

## ***Coping***

Excerpt from the book “The Remainder of My Life; an Autobiography Written in Real Time” an AIDS memoir by Troy Carlyle

Yesterday a cold front blew through Tyler, TX. I was sitting on the back porch, watching the trees bending slightly against the gentle breeze, when one of these gusts brought with it a twenty-degree drop in temperature. And just like that, I remembered I have AIDS.

This happens from time to time. I’ll be daydreaming or making plans or watching a movie – my attention turned completely toward topics outside myself – then, carried on a frigid gust comes a gentle reminder, and I remember: “Oh yeah, I’m dying... Time is short... Don’t make too many plans....”

But growing old also comes at a cost. I just received a warm letter from my grandmother, whose disposition has always inspired me. “Have made friends here,” she wrote. “Would you believe some of the help are great grandchildren of my old friends – who are all gone.... I too think a lot of Phyllis, Dane and Bobby and all my brothers and sisters who are gone. Why am I still here? They all had so much to give. I feel so useless. Like you said, there must be a reason.... My motto is ‘keep smiling.’”

My grandmother turns 102 this year, and I think it’s largely due to her “keep smiling” credo. Still, I wonder what it would be like to outlive so much of one’s family and friends. She has lost children, has no surviving brothers, sisters or friends – no peers with which she can relate. She can no longer enjoy the camaraderie of laughter with an old friend over an “inside joke,” because there are no more inside jokes. She is an anachronism, a fine butter churn in an era when butter churns are no longer used – a lone

weathered tree on a vast grassy plane, which she alone can recall was once a forest of saplings.

Last night the sky was unusually clear, and when I looked up I couldn't help but smile at the sight of Orion. I'm not particularly superstitious, though I suppose we all have our superstitious quirks -- mine is the constellation "Orion." For as long as I can remember, Orion has provided my first view upon looking at the night sky. I can't explain why, but when I look upwards, Orion is always the center of my field of view. As a child, I allowed myself to imagine this ancient warrior was watching over me -- a superstitious viewpoint I hold even now. Aside from the tremendous odds against my always "knowing" where to look, I find an intriguing kind of comfort in the thought that the stars will always be there, even if I won't.

But that's not entirely true, is it? The stars of Orion are, after all, in motion. Every year, the constellation changes ever so slightly, and over millennia will someday not be recognizable. And one by one, these stars will someday burn out.... Someday, Orion too will die.

I suppose it would be unhealthy to invest too much energy into this type of melancholy. Still, I suppose it's only healthy to recall, from time to time, that there is no such thing as "permanent."

I love a good paradox. If you pay attention, you'll discover that life is full of them.

Paradoxical that I finally feel free of the more mundane obligations that have eaten up my life until now. I can finally pursue things that truly interest me, but the cost of that

freedom is suffering and death. In other words, isn't it odd that we don't really appreciate our lives until our lives are at an end?

But what an honor has been my life!... to exist!... to love!... How fortunate am I to have discovered so many things – incredible things – wondrous things, like Yellowstone and music and Mexican food and people who love me no matter what? And even pain... *especially* pain... I'm thankful for that, too, because it is the sole condition for proving I existed – I feel pain, therefore I am.

*I am*. Even knowing I will not always *be*, *I am* -- and that is enough. "When the child was a child," says the angel in Wim Wenders classic film *Wings of Desire*, "he laughed in playgrounds and cried when he skinned his knee." Without darkness, light would have no value or meaning. Without death, there would be no life. If I've been granted a seat in a game, who am I to complain when it is someone else's turn to play?

Coping.... The word suggests I'm dealing with a difficult issue, but today it doesn't seem hard to wrap my mind around it – I don't feel like I'm *coping*, which, I suppose, is an indicator that I'm coping pretty well (at least today, anyway). As a cadet at the Air Force Academy, my squadron commander once gave some advice that's held me in good stead. We had just won the "squadron of the year" award, an accomplishment marked by a formal banquet. "The secret to success," he said during his acceptance speech, "is making it look easy, even when its not."

It was a curious thing to say, but it got me thinking.

I was an average student at the Air Force Academy, graduating with a 2.5 grade point average placing me squarely in the middle of the curve. This mediocre performance was

the result of a wide range of grades, however: A's in English, B's in engineering and philosophy and C's in science. I only failed one class – statistics. I hated statistics because it was boring and impossibly difficult. To make matters worse, the failure put me on academic probation and meant I'd have to sit through the class a second time.

“Aarrgg,” I cried.

Retaking statistics was to prove to be an entirely different experience than *taking* it, however, as I endeavored to apply the lesson learned from my squadron commander: “The secret to success is making it *look* easy, even when its not.” As the instructor began each day, I simply told myself, “This is easy.”

And it was!

I found myself mesmerized by the rationale behind statistics, fascinated by the math. Each day after class, I'd rush back to my room to complete the homework. Statistics wasn't impossible, after all – it was, in fact *easy*! I had discovered, for my own personal use, the tenet that by making something *look* easy, it necessarily *becomes* easy. From failing statistics the previous semester, I succeeded the second go-round with a remarkable 100% average, earning the only A+ you will find on my transcript. This became one of the most powerful life-lessons I had ever stumbled across, and it literally changed my life.

In 1880 a French company of men began the daunting task of excavating earth for the purpose of building a canal across a 50-mile stretch of land in a country that was to become Panama. Soon, however, the workers began to die – a few at first, but then by the

thousands. The more men they sent in, the more died. Eventually, France gave up on the project, calling it an “impossible folly.”

In 1899 (the year my grandfather was born), the United States took on the same project, the result of which can be seen today. One hundred years later, the same locks provide passage through the thriving industrial miracle that shaves 1800 miles off a trip from Boston to San Francisco – all of which only serves to beg the question, “How did the United States succeed where France failed? How do you make possible the impossible?”

You simply make it look easy.

Before attempting any excavation, the United States sent in doctors, who discovered the malaria that killed so many French workers was borne on the many mosquitoes in the area. The mosquitoes thrived in the stagnant marshes and the cesspools of the cities and villages. So “step 1” became an all-out campaign against a species of insect. Marshes were drained, and Panama received the gift of indoor plumbing and a sewer system. The rest, as they say, is history. By making a daunting task look easy, it became easy, or at least easier.

The corollary to our tenet seems to involve fear. The French were stopped in their tracks not because of mosquitoes and malaria, but because of their fear of them. Their fear of failure itself bred the failure they found. This revelation is profoundly instructional, since it brings us to only one startling conclusion: that the task itself is not difficult – it is our fear of the task itself that makes life seem hard.

Time after time, I've discovered the feared task is not so fearsome, not so daunting. The "daunting" task is made impossible only when we fear it... never when we resolve to "make it look easy."

Of course, part of our collective "human experience" involves the nagging question of what tomorrow may bring. There is no way of knowing this information ahead of time. "The best laid plans of mice and men," the saying goes. I may gradually waste away and be gone in five, ten or twenty years, or, like my grandmother, live to a ripe old age of 102. My illness has changed my outlook a bit, that's all.

My fear of death, much like my childhood fear of broccoli, turns out to be based on the faulty premise that the experience might be unpleasant. "Hey," I announce, through ravenous bites, "pass the cheese. This isn't so bad, after all."

-- Troy Carlyle

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