



Boston Catholic Journal

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ANCIENT REALITIES AND YOUTHFUL ILLUSIONS

...and, O yes, the Intruder Death

There are so many realities from which we flee, pretending like children that if we do not acknowledge them, then they will magically not come to be! Denial of this sort is the fragile fabric of innocence to which children have claim. But we have long lost our innocence, even if we have not lost our propensity for denial. If we can, with a studied face of factitious perplexity, insist that we are absolutely clueless about when and where human life begins (although we have no doubts whatever concerning this matter as it pertains to insects and other forms of life) then I will insist that our penchant for denial is either methodological or ideological, but in no way rational.

How often we insist that want to know the truth — even as our behavior skillfully avoids it. What we really wish to know is *what pleases us*, or what *conforms* to a passionate ideology, however flawed and rationally unsustainable. In this sense we do not wish to *know* — we wish to *win*, and if winning is not forthcoming through reason, then duress will do nicely.

This is the state of affairs in American (and European) society and public discourse — which is dangerously encroaching upon private discourse understood as “incorrect” thinking, or in a more abusive sense, thought-control, at least as it is susceptible to spilling over into public utterances.

I should like to start with one of the less malignant forms of denial in the face of conclusive reality.

There are so many inescapable truths that we sometimes simply wish to put our head down and hide from them. In fact, we do — but only for so long, knowing that one day we must come to terms with them, and that the terms will not be congenial to us, and most definitely not of our own making. Let us examine one of them.

You will not always be young

One day *you* will be that skeletonized body that now quietly shuffles past us, bleached white or in shades of gray — that man, that woman, whom our culture of idolized youth dismisses, rather than honors ... the walking dead who do not know their day and that it is past ... and who refuse to leave the landscape of our idolatry unblemished. Old, often unsightly, marred by life and drained of it by giving of it, and left weak, they are a waste of “material resources” — especially money — that should go to the living, which is to say, to the young, instead of the dying, which is to say, the old. "Would that they just die and have done with it! It is what — a day, a month, a year at most? One less lesion on the yet unwithered flesh of our still youthful illusions."

Let us, then, build places for such “undesirables” and let us call them Nursing Homes or “Assisted Care Facilities” where, yes, it is true, we pay a fortune to hide them under the “skilled” care of people who cannot speak their language and who themselves are paid minimum wage while the administrators and owners are paid handsomely ... and rarely, if ever, smell the stench of urine that permeates the hallways. We pay to hide them, and our own conscience, behind the lavish and false promises of a better life for them that we ourselves could not possibly provide! And the cost? Only our inheritance: the house we grew up in (and which the Nursing Home or Assisted Care Facility legally demands, unless we wish to pay several thousands of dollars a month to maintain them there at our own expense) in the happy days of our youth when *we* were not as burdensome to our parents as *they* are now to us ... the Savings Account into which they placed the money they toiled for for so many years — that one day *we* may have that start in life they never did ... but it is little to relinquish, a small price, to be sure, to maintain our illusions of perpetual youth.

But we are only deferring, staving off, the inevitable and we know it! In them we see us! And we are appalled! We look through the family album and see mother when she was even more beautiful and lissome than we could ever wish to be. And, good heavens! Is that handsome young man with the winsome smile and the tight, narrow waist really our father? We both relish and fear such images. We rush to the mirror hoping not to find that first gray thread of hair, that line in our face that lingers after we stop smiling. Portents, we know, of things to come. That will come. That must come! Even as it came to our mothers and fathers — God rest their souls!

This generation is counting on science and not God; it is hoping for the “breakthrough” of the Fountain of Youth that never existed and never will, in order to avoid old age and death ... *and what is ineluctably beyond!* It sees in the onset of old age an *ending*, not a *culmination*, just as it sees in the onset of death *corruption* and not *immortality!*

Sum quod eris, fui quod sis

On the gravestones of the dead — at least in preceding centuries when golf clubs and guitars did not adorn monuments as the final aspirations of the dead — we would often encounter a sober reminder etched both in Latin and indelibly in our consciousness: *Sum quod eris, fui quod sis* — As you are I was; as I am you will be. In other words, “I was just like you and you will be just like me” ... body under a gravestone and soul ... well, elsewhere.

The “old” can say the same to us: As you are I once was; as I am you will one day be — and if we are wise, we will listen. Yes, their lives will pass in the twinkling of an eye. Perhaps tonight. And so will ours — and although you do not see it now, the celerity will literally take your breath away!

But we are not wise and we will not listen. Our youth will pass (indeed, have not some of those years fled us already? — and with our youth our physical beauty. We will see it in others of our age, but not in ourselves, despite changing metrics that do not lie. “How much she has aged!” we silently appraise each other in chance meetings and lie to each other’s faces: “You look absolutely the same!” ... when neither of you do.

Your 10th high school reunion will leave you unsettled. Your 20th will appall you. How did they all lose their beauty so quickly ... except you?

Unless you are fetched off in your prime, you *will* grow old, you *will* lose your beauty — and that brings us to the second Hard Saying: one day you will die.

One day you will come to the sober realization that you (in all your splendor and magnificence) cannot save the world. Or, for that matter, whales, the Idaho Point-headed Grasshopper, or the Flat Pigtoe clam. But you *can* save your soul with the grace of God. The world will pass, and all within it, but your soul will endure for all eternity. Only there will your youth be renewed, for you will be made perfect in God — beautiful without blemish, incorruptible in Christ.

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