

Once Again --

Roxana and I send our greetings to all of you. If you're up for it, it would seem that another update on Pilgrim's Progress or Harper's Health might be in order. Cutting to the chase, we've learned that my chronic form of leukemia has made its transition to the acute variety. My bone marrow is now busy producing a large quantity of white blood cells, along with various other partially formed ones--something, we're told, that is not environmentally sustainable. This foreshortens my life expectancy to two or three months.

This has set in motion the hospice care system and changed all our kids' plans for Thanksgiving. Personally, I'm finding this somewhat paradoxical, since there is as yet no noticeable change in how quite remarkably well I feel. The modular time design (three hours up, an hour and a half down) that we've developed continues to work well, I still have limited capacity to get out and about, and we continue to have great social times with our friends. It would seem that the accelerated dying my blood tests indicate is going on internally should also have more external manifestations--but, don't get me wrong, it's not something I'm asking for.

Old poetry favorites continue to pop up in my memory. Here's e. e. cummings:

dying is fine)but Death

?o

baby

i

wouldn't like

Death if Death

were

good:for

when (instead of stopping to think) you

begin to feel of it, dying

's miraculous

why? be

cause dying is

perfectly natural; perfectly

putting

it mildly lively (but

Death

is strictly

scientific

& artificial &

evil & legal)

we thank thee

god

almighty for dying

(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death

My lively condition has puzzled our hospice team (so far, a social worker and nurse), however. They are more accustomed to seeing people with many more needs that they can help with--something I'm trying to reassure them I will surely be able to provide them in the not too distant future. The best case scenario for me over the coming weeks is that I'll find the energy I presently have gradually decrease until simple tasks become impossible without assistance. I find that about as attractive a way to go as I can imagine. No guarantees, of course; we each die a uniquely individual and personal death, and I'm sure there will be surprises in store down the road for me. Still, about the only thing I've come up with for my hospice team at this point is perhaps getting some help with clipping my toenails.

Pastor Tim has asked about my wishes for a memorial service. My first thought was of an Irish wake, but that might be difficult for the church to pull off. While I believe that such things are meant for the living and should largely be determined by their wishes, God knows what our kids, lacking some supervision, might come up with. I told Tim that I'd appreciate the community singing "Lord of the Dance" and a reading of the short poem Tennyson placed at the end of each of his published collections: "Crossing the Bar." I also proposed a concluding organ postlude of Jeremiah Clarke's (formerly attributed to Purcell) "Trumpet Voluntary." This last may verge uncomfortably close to triumphalism, but it was what Roxana and I chose for our wedding recessional, lo, these many years ago at Chicago Theological Seminary, and it seems somehow fitting.

We're still very much delighting in your visits, those of you close enough for them to be a possibility. We are, however, girding our loins for an anticipated onslaught over Thanksgiving week. This will include brief visits to the Emerald City by my sister and brother-in-law, Roxana's brother and sister-in-law, and our three offspring and their eight urchins (called grandchildren, I believe). Exploring ways to orchestrate these engagements and conversations that gives me a slim hope of at least surviving the week.

The popular wisdom is that people in my circumstances are assumed to have their minds focused on the hereafter or higher, spiritual things. I'm not, however, finding that to be true for me at this point in the journey. (That may, of course, indicate a sadly shallow level of spiritual consciousness on my part.) I find I am still keenly interested in what's happening in this old world of ours, sometimes to the point that I wonder if I may be in a state of denial. Just walking outdoors in the crisp Autumn air, I find myself overcome with wonder and gratitude for the last of

Seattle's falling leaves, our overcast and rainy weather and the place this tiny planet occupies in the cosmos. On second reflection, could this be itself a form of spirituality?

If each of us is essentially made up of our relationships with others, I am in good measure who I am because of my significant life connections with all of you. Something for which I am profoundly grateful. This end of life time for me is a rich reminder of that.

Thanks to all of you for sharing your lives with Roxana's and mine --

Gordon