

As the Dying Ripples Fade

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Hello; I'm Reuben Thomas. It's the fourteenth of January twenty sixty, and I was eighty-six and one-sixth yesterday, if you'll forgive my pedantry, or even if you won't, for that matter. Facts are facts.

Despite the increasing sophistication and efficacy of geriatric care (from neither of which, I'm glad to say, I suffer), I presume that I'm reaching the end of my life, and I want to record some thoughts on things that have interested me over the years. I don't suppose I'll say anything original or interesting in itself, but I hope this recording will make a sort of colophon to my personal archive, to which it will be added and cross-referenced, a last peak in the dying ripples of my life's minute wave function, fading in the vast continuum of space-time.

But why am I making this recording on such a bizarre medium? (An analogue magnetic tape cassette for goodness' sake!) Although it's appropriate in many ways, the answer is, as so often, simple serendipity. I was clearing out the store-room this morning, and came across my old Aiwa cassette recorder, which I bought with money Mum and Dad gave me for Christmas in nineteen eighty-one. My first consumer durable, and how durable! It has endured a long journey from that December to this January. Then I was small, cocooned in my family; now even the family I raised is scattered, and I face alone the window where the raindrops thud. Some say rain hisses, but they're only hearing the overall effect; listen to the individual raindrops, and you hear them thud. The rain's not a dreary background to me, but a vital part of the landscape's complexion. Perhaps it's in self-defence, but over the years I've come to find beauty where others see only tedium. How can one live happily without beautiful surroundings? And which is worse: to live miserably among plainness or to seek its graces? Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but in his mind, which can be changed. Flee ugliness, or alter it; but it's a worse sin to put up with the plain than to appreciate it.

I am lucky to live among such sombre, austere beauty, here on the North York Moors. My house is built underground, under a stand of ash planted on the site of a farmhouse. My wife, who died two years ago, planted the trees in memory of our still-born son, Asher. Now they serve as a memorial to them both. I need memorials, souvenirs, mementoes; they inhabit the past for me, so I can live in the present, not lost in time as so many old people are, overcome by their years.

A lot of rubbish has been written about old age, perhaps because until recently the link between living a long time and ageing was so tight that it was hard to differentiate their effects. Even now, it's difficult to tell what is caused by the natural decay of the brain, and what merely by having lived a long time. I think that longevity rather than senility is the reason that the old often seem uncoupled from the present. It's like the sense of detachment felt by people who, when their world is deranged or destroyed, respond to the psychical rather than the physical implications of the change, trying to understand rather than adapt and survive, like J. G. Ballard's sun-seekers in *The Drowned World*, who abandon civilisation for almost certain death, drawn to come to terms with the strange dreams evoked by

the nascent primæval forests and the overpowering sun. The mental landscape of the long-lived is larger than their physical landscape, and assumes a corresponding importance.

On the other hand, the very young sometimes experience the keen anguish of mortality: when I was four, I attended what we used to call a nursery school, and one day played a game of make-believe with two girls: they were fairies, about to fly to a great gathering of their kind, and I was an old seagull, too old to make the journey. Twice I broke down and cried, and I couldn't understand why; nor could the teacher who comforted me. Later I guessed that perhaps I glimpsed a hint of mortality.

It's in middle age that one tends to worry most about death. The young think they're immortal, the old accept that they're not; the middle-aged, who've lost their illusions of immortality, but aren't yet reconciled to the fact of death, are most vulnerable to despair. This condition is too intense to last; it ends in acceptance, often through a religious belief in resurrection or reincarnation, or, if despair becomes unbearable, in suicide. Martin Gardner, who was a philosopher as well as a mathematician, thought that, aside from the need to believe in a deity, the desire for immortality is the most compelling reason to become religious. Personally I do not want immortality. Eternity is too long to live, and with such a different outlook one would cease to be human. I would rather live indefinitely long, never knowing when I might die, and all the more alive for my ignorance.

The biggest problem of immortality, without an eternal, all-consuming occupation such as the ceaseless worship of the Christian heaven, is what to do. This is exemplified by the bored playchilids of today who have fulfilled every dream, sated every desire and die early in a crescendo of increasingly dangerous pursuits brought on by sheer tedium. I cannot understand them. I am a mass of regrets: that I didn't learn ancient Greek at school; that I never became a professional singer; that I have studied so little geography, and no psychology; that I am a poor linguist; that my command of even my native tongue is so dim. All my life I've been conscious of how little time I've had even for the pursuits I have followed. But if I were immortal, then even the vastness of all the knowledge to be learned and skills to be master would shrink into insignificance: I would sink into lassitude, struck into inactivity by the very time available for my pursuits.

And what of the other impulse to take up religion: the need for a deity? I spent twenty years from the age of eight in religious institutions, singing, and have been a regular churchgoer ever since for the same reason. I have great respect for many religious people and for much of the moral teaching of the great religions, especially that of the Christian church. At its best Christianity espouses all the best and rarest virtues which sadly are lacking just as much today as they were fifty or two thousand years ago. (Contrary to the theories and beliefs of many, humanity neither declines or improves in morality with the passage of time.) But I've never been tempted to become religious. First, I do not see the need: religions seek to give definite and definitive answers to the unanswerable questions of philosophy, which seems to me presumptuous, and to give the universe a purpose, which is hubris: why should there be one? it owes us nothing! Secondly, I am a rationalist, and to accept any religion I would need to abandon my rationality, which is irrational. Thirdly, to be a wholehearted convert, I would have to accept values and dogmas I don't agree with.

I am a humanist, by which I mean that I believe people are individually and collectively responsible for themselves, and that they should, and to some degree can hope to, solve their own problems, without supernatural aid, which may or may not exist. But humanism's greatest virtue, its emphasis on self-responsibility, is also its greatest weakness: without a deity, without positing external powers, it relies on prosaic reason and common sense, and has few icons through which to appeal

to the hearts of potential converts. Humanism's struggle against religious bigotry is reminiscent of the ideological clash of the Nazi party with western democracy in the Second World War. Half-way through the war, the British government started to instruct soldiers in the British Way and Purpose, an attempt to codify the reasons for fighting the war, and the ideals being defended. This was done to try to combat a feeling among the British troops that they didn't really know what they were fighting for, whereas the Germans clearly did. Humanism, with its piecemeal, gentle and inherently disunited approach, has the same problem: it cannot be reduced to any one statement of its aims and ideals. But as someone once remarked, any philosophy which can be put in a nutshell should stay there.

To me the most pernicious aspect of religions is the importance they grant to eschatology. Even humanism suffers from a mild form of eschatology in the notion of progress. I have no quarrel with the idea of progress in science, or progress at a personal level; indeed, humanity itself is, I hope, progressing, finding new and better ways of and reasons for living. But for the race, the idea of moral improvement is a dangerous hope on which to base our plans. As in the arts, fashion in morality is cyclical, and the basic vices perpetuate themselves from one generation to the next. We should plan for a better future, but not for a future in which humanity is better; our task is the much more difficult one of planning a better future for a recidivous humanity.

I think many people would dismiss my criticism of the notion of progress on emotional grounds: if there is no progress, then why plan? all our plans will come to naught. Yet this is exactly the sort of conflict we deal with cheerfully every day: the trams in York are as unreliable as they were forty years ago, and yet people still see the prospect of improvements next year; food farm prices have risen at twice the rate of inflation for ten years, and yet people still explain to each other that of course, costs are rising, and must be covered.

Why is it that we can deal with contradiction in our daily lives, but not in our self-study? Which philosophical system has no fundamental flaw? Which sociologist has reconciled the contradictory demands of individuals and society? Which economist has invented a fair and efficient economic system? Again and again great thinkers point to the contradictions inherent in the least idea, but philosophers are remembered for their grand theories, not their admissions of failure, or their demonstrations of others' errors. Philosophy cannot achieve its goals; but it is one of humanity's most essential activities, because it teaches us the message of Ithaca: there are no answers, there is only searching; but what a great adventure that is!

To remember that contradiction is ubiquitous and inescapable, that we must always compromise, is to join the great actors of history, who, however great their gifts, however exalted their theories, always applied them to what existed, taking "men as they are", to quote Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this is the beginning of sanity.

Any answers we find must be felt rather than understood. Though I can see no purpose for it, I do not feel my life has been pointless: its meaning has been coloured by my love, of people, place, work and play; and by the love of those who have loved me. What I leave to the world will only have value while love informs it.

I hope I haven't bored you. You may think I've overindulged myself in idiosyncrasy, but as my mother often said, "it's not what you say, it's the way that you say it," and communication is so difficult. I have often been accused of pedantry in my communication, and undue criticism of others', but it is my bitter experience that too often people think they are communicating when they are merely hearing their own caricatures of one another. So perhaps I have communicated no substance to you, and all that's left is my manner. If that is all I can leave, so be it.

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