Essay 65

# ON DEATH AND DYING

Like most boys who grew up on farms, I was aware of things dying—farm animals, pets, stray cats, and chickens. Death was in some way quite regular, and in certain instances perfectly OK. Chickens were killed just before meal time, and the thought of fried chicken quickened the senses. Cattle intended for market were not supposed to die until later, for their sale helped us live. Surrounded as we were by birds of all kinds—eagles, quail, pheasants, turkeys, chickens, geese, ducks, migrating pelicans, pigeons, meadow larks, turtle doves, sand hill cranes, hawks—we regarded them as magnificent creatures, some quite tasty. Wild cats, always in pursuit of birds, were regarded as totally unnecessary. Usually the only cats I ever saw were at a distance of some tens of yards, running like crazy, surrounded by lead.

The death of community members was watched with great interest. Old people generally took time to die, and their funerals were anticipated. On those occasions one had the opportunity to learn many things. Before there were funerals homes, i.e. chapels, immediately after embalming the body was brought back to home where family, neighbors and visitors from some distances congregated, and stayed until the funeral one, two or three days later.

People sat in the living room with the casket until the funeral. During the day, the women cared for family and visitors, cooking and arranging. At night, however, it was the men who congregated, and at least a few men stayed awake the entire night. My father told me that in older times it was necessary for protect the body from rats or whatever, and that is why someone must always be there. I never did see that problem, but I learned at an early age that boys were allowed to sit with the men, sleeping as necessary.

I just do not remember the men gossiping when they were together. During the day the talk was work, sports, hunting, wheat prices, the weather, what was wrong with the government, and how to keep sick animals alive. But where men were sitting up all night with a dead person and the boys were asleep, ah, then there was conversation that the word “gossip” just does not cover. By pretending to be asleep, I heard neighborhood history, the dashing deeds of men

who I never ever imagined as teen agers, infidelities, and tales of the first settlers, Indian stories, civil war stories, and occasionally gossip. If you were interested in becoming educated, you should find a way to be present on these occasions.

My mother, Frances McComb Brownlee, was 100 years old when she died in 1998. She had lost blood circulation in one of her legs, there was gangrene, and she was hospitalized first in Stafford Kansas, then in Wichita. My sister Donice and I sat with her for a number of days. When we first arrived in Wichita, I expected her leg to be amputated quite soon. But there always seemed to be the need for more tests. One day I realized that the doctor and staff were just waiting for her to die, so I requested amputation be accomplished promptly. Within hours of the operation she started to improve, and she grew stronger and stronger. Finally the day came when she could be moved from intensive care to another hospital wing. In the process of moving her from her bed, her heart stopped. The decision was made not to make any effort to start it.

Sometime after the operation I asked what had happened to mother's amputated leg. No one seemed to have any idea. This caused me to asked better questions—questions that invoked better and better answers saying they just did not know. I soon learned that one is not supposed to ask such questions. But I smelled lawyers.

Mother's body was taken back to Stafford, and we planned the funeral to be a couple of days later. Because of mother's long life in her community, my sister and I thought it a good idea to do things in the old way, and to bring her and her coffin to the house until funeral day. The mortician was a young man who had never experienced such a thing, and was opposed to the idea. The roads were not good enough for his hearse (I agreed that there is a bit of mud, but there are so many family members here that we can pull you out without difficulty) we might not keep the schedule (there is plenty of time), etc. So that's how it was done.

The service was to be in the Zenith Presbyterian Church—a country church for the town of Zenith no longer exists except in memory. Just as the service was to begin, one of mother's nieces arrived who was herself quite elderly and on

crutches. I asked the service to be delayed until she and her husband were properly seated. In the interval one of our grandsons, aged five, came to the back of the church where the coffin was, and asked me about mother's amputated leg. Where was it? Could he see it? I explained but thought it was a good question and had the mortician open the casket just one more time so that we could see the leg was truly missing. The young man was not aware that those matters had been discussed by the men the night before.

Years before, when I was about my grandson's age, my father told me that Grandpa Gordon was dying, and we needed to visit him. We got in the pickup and headed the few miles to the west (and a quarter of a mile north) to pay our respects. On the way Dad told me that it is very hard to kill an old man, for if it were easy he would have died long ago. So it was probable that someone who was going to visit Grandpa before he died would die before Grandpa would. Upon our arrival, a neighbor was there to visit just like we were doing. As I remember, he was in his forties, and a few days later he died of a heart attack. Grandpa Gordon lasted another six months. And so because of my vast experience, I subscribe to the doctrine that it is hard to kill an old man.

These experiences and many others combine to make it possible for me to face the death of family members with more ease than one might think. I remember standing at the graveside of a grandson who died having lived for only a few weeks. I was really grieving, but it occurred to me that for thousands of generations fathers and grandfathers had stood at the graves of sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. Now I could experience what they had experienced; now I really belonged. This emotion might be called "closure", but whatever it is, it worked.

My experiences with death during the war were quite another matter entirely. From the 1930's onward we saw hundreds, indeed thousands of pictures of the dead in Manchuria and China. When the world war shooting really began in 1937 at the Marco Polo Bridge in China, we were told remarkably clearly of the terrible atrocities the Chinese suffered in the sacking of Nanking, and the subsequent slaughters that seemed to be occurring everywhere. The European war that began formally in September of 1939 had already been pictured quite

well in our minds with the knowledge of the Germans' monstrous killing of the Jews. But of course the worst still lay ahead.

Despite these horrors, perhaps because of them, I was determined to join the army when I was eighteen, and did so. In training there were accidental deaths, and I learned to accept them with some ease for early on I was just like all young men—deep down I knew I would live on and on. Gradually this attitude changed into a belief that I would never survive the war. I could do the mental calculations on the number of Americans dying regularly; the number of airplanes lost each week (we now know that throughout the war there was an average of 40 airplane crashes per day); the huge variety of unexpected ways that death might occur.

In the Army Air Corps it was common practice for two air crews to be billeted in the same Quonset. When a crash claimed the lives of one of the crews, everything of theirs in the Quonset disappeared in a matter of hours. On two occasions I returned to quarters finding it half empty. By empty, I mean EMPTY. There was absolutely no evidence that anyone had ever been there. These events were substantial shocks. Good friends were always remembered with tears. But the truly sobering message was that tomorrow it could be you.

After the war ended, (and when it did so suddenly, I was filled with the joy that now I was going to survive!) I still spent six months on Tinian, and during that time we flew quite often. We did share airplanes, and on one occasion as we stood waiting for our plane to land, it crashed, killing everyone. On another occasion we landed, and the crew that had been waiting was killed when the plane crashed on takeoff. One learned to live with death each day.

I was very aware that many of us have the capacity to at least give the appearance of little concern about those who died. I judged this to be a defense, helping some to keep their sanity. One of my friends on Tinian lived a few Quonsets from mine, and we saw each other frequently. One day I walked over to visit him for a bit—his cot and personal things were totally gone! My heart sank, but then I hoped that perhaps he had just been transferred. His friends then told me the awful story that somehow the metal clothes line had become electrified, and when he went to hang up some clothes he had washed, he was

electrocuted. The fact that I am writing this after six decades is some indication of how I felt.

For some weeks the Army Air Corps guys were stationed across a fence and small ditch from a Marine Unit. That's when I learned that the Marines had been trained quite differently from us air guys. They had been taught to really kill people, with their bare hands if necessary. It was fairly common practice for those Marines to riot on Saturday nights. One night the fight waxed to the point that they tore the seats off of the toilets to use as weapons, and one Marine was killed. To my great astonishment the attitude of the Marines in charge was that each man should be able to defend himself, and if he could not, that was tough. So no charges were ever made.

The Marines were taught much more specifically than we were that **War Is Hell**.

On Tinian after we parked our B-29 at our hardstand, we were always met by a big truck to take us to Operations. These trucks were driven by Marines, and almost every truck had the skull of a Japanese soldier on the bumper. One day, the skull on our truck had quite a lot of skin with one-sixteenth-inch hair on it. A man could easily be visualized. It was unusual in that it had a complete set of teeth—the only skull like that I had ever seen. I called out to the crew, "Look. This skull has a magnificent set of teeth!" The driver then said "Do you like those teeth? Here!" He then reached into the truck, grabbed a big monkey wrench, knocked out a handful of teeth, and handed them to me. My stomach did a turn.

I have doubts that I could ever have been trained to be like a Marine, but there is plenty of evidence that it is a possibility, given environments of the kind wars can produce.

Recently I have told my descendants that it matters not how long one lives, but what one accomplishes during one lifetime. The words probably sound pretty hollow coming from an old man, but they encapsulate my experiences.

It is important for me to add a thought that I’ve already expressed.

As a Christian, I can die smiling.