

Our Incredible Shrinking Life & Influence: Staring into the Face of our own Mortality (Death & Dissolution)

By

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In Heaven, the ancient sages tell us, neither deeds nor their doers are lost to time and its cruel machinations. But here in this world, most of us will fade from memory – and then history, be that history a professional accomplishment or award or merely an entry in the Social Security rolls. A few will endure far longer; those extraordinarily accomplished few, both good and evil. And even they will be diminished across time in most cases, starting out as a book and then gradually, inexorably being whittled down to a chapter, then a paragraph, and then an ever shrinking footnote.

Of course, we persevere because, well, there really is no choice but to move on in some fashion. And we hope, too that maybe somehow we will defy the odds and hang on longer and have a bigger impact than our deeds and feats so far suggest; that somehow we will have a more profound influence tomorrow than we did today. That maybe our existential misery and angst masks a genuinely “Wonderful Life” and, like George Bailey, some flesh and blood or other worldly version of Clarence Oddbody will pop into our lives and reveal how influential and thus important we truly have been... and are. Such are the fairy tales we carry into adulthood; the delusions and illusions we nurture because they keep us believing the improbable. And why not? These give us comfort, instill hope and make it possible to cope with a reality which spits in our face and mockingly dangles our insignificance before us; a reality that reminds us that with each passing day we are drawing ever closer to that day all hope of turning the tide will slip forever from our grasp, chased from this world by our last mortal breath.

Why do we rail so against insignificance and dissolution? Should we not embrace these, as opposed to denying them? Is denying them tantamount to saying we are both vital to the universe, maybe even its crowning achievement and centerpiece? But can we embrace the cold hard reality of our mortality and insignificance without sinking into a species of despair deeper and darker than any grave? Can we use such a conscious realization to some good end? But who, you ask, but the clinically depressed would want to embrace them until they have to, which for most of us is likely on our deathbed? Is not denial or disassociation in this instance good for us? Would not an open embrace of our mortal puniness lend us to pessimism and even cynicism? Is not optimistic hope healthful and its polar opposite detrimental to our best interests – body, mind and soul? Does not our survival instinct argue that we must press on –

the future being a hoped for gap of sorts that runs ahead of us which we gladly fill in with "...I will do or be better....more dutiful, good, and thus significant....tomorrow"?!

It seems so natural to resist and even oppose that which casts us in a poor light or threatens our person, as this can diminish or even extinguish our existence...our unique physical presence in this world and in the social scheme of things. Did not Dylan Thomas wisely implore us to "Rage against the dying of the light"?

And here in America, endowed as we are by our Constitution with the unalienable right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", and fueled by unbridled competitiveness from boardroom to bedroom, we seem especially unwilling to do or say or even think that somehow, someday, someday...we will beat the odds and buy or bargain or scientifically negotiate our way around or beyond our own mortality and petty ego (And it is an ego that will not let death have the final word even – as tombstones and obituaries bear ample witness to).

But consider this hard, cold fact: Even for the few of us whose names will endure for as long as there are men and women to "tell the tale"both here on Earth and on any worlds we visit and eventually colonize...the physical Cosmos will one day wind down and die. Some envision our kind making an exodus into other universes or dimensions, ...buying time and perpetuating ourselves over and over again as one universe dies and we escape to another....which is at present only informed speculation and wishful thinking. But should this actually prove to be the case, you can count on the "immortals" of history shrinking in significance as new names crowd out the old.

In light of this, what are we -- stubborn, stupid or just plain foolish? Perhaps we are none of these. Maybe we are just inveterate gamblers, like cigarette smokers who plainly see that the odds of escaping disease or impairment are stacked against them, but who blithely smoke on, smug in their conviction that they will somehow win the biological lottery.

In the final analysis, what is wrong with us? Why can't we embrace reality and (Ahem) live with its message and implications? Are we incapable of doing so without sinking into a morass of hopelessness, from which the route of escape is drugs, booze, sex, superstition or pseudoscience – singly or in some combination? Why is our mortality and ultimate insignificance so terrifying? Will having everything we are and have achieved wiped out when our world dies – when the universe dies (if we manage to colonize far flung worlds) -- mean that the whole cosmic play (as it were) is a colossal, meaningless, unmourned tragedy?

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So why am I parading human mortality and our ever increasing insignificance with the passage of time before you? Surely only a curmudgeon or pathologically morbid soul would plunk himself and his readership down all in front of a mirror whose backdrop is, well.... basically a desert or cemetery!

It's enough to make you, well.....run into the arms of your own...or someone else's....faith tradition! But even we who believe in the Almighty have to wrestle with the issues of our mortality and insignificance – plus the added possibility that the tally of our words and deeds may leave us considerably diminished in stature compared to what we believe to be the case. Heaven must surely have a hierarchy of sorts, its own pecking order based on individual merit; which is to say, status as reward for acts of faith, charity, love, sacrifice and such while a man or woman was alive. And as such, there surely will be a class of post-mortem dwellers in God's realm who will be, well...less significant...less notable and respected and regarded... then most others (Insignificant, in short).

Well, with all due respect to Milton, better to be insignificant in Heaven than significant in Hell, yes?! But even so, eternally existent but insignificant is an odd form of comfort for believers on this side of the veil.

So we theists, it would seem, must wrestle with pretty much the same mortal issues as the agnostic or atheist, only they are not concerned about what lies beyond the grave...while we are. In terms of this life, it would seem the nonbeliever has a lighter load of baggage than the believer. Faith, it would seem, has its limitations and perchance cannot move every mountain – on this or the other side of life.

So where do we look for comfort or reassurance, if there is any to be had? Can we surmount or banish the specter of our own demise, and the fact the ripples we made on the human pond will likely diminish over time and then be lost for good? How do we get over the death of our oft trumpeted (but frankly overstated) individual and collective human uniqueness – as well as the distant demise awaiting our evolutionary womb (The Cosmos that birthed everything including us)?

The answer, as such, has always been there -- plainly staring back at us.



There are many things the ancient philosophers and prophets got right, and much they got terribly wrong. In the Bible – the Hebrew Scriptures, that is – the Earth is depicted as a cube

floating in water with a dome placed over it bearing holes through which the light of Heaven reaches people at night (Starlight). A global flood is suppose to have occurred ages ago, although there is no geologic evidence of it whatsoever and, had such a flood taken place in the timeframe and manner depicted, the thermal energy generated would have turned the entire body of water into a boiling cauldron that would have eradicated life both in and floating on it.

The litany of mistakes, contradictions and mythic elements in the Biblical scriptures is staggering and well documented. While fundamentalists do mental handsprings to reconcile that which cannot be reasonably reconciled, most believers realize that their Bible is not and never was meant to be a history or science book. It is primarily a means of communicating values and a code of conduct that in some respects is simply an endorsement of moral behavior and propensities longstanding in our species; a sense of what is right and wrong – the Torah within, if you will – that evolved in our primate ancestors, conferred survival advantages, and thus was preserved and elaborated in the hominid lines that lead to our branch of the primate evolutionary bush.

But these ancient texts also contain stories --- myths in the sense of [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#) -- that reveal profound insights into human nature. This isn't too surprising, given that these peoples had to grapple with the same life and death issues that resonate throughout human existence. But what is surprising, is that some of the insights contained in their myths and stories were not seized on and fully developed as the text was being hobbled together. Later, yes, others came along and extracted the more poignant insights and messages woven into the ancient text, spinning interpretations that have waxed and waned in popularity down through history. Some both saw and wrote about what I will shortly share, but it never quite seemed to reach the status of widespread consensus among believers (Among Jewish Rabbis and informed congregants, yes, but less so rank-and-file Christians and such) . But like a book or letter or set of keys sitting plainly in front of our faces which simply does not register, that which is "obvious" can readily be missed.

The odd thing is that the insight we seek is contained in the very first book of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is as though the keys we are looking for, have been hanging in the lock of the main door of our house all along.



The old saying "begin at beginning" is an apt one when it comes to ancient Biblical insight into the origins of our all too human propensity to seek to elevate and perpetuate ourselves. The mythic story of Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden tells the tale:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which HaShem G-d had made. And he said unto the woman: 'Yea, hath G-d said: Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'

2 And the woman said unto the serpent: 'Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat;

3 but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, G-d hath said: Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.'

4 And the serpent said unto the woman: 'Ye shall not surely die;

5 for G-d doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as G-d, knowing good and evil.'

6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.

Source for quote: [Bereshit - Genesis 3 - Hebrew Scriptures](#)

Many Christian theologians looked at this morality tale and pegged it as an act of both capitulation to temptation and an act of rebellion against the Almighty; an evil that stained humankind with an “original sin” that has undermined human nature ever since and from which men require redemption or salvation. This is not how the learned descendents of the men who wrote the Hebrew Scriptures including Genesis see it. And it is in their take on the Genesis story and the nature of humankind that points us to a proper perspective.

The Jewish Talmud is essentially a collection of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish ethics, laws (instruction/revelation), customs, and history. It has two components: the [Mishnah](#), the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the [Gemara](#), a discussion of the Mishnah and related [Tannaitic](#) writings that often ventures onto other subjects and expounds broadly on the Hebrew Scriptures (The [Tanakh](#)). The terms *Talmud* and *Gemara* are often used interchangeably. (Adopted from the Wikipedia entry for the [Talmud](#))

In-a-word, the Talmud articulates a cogent view of our basic nature and relationship to God:

In Genesis 2:7, the Hebrew Scriptures Bible state that the Almighty formed (vayyitzer) humankind. The spelling of this word in Hebrew is unusual insofar as it uses two consecutive Yods instead of the one that is expected. Learned Rabbis and ages have inferred that these Yods stand for the word "yetzer," which translates to “impulse,” with the existence of two Yods here indicating that humanity was formed with two impulses: A good impulse (the yetzer tov) and an “evil” impulse (the yetzer ra).

The yetzer tov is considered the moral conscience, the inner voice that reminds us what's right (internalized and native values) when confronted with something that is that is unlawful (forbidden).

The yetzer ra is difficult to nail down, because there are diverse ideas concerning its nature. It is not a desire to do evil in the way we think of it in the West, but instead is widely considered to be our selfish nature, the desire to satisfy personal needs with little or no regard for the moral consequences of fulfilling those desires.

The yetzer ra is not a bad thing, as the Talmud notes that without it people would not build homes, marry, have children or even carry out business affairs. But the yetzer ra can lead to wrongdoing when it is not controlled or offset/counterbalanced by the yetzer tov. For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with being hungry, but it can lead some folks to shoplift food or just grab morsels and eat as they are shopping in a grocery or convenience store. There is nothing inherently wrong with our libido or sexual desire, but if it leads a person to commit rape, adultery, incest or such then the yetzer ra has won out.

The yetzer ra is generally viewed as internal to a person, as opposed to being an external force acting on a person. The "the devil made me do it" thesis is not in line with the majority of thought in Judaism. Although some say that Satan (Adversary to what is lawful) and the yetzer ra are one and the same, most rabbis view Satan as merely a personification of our own selfish desires, rather an external force or being that acts on us from without.

Of course, people have the ability to choose which impulse to follow: The yetzer tov or the yetzer ra. That is the essence of the Jewish understanding of free will. The Talmud notes that all people are descended from Adam (i.e., a mythic representation of early humans that evolved in Africa), so no one can blame his own wicked conduct on his ancestry. To the contrary, we all have the ability to make choices (unless profoundly impaired mentally-psychologically), and we will all be accountable for the choices we make.

The foregoing six paragraphs are adapted from [Judaism 101: Human Nature](#)

And now, with your indulgence (O' Reader), I will expand on this:

Now, as indicated above the evil impulse is actually a good thing, so long as it doesn't get out of hand. In a way, the evil impulse is our survival instinct; the ancient wiring that helps us avoid a premature death due to starvation, predation, attack or such, while concomitantly compelling us to perpetuate ourselves (Both biologically and in terms of the words and deeds we leave behind).

In Eastern religious – and we must realize that Judaism came out of a Near East milieu and thus shares some features in common with religious traditions that arose and spread throughout the ancient world – evil is not always considered the polar opposite of good. It is part of what makes the whole function properly. If you’ve seen the yin-yang symbol, then you have an inkling of this holistic dance as-it-were.

Evil then only becomes a problem when it overshadows the good impulse (yetzer tov) or throws things out of balance. And what happens when the yetzer ra (“evil”) eclipses the yetzer tov (“good”)? Self takes center stage and begins trying to direct all the other players. This spirit of selfishness makes us....*flee our mortality and resist insignificance.*

Keep in mind that selfishness does not make on evil, but does so when it takes us far beyond preservation or survival into the domination, usurpation, marginalization, suppression or even extirpation of anything (thoughts included) or anyone that we perceive as a threat to our inflated Self.

In the natural order of things our survival instinct (yetzer ra) links up with self-awareness and language and thought -- which gives rise to ego and individuation – and is expressed as the desire for perpetuation beyond merely surmounting immediate physical threats. Once these physical threats are tamed and basic needs are met, selfishness tends to expand its domain and influence. When this happens, inequalities emerge or are accented and power struggles ensue – cognitive dissonance within (Selfishness colors other aspects of self), family struggles and community ones without. Even the altruistic impulse which the ancients would identify with the yetzer tov aspect of our humanity can wind up recruited or subverted by an ever growing inner selfishness/egocentrism. When this happens our sense of charity can be taken hostage; we can find ourselves feeling charitable only to those identified with self or who help maintain, promote, preserve or expand self (in-group). Resistance to this by family, friends and community members can ignite a fierce competitiveness and will to control that limits or redefine altruism and charitable acts, stifle some forms of love, and places narrow concerns over global ones. In its more extreme form, malignant narcissism emerges which compels some to seek positions of power. Those who attain absolute power are almost swallowed up by the yetzer ra. We see in them – the Hitlers and Stalins of history – the flight from mortality (manifest as immortality through deeds, however vain and wicked) and unbridled quest to vanquish insignificance (manifest as feats & monuments meant to demonstrate perpetual significance. In some respects, this strategy works – the evil become immortal in history and perpetually significant (influential) – but equally hated and despised (A poor trade-off in the hearts and minds of sane and reasonable peoples).

Psychology and not just the historic record also bears witness to what happens when one feeds the bulldog – which is to say, lets the yetzer ra dominate. Studies have shown that when a child is spoiled and his self-esteem is fed *ad libitum*, you'll wind up with a spoiled brat, a criminal, a narcissist or worse.

So we have fingered that aspect of ourselves that makes it almost impossible for us to embrace our mortality and accept death and dissolution. So how do we get and keep yetzer ra & yetzer tov in balance such that fear of death& dissolution does not get the upper hand? Here are few approaches I'd like you to consider:

- The Buddhists strive for Nirvana which the Wikipedia entry describes as “the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflictive states ([*kilesa*](#)). The subject is at peace with the world, has compassion for all and gives up obsessions and fixations.” While probably a difficult road for many Westerners, there is much in Buddhism one can “dose adapt” to achieve a healthier frame-of-mind and outlook, i.e., as in living in the moment (“Timelessness”) and putting your ego in the back as opposed to the front seat as you go about your daily affairs. Click to access [an introduction to Buddhism](#)
- Give yourself over to helping others less fortunate than you are. This is good for those you help and good for you in terms of shifting your focus from self to others and also letting your yetzer tov take the lead. You not only feel better about yourself, but for believers there is the prospect of post mortem recognition and acknowledgement (rewards) by the Almighty.
- There is a popular adage among many religionists which goes, “Let go and let God.” In real world terms, it means to do all you can about a given situation then release it to God’s keeping and have faith He will handle things in your best interest (albeit your best interests may involve pain, loss or such). Some might call this kind of surrender defeatist or fatalistic and it is in some extreme forms. However, when done with a heart that trusts, this release is adaptive and thus healthy.
- Stop seeing insignificance and dissolution as a negative. This seems to run contrary to our survival instinct and by no means I endorse embracing death or wishing for it, but rather putting it in perspective as a built-in feature of the natural order that paves the way for others (those who survive us) to hopefully experience at least some of the joys and growth-conductive experiences and challenges we have.

There are many others, but I'll leave it to you to explore and ascertain what's "out there" and what works best for you. The main thing is that you recognize that while self-preservation and resistance to death is natural (A primal drive - [3 Primal Drives](#)) – the yetzer ra – it is important to engage in practices and thought patterns that bolster the yatzer tov.

Mazel Tov ("Good fortune") and I'chaim ("To life")

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