



Illustration by Harold Schuler, visually-impaired
86-year-old Colorado resident and amateur artist

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY¹

Steven A. Wartman MD, PhD, MACP

Dr. Wartman (AQA, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1970) is President Emeritus, Association of Academic Health Centers, Washington, DC. He is a member of the AQA Board of Directors, and the Editorial Board of *The Pharos*.

There is a personal war going on in self-imposed isolation: a war between angst and ennui. Each day marks a new constellation of COVID-19 prognostications, anxiety, and shades of despair. A close friend suggested I take a walk in the woods.

À la recherche du temps perdu²

The Boston suburb where we live has plenty of wooded paths. After consulting a trail map, I began my first foray, finding a somewhat obscure entranceway behind a large

water tower. A quarter of a mile down the path, the smell of the woods evoked a sudden remembrance, not unlike Proust's madeleine,² with an intense olfactory stimulus that instantaneously brought a long ago event vividly to mind.

It was the summer of 1957 at a boys and girls camp in the Poconos. The male pre-teen reptilian brains of newly arrived 12-year-olds were excitedly developing three major goals for the eight-week session:

1. Read as many comic books as possible;
2. Set off firecrackers; and
3. Conduct a late night raid on the girls camp.

It was the latter, of course, that really stirred the imagination. We spent weeks planning it. Which bunk to target? What would be the best time? What route to take, and



what to wear? These were easy to figure out. The harder problems were about methods to wake ourselves up in the middle of the night and how to exit and re-enter our bunk unobserved. Going out the front door seemed too risky for a number of reasons as the counselor slept near the door and there was some kind of night patrol out front. Someone noticed a loose plank in the rear of the cabin that could easily be converted to an ersatz trapdoor. Problem solved!

Now, how to wake up? Drinking several glasses of water before going to bed was readily rejected when the potential consequences were duly considered. An alarm clock would wake up the counselor and others who were not part of the raid. But my parents had given me a small rectangular wind-up clock inside a faux leather case that could be snapped shut. We experimented with this prescient apparatus and determined that by closing the case and placing it under my pillow the faint sound would be enough to wake me but not the others. Another problem solved!

We settled on a time—2:30 a.m.—and a midweek date so as to avoid the weekend when the counseling staff usually stayed out late. After checking the weather forecast and getting our clothes ready, I set the alarm and went to bed.

I awoke to a dull but persistent ringing in my ears. I'm not sure how long the alarm had been going off (I later

discovered that its winding mechanism was nearly spent). I managed to wake the three other conspirators. We dressed and exited the trapdoor onto the edge of a playing field and in five minutes we were in the woods.

The moon was bright and the ground soft with pine needles. Surprisingly there was an intense humming, a kind of vibrating sound—the woods were very much alive at this strange hour. But most noticeable to me was the smell: a pleasant, damp, slightly acrid odor that filled my nostrils—a deeply earthy aroma that I apparently never forgot.

We arrived at the designated bunk for girls our age—Poplar-Willows (girls' bunks were named after trees in that era, while boys' bunks were just numbered)—and quietly slipped inside. The air was fragrant with the warm smell of sleep. We quickly went about our business emptying cubbies full of clothes onto the floor and were amazed that no one woke up. We made it back to our bunk by 3:30 a.m. and fell asleep eagerly awaiting the fall-out the next morning when the entire camp met at the flag pole to raise the colors before proceeding to the dining hall.

At the flag pole that morning stood the head counselor, George, a rather militaristic sort whose *mien* suggested that of a defrocked marine. George's main mission that summer was to make himself look good to the cowboy hat-wearing

camp owner known to campers as “Bucky.” “Who committed this dastardly crime?” George shouted. “It will be far better if the guilty parties would step forth and admit it.”

This post hoc peroration calls to mind the warnings of the grade school teacher Miss Shields in the movie *A Christmas Story*.³ She asked those responsible for taunting and then abandoning a classmate whose tongue got stuck to a frozen pole in the school yard to identify themselves. And like Ralphie in the movie, we kids knew it was always better not to get caught, and we never were.

Suspended animation

Life in COVID-19 self-isolation might be compared to a form of suspended animation like the kind experienced by Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*.⁴ Each day is a tiresome repeat of the previous day, although there is the potential to learn and/or do something new. But this is where ennui and angst collide to make forward motion seem halting and progress uncertain.

The loss of the pace of time was vividly illustrated by the ancient mariner:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.⁵

A colleague pointed out to me that for those under the age of 50, the loss of one or two years can easily be made up on the back end. But for those over 70, time has a shortened horizon, like the unspooling of a roll of toilet paper that goes faster as the end approaches.

In my present state, “Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ Into the future.”⁶ As a result, each day brings worry: about myself, my loved ones, the country, the global community, racial equity, climate change, new social patterns, economic inequality, and ultimately thoughts of death.

As is abundantly clear from my 1957 remembrance, I was increasingly seeking solace in the past, finding “Strength in what remains behind...In the soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering.”¹ Is it too much to ask, “Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”¹

Devolving into the past is a pernicious form of denial. What is needed in this trying time is acceptance and letting go along with the courage to stand up and make time not the enemy but a knowledgeable companion. Of course, this is easier said than done. The woods can help as an explicit metaphor for the cycle of life: The birds and other animals scurrying for food and shelter;

the flora, exuberant in early spring and summer, gradually fading and dissolving to replenish the earth. Despite Hamlet’s warning:

To sleep, perchance to Dream; aye, there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There’s the respect
That makes Calamity of so long life,⁷

The approach of evening need not bring increasing anxiety. The night if not lit up by a thousand stars is beset by the whimperings of fate. Better to fall asleep imaging “falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling... upon all the living and the dead.”⁸

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The author’s E-mail address is swartman@aahcdc.org.