

## Submitted Excerpts on Death and Dying

Prepared by the Humanities in Medicine Society at UWSOM

Edited by Daniel Bushyhead and Isaiah Kletenik

### *We Grow Accustomed to the Dark* by Emily Dickinson

We grow accustomed to the Dark—  
When light is put away—  
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye—

A Moment—We uncertain step  
For newness of the night—  
Then—fit our Vision to the Dark—  
And meet the Road—erect—

And so of larger—Darkness—  
Those Evenings of the Brain—  
When not a Moon disclose a sign—  
Or Star—come out—within—

The Bravest—grope a little—  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead—  
But as they learn to see—

Either the Darkness alters—  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight—  
And Life steps almost straight.

“All things good and bad are experienced through sensation, but sensation ceases at death. So death is nothing to us, and to know this makes a mortal life happy. Life is not improved by adding infinite time; removing the desire for immortality is what’s required. There is no reason why one who is convinced that there is nothing to fear at death should fear anything about it during life. And whoever says that he dreads death not because it’s painful to experience, but only because it’s painful to contemplate, is foolish. It is pointless to agonize over something that brings no trouble when it arrives. So death, the most dreaded of evils, is nothing to us, because when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist. It neither concerns the living nor the dead, since death does not exist for the living, and the dead no longer exist.” - **Epicurus**

### **Sonnet No. 71 by Shakespeare**

No longer mourn for me when I am dead  
Then you shall hear the surly sullen bell  
Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell:  
Nay, if you read this line, remember not  
The hand that writ it; for I love you so  
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot  
If thinking on me then should make you woe.  
O, if, I say, you look upon this verse  
When I perhaps compounded am with clay,  
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse.  
But let your love even with my life decay,  
Lest the wise world should look into your moan  
And mock you with me after I am gone.

### **Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8**

1 Remember your Creator  
in the days of your youth,  
before the days of trouble come  
and the years approach when you will say,  
“I find no pleasure in them”—  
2 before the sun and the light  
and the moon and the stars grow dark,  
and the clouds return after the rain;  
3 when the keepers of the house tremble,  
and the strong men stoop,  
when the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those looking through the windows grow dim;  
4 when the doors to the street are closed  
and the sound of grinding fades;  
when people rise up at the sound of birds,  
but all their songs grow faint;  
5 when people are afraid of heights  
and of dangers in the streets;  
when the almond tree blossoms  
and the grasshopper drags itself along  
and desire no longer is stirred.

Then people go to their eternal home  
and mourners go about the streets.  
6 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,  
and the golden bowl is broken;  
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel broken at the well,  
7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.  
8 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says Koheleth  
“Everything is meaningless!”

***Death, be not proud by John Donne***

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

“I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue. But as much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking...The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there's little good evidence. Far better, it seems to me, in our vulnerability, is to look death in the eye and to be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides.” - **Carl Sagan**

***From Holy the Firm by Annie Dillard***

One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burned dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled, and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth's wings vanished in a fine, foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened, and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away, and her heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round pool.

And then this moth essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth's head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.

She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burned out his brains in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly at my feet.

### **From *The Gay Science* by Friedrich Nietzsche**

The Thought of Death: It gives me a melancholy happiness to live in the midst of this confusion of streets, of necessities, of voices: how much enjoyment, impatience and desire, how much thirsty life and drunkenness of life comes to light here every moment! And yet it will soon be so still for all these shouting, lively, life-loving people! How everyone's shadow, his gloomy travelling-companion stands behind him! It is always as in the last moment before the departure of an emigrant-ship: people have more than ever to say to one another, the hour presses, the ocean with its lonely silence waits impatiently behind all the noise - so greedy, so certain of its prey! And all, all, suppose that the past has been nothing, or a small matter, that the near future is everything: hence this haste, this crying,

this self-deafening and self-overreaching! Everyone wants to be foremost in this future, - and yet death and the stillness of death are the only things certain and common to all in this future! How strange that this sole thing that is certain and common to all, exercises almost no influence on men, and that they are the furthest from regarding themselves as the brotherhood of death! It makes me happy to see that men do not want to think at all of the idea of death! I would fain do something to make the idea of life even a hundred times more worthy of their attention.

**From *To Die of Having Lived* by Dr. Richard Rapport**

Doctors don't cure much; they only delay things. As conventional medical treatment has become more technological and less humanistic, some patients seek magic in other disciplines: acupuncture, chiropractic, holistic medicine or naturopathy, faith healing. These hopeful ideas will all fail too. In the end, we will die not only because we have lived, but as we have lived. Sick people acquire no great insights just because they are sick. If you hope for a miracle, look now, because one isn't likely to find you when you're on a ventilator in the CCU.

***Requiem* by Robert Louis Stevenson**

Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie:  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you 'grave for me:  
Here he lies where he long'd to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.