



Opinion

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How Journeys Often End

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Decline, as aging progresses, is inevitable to most people. What seems to be sometimes insufficiently emphasized is the importance that mental and physical preparation for the development of the likely future conditions that will require rehabilitation care.

Inspired by Socrates's famous comment that "an unexamined life is not worth living" and aware of the importance of this issue I have summarized personal experiences and conclusions based on observations during a long medical career.

As I find myself trying to remember the past and attempting to make sense of recent events in my life, I realize that, foolishly, I have lived for a number of years an unrealistic existence by acting as if I was an ageless, immortal creature.

Two years ago I celebrated my 92nd birthday, and soon afterwards a few episodes brought light to my mind that forced me to realistically recognize the fact the inevitable day of the end of my journey was rapidly approaching. Up to that day, I had given very little thought to the possible mental and physical condition I would be when that time came.

Throughout my entire life my health has been for the most part very good, except for a few problems from which I recovered through medical or surgical interventions. However, deafness has been steadily worsening, to the point it has affected my social and professional life. Attendance to meetings of various types, even social gatherings, have become uncomfortable. One- to- one conversations over the telephone, are virtually impossible..

My wife's rather rapid developed Alzheimer's disease with severe physical and mental problems forced my decision to terminate my involvement in the teaching I had done, virtually full-time, at the Medical School in Miami. We moved from the big city to a small community in south-west Florida. Over the course of a couple years, her condition has deteriorated further, so her transfer to an Assisted Living Facility became necessary. An emotionally painful experience.

I have used my time writing and reading, to the point I was able to write and published a few books.

Almost overnight, I began to notice a rapid decrease in my physical and mental condition. As recently as a few months ago, I was physically very active; religiously I walked at a fast pace, three-quarters of a mile every day. Today, I cannot do that because of loss of energy. My balance is also affected. From depending on a cane, I rapidly found it necessary to go to a walker. Remembering words, even many that I frequently use, escape, and their return oftentimes takes a few seconds.

Terribly concerning to me is the realization that my desire to use my time remembering my early life is already compromised and rapidly becoming a major handicap. Simply, because those events I try to remember, I seem unable to bring forth.

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The mental problem is further complicated by the parallel progressive loss of vision. My passion for reading I can no longer enjoy. Reading long chapters is now difficult. Even the watching of television, despite the addition of a system that allows the reading of the words, is not very effective. Much too often, the printed words disappear from the screen before I have a chance to read them all. Telephone conversations, which for sometime were a means of communication with a few people and my children, are no longer possible. The virtually complete isolation my mental decline has taken me is terrible depressing.

As I face inevitable death in the near future, but probably preceded by a period of increased physical and emotional discomfort, forces me to think as to how I should I respond to it. To put myself in the hands of physicians, each one of them addressing my physical problems according to their sub-specialties and foolishly hoping for either cures or improvements? Even if improvements can be achieved, does it make sense for me to accept their proposals, which at best might extend my physical life for a short time?

Major progress in the prevention and cure of many medical conditions has taken place in the last few decades. However, parallel to it, a loss of objectivity has crept in the mind of the public as well as in the mind of the medical profession. This change has done harm, and will inevitably become worse, as one realizes the role economics plays into its unfolding.

I had hoped to be as objective as possible when pondering on the rapidly approaching final event, and wandering on the best way I should face it. Whether it comes suddenly or gradually and without pain, I wished I would be able to devote my remaining days to dedicate my thoughts to those dear to me. To share with my children and grandchildren the experiences I could bring forth. To tell them how productive my life was; how exciting the recollections of happy family events; of the satisfactions my involvement on education brought about; the writing of twenty books and over four hundred articles; serving as visiting professor in forty different countries and holding the Chair of Orthopaedics at the Universities of Miami and Southern California; my being the founder and Director of the Rehabilitation Center at the University of Miami, and later serving there as Professor and Chairman of the nation's first Department of Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation in the 1970's. Being elected to the presidency of the Hip Society and the American Academy of Orthopaedics, and receiving the honor they represented. However, among the experiences during my academic career, the one that grew the deepest roots was being the recipient of the Elmer and Rosemary Nix Ethics Award, from the Clinical Orthopedic Society. Hanging on the wall of my office is the precious certificate.

Now, I dwell on the possible example I should best be able to leave to my children and grandchildren after my final departure. Perhaps the answer is not difficult to find. I wish to be remembered as a man who despite major obstacles worked hard to overcome them; that successfully I destroyed many of them; and the ones I failed to defeat only served to assist me in becoming the person I am. That tenacity never left me.

Hidden in my soul, there is a morbid feature I was never able to correct. I find myself dwelling on unhappy experiences more than on happy ones. Decades-old unpleasant events continue to live as if they were recent ones. Vivid in my mind, more so than any other example, deals with my mother. She passed away more than twenty years ago, at the age of

ninety-nine, but despite the long-elapsed time, not a single day goes by without my lamenting the likely wrongs I did to her.

Currently, I live alone as my wife tries to exist in an Assisted Living Facility. I have lived in this town almost five years, and have not yet met a friend, or visited the home of a single person. My only brief conversations, limited to a few words, are those I have with the waitress to whom I struggle to tell the food I wish to have. My daughter, who lives not far from me, visits as often as she can, but she is extremely busy with her duties as the County Attorney and taking care of her growing children. The solitude I have been condemned to live I do not wish to anyone.

The curtains will soon come down, and the tears of a few will run down their cheeks. The pain that goes along will not be the same among them, but the sincerity equal. The grandchildren, not yet able to appreciate the meaning of life, will cry a few times, but reality, in a short span, will intrude and seal the book. My children will experience true pain and for a long time memories will recur. Fortunately, for them the recurrences will be spaced further and further apart.

I hope that a large segment of the readers of these few pages will be people who may be experiencing symptoms of decline. Hopefully, my experiences will be of some help to them.