



Boston Catholic Journal



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Ancient Realities and Youthful Illusions



... and, Oh 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 pass! 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, oddly, 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 be ideologically re-affirmed.

This is the state of affairs in American (and European) society and public discourse, which is dangerously encroaching upon private discourse understood as “incorrect” and potentially irreformable thinking in need of ideological reform, or in a more abusive sense, indoctrination, for such thinking 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 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 hide them under the “not-so-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, given our lavish lifestyle! And the cost? Only your inheritance: the house we grew up (the State will require reimbursement for the cost of institutionalizing your “loved one” — to the tune of approximately \$100,000 per year: divide *that* into the value of your home!) In the happy days of our youth when *we* were not as burdensome to our parents as *they* are now to us ... such a sacrifice is a small price, to be sure, to maintain our illusions of perpetual youth.

It is true that some of us, perhaps many of us, given the current demographics in the “developed” world cannot, sincerely cannot, take care of our parents in their old age. We do not have the medical skills, and since most households have two working parents to make ends meet, we do not have the time to devote to their care 24 hours a day. This is sadly true. And none of us are blameworthy who come to this hard choice that most often is no choice at all. It pains us. But it is equally true that many who can take care of their parents in their own homes simply do not wish to. It is a burden ... and an expense. And what will become of our “careers”? In our obsession with beauty and “fitness”, with power in the work-place, and with possessing the 6-bedroom house that we never intend to fill with children (who, like our parents, are a burden and an expense) we have time for neither: the young nor the old.

The young we abstain from through contraception and abortion — and the old are little more than impedimenta. We say we love them, but we do not wish to sacrifice for them — who sacrificed for us. We are *young*! It is *our* time! And *our time has come!* But so will another ...

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 strand of gray hair, that first line in our face that now 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” to that elusive *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 suddenness 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 us 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 “cannot make one hair white or black” (Saint Matthew 5.36). Nor, for that matter, can you save the 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, and incorruptible in Christ.

Only there will you finally encounter that beauty for which you have so longed and which for so long has eluded you: holiness! The *imago Dei*, the image of God Himself within you, and in which you were created long before the deformity of sin left you destitute.

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