of agriculture, but never mind. We were talking about the back and its vicissitudes.

Nevertheless, a little later, you decide to take your body out for a spin. “Don’t look back,” the great Satchel Paige advised, “something might be gaining on you.” In my case, it’s the man with the scythe whom I hope to outstrip for a few more years.

Of course, the back, which had only been moaning quietly before now begins to object vociferously, asking sourly, “what the hell are you thinking?” Nevertheless, you press on, thinking your will will prevail, and your back can go to hell.

But the next dispiriting thing you notice are all these chubby old ladies whizzing by you as if they are already late for their hair appointments. How humiliating—to be passed by these old biddies! You think about the days in junior high when you were a track star, setting school records in the dashes and anchoring the relay races, which you used to run in your bare feet. Then you ran like the wind. These days, you are merely winded after trudging a hundred yards.

When you can go no further, you turn around only to become aware of still another distressing sight. Actually, it is your sight — or lack of it. It ain’t working. You could see pretty well after your corneal surgery last year, but now you can’t see worth shit. What is that ahead of you? Is it a woolly mammoth, a Saint Bernard or merely a burly ex-football player? Where are the eyes of yesteryear? Gone missing. Well, they didn’t give me any guarantees as to how long my vision would last before it decided, like my back, to begin to object to its continued use outdoors. The way of all flesh doesn’t stop with the flesh; it continues with the cornea, so now I am cursing the darkness in the middle of a miasmal morning.

I finally arrive home in a disconsolate mood, but now it is time to hop onto my stationary bike, which is the only kind I have ever been able to ride since my balance is worse than that of an elderly inebriate on New Year’s Eve. I used to be able to pedal reasonably fast and for a long time. But lately someone must have snuck in to affix some kind of a brake to the bike since suddenly it seems that I am pumping uphill at an acute angle. Heart rate is up, speed is down, my old distance marks

are a treasured memory, which I can only mourn. All I am aware of now is the sound of someone huffing and puffing.

At last the torture is over, but now I really have to piss. That damn enlarged prostate of mine has no patience—it must be satisfied now! I race into the bathroom, unzip my fly before it is too late, and make sure, because I have my girlfriend’s admonitions in my ears as I piss that she will behead me if I continue to treat the floor as an auxiliary pissoir, I am pissing very carefully into the toilet bowl. Of course, these days, my urinary stream is a sometimes thing. It starts, it stops, it pauses to refresh itself, it pulses, stops, dribbles, starts up again with what seems to be its last mighty effort to produce something worthwhile and finally drips itself into extinction.

I’m relieved, however, because at least I haven’t soiled my pants this time. But wait. What is that? Pulling up my pants, I can feel some urine on my left thigh. How the hell did it get in there? Is there some kind of silent secondary stream that runs down the side of my leg when I am otherwise preoccupied with trying to keep my penile aim from going astray?

Now I have to find a towel to wipe off the offending liquid and just hope my girlfriend won’t say, when I return to the kitchen, “what is that funny smell, darling?”

Well, you get the idea. Life is no longer a bowl of cherries, or if it is, some of them are turning rotten. And naturally I can’t help wondering how long I have to go before I really cross that final threshold over the unknown. For years, I’ve joked that I’ve wanted to live to be 1000—months—old. Now I’m at 984 and counting. I’m getting close, and it’s no longer just a joke.

And of course I now also have to wonder what will be next? I mean, after I die, assuming I will ever get around to it.

Well, in my case, I have some inklings because I’ve spent half my life researching and writing about near-death experiences and in the course of my work I’ve interviewed hundreds of people who have told me what it was like for them to die—at least for a few moments—before returning to life. And what they have told me has been, I am frank to admit, profoundly reassuring.

I remember one woman who said that in order to grasp the feeling of peace that comes with death you would have to take the thousand best things that ever happened to you, multiply them by a million and

maybe, she said (I remember her emphasis on the word, “maybe”), you could come close to that feeling. Another man said that if you were to describe the feelings of peace that accompanied death, you would have to write it in letters a mile high. All this might sound hyperbolic, but I have heard such sentiments from many near-death experiencers. Here’s just one more specific quote from a man I knew very well for many years, telling me what it was like for him to die:

It was a total immersion in light, brightness, warmth, peace, security . . . I just immediately went into this beautiful bright light. It’s difficult to describe . . . Verbally, it cannot be expressed. It’s something which becomes you and you become it. I could say “I was peace, I was love.” I was the brightness. It was part of me. . . . You just know. You’re all-knowing—and everything is a part of you. It’s just so beautiful. It was eternity. It’s like I was always there and I will always be there, and my existence on earth was just a brief instant.

After listening to so many people describe what it was like for them to die, it is easy for me to imagine what it might be like for me—for anyone—to take that final journey. And many great writers have said much the same thing as those I have interviewed have told me about what is in store when we die. Walt Whitman, for example, who wrote “And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death.” And Herman Melville, with even more eloquence, said, “And death, which alike levels all, alike impresses all with a last revelation, which only an author from the death could adequately tell.” It seems that in our own time, these authors from the death are today’s near-death experiencers, and the revelations they have shared with us appear fully to support the claims of these famous 19th century American authors.

So having immersed myself in the study of near-death experiences for so many years, I’m actually looking forward to my passage when my time comes. Still, I’m not looking forward to the dying part. In that regard, I’m with Woody Allen who quipped, “I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” I just hope that all those stories I’ve heard about how wonderful death itself is aren’t some kind of a spiritual *trompe l’oeil*, a cosmic joke played by a malevolent god. Or as that marvelously antic diarist and composer, Ned Rorem, whimsically jested, “If, after dying, I discover there is no Life After Death, will I be furious?”

Of course, when I am faced with the imminence of death, I hope I’ll be able to comport myself with some equanimity, but who knows? Think of Seneca who wrote so eloquently about suicide, and then horribly botched his own. Well, naturally, I’m not planning to hasten my death by such extravagant means, though I wouldn’t refuse a kind offer of a little help from my doctor friends to ease me on my way if I’m having trouble giving birth to my death. It can, after all, be a labor-intensive enterprise. I just hope I can find myself on that stairway to heaven I’ve heard so much about and can manage to avoid a trip in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, when did you say Federer will be playing his next match?

About the Author

Kenneth Ring, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Connecticut (though he currently resides in northern California). He is the co-founder and past President of the International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS), founder and original editor of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, and the author of five books on the subject of near-death experiences, including *Heading Toward Omega*, *Mindsight: Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind* and *Lessons from the Light*. For many years, he lectured internationally on his NDE research and related topics and has appeared on many radio and television programs in connection with his work. He has also had a long-standing interest in psychedelic experiences and research.

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