INTRODUCTION

1.

Our subject is dying and how we think about dying. It is about the prospect of death, and how we experience the death of others. The subject claims the attention of all thoughtful human beings because we and those we love will surely be claimed by death. "I had not thought death had undone so many," Eliot wrote, echoing Dante. To be precise, death has undone almost all who have gone before us (allowing for a few exceptions proposed by religion and mythology), and our own undoing draws closer with each hour we live. Our subject is not what to do about death, for it is not clear that there is much to be done about it at all. Rather, this discussion and the widely varied readings collected in this book aim at helping us to be more worthily the kind of creatures who will die, and who know they will die.

We are born to die. Not that death is the purpose of our being born, but we are born toward death, and in each of our lives the work of dying is already underway. The work of dying well is, in largest part, the work of living well. Most of us are at ease in discussing what makes for a good life, but we typically become tongue-tied and nervous when the discussion turns to a good death. As children of a culture radically, even religiously, devoted to youth and health, many find it incomprehensible, indeed offensive, that the word "good" should in any way be associated with death. Death, it is thought, is an unmitigated evil, the very antithesis of all that is good.

Death is to be warded off by exercise, by healthy habits, by medical advances. What cannot be halted can be delayed, and what cannot be delayed can be denied. But all our progress and all our protest notwithstanding, the mortality rate holds steady at one hundred percent. Maybe this book will help free the reader from the delusions of progress and the futility of protest. The alternatives to delusion and futility are various, as the authors gathered here will show. In some instances, the alternatives proposed may be no more than alternative delusions and futilities, but that is for the reader to judge.

The readings gathered in this book impose nothing; they only propose. They propose different ways of thinking about death, of encountering death, of being encountered by death—our own death and the death of others. The proposals are often in the form of stories, and some proposals will "impose" themselves upon the reader's mind and heart as being more worthy, more true, than others. But please do not expect ethical principles or equations for resolving the

dilemma of death. Be prepared for wisdom. Eliot again: "Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" On the far side of wisdom about death, some have found, or found again, the Life that was lost in living against the knowledge that we are creatures who will die, and who know we will die.

2.

Death is the most everyday of everyday things. It is not simply that millions of people die every day, that millions will die this day, although that too is true. Death is the warp and woof of existence in the ordinary, the quotidian, the way things are. It is the horizon against which we get up in the morning and go to bed at night, and the next morning we awake to find the horizon has drawn closer. From the twelfth-century *Enchiridion Leonis* comes the nighttime prayer of children of all ages: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep; If I should die before I wake, I pray thee Lord my soul to take." Every going to sleep is a little death, a rehearsal for the real thing.

Such is the generality of everyday existence with which the wise have learned to live. But then our wisdom is shattered, not by a sudden awareness of the generality but by the singularity of *a* death—by the death of someone we love with a love inseparable from life. Or it is shattered by the imminent prospect of our own dying. With the cultivated complacency of the mass murderer that he was, Josef Stalin observed, "One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic." The generality is a buffer against both guilt and sorrow. It is death in the singular that shatters all we thought we knew about death. It is death in the singular that turns the problem of death into the catastrophe of death. In these pages we come across the lamentation of Dietrich von Hildebrand, "I am filled with disgust and emptiness over the rhythm of everyday life that goes relentlessly on—as though nothing had changed, as though I had not lost my precious beloved!"

It used to be said that the Victorians of the nineteenth century talked incessantly about death but were silent about sex, whereas today we talk incessantly about sex and are silent about death. In 1973, Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* contended that Freud had gotten it exactly backwards. It is not true, said Becker, that our fear of death is rooted in our denial of sex but, rather, that our fear of sex is rooted in our denial of death. Throughout history, and in many cultures, sex and death have been engaged in a *danse macabre,* and not simply at the shadowed margins of erotic fantasy where dwell the likes of the Marquis de Sade.

In sex and death are joined beginning and ending, the generative and the destructive. In today's culture we chatter incessantly about both sex and death.

They are subjected to the specialization of experts: therapists, ethicists, and the like. Sex and death have been "problematized," and problems are to be "solved" by sexual technique and the technology of dying. Victorian reticence about sex and our former reticence about death may have mystified both, although the probable intent was simply to put them out of mind. In any event, we have now embarked with a vengeance upon a course of demystification. Now there is nothing we cannot talk about in polite company. It is a great liberation. And a great loss, if in fact both sex and death partake of mystery. Mystery is attended by a fitting reticence.

Death and dying has become a strangely popular topic. "Support groups" for the bereaved crop up all over. How to "cope" with dying is a regular on television talk shows. It no doubt has something to do with the growing number of old people in the population. "So many more people seem to die these days," remarked my elderly aunt as she looked over the obituary columns in the local daily. Obituaries routinely include medical details once thought to be the private business of the family. Every evening without fail, at least in our cities, the television news carries a "sob shot" of relatives who have lost someone in an accident or crime. "And how did you feel when you saw she was dead?" The intrusiveness is shameless, and taboos once broken are hard to put back together again.

Evelyn Waugh's *Loved One* brilliantly satirized and Jessica Mitford's *American Way of Death* brutally savaged the death industry of commercial exploitation. Years later it may be time for a similarly critical look at the psychological death industry that got underway in 1969 when Elizabeth Kübler-Ross set forth her five stages of grieving—denial, anger, bargaining, preparatory grief, and acceptance. No doubt many people feel they have been helped by formal and informal therapies for bereavement and, if they feel they have been helped, they probably have been helped in some way that is not unimportant. Just being able to get through the day without cracking up is no little thing. But neither, one may suggest, is it the most important thing. I have listened to people who speak with studied, almost clinical, detail about where they are in their trek through the five stages. Death and bereavement are "processed." There are hundreds of self-help books on how to cope with death in order to get on with life. This book is not one of them.

A measure of reticence and silence is in order. There is a time simply to be present to death—whether one's own or that of others—without any felt urgencies about doing something about it or getting over it. The Preacher had it right: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to mourn, and a time to dance." The time of mourning should be given its due. One may be permitted to wonder about the wisdom of contemporary funeral rites that hurry to the

dancing, displacing sorrow with the determined affirmation of resurrection hope, supplying a ready answer to a question that has not been given time to understand itself. One may even long for the *Dies Irae,* the sequence at the old Requiem Mass. *Dies irae, dies illa / Solvet saeclum in favilla / Teste David cum Sibylla:* "Day of wrath and terror looming / Heaven and earth to ash consuming / Seer's and Psalmist's true foredooming."

The worst thing is not the sorrow or the loss or the heartbreak. Worse is to be encountered by death and not to be changed by the encounter. There are pills we can take to get through the experience, but the danger is that we then do not go through the experience but around it. Traditions of wisdom encourage us to stay with death a while. Among observant Jews, for instance, those closest to the deceased observe *shiva* for seven days following the death. During *shiva* one does not work, bathe, put on shoes, engage in intercourse, read Torah, or have one's hair cut. The mourners are to behave as though they themselves had died. The first response to death is to give inconsolable grief its due. Such grief is assimilated during the seven days of *shiva,* and then tempered by a month of more moderate mourning. After a year all mourning is set aside, except for the praying of *kaddish,* the prayer for the dead, on the anniversary of the death.

Milton Himmelfarb's reflection in the pages that follow lifts up the importance of ritual in the face of death. Many people have been mistaught to think that there is something trivial, artificial, and even dishonest about ritual. We speak of "mere" ritual. The important thing, or so we are told, is to concentrate on how we *feel* about what is happening. This attitude has its source in what some philosophers call "modern emotivism," the doctrine that the authenticity and sincerity of our feeling is all that matters. In fact, there is something that might be called "artificial" in ritual in that ritual is an artifact. That is to say, rituals are constructed by communities of people beyond number who have been here before us. Encountered by the singularity of the death of a particular person who had never been here before and will never be here again, we may cry out in our immeasurable sense of loss that precisely *this* catastrophe has never happened before. There is truth in that, but another truth, and what we come to understand in time is a greater truth, is in the ritual that tells us that we are not alone in our aloneness.

3.

In a wrenchingly poignant story in these pages, Peter de Vries would call us to "The recognition of how long, how very long, is the mourners' bench upon which we sit, arms linked in undeluded friendship—all of us, brief links ourselves, in the eternal pity." From the pity we may hope that wisdom has

been distilled, a wisdom from which we can benefit when we take our place on the mourners' bench. Philosophy means the love of wisdom, and so some may look to philosophers in their time of loss and aloneness. George Santayana (1863–1952) wrote, "A good way of testing the caliber of a philosophy is to ask what it thinks of death." What does it tell us that modern philosophy has had relatively little to say about death? Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) wrote, "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." There is undoubtedly wisdom in such reticence that stands in refreshing contrast to a popular culture sated by therapeutic chatter. But those who sit, arms linked in undeluded friendship, cannot help but ask and wonder.

All philosophy begins in wonder, said the ancients. With exceptions, contemporary philosophy stops at wonder. We are told: Don't ask, don't wonder, about what you cannot know for sure. But the most important things of everyday life we cannot know for sure. We cannot *know* them beyond all possibility of their turning out to false. We order our loves and loyalties, we invest our years with meaning and our death with hope, not knowing for sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, whether we might not have gotten it wrong. What we need is a philosophy that enables us to speak truly, if not clearly, a wisdom that does not eliminate but comprehends our doubt.

The brave new world of much modern philosophy, which is no longer very new, is strangely silent about death. Death is a surd, an irrational event, that inconveniently disrupts a world that is otherwise under rational control. It is a subject pushed to the side, best left to the specialists of medical and therapeutic technique. The result is a weirdly unreal view of reality, a kingdom of let's pretend-things-are-not-as-they-are. In the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay:

> Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age
> The child is grown, and puts away childish things.
> Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.
> Nobody that matters, that is.

Philosophers of the Anglo-American analytic school have tended to suggest that not much can meaningfully be said about death because, by definition, those who are alive do not *know* death in a way that makes it subject to rational analysis. This view is reinforced by a strong prejudice against metaphysics, the explanation of reality beyond what we can learn by measurable experience. Such philosophers are inclined to say with Jesus, but with a very different intention, "Let the dead bury their dead." Not because the question of death is answered in the mystery of God's purposes but because the question

is unanswerable. It is a subject best left to novelists, poets, and explorers into the darker regions of the psyche. Other philosophers, such as the German Schopenhauer (1788–1860), have insisted that death is the muse, the source of inspiration, of all philosophy. But it is a muse that hovers mockingly, exposing the limits and, finally, the futility of all we think we know for sure.

For many philosophers ancient and modern, the chief concern is not with understanding death but with tempering or overcoming the fear that death evokes. In his dictionary, Voltaire declared, "The human species is the only one which knows that it will die, and it knows this through experience." There has been much debate over the years over whether some lower animals are aware of their approaching extinction, and whether in some primitive cultures human beings did not live in happy or pitiable obliviousness to the onrush of death. Since it is only our own experience that, in Voltaire's phrase, we know through experience, such questions may never be resolved. In this century, Sigmund Freud wrote very influentially, if somewhat confusedly, about our awareness of death. In his early work, he contended that our consciousness of death is really superficial since our unconscious is firmly convinced of its immortality. In a later period he would write about the myriad ways in which our behavior is driven by an unconscious death wish. So which is it? It is as though the hovering muse were playing hide-and-seek with us.

Philosophers of an earlier time thought they had a firm fix on the location of death. The philosophical goal was to rob it of its sting. Four centuries before Christ, Epicurus declared that the fear of death rested on two mistakes. First, it was thought to be painful, and second, it was thought that the soul might survive to experience punishment in another life. All that had to be done was to expose these mistakes, and then it would be evident, as Epicurus wrote to a friend, that "Death is nothing to us. It does not concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more." Thus did the Epicureans neatly dispatch death, turning it into nothing more than a pleasant falling asleep.

Not surprisingly, many have found that solution less than satisfactory. For many, a falling asleep into a permanent loss of consciousness is precisely the terror of death. Loss of consciousness is feared as a loss of being. Not being is no solution at all. The twentieth-century Spanish existentialist philosopher Miguel de Unamuno says that "as a youth and even as a child, I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even then nothing appeared to me quite so horrible as nothingness itself." In this view, to be in hell is better than not to be at all.

Teaching at the same time as the Epicureans, the Stoics proposed a different solution. The wise man, they said, is freed as much as possible from all sensations of grief or joy, submitting himself entirely to a natural law that in-

cluded death. The Stoic view keeps reappearing in history, and in this book is very ably represented by the sixteenth-century French essayist Montaigne, who would persuade us that "To Philosophize Is to Learn to Die." That is the approach urged upon Hamlet by his mother when she counsels him that "All that lives must die." Later we will come to Jude Bottum's explanation of why he and so many others find that unconvincing.

To overcome the fear of death, said the Stoics, we have but to think about it constantly. Seneca repeatedly compared death to a banquet from which we should retire graciously at the appointed time, or to a role in a play that should satisfy us when it is over since that is all that the author wrote. Behind this was the view of Plato that philosophizing means learning to die. That may sound dreadfully dour and even macabre, unless it is understood that learning to die means communing with the eternal that never dies. Death is part of Nature with a capital N, which is the providential ordering of reality.

Marcus Aurelius, the noblest of Stoics, wrote, "Remember that no man loseth other life than that which he liveth, nor liveth other than that which he loseth." Whether it is our own death or the death of someone we love, we uselessly agitate ourselves by regretting what was not to be. "The longest-lived and the shortest-lived man, when they come to die, lose one and the same thing." What is there to mourn? In the final analysis, nothing is lost. We can only lose what might have been, and tranquillity comes with the recognition that there is no "might have been." What is is, what was was, and all is as it must be. In current theories of the stages of grief, this is sometimes called "acceptance."

For other thinkers, death is less to be passively accepted than to be defiantly embraced. If you must die—and you must—then flaunt it. "I teach you the Superman," declared Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra.* "Man is something that is to be surpassed." "He is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman—a rope over an abyss." By proudly embracing death as the natural terminus of life, one surpasses the limits of the natural. The ability to forego all consolations is itself a kind of consolation. Rejecting the proud posture of the Superman, yet others adamantly insist that there is no consolation beyond the loss of consolations. Unamuno's childhood nightmare is true: I have not really faced death until I have faced nothingness, and since nothingness is nothing, there is no *I* to face it. Death is not only the obliteration of the self but the nonexistence of the self to be obliterated.

"Our own death," Freud decreed, "is unimaginable." The late Karl Menninger, a psychiatrist, wrote, "It may be considered axiomatic that the human mind cannot conceive of its non-existence." If I think I have succeeded in conceiving my nonexistence, it is still *I* who conceive it and therefore I exist. "Whenever we make the attempt to imagine our death," Freud observed, "we perceive that we survive as spectators." To this line of reasoning it may be

objected that we can conceive of our nonexistence before we were conceived in our mother's womb, so why can we not just as readily conceive of our nonexistence when we die? To that it might be answered, in turn, that our nonexistence before we were conceived is not so much nonexistence as not-yet-existence. I know now that the person that was not before I came to be—except possibly as a thought in the minds of our parents or the mind of God—came to be the person that I undeniably am. These are intriguing "thought experiments," although some may be forgiven for thinking that they are little more than playing with puzzles in order to distract our attention from the smashing hammer blow to existence that is death itself.

The idea of death as absolute nothingness—and, oddly enough, as a kind of fulfillment—has been influentially promoted by the disciples of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) who make a sharp distinction between the death of others and our own dying. "Our death," wrote his American disciple, Peter Koestenbaum, "is generically different from the death of others." If we view the matter in a "phenomenological" way, we see that the death of somebody else is the removal of "an object in the world," but it does not remove "the observing ego or subject." When we consider another's death, we are still in the picture; death is an event within the world, but the world goes on. My own death is a very different matter. When I think that I am thinking about myself being dead, I am deceiving myself, for I have then sneaked myself back into the picture as the observer. The whole point of my being dead is that the observer is eliminated. "With the extinction of the observer, the entire scene vanishes as well." And so it is, says Koestenbaum, that "my image of the death of myself is tantamount to asserting the end of the world." There is no consolation for the end of the world.

This brief excursus on philosophical understandings of death may leave us wondering about Santayana's maxim that "a good way of testing the caliber of a philosophy is to ask what it thinks of death." Much depends, of course, on the caliber or the quality that we are looking for. Are we, for instance, looking for the truth about death or are we looking for ways to cope with what we can never understand? We may think that we can understand the death of others as "an event within the world," but in fact it would seem that we can only understand our experience of others' dying and being dead. Only the other person could understand his own death and, since he is dead and therefore is no more, even he cannot do that. And if death is truly the extinction of the self, I will never understand my own death because, being dead, there is no *I* to understand or to be understood. In our efforts to come to terms with death, it would seem that philosophy offers slim pickings. Little wonder that so many still today fall back on the austere doctrine of the Stoics that what is must be,

and therefore our mourning over what might have been is but an indulgence of irrational passion.

4.

Yet most of those who have sat on the long mourners' bench, arms linked in undeluded friendship and contemplating the eternal pity, look to other sources of wisdom. Most commonly they look to sources of wisdom called religious. To the modern skeptic, religion is the fall-back position when philosophy fails. In the absence of truth, religion provides consolation, and in return for consolation one might be prepared to pay the price of delusion. Deluded friendship is still friendship and may be preferred to facing nothingness all alone. The great religions, however, purport to be sources of wisdom. Their teachers, too, are philosophers—"lovers of wisdom"—who are not confined to the cramped dictates of the empirical, of what can be measured and tested in the laboratories of modern science. To paraphrase Hamlet's reproach of Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophical seminars or tested by your science."

One assumes that most readers of this book are, to the extent they count themselves as religious, Christians or Jews. So pervasive is the penetration of biblical religion in our culture that even atheists are not generic atheists but Christian or Jewish atheists. That is to say, it is biblical religion that defines what they reject. In recent decades, however, there is an evident fascination with "Eastern religions," albeit frequently imported in forms that are highly westernized. We begin this brief excursus on religion and the understanding of death with Hinduism and Buddhism, then turning to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Each claims to offer a comprehensive account of reality, which would not be comprehensive if it did not include the reality of death. Of each we can ask whether it corresponds to our experience—rational, emotional, poetic—of the way things really are, or of the way things believably might be.

In its beginnings more than three thousand years ago, Hinduism concentrated on affirming life and had little to say about death. In the oldest literature, the *Vedas,* death is to be postponed as long as possible, and there is only the vaguest sense of a soul that might survive death. There is, however, a feared "redeath" or "second death" that happens after the death of the body, and this receives extensive elaboration in the *Upanishads,* which are meant to be an interpretation of the earlier sacred texts. The affirmation of life is now severely tempered, falling under the shadow of Atman, the eternal soul that lives in everything but has no personal characteristics. Atman was never born and will never die and, according to one sage, "is concealed in the heart of all beings;

smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces." Atman is identical with Brahman, and Brahman is that which is truly real as distinct from the tangible universe (Maya) that only appears to be real.

Because Atman has no beginning and no end, it follows that death is not truly real. In the *Bhagavad Gita* the god Krishna reproaches Prince Arjuna, who is grieving over the friends who will be killed in a coming battle: "The truly wise mourn neither for the living or the dead. There never was a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be." Unlike the Stoic rejection of mourning, it is here rejected because death is not real, and death is not real because life is not real. Not *really* real. The self that dies is an illusion that is carried along by the laws of a world in which everything is being endlessly changed. Here the dreaded "redeath" of the *Vedas* now reappears as the dreaded rebirth. This gives rise to the doctrine of reincarnation (Samsara) in which the unliberated soul is carried forward by its deeds and their effect (Karma) into other births and other deaths.

The ultimate goal, according to Krishna, is to be freed from "the terrible wheel of death and rebirth." This is not the immortality of the soul but the elimination of all false modes of existence in which the "I" is attached to this concrete and unreal world. The great mistake that chains us to the "terrible wheel" of repeated cycles of life and death and rebirth—whether rebirth as a cockroach, a princess, or any number of other reincarnations—is to think this world is real. Only by acquiring true knowledge can one be liberated from the wheel, and true knowledge cannot mean knowledge about this world, for everything we know about the world is as false as the world itself. True knowledge is the experience in which the difference between subject and object is eliminated and, in perfect detachment from the world, one is united with Atman/Brahman that knows neither birth nor death. "Whoever knows Brahman," says the Mundaka Upanishad, "becomes Brahman."

Such knowledge is not come by easily. In the Upanishads, the method of liberating knowledge is Yoga. In the window of a health club near my Manhattan office is a listing of instructions offered, including "Yoga in easy lessons." It is but one of many instances in which Eastern religion is used to provide a tincture of the exotic in western commerce. The Yoga of the Upanishads is a discipline of great subtlety and difficulty whose masters move through eight levels to the spiritual perfection of Samadhi. At that highest level, all marks of one's personhood are erased and one can neither be born nor die. The union with Atman/Brahman is complete and there is nothing but a deep, dreamless sleep from which one never wakes. The curse of life has been definitively overcome.

Needless to say, such a view is in sharpest contrast to Western understandings of life and death. "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy," wrote the

late rabbi and my dear friend Abraham Joshua Heschel. It is with the sardonic wickedness of a westerner intending to shock that Mark Twain said, "Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is, knows how deep a debt of gratitude we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world." On the other hand, if the alternative is endless existence on "the terrible wheel of death and rebirth," one may well view a final death as a benefaction. The tales of reincarnation peddled in our popular culture are told by people who claim that in their former lives they were kings and queens and famous lovers. It seems nobody was a slave or beggar, never mind a lizard or flea. The Hindu teachers who have thought seriously about reincarnation know better.

Almost three hundred million people today follow one version or another of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, otherwise known as the Buddha, which means the Enlightened One. The great insight that came to the Buddha six centuries before Christ is that everything is under the power of Dukkha, or suffering. Suffering, in turn, is not caused by something that happens to you but by your desire or craving. Moreover, everything that exists has its origin in something else. All things are caused, nothing is permanent, everything is destined for oblivion. The reason we suffer in this life is that we struggle against the radical impermanence of everything, and most particularly we struggle against death. The only cure is to give up, to yield oneself to oblivion.

In the wakeless sleep of union with Atman, classical Hinduism promises an overcoming of death. Buddhists, on the other hand, teach the achievement of nonself or *anatman*. Rising above all desire for timeless selfhood, one surrenders to the causal flux of everything in a "middle path" that is without suffering. As with Yoga, this is no easy achievement. The main obstacle to such achievement is in our own heads. Our suffering comes from a mental addiction to thinking of ourselves as permanent beings. "All that we are is the result of what we have thought," says the first chapter of the Dhammapada. "It is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the wagon." We are the victims of the "primacy of mind," and the mind leads us into spiritually destructive falsehoods, the chief of which is that we can avoid death by somehow making life permanent—as in the idea of an immortal soul.

Only the mind can free the mind from these destructive falsehoods. The Buddha remedied his disciples' craving for eternal truths by the "fourfold denial." When asked, for example, whether the holy person continues to exist after death, he answered: A saint exists after death; a saint does not exist after death; a saint both exists and does not exist after death; a saint neither exists nor does not exist after death. To the logical mind of the West, this seems like

jibberish. It may also seem like jibberish to the logical mind of the East. In the Buddhist view, the lethal link that must be broken is the mind's attachment to logic. Neither the question nor the answer about life after death is spiritually important; indeed they are obstacles to enlightenment. Death is simply there to be accepted. Any effort to get around death, even in the form of speculation about the meaning of death, can only cause anguish.

In some Buddhist monastic disciplines, the monks are compelled to sit silently in the presence of a corpse in varying stages of decay. After a long period of meditation on the decaying corpse, one learns that death is nothing in itself; and if death is nothing in itself, neither is life. In Zen Buddhism, death plays a role similar to that of a meaningless expression, such as "the sound of one hand clapping." As one concentrates ever more intensely on such a "koan," the mind is emptied of everything else. The emptied mind is incapable of the vain speculations that lead one back to suffering. When death is treated as a koan, it becomes evident that all things, including life and death, are empty, and in this enlightenment all craving for the changeless is terminated in the state of Nirvana, which is perfect extinction, the achievement of *anatman,* the arrival at nonself.

5.

For the nearly one billion Muslims in the world, both life and death are very real indeed. Death is portrayed in graphic images that may strike non-Muslims as fantastical, but they perhaps have the merit of cutting through philosophical abstractions. The Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam, has no systematic treatment of death but the clues that it provides are elaborated in the fourteenth-century "Book of the Soul" (*Kitab-al-ruh*). As in all Islamic teaching, the premise on which everything builds is the omnipotence of Allah. (Contrary to common opinion, Allah does not denote a god other than the one we westerners refer to as God. Allah is simply the Arabic word for God.) Allah does everything; he brings people into being, sets the span of their lives, and causes them to die. Everything is determined ahead of time. To use a western and Christian term, Islam teaches a strict doctrine of predestination. Although we cannot read it, the ticket we get at the beginning of life's journey is imprinted with our final destination, and with all the stops along the way.

The very word "Islam" is Arabic for "surrender," and all of life is conceived as unqualified submission to the will of Allah. Not surprisingly, questions of predestination and free will have occupied Muslim thinkers for centuries. If everything is determined ahead of time, for instance, one may ask what purpose there was in the mission of the Prophet Muhammed, or in today's call for people to change their lives. Recognizing some of these intellectual difficulties,

the Prophet declared that "only a little knowledge was communicated to man" and it is our duty to submit to what is revealed, not to speculate about what was not revealed. And yet, inevitably, Muslim thinkers have speculated. It is suggested by various authorities, for instance, that there is something like a life spirit or soul (*nafs*) within each human being. This makes possible individuality—why it is that I am not someone else—and explains what we ordinarily call consciousness.

Death is commonly compared with going to sleep, and going to sleep is sometimes called "the little death." While people are sleeping, God takes away their souls. If it is not yet time for someone to die, God returns the soul when the person awakes. In this context, "Now I lay me down to sleep" takes on a very specific meaning, since God both "keeps" and "takes" my soul while I am sleeping. I have in a sense experienced dying as many times as I have experienced going to sleep. If it is really my time to die, the soul "rises into the throat" and thus escapes the body. Modern medical experts have remarked on the compatibility of Muslim teaching with current definitions of death, such as "brain death." For instance, brain stem lesions frequently create breathing disturbances that may easily be associated with something happening in the throat. Notably absent in Islamic thought, and in most medical concepts of death today, is any reference to the function of the heart in defining death.

When someone dies, the Angel of Death (*malak al-mawt*) comes and sits at the head of the deceased and tells the soul its destination. Wicked souls are told "to depart to the wrath of God," whereat they try to run away by seeking refuge in various parts of the body. Such souls must then be extracted "like the dragging of an iron skewer through moist wool, tearing the veins and sinews." This explains the frequently anguishing death throes to which many are subjected. After getting the soul out of the body, angels place it in a hair cloth and "the odor from it is like the stench of a rotting carcass." After a complete account of sins is made, the soul is returned to the body in the grave. Righteous souls, on the other hand, are told to depart to the mercy of God and they leave the body, "flowing as easily as a drop from a waterskin." Angels wrap such souls in a perfumed shroud and they are taken to "seventh heaven" for a time before being returned to their bodies.

A blue angel (Munkar) and a black angel (Nakir) then question the deceased about the basic teachings of Islam. Unbelievers who fail this test at the grave are tormented by terrible heat and smoke that are let into the grave from *jihannam* (hell), and the grave itself contracts painfully "so that their ribs are piled up upon one another." And so it continues until the final judgment when both believers and unbelievers are raised up and given physical bodies with which they can either enjoy or suffer what awaits them. The righteous enter the Garden of Delights, which are described in very palpable terms of sensual

pleasure, whereas unbelievers at the Day of Judgment are forced to bloat themselves with bitter fruit and "drink down upon it hot water, drinking as drinks the camel crazed with thirst." After that, they are sent off to hell where they put on "garments of fire" and have boiling water poured over their heads. This goes on endlessly, for annihilation is ruled out. Allah declares that "whenever their skins are cooked to a turn, We shall substitute new skins for them, that they may feel the punishment."

A very special and enviable fate is reserved for the martyrs of Islam who die in a *jihad*—a struggle for truth commonly called a "holy war." Anything they have done wrong in their lives is immediately expiated by their holy death and the formalities of judgment are dispensed with. They immediately enter the Garden of Delights. The Shiites, followers of the smaller of Islam's two major branches, have developed a special zeal for martyrdom, perhaps because the slaughter of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn, in 680 played a central part in the origins of the Shiite movement. Today, especially in the Middle East, some Islamic teachers complain that martyrdom has been cheapened by bestowing the title of martyr on almost anyone who died in a state of hostility to Islam's enemies, notably the State of Israel. It should be noted also that some Muslim thinkers, influenced by the mystic tradition of the Sufis, have treated the more graphic details in the teaching as metaphorical, and, against a rigid determinism, have emphasized more strongly the dimension of individual responsibility.

The Muslim view of death, as of life, is uncompromisingly earthy and concrete, allowing for no evasion of the reality of what is experienced as real. Angelic interventions and other impositions on reality notwithstanding, the facts of death and putrefaction are accorded great respect. Cremation of the body is unthinkable, and medical students can only study anatomy using cadavers of non-Muslims, who are already damned in any case. This extends to strong inhibitions about organ transplants. Liver transplants are prohibited because the Prophet's uncle, Hamzah, was murdered by a heathen who opened his belly and chewed up his liver. Kidney transplants are another matter, however. Since the Hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet) makes it clear that those entering the Garden of Delights will never have to urinate, the removal of the kidneys is thought to be no great loss.

6.

The understanding of death in Judaism necessarily engages Christian teaching as well, since the latter depends upon and emerges from the former. As St. Paul writes in Romans 12, Christians are like branches grafted on to the

root of Israel. He urges Christians to "remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you." But first we will treat the Jewish understanding of death, and then turn to the development of that understanding in Christianity. The first thing to be said about death in this context is that it is not natural. Death is the result of sin. This is made clear in the creation story of chapters two and three of Genesis. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"

Interpreters of this passage are by no means of one mind about its meaning. One view is that "the fall" in the garden was really, so to speak, a fall up rather than down. That is to say, Adam and Eve lived in the garden as little more than innocent animals until they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With that transgression, they lost immortality but gained the consciousness that we associate with being fully human. Alternatively, it said that before the transgression they lived in perfect communion with God and what God willed. The transgression consisted not in gaining a knowledge of good and evil but in presuming to know on their own and to decide on their own what is good and what is evil. The transgression was, as it were, a declaration of independence from God.

Similarly, there is disagreement about whether death should be understood as a punishment for sin or simply as a result of sin. In the latter case, the statement that "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" is simply a warning about the consequences of doing what is forbidden. In any event, death is not part of the natural created order that God declared to be good. With death came other consequences: exile from the garden, the pain of childbirth, and a life of onerous labor. Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise into death, but also into history. From here on in the Jewish tradition, there is an unbreakable connection between death and history.

In the Hebrew Bible that Christians call the Old Testament, Yhwh again and again rescues his people, but he always rescues them for history, not from history. There is nothing here comparable to the Platonic idea—an idea evident also in some strands of Christian thought—that the immortal soul will survive death. Yhwh's promise to Abraham, for instance, is not that he will be rewarded with immortality but that his tribe will be multiplied. "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted" (Genesis 13:16). In the Bible, the dead are mourned, and suffering Job can cry out that he hates life, but Yhwh's response is not to eliminate death. Rather, he again and again saves them from

their enemies so that their history will continue. Yhwh leads Israel out of bondage in Egypt to a promised land that renews history, not to a deathless kingdom of the Garden of Eden restored.

At least in the early periods of the Jewish tradition, there is no confidence that the soul will survive death. The Psalms and other parts of the Bible speak often of "Sheol," but it seems that Sheol is neither heaven nor hell but simply a shadowy realm where the dead dwell. It seems that nothing happens there. Sheol is not so much an after-life as an after-death. "For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?" (Psalm 6:5). Of the foolish it is said, "Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home." Then the Psalmist immediately adds, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." (Psalm 49:14–15)

The last sentence is one of many intimations of immortality in the Bible that later Judaism will develop further. In Jewish-Christian dialogue today it is commonly said that Christianity is concerned about the salvation of the soul whereas Judaism's concern is for the redemption of the world. In fact, the two concerns are not unrelated, and certainly not antithetical. Especially after the biblical period, Jews increasingly regard the soul as immortal, and the vindication of the righteous dead becomes an integral part of the world's redemption. This is notably evident in the Talmud, which includes the authoritative interpretations in the Mishnah (the oral teachings given Moses at the same time as the written law) and in the Gemara, which are commentaries on the Mishnah. While the Talmud did not receive its final form until the early centuries of the Christian era, it is clear that the teaching goes back to a much earlier era.

In the Book of Daniel, for example, we find a powerful passage envisioning the resurrection of the dead and a general judgment. "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end." (Daniel 12:1–4) This passage receives elaborate development in Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, with its details about the Book of Life and the seven seals that can be broken only by Christ, the Lamb who was slain.

As with Christianity, later Jewish thought reflects the influence of a Platonic belief in the immortality of the soul, but neither Christianity nor Juda-

ism loses its grounding in a hope for the redemption of history. As many scholars have noted, the way that Jesus and the first Christians, who were all Jews, spoke about the resurrection of the dead assumed that the idea of such a resurrection was already well planted in Jewish piety. The body matters, as is evident in Jewish funeral practices. The body is not just the "mortal coil" that remains after the soul has taken its flight. Among observant Jews, there are strong inhibitions against both embalming and autopsy, and we have already discussed other customs of mourning and prayer that bind together the living and dead in powerful solidarity. This reflects the solidarity of body and soul, which, with the whole of reality encompassing us all, awaits a final redemption.

The sense of cosmic redemption does not detract from the undeniable specificity of a particular death. What Christians call "the last rites" for the dying have their counterpart in Jewish custom. The form is given in the *Shulhan Arukh*, a sixteenth-century code of law followed by observant Jews to this day. Usually, although not necessarily, a rabbi presides at this preparation for a good death.

> When one is approaching death, it is to be said to him [or her]: "Many have confessed and not died and many who did not confess did die. May it be that for the merit of confessing you will live. And all who do confess have a portion in the world-to-come." If he is unable to confess with his mouth, let him do it in his heart. And if he does not know the full confession, let him only say: "May my death be atonement for all my sins." . . . The form of confession is as follows: "I acknowledge before Thee Lord my God and God of my fathers that my healing and my death are in Thy hands. May it be Thy will that I be completely healed, but if I die, then let my death be atonement for all sins of carelessness, those done for pleasure, and those done in rebellion that I have sinned, transgressed, and rebelled against Thee. May my portion be in the Garden of Eden, and may I merit the world-to-come that is in store for the righteous." And if he wishes to confess at greater length, he may do so. (*Shulhan Arukh: Yoreh De'ah*, 338.1–2)

The idea that death is something that we owe may be deeply entrenched in the human consciousness. Sheridan wrote, "Death's a debt; his mandamus binds all alike—no bail no demurrer." As Shakespeare would have it in *Henry IV*, "A man can die but once; we owe God a death." In the Christian understanding, Christ died that we might live. And yet we die. We began this discussion of Judaism and Christianity by saying that death is not natural; it is not part of the way things were originally supposed to be. And yet it is undeniably part of the only human nature we are given to live. The idea that death

is a debt to be paid by all the children of Adam and Eve, hints at some mysterious connection between death and redemption. The eternal pity is not untouched by purpose.

7.

A long time ago, when I was a young pastor in a very black and very poor inner-city parish that could not pay a salary, I worked part-time as chaplain at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. With more than three thousand beds, Kings County boasted then of being the largest medical center in the world. It seems primitive now, but thirty-five years ago not much of a fuss was made about those who were beyond reasonable hope of recovery. They were almost all poor people, and this was before Medicaid or Medicare, so it was, as we used to say, a charity hospital. They were sedated, and food was brought for those who could eat. The dying, male and female, had their beds lined up side by side in a huge ward, fifty to a hundred of them at any given time. On hot summer days and without air-conditioning, they would fitfully toss off sheets and undergarments. The scene of naked and half-naked bodies groaning and writhing was reminiscent of Dante's *Purgatorio.*

Hardly a twenty-four-hour stint would go by without my accompanying two or three or more people to their death. One such death is indelibly printed upon my memory. His name was Albert, a man of about seventy and (I don't know why it sticks in my mind) completely bald. That hot summer morning I had prayed with him and read the twenty-third Psalm. Toward evening, I went up again to the death ward—for so everybody called it—to see him again. Clearly the end was near. Although he had been given a sedative, he was entirely lucid. I put my left arm around his shoulder and together, face almost touching face, we prayed the Our Father. Then Albert's eyes opened wider, as though he had seen something in my expression. "Oh," he said, "Oh, don't be afraid." His body sagged back and he was dead. Stunned, I realized that, while I thought I was ministering to him, his last moment of life was expended in ministering to me.

There is another death that will not leave me. Charlie Williams was a deacon of St. John the Evangelist in Brooklyn. (We sometimes called the parish St. John the Mundane in order to distinguish it from St. John the Divine, the Episcopal cathedral up on Morningside Heights.) Charlie was an ever-ebullient and sustaining presence through tough times. In the face of every difficulty, he had no doubt but that "Jesus going to see us through." Then something went bad in his chest, and the doctors made medically erudite noises to cover their ignorance. I held his hand as he died a painful death at age forty-three. Through the blood that bubbled up from his hemorrhaging lungs he formed his last

word—very quietly, not complaining but deeply puzzled, he looked up at me and said, "Why?"

Between Albert's calm assurance and Charlie's puzzlement, who is to say which is the Christian way to die? I have been with others who screamed defiance, and some who screamed with pain, and many who just went to sleep. Typically today the patient is heavily sedated and plugged into sundry machines. One only knows that death has come when the beeping lines on the monitors go flat or the attending physician nods his head in acknowledgment of medicine's defeat. It used to be that we accompanied sisters and brothers to their final encounter. Now we mostly sit by and wait. The last moment that we are really with them, and they with us, is in many cases hours or even many days before they die. But medical technology notwithstanding, for each one of them, for each one of us, at some point "it" happens. The Christian tradition has a great deal to say about "it." That teaching informs the ways in which Christians think about death and the evidence suggests that, at least in many cases, it forms the way they die.

8.

What the Christian tradition has to say about death is both straightforward and modest. It is straightforward in that it asserts that *X* is to be said but *Y* is not to be said. It is modest in that it acknowledges that everything that we say is necessarily inadequate. We are dealing with things that we cannot understand fully since they are beyond our experience. What we know from experience and what we can reasonably infer from what we know is joined to what is revealed by God. But God's revelation must be accommodated to our human understanding or else we would not understand it. Our human understanding, in turn, is limited and finite. And so Christians say with St. Paul, "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Thus when it comes to death, as to so much else that transcends our understanding, we say it is a mystery. Some protest that saying something is a mystery is an evasion, even a cop-out. The response is that acknowledging both what we know and what we do not know is the course of unrelenting honesty. It is the alternative to the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil by which our first parents decided that they would determine what is true. The commonplace, indeed banal, expression of this primordial sin in our popular culture is that we decide what is true "for me."

In dealing with both the necessity and limitation of talking about things we cannot understand fully, Catholic Christians (but not only Catholics) typically speak of "analogy." An analogy is a comparison or similarity between

things that are both like and unlike one another. For instance, "A is to B as C is to D." Theology is language about God, and all our language about God is analogous. That is because we can only compare God, the Creator, with the created things that we know. Thus every similarity between God and creatures (God is good; human beings are good) is understood to indicate a greater dissimilarity (God's goodness is unlike human goodness in that it infinitely surpasses it). The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 put the matter succinctly: "No similarity can be found so great but that the dissimilarity is even greater." This may lead one to throw up one's hands in despair over ever saying anything for sure about a mystery. That would be the case were it not for the Christian confidence that experience can be trusted, reasoning on the basis of experience can be trusted, and, above all, revelation can be trusted. And all this is the case because God, who is Lord of all, can be trusted.

Analogical language, then, is more than just human speculation or groping after things that surpass our understanding. Christians believe that what their faith says about life and death—and about the One who is the source and end of all that is, ever was, and ever will be—is analogy that can be trusted and trusted absolutely. It can be trusted in the face of the mystery that is death. This brief discussion of analogy, of what we can know and what we cannot know, is simply to prepare the way for a short survey of what Christianity has to say about death. With Judaism—upon which Christianity is entirely dependent and without which it makes no sense at all—Christianity affirms that death is not "natural." It is not the way things were supposed to be in the beginning.

This is the way the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it: "Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness. They become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image—that of a God jealous of his prerogatives. The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject 'to its bondage to decay.' (Romans 8:21) Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will 'return to the ground' (Genesis 4:3–15), for out of it he was taken. *Death makes its entry into human history.*" (399, 400)

An awful lot is packed into that little paragraph. Note that the consequences of sin, including death, are precisely that: consequences, not punishments. Creating human beings with free will so that they could freely love him and one another—for love that is not free is not love at all—God "foretold"

what would happen if they turned away from him. And, sure enough, that is what happened. The question inevitably arises: What would the world be like if there had been no sin and, therefore, no death? A thousand intellectual difficulties immediately propose themselves if we try to think of a world in which people lived forever. Never one to be intimidated by insuperable difficulties, the great St. Augustine (354–430) addresses the pertinent questions with considerable verve in Book XIII of his *City of God*. I will not go into the details here, but it makes for fascinating reading.

Suffice it that, had there been no sin and death, Christians would not hope for heaven, for heaven would be here on earth. Heaven is, quite simply, living in perfect fellowship with God who is everything good and true and beautiful, far beyond our capacity to imagine. Because sin and death did happen, the Christian hope is for a heaven that is the original state of the Garden of Eden restored, and then more. And then quite a bit more, actually. For one thing, since we will carry our personal identities with us, we will presumably have the memory of everything that has happened since that unfortunate afternoon in the garden. Another distinct improvement over the original state is that in heaven we will presumably not be able to fall into sin all over again, thus restarting the same dismal story of death's dominion.

But if in heaven we will not be able to sin, does that mean we will not have free will? And if we do not have free will, how will we be able to love freely? In response to such questions, please see above on "analogical language." Frankly, we are in over our heads here. The Christian view invites us to believe that our eternal destiny is not only an improvement over the original situation in the Garden of Eden, it is an infinite improvement. So much better is the prospect that in our contemplation of it we might even feel gratitude that our first parents fell into sin. In the great liturgy of the Easter Vigil, Christians call their fall a "happy fault" or, in the Latin, *felix culpa*. "O, happy fault that gave us such a great Redeemer!" the liturgy exults.

The prospect of a love that is absolutely and eternally secure is, of course, very different from our experience with the loves of this world. But then, so too is the idea of living forever and so much else in the Christian concept of heaven. The hope is for something genuinely new and unprecedented in our experience. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth," says the book of Revelation. "God will dwell with them, and they shall be his people . . . and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21) All of this is quite candidly acknowledged to be beyond our comprehension. As St. Paul writes, echoing the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, "Eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, nor the heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Earlier we mentioned those who suggest that the original fall into sin was really a "fall up" because it brought with it human consciousness as we know it. It is said that the life of primitive innocence is, well, so much less *interesting* than the conflicted life of our actual experience. So also there are those who think that heaven must be a very dull place. Unless one is crazy about music, who wants to be singing around the throne or playing harps forever and ever? And while it is very attractive to think there will be no more tears or mourning or crying or pain, aren't those things the necessary antitheses to joy, birth, laughter, and pleasure? Isn't there a necessary connection between the negative and the positive? In the world as we know it, the answer would seem to be yes. But not, or so Christians believe, in the new heaven and new earth.

In that happy circumstance, St Paul writes, "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28), and one could only find that prospect dull if one thinks God is dull. In the Christian view that is unthinkable since, as the eleventh-century Anselm of Canterbury put it, "God is that than which nothing greater can be thought." God is always more. God is, so to speak, the nth degree of all that is true, good, and beautiful, and then more. It is this promise of perfect communion with the Absolute that transcends our present experience in which thesis is accompanied by antithesis, light by dark, joy by mourning, and life by death. The Christian understanding of death, then, is placed firmly within an understanding of all reality as centered in the life of God as reality's first cause and final end. In this context, St Paul, in the same passage, issues his defiant, almost taunting, challenge, "O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?"

For those sitting on the mourning bench of the eternal pity, however, that triumphant note will ring hollow if struck prematurely. We have already discussed the problem with upbeat funeral services that "celebrate life" in a way that short-circuits the *Dies Irae* of sin, loss, and judgment. A good many Christians, it must be admitted, have imbibed too well Platonic notions of an immortal soul floating off to paradise or even Buddhist ideas of the unreality of death, and therefore the unreality of life as well. The attitude seems to be, "Death? It's no big deal." But for those dying their own death and the death of those they love, death is a very big deal indeed. Don't tell them that it doesn't matter, that they'll get over it, that things will look brighter tomorrow. Death is, in the words of St Paul, "the last enemy." (1 Corinthians 15:26) The only consolation to be trusted is the consolation that is on the far side of the inconsolable.

Some Christian theologians, too, have followed philosophers who suggest that human life attains its fulfillment in death. But the mainstream of the Christian tradition has unthinkingly recognized that death does not fulfill life but terminates it. With the Jewish realism of the Old Testament, death is seen

as separation from God in the realm of Sheol where no praise sounds. Yet our separation from God is not God's separation from us, for the power of Yhwh extends also to the kingdom of the dead. "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!" (Psalm 139:7–8).

Where God is, there is life. We ask: Why is there death? We might better ask, Why is there life? The biblical view is that life is created by the divine spirit. If life comes from God, then death, which is separation from life, is separation from God. This is the essential connection between sin and death. Sin is turning away from God, who is the source of life, and therefore death inevitably follows.

This view would seem to be very different from, even incompatible with, modern biology's claim that life is a function of the living cell. But maybe not. The Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, wrote that the heart of being in sin is that "man is outside the divine center to which his own center essentially belongs." The sinner has become "the center of himself and of his world." This is the pride or hubris that makes us want to be our own god. St Augustine's term for such hubris is *amor sui*, the love of self. When we make ourselves the center of our own world, we become radically disconnected from the very center of our being, and the result is dis-integration. Sickness is a disintegration of the organism's centeredness; the organism goes off on its own. In a cancer, for instance, an organism may be strong and healthy and growing. The potentially fatal problem is that it is a disordered strength, a de-centered healthiness, and a growth that has no regard for the body of which it is part.

In a very important respect, cancer is not so much a sickness as a form of rambunctious healthiness that has broken away from its orientation toward the source and end of life. This is graphically described by Dr. Sherwin Nuland in his book, *How We Die:*

> Cancer, far from being a clandestine foe, is in fact berserk with the malicious exuberance of killing. The disease pursues a continuous, uninhibited, circumferential, barn-burning expedition of destructiveness, in which it heeds no rules, follows no commands, and explodes all resistance in a homicidal riot of devastation. Its cells behave like the members of a barbarian horde run amok—leaderless and undirected, but with a single-minded purpose: to plunder everything within reach. This is what medical scientists mean when they use the word *autonomy.* The form and rate of multiplication of the murderous cells violate every rule of decorum within the living animal whose vital currents nourish it only to be destroyed by this enlarging atrocity that has sprung newborn from its own protoplasm. In this sense, cancer is not a parasite. Galen was wrong to call it *praeter naturam*, "outside of nature." Its first cells are the bastard offspring of unsuspecting parents who

ultimately reject them because they are ugly, deformed, and unruly. In the community of living tissues, the uncontrolled mob of misfits that is cancer behaves like a gang of perpetually wilding adolescents. They are the juvenile delinquents of cellular society.

Sin is the declaration of *autonomy* from the source of life, and thus the consequence of sin is the opposite of life, which is death. Originally and persistently, sin is wanting to know and decide good and evil for ourselves, rather than depending on God's definition of good and evil. The "essence" of illness, writes the medical philosopher V. von Weiszacker, is "in a kind of estrangement from oneself." "The common factor in all illnesses is therefore to be found in a departure from the right order of life." With the entrance of sin, the world—both spiritual and physical—went wildly out of whack. This Christian concept takes very seriously both body and soul. There is, of course, a difference between physical and spiritual death. Augustine wrote that physical death is the separation of the soul from the body, while spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God. But the Christian concern is for both the spiritual and the physical.

Just as the hope is for a new heaven *and a new earth,* so the basic Christian creeds anticipate "the resurrection of the body." The final redemption must encompass the whole of creation, including the physical. The resurrection of the body is central in Canto Fourteen of Dante's *Paradiso:*

> When glorified and sanctified, the flesh
> is once again our dress, our persons shall
> in being all complete, please all the more;
> therefore, whatever light gratuitous
> the Highest Good gives us will be *enhanced*—
> the light that will allow us to see Him
> that light will cause our vision to increase.

The *visio Dei,* the vision of God, is the fulfillment toward which all human life is innerly directed. That vision will be more radiant, it will be "enhanced," when the soul is rejoined with the flesh "now covered by the earth." As coals burn with a more intense glow than an immaterial flame, so also our bodies will bring to perfection our vision of God. This concept is in sharp contrast to the Platonic idea that the soul reaches perfection after it is rid of the unworthy encumbrance of the body.

All kinds of questions immediately arise. Will we have in eternity the *same* body we had on earth? Will it bear the scars and ravages of its earthly sojourn? How old will the resurrected body be? Obviously, such questions occurred also

to St. Paul, who writes at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians: "With what kind of body do they come? What you sow is not the body that is to be but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body."

The term "spiritual body" may seem like an oxymoron. After all, we might think, the physical is physical and the spiritual is spiritual. But recall again the Old Testament understanding of the spirit of Yhwh as the source of life, and we can perhaps begin to understand the concept of the whole creation newly recharged with the spirit of the living God. Yet there is no doubt that, with St. Paul, we reach the limits of human language and comprehension in trying to envision the new heaven and new earth. The irrepressible conviction is that the body is part of the *self,* and without the body the self is not whole. "In my flesh I shall see God," the suffering Job cried out (19:26), and so the Christian tradition continues to echo that cry.

For Christians, of course, this confident cry turns most crucially upon the bodily resurrection of Jesus, who is, as the New Testament declares, "the first fruits" of the new creation. After the resurrection, his body was different. He seemed to pass through walls (John 20:26), and his disciples did not at first recognize the resurrected Jesus (Luke 24:16). The Christian claim is that we will be "like him," without presuming to explain precisely what that means. The hope is not contingent upon our understanding the precise shape of what we hope for. Paul again: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:13 f.)

Finally, analysis gives way to doxology and explanation dissolves into praise:

> Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:51 f.)

The completion for which we yearn would not be complete without our bodies. Again Dante: "One and the other choir seemed to me / so quick and keen to say 'Amen' that they / showed clearly how they longed for their dead

bodies." For the thirteenth-century German mystic, Mechthild of Magdenburg, the body is the way of knowing God. Though her body was the source of pain, she could not bear the thought of being separated from it. "The love of God lies on me. And when I think that my body will be lost in death and I shall no longer be able to suffer for Jesus or to praise him, this is so heavy to me that I long, if it were possible, to live until Judgment Day. My love forces me to this."

The modern notion of the psychosomatic unity of the human being—the unity of body, mind, and spirit—has deep roots in Judaism and Christianity. In her wonderful study, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity,* Caroline Bynum acknowledges the philosophical difficulties raised by the resurrection of the body, but she concludes: "For however absurd it seems—and some of the greatest theologians have grappled with that absurdity—it is a concept of sublime courage and optimism. It locates redemption where ultimate horror also resides in pain, mutilation, death, and decay. . . . It was the stench and fragmentation they saw lifted to glory in resurrection."

God is infinite, we human beings are finite. In our existence in time, finitude necessarily entails death. But, Christians believe, it will not be so in "the eternal present" of perfect communion with God. We will still be finite, but we will not die. What we call death is, for the believer, entrance into the fullness of the life of God that is lived by the resurrected Jesus—a life in which Christians participate already now. In this light, some noted Christian thinkers have actually called death a good thing. The contemporary historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, goes so far as to speak of "the gospel of death." Comparing the Christian understanding with the views of Eastern religions, he writes: "Although the idea of cycles promises immortality beyond the arc of this bounded existence, it actually holds out the prospect of an endless karma from which even the merciful forgetfulness of death is no escape. In antithesis to this, the Christian gospel of death announces to men the gracious message that they will die once and for all." One must keep in mind, however, that this apparent insouciance about death is always and entirely premised upon an event that is on the far side of death, namely, the resurrection of Jesus.

In discussing the second-century church father, Irenaeus, Pelikan writes:

> Having taken on flesh, Christ is obedient to the death of the cross. To live a genuine human life means to live a life that is formed by the shape of death. By going through death rather than around death, he transforms the shape of death into the shape of life. . . . This is what makes the coming of Christ literally a matter of life and death. His history must be as genuine a part of the human story as the history of Adam or the history of any other man. Irenaeus defends the genuineness

> of this history with all the passion and rhetoric he can summon against the heretics who transform the story of Christ into something less than history in their effort to transform it into something more than history. Only if his history is a real history can it save men who live and die in real history.

At the end of the twentieth century, as in the second century, there are many Christians (it is not polite to call them "heretics" today) who "transform the story of Christ into something less than history in their effort to transform it into something more than history." Both Judaism and Christianity are adamant in their insistence that what we experience as real is really real. As Caroline Bynum says, the only redemption worthy of our hope is a redemption located "where ultimate horror also resides—in pain, mutilation, death, and decay." The only answer that rings true is the answer that is on the far side of having plumbed the deepest depths of the eternal pity. And that is why what Christianity has to say about death and life is centered in a sign of dereliction, the God-Man hanging on a cross.

9.

The readings collected here are by believers and agnostics of various kinds. The selections are not all of the genre generally described as "edifying." Far from it. Some believers rail against death, and others confess no faith but entrust themselves to what must be. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych cannot die until he is forced to acknowledge that he has not really lived, and then "there was no fear because there was no death." C. S. Lewis, the noted Christian apologist, demands of himself an unflinching experience of death's robbery for which there is no compensation, while Jeffrey Ford provides the view that death is an unnecessary unpleasantness to be evaded by mercy killing. Peter De Vries throws his outrage at a crucified Christ who, we are left to infer, extends his arms to be hit again. Christian de Chergé's "Last Testament" testifies to a sighting of the face of God in the face of the terrorist who kills him, leaving us to wonder whether human beings are really capable of such love, and hoping that they are—hoping that we are.

For all of us, the time will come. That is the most banal and unsettling of observations. On January 8, 1997, the Supreme Court held oral argument on circuit court rulings supporting doctor-assisted suicide. Several justices were troubled by the claim that assisted killing could be limited to those who are near death. A lawyer in favor of the proposed measures explained that the difference is that for such people "the dying process has already begun." Justice Antonin Scalia responded, "I hate to tell you, but the dying process has already

begun for all of us." That is the case for the young who deny it and for the not-so-young who must work hard to deny it. The view is urged that we have to die and get out of the way in order to make room for those who come after us. Tennyson wrote, "Old men must die; or the world would grow moldy, would only breed the past again." We may know the wish is ignoble and yet wish that an exception might be made for ourselves. But for all the vaunted advances in medical technology, the mortality rate, as mentioned earlier, continues to be one hundred percent.

It has often been said that each death is unique, that each of us must die our own death. Enthusiasts such as Walt Whitman gild the inevitable. "Nothing can happen more beautiful than death," he wrote in *Leaves of Grass*. In *Song of Myself* he trumpets: "Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her, it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." Good for him. "Why fear death?" asked Charles Frohman as he went down with the sinking *Lusitania*. "Death is only a beautiful adventure." Fare thee well, Mr. Frohman. If each life is unique, and it is, then it would seem to follow that each death is unique. I will not dispute the logic of that. And there is no doubt an element of adventure in moving into the unknown. But in my own experience of dying, it struck me as so very commonplace, even trite, that this life should end this way. Perhaps I should explain.

10.

Several lawyers have told me that it would make a terrific malpractice suit. All I would have to do is make a deposition and then answer a few questions in court, if it ever came to trial, which it probably wouldn't since the insurance companies would be eager to settle. It would be, I was assured, a very big settlement. The statute of limitations has not run out as of this writing. But I will not sue, mainly because it would somehow sully my gratitude for being returned from the jaws of death. Gratitude is too precious and too fragile to keep company with what looks suspiciously like revenge.

The stomach pains and intestinal cramps had been coming on for almost a year. My regular physician, a Park Avenue doctor of excellent reputation, had told me long ago how pleased he was with the new techniques for colonoscopy. It meant, he said, that none of his patients need die of colon cancer. His partner, the specialist in these matters, did one colonoscopy and, some weeks later, another. After each mildly painful probing up through the intestines, he was glad to tell me that there was nothing there. Then, on Sunday afternoon, January 10, 1993, about five o'clock, after four days of intense discomfort in which there was yet another probe and yet another X-ray, I was at home suddenly

doubled over on the floor with nausea and pain. The sensation was of my stomach exploding.

A friend who was visiting phoned the doctor's office, but he was on vacation. The physician covering for him listened to the symptoms and prescribed a powerful laxative. (I said that this story would smack of the commonplace.) Much later, other doctors said that the prescription might, more than possibly, have been fatal. They said they never heard of several colonoscopies not detecting a tumor, and shook their heads over a physician who would prescribe a laxative after being apprised of symptoms indicating something much more serious was wrong.

The friend had the presence of mind to bundle me off—pushing, pulling, half-carrying me—to the nearest emergency room, which, fortunately, was only a block from the house. The place was crowded. I strongly recommend always having with you an aggressive friend or two when you go to a hospital and are really sick. A large and imperiously indifferent woman at the desk was not about to let anyone jump the line of waiting cases, relenting only when the friend gave signs that he was not averse to the use of physical violence. She then sat me down to answer a long list of questions about symptoms and medical insurance, which I tried to answer until I fell off the chair in a faint, at which point she surmised she had an emergency on her hands. The experience so far did not instill confidence in the care I was likely to receive.

Very soon, however, I was flat on my back on a gurney, surrounded by tubes, machines, and technicians exhibiting their practiced display of frenetic precision, just like on television. The hospital's chief surgeon, who happened to be on duty that night, ordered an X-ray that showed a large tumor in the colon and declared there was no time to lose. I was wheeled at great speed down the halls for an elevator to the operating room, only to discover the elevators were out of order. By then I had been sedated and was feeling no pain. In fact, I was somewhat giddy and recall trying to make a joke about the contrast between the high-tech medicine and the broken-down elevators. A guard showed up who said he knew how to get number six elevator working, and then I was looking up at the white water-stained ceiling of the operating room, and then there was someone putting a mask over my face and telling me to breathe deeply, and then there was "Now I lay me down to sleep . . . ," and then there was the next morning.

The operation took several hours and was an unspeakable mess. The tumor had expanded to rupture the intestine: blood, fecal matter, and guts all over the place. My stomach was sliced open from the rib case down to the pubic area, then another slice five inches to the left from the navel for a temporary colostomy. I've noticed that in such cases the doctors always seem to say that

the tumor was "as big as a grapefruit," but my surgeon insists the blackish gray glob was the size of "a big apple." After they had sewed me up, the hemorrhaging began, they knew not from where. Blood pressure collapsed and other vital signs began to fade. What to do? The surgeon advised my friend to call the immediate family and let them know I would likely not make it through the night. The doctors debated. To open me up all over again might kill me. On the other hand, if they didn't find and stop the hemorrhaging I was surely dead.

Of course they went in again. The source of the effusion of blood was the spleen, "nicked," as the surgeon said, in the ghastliness of the first surgery. Given the circumstances, I'm surprised that parts more vital were not nicked. The spleen removed and the blood flow stanched, they sewed me up again and waited to see if I would live. The particulars of that night, of course, I was told after the event. "It was an interesting case," one doctor opined in a friendly manner. "It was as though you had been hit twice by a Mack truck going sixty miles an hour. I didn't think you'd survive."

My first clear memory is of the next morning, I don't know what time. I am surrounded by doctors and technicians talking in a worried tone about why I am not coming to. I heard everything that was said and desperately wanted to respond, but I was locked into absolute immobility, incapable of moving an eyelash or twitching a toe. The sensation was that of being encased in marble; pink marble, I thought, such as is used for gravestones. The surgeon repeatedly urged me to move my thumb, but it was impossible. Then I heard, "The Cardinal is here." It was my bishop, John Cardinal O'Connor. He spoke directly into my right ear, repeatedly calling my name. Then, "Richard, wriggle your nose." It was a plea and a command, and I wanted to do it more urgently than anything I have ever wanted to do in my life. The trying, the sheer exercise of will to wriggle my nose, seemed to go on and on, and then I felt a twinge, no more than a fraction of a millimeter, and the Cardinal said, "He did it! He did it!" "I didn't see anything," said the surgeon. So I tried again, and I did it again, and everybody saw it, and the Cardinal and the doctors and the technicians all began to exclaim what a wonderful thing it was, as though one had risen from the dead.

The days in the intensive care unit were an experience familiar to anyone who has ever been there. I had never been there before, except to visit others, and that is nothing like being there. I was struck by my disposition of utter passivity. There was absolutely nothing I could do or wanted to do, except to lie there and let them do whatever they do in such a place. Indifferent to time, I neither knew nor cared whether it was night or day. I recall counting sixteen different tubes and other things plugged into my body before I stopped counting. From time to time, it seemed several times an hour but surely could not

have been, a strange young woman with a brown wool hat and heavy gold necklace would come by and whisper, "I want blood." She stuck in a needle and took blood, smiling mysteriously all the time. She could have said she wanted to cut off my right leg and I would probably have raised no objection. So busy was I with just being there, with one thought that was my one and every thought: "I almost died."

Astonishment and passivity were strangely mixed. I confess to having thought of myself as a person very much in charge. Friends, meaning, I am sure, no unkindness, had sometimes described me as a control freak. Now there was nothing to be done, nothing that I could do, except be there. Here comes a most curious part of the story, and readers may make of it what they will. In the readings gathered here, Carol Zaleski provides an insightful reflection on "near death" experiences. I had always been skeptical of such tales. I am much less so now. I am inclined to think of it as a "near life" experience, and it happened this way.

It was a couple of days after leaving intensive care, and it was night. I could hear patients in adjoining rooms moaning and mumbling and occasionally calling out; the surrounding medical machines were pumping and sucking and bleeping as usual. Then, all of a sudden, I was jerked into an utterly lucid state of awareness. I was sitting up in the bed staring intently into the darkness, although in fact I knew my body was lying flat. What I was staring at was a color like blue and purple, and vaguely in the form of hanging drapery. By the drapery were two "presences." I saw them and yet did not see them, and I cannot explain that. But they were there, and I knew that I was not tied to the bed. I was able and prepared to get up and go somewhere. And then the presences—one or both of them, I do not know—spoke. This I heard clearly. Not in an ordinary way, for I cannot remember anything about the voice. But the message was beyond mistaking: "Everything is ready now."

That was it. They waited for a while, maybe for a minute. Whether they were waiting for a response or just waiting to see whether I had received the message, I don't know. "Everything is ready now." It was not in the form of a command, nor was it an invitation to do anything. They were just letting me know. Then they were gone, and I was again flat on my back with my mind racing wildly. I had an iron resolve to determine right then and there what had happened. Had I been dreaming? In no way. I was then and was now as lucid and wide awake as I had ever been in my life.

Tell me that I was dreaming and you might as well tell me that I am dreaming that I wrote the sentence before this one. Testing my awareness, I pinched myself hard, and ran through the multiplication tables, and recalled the birth dates of my seven brothers and sisters, and my wits were vibrantly about me. The whole thing had lasted three or four minutes, maybe less. I re-

solved at that moment that I would never, never let anything dissuade me from the reality of what had happened. Knowing myself, I expected I would later be inclined to doubt it. It was an experience as real, as powerfully confirmed by the senses, as anything I have ever known. That was almost seven years ago. Since then I have not had a moment in which I was seriously tempted to think it did not happen. It happened—as surely, as simply, as undeniably as it happened that I tied my shoelaces this morning. I could as well deny the one as deny the other, and were I to deny either I would surely be mad.

"Everything is ready now." I would be thinking about that incessantly during the months of convalescence. My theological mind would immediately go to work on it. They were angels, of course. *Angelos* simply means "messenger." There were no white robes or wings or anything of that sort. As I said, I did not see them in any ordinary sense of the word. But there was a message; therefore there were messengers. Clearly, the message was that I could go somewhere with them. Not that I must go or should go, but simply that they were ready if I was. Go where? To God, or so it seemed. I understood that they were ready to get me ready to see God. It was obvious enough to me that I was not prepared, in my present physical and spiritual condition, for the beatific vision, for seeing God face to face. They were ready to get me ready. This comports with the doctrine of purgatory, that there is a process of purging and preparation to get us ready to meet God. I should say that their presence was entirely friendly. There was nothing sweet or cloying, and there was no urgency about it. It was as though they just wanted to let me know. The decision was mine as to when or whether I would take them up on the offer.

There is this about being really sick, you get an enormous amount of attention. I cannot say that I did not enjoy it. In the pain and the nausea and the boredom without end, there were times when I was content to lie back and enjoy the attention. It was a kind of compensation. Over these days there were hundreds of cards and letters and phone calls and, later, brief visits—the last by people who sometimes betrayed the hope of having a final word with what they took to be their dying friend. Some of those who checked in I had not seen in years. Nor have I seen them since, so busy are we with our several busynesses. Sickness is an enforced pause for the counting up of our friends, and being grateful.

In all the cards and letters assuring me of prayer, and almost all did offer such assurance, there were notable differences. Catholics say they are "storming the gates of heaven" on your behalf, and have arranged to have masses said. Evangelical Protestants are "lifting you up before the throne." Mainline Protestants, Jews, and the unaffiliated let it go with a simple "I am praying for you," or "You are in my prayers." One gets the impression that Catholics and evangelicals are more aggressive on the prayer front.

Then there were longer letters laying out the case for my getting better. A friend who is a constitutional scholar at an ivy league university wrote a virtual lawyer's brief summing up the reasons for dying and the reasons for living, and came down strongly on the side of my living. It was very odd, because after that there were a number of similar letters, all arguing that I should stay around for a while and assuming that I was undecided about that. I was undecided. This struck me as strange: At the time of crisis and in the months of recovery following, I was never once afraid. I don't claim it as a virtue; it was simply the fact. It had less to do with courage than with indifference. Maybe this is "holy indifference," what the spiritual manuals describe as "a quality in a person's love for God above all that excludes preferences for any person, object, or condition of life." Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, and Ignatius Loyola all write at length about such holy indifference. All I know is that I was surprisingly indifferent to whether I would live or die. It probably had less to do with holiness than with my knowing that there was nothing I could do about it one way or another.

On the other hand, there was the message: "Everything is ready now." As though the decision were mine, to stay or to go. A friend who had written with his son the story of his son's several years of waging a heroic battle against a horrific series of cancers sent me their book, inscribed with the admonition "to fight relentlessly for life." It was very kind, but I was not at all disposed to fight. More to the point were those letters calmly laying out the reasons why it would be better for others, if not for me, were I to live rather than to die. Over the slow weeks and slower months of recovery, I gradually came to agree. But still very tentatively.

When I was recuperating at home and could take phone calls, those calls became a staple of everyday existence. There were dozens of calls daily; closer friends called every day. Somebody was always on call waiting. I enjoyed it shamelessly. Although I was often too tired to talk, when I had the energy I related in detail, over and over again, every minuscule change in my condition. With a credible display of intense interest, people listened to the problems with colostomy bags and the latest wrinkle in controlling the nausea that came with chemotherapy. And always in my talking, I was on the edge of tears. I, who had seldom cried in my adult life, was regularly, and without embarrassment, blubbering. Not in sadness. Not at all. But in a kind of amazement that this had happened to me, and maybe I was going to die and maybe I was going to live, and it was all quite out of my control. That was it, I think: I was not in charge, and it was both strange and very good not to be in charge.

Tentatively, I say, I began to think that I might live. It was not a particularly joyful prospect. Everything was shrouded by the thought of death, that I had almost died, that I may still die, that everyone and everything is dying. As

much as I was grateful for all the calls and letters, I harbored a secret resentment. These friends who said they were thinking about me and praying for me all the time, I knew they also went shopping and visited their children and tended to their businesses, and there were long times when they were not thinking about me at all. More important, they were forgetting the primordial, overwhelming, indomitable fact: We are dying! Why weren't they as crushingly impressed by that fact as I was?

After a month or so, I could, with assistance, walk around the block. Shuffle is the more accurate term; irrationally fearing with every step that my stomach would rip open again. I have lived in New York almost forty years and have always been a fierce chauvinist about the place. When you're tired of London, you're tired of life, said the great Dr. Johnson. I had always thought that about New York, where there is more terror and tenderness per square foot than any place in the world. I embraced all the clichés about the place—the palpable vitality of its streets, the electricity in the air, and so forth and so on. Shuffling around the block and then, later, around several blocks, I was tired of it. Death was everywhere. The children at the playground at 19th Street and Second Avenue I saw as corpses covered with putrefying skin. The bright young model prancing up Park Avenue with her portfolio under her arm and dreaming of the success she is to be, doesn't she know she's going to die, that she's already dying? I wanted to cry out to everybody and everything, "Don't you know what's happening?" But I didn't. Let them be in their innocence and ignorance. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Surprising to me, and to others, I did what had to be done with my work. I read manuscripts, wrote my columns, made editorial decisions, but all listlessly. It didn't really matter. After some time, I could shuffle the few blocks to the church and say Mass. At the altar, I cried a lot, and hoped the people didn't notice. To think that I'm really here after all, I thought, at the altar, at the *axis mundi,* the center of life. And of death. I would be helped back to the house, and days beyond numbering I would simply lie on the sofa looking out at the back yard. That birch tree, which every winter looked as dead as dead could be, was budding again. Would I be here to see it in full leaf, to see its leaves fall in the autumn? Never mind. It doesn't matter.

When I was a young man a parishioner told me, "Do all your praying before you get really sick. When you're sick you can't really pray." She was right, at least in largest part. Being really sick—vomiting, and worrying about what will show up on the next blood test, and trying to ignore the pain at three o'clock in the morning—is a full-time job. At best, you want to recede into relatively painless passivity, and listen to your older sister reading Willa Cather, as my sister read to me. During those long nights, *My Antonia, Death*

Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, and at those times I could have wished it to go on and on. Not that it mattered, but it was ever so pleasant being ever so pampered.

People are different around the very sick, especially when they think they may be dying. In the hospital, bishops came to visit and knelt by my bedside, asking for a blessing. A Jewish doctor, professing himself an atheist, asked for my prayers with embarrassed urgency. His wife had cancer, he explained, "And you know about that now." Call it primitive instinct or spiritual insight, but there is an aura about the sick and dying. They have crossed a line into a precinct others do not know. It is the aura of redemptive suffering, of suffering "offered up" on behalf of others, because there is nothing else to be done with it and you have to do something with it. The point is obvious but it impressed me nonetheless: When you are really sick it is impossible to imagine what it is like to be really well; and when you are well it is almost impossible to remember what it was like to be really sick. They are different precincts.

I had lost nearly fifty pounds and was greatly weakened. There was still another major surgery to come, to reverse the colostomy. You don't want to know the messy details. It was not the most dangerous surgery, but it was the third Mack truck, and for a long time afterward I barely had strength to lift my hand. Then, step by almost imperceptible step, I was recovering and dared to hope that I would be well again, that I would stride down the street again, that I would take on new projects again. Very little things stand out like luminous signposts. The first time I was able to take a shower by myself. It was dying and rising again in baptismal flood. When I was sent home from the hospital and told that, if I did not urinate by five o'clock, I should come back to the emergency room and someone would put the catheter back in, my heart sank. It was quite irrational, but going back to the emergency room would have been like recapitulating the entire ordeal of these last several months. I could not endure the thought. When at four o'clock I peed a strong triumphant pee, my heart was lifted on high, and with tears of gratitude I began to sing with feeble voice a Te Deum. I thought, "I am going to get better." And I allowed myself, ever so tentatively, to be glad.

That was almost seven years ago. I feel very well now. They tell me I might be around for another twenty years or so. The doctors say, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, that five years marks complete recovery when you are restored to your age slot on the actuarial charts. The tests continue. Next Monday we get the latest report on the CEA (Carcinoembryonic Antigen), the blood indicator of cancerous activity, although my doctor says the test is not really necessary. I think I am well now. It took a long time after the surgeries, almost two years, before the day came when I suddenly realized that the controlling thought that

day had not been the thought of death. And now, in writing this little essay, it all comes back. I remember where I have been, and where I will be again, and where we will all be.

There is nothing that remarkable in my story, except that we are all unique in our living and dying. The stories, poems, and reflections in the following pages speak of the eternal pity in other and, I expect, more compelling ways. Early on in my illness a friend gave me John Donne's wondrous *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, and there is here an excerpt from that, including his well-known "No man is an island." The *Devotions* were written a year after Donne had almost died, and then lingered for months by death's door. He writes, "Though I may have seniors, others may be elder than I, yet I have proceeded apace in a good university, and gone a great way in a little time, by the furtherance of a vehement fever." So I too have been to a good university, and what I have learned, what I have learned most importantly, is that, in living and in dying, everything is ready now.