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## Waiting to Die—Part II

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I might have been a tad too glib when in the first installment of what clearly will be a terminal series having to do with my personal terminus, I observed that at least for me waiting to die was rather boring.

After this winter, I have had cause to change my mind. For a while there, I thought it might be more of a matter of life or death. I found myself thinking of the line Othello sings toward the end of Verdi's opera as he contemplates his own death: "*Ecco la fine del mio camin.*" Colloquially, "This is the end of the line for me."

You see, I was one of the millions who caught the flu bug or, rather, it caught me. And held me tight for a while in what seemed to be its death-like grip. It was really bad for a week or ten days there—it's hard to remember how long. Even now, five weeks to the day after becoming sick, I am still hawking and spitting up gobs of sputum, and my voice now resembles that of one of your local frogs. There were times when I considered whether the first piece I wrote in the series might well turn out to be my epitaph. I admit there were moments, or really days, when I felt it didn't matter if that were the case since I was past caring whether I lived or died. *La vie ou la mort, c'est la même chose.*

I also thought ruefully that it is wise to be careful what you write about. Magical thinking or not, someone might be listening. I remember not long after I had completed my research having to do with near-death experiences in the blind, I developed glaucoma, and as a result I am now virtually blind in my right eye and have since had a series of other ocular maladies. I'm just glad I didn't choose to research gonorrhoea.

There are other well-known stories about people tempting the devil and then having to consort with him to their infinite regret.

For example, in 1904, Gustav Mahler was working on a song cycle called *Kindertotenlieder* (songs on the death of children). As it happened, this was only two weeks after the birth of his second child. The timing as well as the content of the work greatly upset Mahler's wife, Alma, who felt that the composer was tempting Providence. And sure enough, four years later, his daughter was dead of scarlet fever, devastating both him and his prescient wife.

But thinking about death, as I have often had occasion to do, both in connection with my many years of studying near-death experiences and as a result of nearing my own demise, however uncertain the date, can't help but conjure up certain images.

For the last several years, this is one that has occurred a number of times to me, like a kind of repetitive waking nightmare. I am in a forest surrounded by comrades. We are all fighting an unknown enemy who keeps shooting at us. I see some of my comrades fall and die; others are wounded and lie bloody on the ground. I keep moving, hoping that no bullet will strike me.

And isn't this like life itself where death is the enemy whose bullets no one can dodge forever? We are in a war against death, and as we get older, more of our comrades succumb or if they don't die, they become disabled, infirm, or demented. Or sometimes they barely escape themselves, as happened recently to a good friend of mine, almost exactly my age, who became ill with the flu at almost the same time I did but whose experience was far worse. Not knowing of his illness, I had written him on his birthday and expressed the hope that all was well with him. When he was again well enough to write, even though he was still not recovered, this is what he told me:

At just about the time that you are hoping that I am having a better time than you are, I am being stricken with overpowering symptoms of the same malady. I take a few sleeping pills and hit the sack, determined to ignore it. Alas, I awaken the next morning with high fever, urine-soaked bed, pounding headache, wicked aches and pains, and inability even to arise from the bed and make it to the bathroom. Off I go in an ambulance to the hospital, where they wheel me in to the ER for extended tests and treatment. Turns out that I too have the flu, but of a most severe strain. For more than a week after they get me back home I was literally bouncing off the walls, being unable to lift myself off the floor once I had arrived there, totally unable to control my urine, only semiconscious of what was happening around me, ignorant as to what day of the week it was or whether it was day or night, unable to grasp anything without dropping it, and so on.

I shuddered and almost cried when I received my friend's e-mail. There, but for the grace of God, et cetera. My friend survived and was able to dodge death's bullet, but I could easily have lost my beloved comrade. Death is all around us, but mostly we can pretend it isn't—except when it comes close or someone dear to us does die. Then we remember. When you get old, you have lots of such reminders.

Meanwhile, now that I've largely recovered from the flu, I have resumed some of my own preparations for death or taken measures to deal with my increasing physical limitations.

One set has to do with my vision, which although it is not yet deteriorated to a point where it is really worrying me, has declined significantly during the last year. As a result, I can now drive only locally and then just during daylight hours and have to depend more on the kindness of my girlfriend and sometimes often friends to tote me around.

My visual difficulties have also forced me to succumb to the lure of personal entertainment devices that have become so ubiquitous in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In my case, I have just acquired an iPad so I can more easily read my favorite magazines and novels. I regard this as still another personal affront and humiliation. I never wanted to become "one of those people."

And to spare my heirs the trouble, I am now in the process of giving away all my professional books and eventually my entire library. I have a large archive, too, much of which I will probably trash as I have not yet been flooded with offers from potential biographers to write my life story.

Downsizing and letting go—that's the name of the game I'm playing these days. Another means of making way for death.

Other factors—let's not go too much into those depressing details—have also made it increasingly difficult for me to travel, so I'm mostly restricted just to my locality in the Bay Area. I used to love to travel and have traveled widely, but now I have to get used to promenading around my own neighborhood—literally—as I have become something of a tottering boulevardier in my declining years. All that's missing are an elegant cane and a top hat.

Another doleful sign of the end times (mine, not the world's) is that increasingly I find myself thinking of people from my past who played an important part of my life. Actually, this isn't really a melancholy preoccupation at all. On the contrary, I often think of them with strong feelings of gratitude, as if I am in a sense saying farewell to them and thanking them, as it were, for all they have done for me. The other night, for example, in a conversation with my girlfriend about my early days as a graduate student, I spent a long time talking about my major professor, Harold H. Kelley, a distinguished social psychologist, whose personal care for and interest in me helped me survive a deep crisis of confidence not long after I arrived in graduate school. Kelley was venerated in his lifetime, not only for his important work but for his warm and caring nature. He saved my ass, and I will always be indebted to him.

Many years later, after I had become known for my work on near-death experiences, we happened to meet at a conference. He was much the same in his openhearted and friendly manner, and I had a chance to tell him then, awkwardly, I'm sure, how much he meant to me. I still felt like his grateful student, and I was.

But I am not only thinking about the past. I am thinking about my future, too. Not here, but there. And about my father from whom I was separated at an early age and who died young. I have missed him

my entire life and wonder whether I will soon be seeing him again.

Some years ago, as a result of a really bizarre set of circumstances, I happened to get a reading from a medium—the only one I have ever had—and my dad came through.

At one point I asked the medium whether she could give me any information about my father. This is what she told me. (My responses are in parentheses.)

Well, first of all, I feel like he crossed before his time. Somehow you and he had abbreviated time together. (That's very true.) And I hear an apology for that. He apologizes to you, that's what I'm getting. To me, it's like in a way he was letting you down. This could be like he crossed without having enough time with you as father. It's like, "I'm sorry." He crossed very quickly, too. (Yes.) Was that from a heart attack? (Exactly.) OK, and there was no goodbye, correct? (That's right.) And you were much younger, right? (True.) [I was 17 when he died.] I just feel like there's an apology for that. I feel like he's saying he should have taken care of his health better. I don't feel that he's that old when he crosses at all. [He was 41, just as his career as an artist was taking off.] There's a tragedy around him. (Yes.)

After she gave me a good deal of evidential information about my father, she added this:

It's also interesting in that he says he helps you with your work from the other side. Somehow organizes things on the other side that helps your work here, you understand? Were you—this is going to sound bizarre—OK, were you on Larry King or something? (That's amazing, yes, I was on Larry King.) Really? Was this like 20 years ago? [Damn close—it was in 1992, 19 years ago.] I'm getting something like, your dad helped to arrange getting you on Larry King. I was arguing with him, "What, Larry King?" I thought maybe I was getting it wrong. (So he's helping me?) And he has helped you. He's helped you for twenty years. Because he couldn't do it here physically, he's had to do it from the other side. [I always felt this and several years ago wrote a memoir about my dad, the main theme of which was my

sense that he had been a continuing, loving and guiding presence in my life.]

Toward the end of the reading, I couldn't help asking the medium a question, which coming from me, will make you laugh:

(I'd like to know in the unlikely event of my death, will I see my father or will I have some connection to the various people you described to me?) Well, absolutely, but he's laughing at you! "You are asking me that when you already know the answer!" I mean, he's joking with me, and he sighs, and says [apparently tongue-in-cosmic-cheek], "First, there's going to be a tunnel, and then, if you like, I'll greet you, and then you're going to see all of us there. . . ." It's almost like he's laughing at you, you understand.

Recently, I completed a little memoir I called *Pieces of My Mind Before I Fall to Pieces*, and at the very end, I wrote these lines, again about my father:

Throughout my life, I feel that I have been looked after and guided, not only by many friends and relatives as well as my various mentors, but by invisible agencies, not least of whom is my father, who have watched over me and protected me. A foolish man like me could not have made it through life without assistance from those tasked with looking after me from some unknowable elsewhere.

Of course, my time is limited (everyone's is, to be sure, but when you're in your early eighties, you are more aware that the sands of time are rapidly ebbing), and I'm mindful that I am now very close to my goal of living to be 1000 months old. My health, fortunately, is still tolerably good, but one never knows when the man with the scythe will show up at one's door saying, "it's time." When he comes, I trust I will be ready—ready to take my next adventure.

As I have said, I hope when that time comes, I will be seeing my father again. As it happens, I am finishing up the last stages of this book on his birthday.

Happy birthday, dad. See you soon!

### **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.

### **About the Journal**

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