

Reflections on Life, Death And Grabbing the Gusto

PATRICK T. REARDON

We're born to die. I don't mean that in a maudlin way. I mean it in a matter-of-fact way. That new baby, wrapped in the softest of blankets, held gently, tenderly, in her father's arms, her eyes pensively scanning her new world — she's dying.

NBA star LeBron James, rising up, up, up and over his defender to tomahawk the ball through the basket to win the game at the buzzer — he's dying.

Pope Francis is dying, and Donald Trump is dying. So are Beyoncé and J. K. Rowling, Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey. I'm dying, and you're dying.

We're born to live.

That's the flip side of the hard fact of death. At some point, for one reason or another, after 3 million or so beats of my heart, the final beat will take place. What happened in between the first and the last?

How did I live? How did I spend those millions of heartbeats?

A half-century ago, Schlitz Beer promoted itself with an advertising campaign that included the advice "You only go around once in life. So, grab for all the gusto you can." It was aimed, of course, at getting beer-drinkers to buy Schlitz, but, when viewed from the right perspective, it's great advice for anyone about living a full life.

Unfortunately, it also can be taken the wrong way. We are bombarded with messages in ads and entertainment, even in political speeches, that living life with gusto means living life with lots of things, lots of toys. And it's not just toys they are selling us. It's also the make-believe idea that life is open-ended.

Think about the television commercials telling you that you basically can stay young forever by

eating the right foods or taking the right drugs or doing the right exercises. Think about the websites that tell you "50 Is the New 30."

Their message is this: Toys make you happy, you can be happy all the time, and there will be no end to your happiness.

PATIENCE OF JOB

I'm sorry, that's not how it works. Ask Job, the rich guy in the Bible who is righteous and God-loving, and then he finds his world caving in.

To test Job's faith, God permits thieves to steal his many oxen and donkeys, and a fire to fall from the heavens to burn up his sheep and servants, and another set of thieves to take his camels and slay more servants, and a great wind to sweep in from the desert and cause the collapse of a house, killing all his sons and daughters.

Then, Job is afflicted with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, and he is left sitting among the ashes (or, as some translations have it, on a dunghill).

You've heard the term "the patience of Job." Don't believe it. Read the book of Job, and you see that Job is anything but patient. He whines and complains to God, and he demands that God tell him why he is suffering so. Why are bad things happening to a good man?

The book of Job is a work of existentialism, written some 2,500 years before Jean-Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard came to embody the term.



It grapples with the problem of human suffering — and, by extension, the reality of death. If people live a good life, why must they suffer? Why must they die?

After a whole lot of Job's carping, God gets fed up. Speaking "out of the whirlwind," God says: "Where were you when I founded the earth?... When I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands? ... Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning?... Can you send the lightnings on their way, so that they say to you, 'Here we are?'" And on and on and on.

In effect, God is saying, "I'm God, and you're not. I can see farther, deeper and more clearly than you." It really isn't an answer, but it's all Job has.

And he decides that it's enough. Despite all his trials, he does not curse God. He does not turn his back. Essentially, he embraces God and embraces life. He embraces the sad and painful mystery at the heart of life. He chooses acceptance rather than bitterness, hope instead of despair.

That's the positive way of understanding — and living by — the Schlitz slogan.

You can "grab for all the gusto you can" by refusing to acknowledge the reality of death, by refusing to recognize the presence of pain in every life — by believing that it's possible to be happy in all things all the time.

BUBBLE WRAP

The only way that works, though, is if you cushion yourself from life and encase yourself in a kind of emotional and social bubble wrap. It works if you keep the pain of life as far from your awareness as possible. You feel bad, but you have so many distractions and so many defenses that you don't notice the bad feelings. They just eat at you silently while you try to go blissfully on your way. It's a life without much real gusto.

The problem with this approach is that, if you insulate yourself from pain, you insulate yourself from all the other feelings in life, including joy and ecstasy and surprise. You wall yourself off, hiding from the feelings you're afraid to feel and the pain you're scared to face.

On the other hand, you can "grab for all the gusto you can" by being open to life in all its richness.

You do that by showing up. It's as simple as that. You pay attention. It's the difference between

walking through a neighborhood or flying past it on an interstate highway.

If I'm in a restaurant with my wife, do I spend half the time looking down at my smartphone, and the other half thinking about what I'm going to be doing later in the day? Or do I focus on her? Do I listen — really listen — to her, instead of just biding my time for an opening to talk about me? And am I willing to tell her about how my life is going — not just facts, but what I'm feeling?

This isn't just about what goes on between people who love each other. It has to do with any relationship and any interaction — with a boss or bus driver, with a friend or a passerby. Are you seeing the person in front of you? Do you see the cashier at McDonald's, or is he or she just a hand that takes your money?

We've all heard the term "bedside manner." That's about showing up and being present. It's about a doctor being open to life, which means treating the patient as a person, not as a case — really seeing and hearing that patient, recognizing the patient's deep need for a human connection.

Death plays a role in this willingness to be open to life. If you and your sister are going to live forever, well, what does it matter if you're distracted during a particular meal? There will be an endless number of meals to come.

Of course, that's not true. At some point, one of you will be sitting at a table with no one in the other chair. It's good to recognize this and even talk about it. That may seem morbid, but it can be life-affirming.

No amount of talk is going to protect the surviving sister from the great pain and grief that will come. After all, this heartache will result from the deep connection, the deep love, that the two of you have had.

It's true that such talk brings up at this present moment a glimmer of the sorrow that one of you will feel at some future date. You begin to mourn already. Why elicit such sad feelings in each other? Why bring more pain into your lives?

Here's why: When you remember that your sister won't live forever, it forces you to look at her as the treasure she is, to do as much as you can to really be with her, to be fully present, paying attention. To be alive with her.

This is something that doesn't apply only to family and friends. It has to do with a way of looking at everybody and everything in the world.

The human spirit rebels at the fact of death. We hate the idea that, at some point down the line, we will cease to exist. Christians and many other religious people believe in a life after death, but who knows what that would be like? Yet, even those with faith in a future heaven feel a lust for this life.

I don't want to die, but I'm going to have to anyway. This is the tragedy built into my life and into everyone's life. If you're aware of this, you are aware that everyone you meet is a tragic figure. Each of us — your boss, the McDonald's cashier, your sister, the irritating drunk at the ball game — shares this fate. It makes us sisters and brothers.

It also makes each of us a treasure, like the flower that blooms and then wilts, a temporary beauty. We are all temporary beauties. Each of us is like the stunning sunset that takes your breath away and, then, a moment later, is gone as the sky fades to dark night.

Each of us knows that the dark night is coming. If we try to hide from that bleak end — if we pretend that it won't happen — we're fooling ourselves.

Remember, the Schlitz slogan didn't just talk about grabbing for gusto. It also recognized that each of us only goes around once in life. To fully live, to live with gusto, you have to know that death is out there, stalking us.

You can skulk around in fear and never experience the great highs and lows of life, the wonders and the curiosities, the odors and aromas — never get past the surface of other people, or let them get below your surface.

Or you can grab the reality of death and the fullness of life, and embrace them together in a bear hug. And we can sing, as Frank Sinatra did more than half a century ago: "I'm going to live until I die."

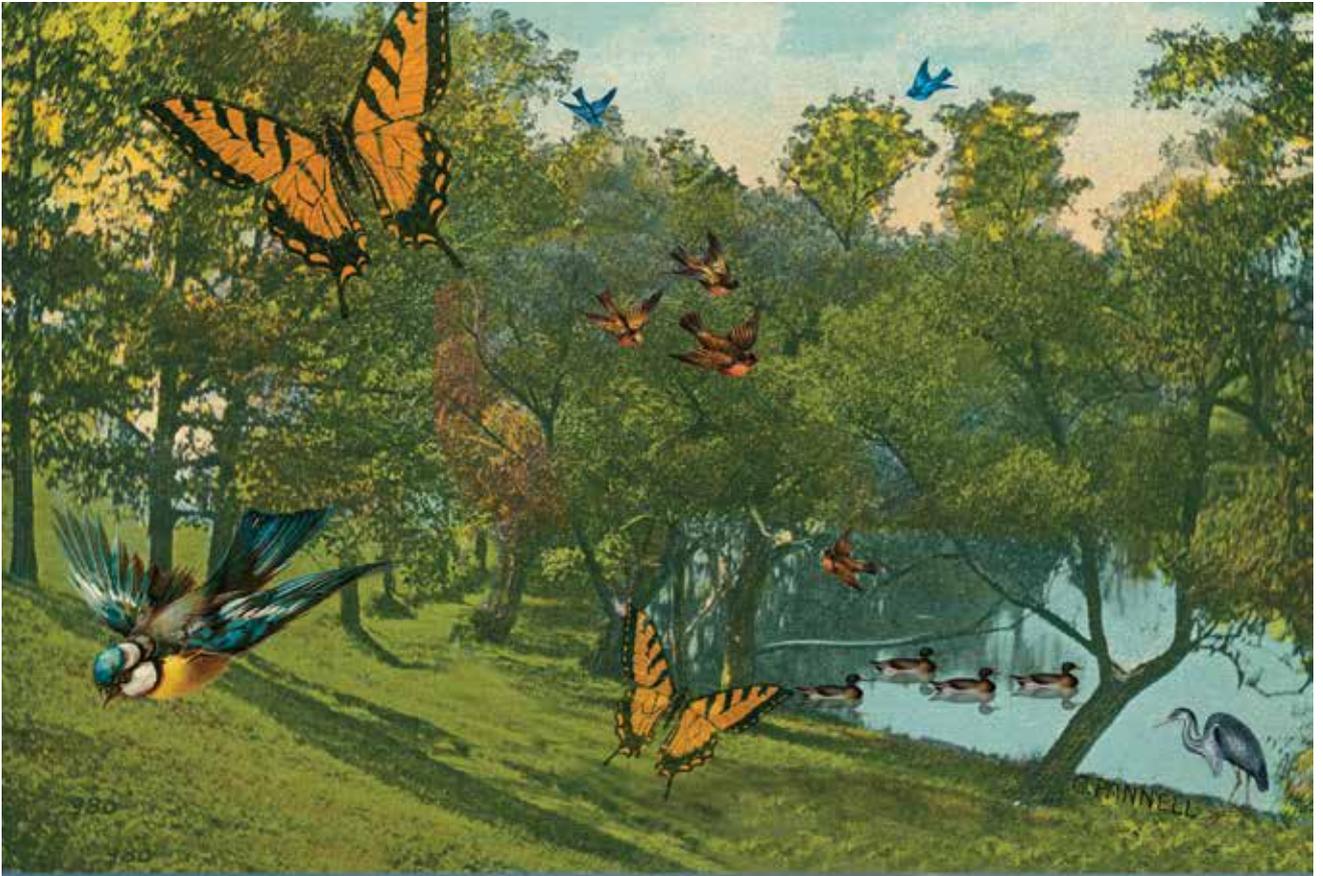
PATRICK T. REARDON is the author of eight books, including *Requiem for David*, a poetry collection published in February 2017 by Silver Birch Press, and *Faith Stripped to Its Essence*, a literary-religious analysis of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*. Reardon lives in Chicago.

Flannery's Farewell

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

"O Raphael, lead us toward those we are waiting for, those who are waiting for us. ... Lonely and tired, crushed by the separations and sorrows of life, we feel the need of calling you and pleading for the protection of your wings, so that we may not be as strangers in the province of joy, all ignorant of the concerns of our country." — Prayer to St. Raphael

I'm like to light out for that province soon as things don't look too good in this one. I've prayed daily for years for your direction and know that you've lent me your angel's ear, for how otherwise would I have gotten this far, met so many kin souls on the road we're all limpin' along on together step by slow step, me most crippled of all? These are my last days, that's pretty clear — though sometimes at night I still feel the call of this life, despite what I know in my blood. The sounds of the farm waken me, wild yell of my peafowl announcing their blue bliss. I won't mind leavin' at all but for this.



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