

Words to Die By

“Life is short. Take big bites.” This was the advice of the late science fiction writer Robert Heinlein. I’m reminded of Heinlein’s admonition when I think of the climactic shootout in *True Grit*, the recently remade movie starring Jeff Bridges, Hailee Steinfeld and Matt Damon. For those who haven’t seen the film or read the novel, Bridges reprises the role of Rooster Cogburn played by John Wayne in the original movie version. Rooster Cogburn, is a scruffy, one-eyed, hard-drinking, curmudgeonly, oppositionally-minded bounty hunter, persuaded by 14 year-old Mattie Ross (played by Steinfeld), to hunt down her father’s killer. The shootout in question occurs when Rooster confronts the Ned Pepper outlaw gang, with whom Mattie’s father’s killer has been traveling. Outnumbered three to one, Rooster shouts, “Fill your hand you son-of-a-bitch.!", grabs his horse’s reins with his teeth, and with a six-gun in each hand, gallops directly at the three outlaws, firing as he rides.

I’m rather attracted to Rooster Coburn’s words. One could do worse for words to die by. One supposes that Dylan Thomas may have felt similarly when he penned “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” The fifth stanza of that poem urges:

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

In a spirit worthy of Thomas, Rooster Cogburn challenges his opponents, and, in effect, fate, to “bring it on!” Popular legend has attributed a similar remark to Rear Admiral David Farragut in the American Civil War Battle of Mobile Bay. In popular legend, Farragut is supposed to have ordered the *Brooklyn*, a ship under his command, to “Damn the torpedoes. Go ahead,” when the Brooklyn slowed in the face of the Tennessee, a confederate warship. Although historians are not certain that Farragut actually uttered these words, which would have been extremely difficult to hear in the midst of the battle, modern myth has seized upon them and further enhanced them into “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” The phrase has a nice cachet and whether Farragut said the words or not, we like the fearless throb of determination that they elicit, not unlike “Fill your hand you son-of-a-bitch!”

I rather like the stance toward which these words call us. Like the batter facing the overpowering fast ball pitcher, we stand fiercely at the plate, challenging the pitcher to “Bring It!” daring our adversary, or the fates, to do their worst; we are ready to give our all. I like the sense these words convey of self-ownership, of active, rather than passive, participation in our own existential being. Facing death, we do not shrink, but stand determinedly in its face.

Many years ago, when I was young and just starting out on my professional career, I was attracted to a poster, popular at that time that evoked a like kind of internal response. The poster was a caricatured picture of a cave

man, clad in skins and bulging with muscles and toting a vicious looking club. The caption under the picture read, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. . . 'Cause I'm the meanest son-of-bitch-in-the valley." At the time, as a young man who was at the height of his physical powers and just discovering his potential in the wider world, I was attracted by the notion of being powerful enough to control my destiny. My boss, an older and wiser man who had experienced more of life's slings and arrows, reacted differently to the poster. His reaction, as I recall, was a somewhat sorrowful and rueful shake of the head and a comment to the effect that it was unfortunate that so many people felt that way. These many years later, I can relate much more readily to his reaction and can see the imagery of bully and violator that that poster evoked in his thought. And I, too, regret the many ways in which the powerful impinge upon the less fortunate.

And likewise, I have been privileged to know those for whom death is not a foe to be battled, but a welcome release from torment, pain and hopelessness. It is absurd and unconscionably callous to insist on the importance of raging against the light, of challenging fate to "bring it on", to a woman suffering unremitting pain from terminal cancer, to a man whose faculties no longer allow him to meaningfully interact with the world, or to anyone whose limits have long since been passed and for whom every moment is a test of ability to endure agony. Under some circumstances, there seems no emotional or physical energy to even spend enduring, let alone challenging. The youthful William Cullen Bryant seems

to have had a prescient appreciation of these realities, when he wrote his most famous poem, *Thanatopsis*, which closes with these words:

*So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged by his dungeon; but, sustain'd and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.*

Though death is a universal experience, it seems that, like life, one cannot reduce it to a simple aphorism. One size does not fit all. Indeed, it seems to me that even though death is universal, it is also the most unique and individual of all human experiences. No one can begin to truly understand the entirely personal experience that is each individual's death. And so, it may well be that the height of arrogance, the height of hubris, is to presume to advise another on the proper stance toward death.

And yet, for many, people, perhaps even all people, the mystery of death, the fear of the possibility of non-being constitutes the ultimate question of meaning. Ernest Becker won a Pulitzer Prize for his ponderous work, *The Denial of Death*, in which he amasses considerable evidence for his view

that the ultimate driver of human psychology is our underlying awareness and fear of our own mortality. He suggests that human civilization is our elaborate and symbolic psychological and sociological defense against confronting the sheer terror of the fact of our mortality. At some level, civilization serves to ally us as individuals with a cause that transcends our individual existence, extending our sense of survival beyond our individual physical existence. Our participation in a cause greater than ourselves perhaps lends us a sense of personal survival. We, many of us, pursue causes and contribute our time and resources to these causes, which, in part, may repay us with some greater sense of our own meaning and a perspective that will, hopefully, outlast our lifetime. Among the complex reasons for any action, Becker suggests, the desire for a survival of a sense of self is a powerful motivator.

To this charge, I, for one, plead guilty. I recognize that in almost all my actions, there are many subtle crosscurrents in my motivation. Among these currents, it is true that I hope that, in some fashion, my actions contribute to something of value that survives over time long beyond my physical being. And, in the same moment, I also affirm that the meaning of my life is really found in the existential moment, through the act each instant in which I express the authentic self that I experience myself to be.

Perhaps this is a contradiction. I'm not sure. But I think I can be authentic in the existential sense and still work toward purposeful and lasting contributions. In fact, I think that is a part of my authentic self. Granted, that may simply be my rationalization, according to Becker's viewpoint, in which I am allying myself with something symbolic. But, be that as it may, that's how I experience my world and I affirm it.

And, that said, this discussion revolves full circle to the original issue of how one embraces life. When all is said and done, and even for the person suffering painfully through each moment, the question that remains is, "How do I choose to meet this moment?" Finally, that choice is the only certain choice which confronts the human condition, the one definite freedom that we have, whatever our circumstances. I do make the choice of how I respond, now, in this moment, in these circumstances, within whatever limitations may impinge upon me. And I hope that, whatever the circumstance, I will be able to maintain defiantly with Rooster Cogburn, "Fill your hand, you son-of-a-bitch!"