

Tract 11: At the Hour of Death*

One of the founding fathers of the United States was the writer and ingenious inventor Benjamin Franklin; when he retired at the age of forty-two, he gave this advice to a young merchant: “Remember that Time is Money.”¹ In the Western world this advice no longer applies just to the economic sphere but governs all dimensions of life. The concept of time that it insinuates does not correspond to an open temporality capable of ushering in the *kairos*, the moment conducive to the sudden appearance of a surprising event. This concept implies, on the contrary, the idea of quantification and measurability: it corresponds to *chronos*. This is divisible clock time, within which all instants are equivalent and unrelated to each other, without ties that would tell the story of an individual or of a community. The time of a life therefore is set within a framework; it tends toward death. As though death commanded the movement of life: the time of human existence unravels a little more each day, or rather at every moment, while bringing us ever closer to death.

Since we now see time exclusively as measurable time, the objective of life is to make the most of the time that we have left, in other words, to profit from our remaining time to live, either by accumulating money and material goods in a mad race for success—“the one who dies with the most toys, wins”—or by experiencing the most pleasures. To the point of eliminating the “dead” times, because they yield nothing, neither wealth nor pleasures nor new experiences. The motto of contemporary man could be summarized as follows: “Life is short, let’s make the most of it!” This is, in fact, the meaning of the Latin maxim that is pronounced nowadays in an imperative tone: “Carpe diem”—“Seize the day.” Making the maximum

* This Tract has been translated by Michael J. Miller.

¹ Benjamin Franklin, “Advice to a young Tradesman” (1748), in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 3, 1745–1750, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 306–8, at 306.

profit in a minimum of time is the unavoidable law today, not only of the economy but also of life in general.

What if we changed our concept of time? What if we allowed ourselves to experience time in its *kairos* version, so as to allow transcendence to break into our immanent temporal framework? Certainly, we cannot escape death, or the time of dying, but we can perhaps “live” in a different way this particular time that is called “agony.” It could teach and enlighten us also about ordinary time. This time of dying should not necessarily be considered as a “dead” time that we ought to get rid of as rapidly as possible. It can be, on the contrary, a very important time for the dying person, as well as for the well person who accompanies him. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his posthumous work, remarks that in the time of agony what is “Essential” emerges.² In saying so he agrees with the experience of a man from Grenoble who for two years accompanied his wife at the end of her life: “People think that the living are the ones who close the eyes of the dying, but the dying are the ones who open the eyes of the living.”³

To what, then, does the dying person witness? What essential thing does this time of dying teach us about human existence? Does the experience of finiteness—the temporal framework in which we are set, with our own death as its only horizon—explain by itself the contemporary desire for total autonomy, which results in the need to control our own finiteness, including the time of dying and our own death? What if this principle of autonomy was only an illusion? What if true freedom was found in confident consent to that finiteness, devoid of all intention to control, so that we could live fully this essential time without allowing it to escape from us?

Managing the Time of Dying

Contemporary man sees very well his inability to prevent time from passing. His life is governed by time. Because he refuses to be dependent in this way, he decides to control the entirety of his existence so as to depend on nothing and no one, thus making his autonomy an absolute value, deprived of any substrate besides his own will. Because he reduces reason to the technological-scientific dimension alone, from birth to the time of dying, all ages of life are subject to this control. “Today dying is thought

² Paul Ricoeur, *Living up to Death*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 14 [originally *Vivant jusqu'à la mort: suivi de Fragments* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 43].

³ Didier Sicard, “Penser solidairement la fin de vie [Thinking in Solidarity about the End of Life],” French commission report to François Hollande, December 18, 2012, p. 9.

of as something to be controlled and is always understood as a commission to organize something. Dying is addressed more and more often with the attitude of management,” the German ethicist and physician Giovanni Maio emphasizes.⁴ Therefore the time of the end of life is increasingly approached from the perspective of management: it is set within a managerial logic that in recent years could be summed up in the formula “death control,” by analogy with “birth control.” The objective, the French sociologist Patrick Baudry notes, is to make death and dying “an end that is foreseeable, programmable and manageable.”⁵ Moreover death and the dying person must be “pleasant for the living,”⁶ and must not move them or even disturb them. Channeled into an antiseptic, allegedly “humanizing” process of control, into the framework of a managerial logic, dying and death are no longer considered tragic events that might unsettle the daily routine of those who are well. This is demonstrated by the protagonist of the novel by the Senegalese author Cheikh Hamidou Kane entitled *L'Aventure ambiguë*: the young African man Samba Diallo observes that the people in his homeland lead their lives in a familiarity, an intimacy with death, whereas in the West it has “become a stranger [to him] again. Everything fights it and drives it far away from our bodies and minds. I forget about it. When I look for it in my thoughts, I see only a withered sentiment, an abstract eventuality, scarcely any more unpleasant for me than for my insurance company.”⁷ Just like the time of dying, death is, in effect, banished from the closed temporal framework in which man moves about. He lives as though these realities did not exist. And since he must experience them after all, they have to be subjected to the logic of managerial control.

Not only must this time of dying be “comfortable,” controlled, for the dying person and also for the “healthy” person; it must also be set apart from the time of the living, which is characterized by the race for experiences, preferably pleasurably rich. Indeed, the dying person, like the elderly person, is confined to a separate world, a sort of ghetto or Apartheid. The

⁴ Giovanni Maio, “Gefangen im Übermaß an Ansprüchen und Verheißungen: Zur Bedeutung des Schicksals für das Denken der modernen Medizin,” in *Abschaffung des Schicksals? Menschsein zwischen Gegebenheit des Lebens und medizin-technischer Gestaltbarkeit*, ed. Giovanni Maio (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), 10–48, at 31. Unless indicated by an English edition being cited first, translations are original to this tract (although English-translation editions are provided for some works after the original-language citation).

⁵ Patrick Baudry, “De la mort à la disparition,” in *Savoir mourir*, ed. Christine and Alain Montandon (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), 211–17, at 211.

⁶ Baudry, “De la mort à la disparition,” 214.

⁷ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) (Paris: Éditions 1978), 161.

French writer Michel Houellebecq nicely sums up this dictate of omnipresent, high-performing youth: "In the modern world, you could be a partner-swapper, bisexual, transsexual, a zoophile, or sado-masochistic, but it was forbidden to be old,"⁸ and, we might add, to be dying. Old age and the time of dying are considered disgraceful; they are problems to be solved by means of technological-scientific thought. The French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard remarks that they are like "a considerable dead weight in the management of society. A large part of social wealth (money and moral values) is swallowed up by it without being able to give it any meaning. This puts one third of society into a state of economic parasitism and segregation." Just like old age, the time of dying "is now only a marginal, utterly asocial slice of life—a ghetto, a reprieve, a slope in front of the fortress of death."⁹

It is as if the dying person were there, facing the "healthy" person, without being present in the sense of a true presence, as though he were already absent and yet burdensome. In short: a living person who is already dead, even to the point where "the physician no longer came into the room of the patient, for whom 'nothing more could be done,'" the French psychoanalyst Robert William Higgins notes.¹⁰ This is the sign of the failure of contemporary medicine, which increasingly considers the patient from the perspective of a problem to solve and to control. And the French sociologist Claudine Herzlich explains: "The patient is now no more than the occupant of a bed, regarded as though he were already nothing but a corpse."¹¹ Baudry sums up: "For us today, the 'dying person' is considered already dead, already dehumanized."¹² The same observation about the elderly person was already made by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1970: "Shielded behind the myths of expansion and abundance," Western society, overcome by the race for profit, "treats the elderly as pariahs," as "refuse," "waste," or "walking

⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, trans. Gavin Bowd (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 152 [originally *La Possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 213].

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la Mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 249 (also in English as *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant [London: Sage, 1993], 163).

¹⁰ Robert William Higgins, "Le statut du mourant: Une place 'impossible,'" in *Le mourant* (Vallet: M-Editer, 2006), 3–41, at 5.

¹¹ Claudine Herzlich, "Les nouveaux discours sur la mort et le silence face aux mourants: Principes éthiques et pratiques quotidiennes," in *La fin de la vie qui en décide?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 53–78, at 60.

¹² Patrick Baudry, "La place du mourant," in *Le mourant* (Vallet: M-Editer, 2006), 83–112, at 105.

corpses.”¹³ The logic of time perceived as *chronos* demands the multiplication of experiences and pleasures. The time of dying is therefore perceived as a “dead” time, a time during which there is nothing left to experience and nothing can be experienced. This time is considered as devoid of meaning, absurd. It is a time of waiting without expectations, without depth, without hope; in short, a sheer waste of time which has nothing to say about the human being or about the community of mortal men. What is more, it is burdensome to the “healthy” person, because it prevents him from attending to “useful” occupations. In his speech in Stockholm given in December 1990 when the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to him, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz emphasized: “A society possessed by the frantic need to produce more in order to consume more tends to reduce ideas, feelings, art, love, friendship and people themselves to consumer products.” We can add to this list both aging and the time of dying. The poet went on to say: “Everything becomes a thing to be bought, used and then thrown in the rubbish dump. No other society has produced so much waste as ours has. Material and moral waste.”¹⁴ The time of dying, from this perspective, could be compared to an excess piece of useless trash that we ought to get rid of as quickly as possible, as we disconnect the plug of a broken-down electrical appliance. It is no longer a consumer item for the dying person, nor is it one for the “healthy” person, whose time he uses up for no purpose. As a prisoner of a constantly accelerating pace in which everything is urgent, he no longer has the time to waste time on the unprofitable moments of life during which it would no longer be possible to experience pleasures. In a culture bearing the stamp of urgency and activism, of efficiency and hedonism, the time of dying is thus perceived as a form of extreme violence which therefore ought to be cut short as rapidly as possible.

Indeed, so as not to have to experience such “dead time”—thus it is viewed both by the dying person and by the “healthy” person—which is devoid of meaning and as cruel as can be, Western culture boasts of the notion of a “good” death understood as a final “short-circuit”: the body lets go all at once, the time of dying is adjourned. From this perspective, the sudden occurrence of an aneurism or a heart attack, as the French psychoanalyst Marie-Frédérique Bacqué observes, is “an ‘ideal death,’ allowing the person to be snuffed out suddenly, or in his sleep, avoiding suffering and

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 8, 12, 568, 13 (also in English as *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian [London: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972], 2, 7, 542, 6).

¹⁴ Octavio Paz, “Nobel Lecture: In Search of the Present,” December 8, 1990, trans. Anthony Stanton, nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1990/paz/lecture/, par. 23.

disappointment, agony and anxiety-producing questions; a momentary death which right away would put the final punctuation mark after a life, neatly, without procrastination, as though in full swing.”¹⁵ A “sudden” death, if possible in the absence of consciousness, is viewed as ideal, because then one does not realize that one is dying, one does not see oneself dying, one does not agonize, one does not have to struggle or to experience any anguish. Furthermore, this type of sudden death spares the “healthy” person from the senseless waiting that the time of dying demands. The French philosopher Damien Le Guay remarks that ultimately it is about “more effectively reducing to what is strictly necessary the periods of waiting (and of sharing) that are now deemed too long.”¹⁶ People therefore want to reduce as much as possible the time of dying because of their refusal to confront death, along with suffering, but also because they have a problematic notion of the autonomy of the human subject, which would involve only the individual in his choices and actions and would not concern the whole community.

This death, so sudden that the subject would not be aware of what is happening to him, was nevertheless interpreted by the ancient philosophers as a “bad” death, of which one must beware. A “good death,” indeed, was preceded by dying which took its time, a time dedicated to entering into a relation with those near and dear, a time of farewell (*a-dieu*, commending a person “to God”), a time of preparation and of spiritual work on oneself, a time in which “the work of demise”¹⁷ is done. In his “Discourse at a Grave-side,” given in 1845, Kierkegaard nicely summarizes this tension in attitudes toward death: “If someone meets sudden death, something a more earnest age regarded as the greatest misfortune (which is why it is mentioned in the ancient prayer [‘From sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us’]) but which a later age regards as the greatest good fortune, then one is indeed helped.”¹⁸

What if Kierkegaard was correct on the subject of traditional prayers? What if the “good death” desired by our contemporaries turned out to be a great misfortune, because it would prevent people from experiencing a time that is of capital importance, for the dying person as well as for the “healthy” person? For ultimately, to quote the Danish philosopher, “To die is indeed the lot of every human being and thus is a very mediocre art, but

¹⁵ Marie-Frédérique Bacqué, *Apprivoiser la mort* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), 33–34.

¹⁶ Damien Le Guay, “La mort intime,” *Conférence* 43 (2016–2017): 49–91, at 52.

¹⁷ See Michel de M’Uzan, “Le travail du trépas” (1976), in *De l’art à la mort: Itinéraire psychanalytique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 182–99.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, “Discourse at a Graveside” (1845), in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. Sren Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 69–102, at 74. See for example Etienne Binet, *Remèdes souverains contre la peste et la mort soudaine* (1628) (Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 1998).

to be able to die well is indeed the highest wisdom of life.”¹⁹ And what if the dying person who took the time to die—or rather who let himself live in the presence of death, consented to mingle with it, and allowed the time of *kairos* to enter into his life—were to teach us again a dimension of life that we have forgotten or wanted to forget?

The Time of Dying

In order to try to answer this question, let us dwell for a moment on the way in which people used to call the time of dying “agony.” This term, borrowed from the ecclesiastical Latin *gonia*, “anguish,” is derived from the Greek *agōnia*, which comes from the verb *agein*, which means “to drive” or “to lead.” Another derivative of this verb is the word *agōn*, which signifies a sports competition, a wrestling match. One might wonder: wherein lies the struggle? Would it not be, rather, in this refusal to confront anguish by advocating a “good death” that is under control? One reason for this refusal lies in the experience of the agony of the dying person who is forced to have to continue living with the help of technological equipment that surrounds him on every side and tries to control and prolong his life at all costs. This “domestication” of death by medical technology—a domestication that amounts to the unreasonable therapeutic obstinacy—in reality results in a depersonalization of death; the dying person is prevented from experiencing his own death as an eminently personal act. In reaction to this encroachment of biomedical power on the time of dying, which depersonalizes it, we have seen the appearance of a movement concerned about having the option not to undergo disproportionate medical treatments and to die naturally instead. This “right” to die, as defended by the German philosopher Hans Jonas,²⁰ however, does not eliminate the time of agony. Nevertheless it assumes a radical form when it becomes the demand to make one’s own decision to inflict death on oneself by resorting to euthanasia or assisted suicide. Those who take this position refuse to experience this struggle, this agony, and arrogantly claim the freedom to determine the exact moment of their death according to subjective criteria based on a quantitative and qualitative utilitarian calculus of future goods and evils.²¹ Such an attitude

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, “Discourse at a Graveside,” 76.

²⁰ The German title of his short work is explicit: *Techniken des Todesaufschubs und das Recht zu sterben* [Techniques for Postponing Death and the Right to Die] (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1985).

²¹ See *Le suicide: Regards croisés*, ed. François-Xavier Putallaz and Bernard N. Schumacher (Paris: Cerf, 2019).

toward the time of dying reveals in the final analysis a more fundamental attitude toward life and time.

Dying, a Struggle

The time of dying implies a different view of temporality: a person no longer projects himself into the future, or possibly into the past; he is in a way forced to live in the here and now, in the present as it is given to us. If there is a struggle within this time, it consists of making oneself available to inhabit the present moment; it is about *being present*—in the twofold sense of the *temporal present* (the now) and of *presence*—to what is, to what presents itself. To be present is to put oneself in the presence of reality, of another person, as what I am living, what is being experienced within me, here and now. Although we can oblige someone to be there—for example a caregiver, a relative or close friend—we cannot oblige anyone to be present in the sense of a gratuitous presence that is open to the presence of the other person. Indeed there are two ways of being present. The first consists of an indifferent physical and spiritual presence, without the form of relation, without in any way being present to or genuinely addressing another. The second is neither a technique to master nor an attitude of controlling reality and the other person; it is above all a way of being in relation to the world and to others that is characterized by openness and a willingness to listen, to enter into relation. To take care of oneself and of the other is to care for and to experience presence in the present moment.

Contemporary man tends to refuse to be present to what happens, to the reality of things. Indeed, he has developed the habit, on the one hand, of living in the future, moved as he is by activism, and, on the other hand, of thinking about reality as necessarily being subject to his calculations so that he can control and transform it as he wishes. Moreover, he dodges the situations that would elude his control, so as not to let them unsettle him. He has developed the habit of not being where he ought to be. Wilfrid Stinissen emphasizes: “We live in the reality that was or in the one that is coming (though it often does not come in the way we thought it would). . . . We lose most of our time by not being present or being occupied when the present moment appeals to us.”²² Now we can respond to the present moment only if we allow ourselves to be seized by the time of *kairos*, by letting go of the supremacy assigned to the time of *chronos*, of control. The time of dying, insofar as one allows it to be experienced, teaches a human being once again

²² Wilfrid Stinissen, *Eternity in the Midst of Time*, trans. Clare Marie (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 146.

to be really present, in deliberate presence to what happens during this particular time which escapes his categorical concepts and also his own will to control. Or, as Ricoeur puts it, when he reflects on the notion of neighbor, relying on the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Being a neighbor lies in the habit of making oneself available,"²³ present. He explains that the Samaritan "is neither occupied nor preoccupied by dint of being occupied," but rather he is "available for encounter and the presence of others."²⁴

The dying person, in his final moments, provides us with a key to existence: "The only thing required is that you are completely present in *reality now*,"²⁵ as Stinissen reports. Paz uses an even more radical expression in this regard: "The search for the present is neither the pursuit of an earthly paradise nor that of a timeless eternity: it is the search for a real reality."²⁶ The present is the living "source of *presences*," among which we can classify not only death but also "dying well."²⁷ When we stop running and ceaselessly struggling, "we are left empty-handed. Then the doors of perception open slightly and the *other time* appears, the real one we were searching for without knowing it: the present, the presence."²⁸ Here too, the poet expresses in a few words the whole density of a fundamental existential experience. Our contemporaries are immersed in cacophony—the noise of machines, the churning of thoughts or desires—and in activism, to which is added their desire to control everything in the name of an autonomy that they supposedly owe to themselves alone; consequently they go right past what is essential: "existence which is present" to reality; silence can remind us of this, the Swiss writer and philosopher Max Picard notes.²⁹ Ricoeur sums this up nicely: "Within the very framework of the time of agony" emerges what

²³ Paul Ricoeur, "The *Socius* and the Neighbor," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 98–109, at 99 [originally "Le *socius* et le prochain" (1954), in *Histoire et vérité* (1955) (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 213–29, at 214].

²⁴ Ricoeur, "The *Socius* and the Neighbor," 99 (French, 215).

²⁵ Stinissen, *Eternity*, 157.

²⁶ Paz, "In Search of the Present," par. 11.

²⁷ Paz, "In Search of the Present," par. 24.

²⁸ Paz, "In Search of the Present," final par.

²⁹ See Max Picard, *Die Welt des Schweigens* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1959), 158: "In today's world, which appraises everything according to its immediate yield, there is no room left for silence. Silence was driven out because it was not lucrative, because it was only *there*; it seemed to have no purpose, nothing resulted from it, it was unproductive. Silence still exists today almost exclusively in this form: as inability, the fact that someone can no longer speak, as something reduced, negative—this is the only form in which it still appears. It persists only as a design fault in the constant flow of noise."

is “Essential.”³⁰ When he comes to die, a human being is “made . . . available for the essential.”³¹ The French philosopher Éric Fiat, for his part, describes this time allotted to dying as the time “when what is essential is sometimes said more pristinely than in the moments of busy life.”³²

In order for this essential thing to be able to express and reveal itself, the dying person and the “healthy” person must inhabit the present, being present to the reality of this particular time in a silent attitude. This is no longer the time of *chronos* and of control, but rather the time of *kairos* that is conducive to the opportune moment, to a just act, or to the sudden appearance of an event, such as forgiving, giving and receiving, being silent and speaking. The latter sort of time invites us to openness and receptivity, in short to availability, because it contains the unforeseeable which presents itself all of a sudden: the surprise. In order to be capable of allowing oneself to be seized and taught by what happens in the present, the dying person and the “healthy” person strive to get rid of all temptations to control, so as to consent to an abandonment, in the sense that there is no longer any way of latching on or of holding on. This abandonment allows the person to be open to the emergence of a surprising new reality. We are the ones who are taken by surprise (something beyond our grasp).

The struggle that unfolds in the time of dying thus consists, first of all, in relinquishing the time of *chronos* and of control so as to allow oneself to be seized by the time of *kairos*, so as to consent to the reality that is unfolding here and now and to inhabit this present moment fully without any will to control it. To refuse to enter into this struggle of detachment from *chronos* time is to refuse to be open to this essential thing that is revealed radically during this same time.

The time of dying, when lived fully, thus brings the dying person and the “healthy” person back to the present, to the presence of the moments of life that the agonizing person is living in his radical destitution. The French author François Mauriac expresses this very well, even though he is speaking about aging: “I do not feel detached from anything or anyone. But living would now be enough to keep me busy. This blood that still flows to my hand placed on my knee, this sea that I sense beating inside me, this reflux and flow that are not eternal, this world that is so close to ending, demands an attention to every moment, to all these final moments before the last: that is what old age is,”³³ and also, we might add, the time of dying.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Living up to Death*, 14 (French, 43).

³¹ Ricoeur, *Living up to Death*, 42 (French, 76).

³² Éric Fiat, *Corps et âme* (Nantes: Default, 2015), 198.

³³ François Mauriac, *Nouveaux Mémoires intérieurs* (1964), in *Mémoires intérieurs*:

This inhabiting the present moment, however, is not fixed in the present. Indeed, the act of being present to the presence of what happens does not spring from nowhere; it is inscribed in the past of a twofold narrative: that of the person and that of the community, which contemporary man habitually forgets in the name of individualistic autonomy and because of the temporality that he reduces to a succession of moments without ties between them. I do not die alone; my dying is inscribed in my story and that of the community in which I live. My dying always has implications for the community. It therefore reveals the social dimension of human existence. The individualization of the time of dying that is promoted by our culture is a symptom of the de-socialization of individuals, who live as though they were alone in the world. Baudry justifiably remarks: "In doing without any socialization of death, of dying, and of the space of the deceased, what we diminish is the socialization of life itself."³⁴ In other words, by socializing the time of dying, we contribute to the socialization of life. This is revealed by the experience of dying, as a communal narrative.

We must insist on the fact that this inhabiting of the present moment is not confined to the present. On the contrary, it has its source in the past, as we just saw, while being open to the future, to the sudden appearance of an existential reality that is not yet present, a reality that eludes prospective reasoning and also the will to control. This openness of the present toward the past and toward the future implies another dimension contained in the word "present." This word means not just a "presence to" and a "presence for," but also a *given or revealed present*. In other words, the openness that the present moment brings is characterized by a relinquishing of the will to control, so as to allow oneself to be seized by reality, understood as the first gift. Living in the present thus means experiencing a presence and perceiving reality (the other and oneself) as gratuitous gifts: gifts that can be neither merited nor controlled, but only received. One then has the more fundamental experience that life is a gift that eludes all control of the will or of technology and science, and one participates in it gratefully, as the Swiss poet Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz admirably summarizes it.

You just see that, in the unknown areas of life, there is one thing that was given to you, which is precisely life. It matters little what it has brought you and what it still holds in store for you—I mean its quality

Nouveaux Mémoires intérieurs (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 419.

³⁴ Patrick Baudry, *La place des morts: Enjeux et rites* (1999), 2nd ed. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 19.

of whether it has been good or bad, as they say: because there is the fact that you are alive, which is a great thing. And in the silence, and the solitude, and the rest, when all the noises have become silent, when every detail is suppressed and every anecdote has been removed from you, this is what you participate in with thanksgiving.³⁵

The dying person finds himself in a radical poverty and destitution which contain, ultimately, an incommensurable wealth, a wealth that lies in the acceptance of existence as it presents itself, in an availability to the present moment, in a presence to the present-gift: the gift of reality, of others, and of oneself. Or, as Ramuz put it in his book *Présence de la mort*: “I love only existence. Just the fact that a thing exists, it doesn’t matter what, it doesn’t matter how. All that is good is being.”³⁶

The time of dying reveals to the dying person and also to the “healthy” person that his life is not at his disposal but that it was given and entrusted to him. Indeed, we cannot initiate our own beginning; we do not decide when and how we come to earth. The start of my life is always a “missed act,” in the sense that I am not at the origin of it, capable of disposing of it. My life is given to me and does not stop being given to me at every moment. This is why it is fundamentally nondisposable. The great vulnerability that belongs to this time of dying reveals this ontological nondisposability of life, because life is what comes about: what comes to me without my requesting it, what incessantly surprises me. Ricoeur nicely summarizes this experience: “For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself.”³⁷

Herein lies one of the fruits of this struggle that corresponds to the time of dying, both for the dying person and for the “healthy” person: consenting to be no longer in charge of one’s life, but rather allowing oneself to be seized by life at every moment, in the experiences that it permits us to have until our last breath. In the trial of dying, the subject feels like a dying person; he abandons himself to the respiration of the life that is still present, renouncing any sort of control. This experience of passivity—understood as abandonment with regard to what happens and what one becomes—occurs by way of acquiescing and receptive availability to what it is given.

³⁵ Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, *Besoin de grandeur* (Lausanne: Éditions Aujourd'hui, 1937; Lausanne: Rencontre, 1951), 92–93.

³⁶ Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, *Présence de la mort* (1922) (Vevey: L'Aire Bleue, 2009), 68.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 191 [originally *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 223].

This is what the dying person teaches the “healthy” person, as the man quoted at the beginning of this article reminds us: “People think that the living are the ones who close the eyes of the dying, but the dying are the ones who open the eyes of the living.” This is also the lesson of the story about the end of a life that the French psychologist Marie de Hennezel records. It was the case of a young woman afflicted with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease), who went from great autonomy to almost total paralysis. “Her paralysis, her immobility obliged her to take an interior risk in order to live: the risk of abandoning herself, letting go, accepting her dependency, and accepting the fact that others took care of her. This was a total reversal of her values. She therefore let herself be cared for and loved, patiently and so graciously that she taught everyone who came close to her about a human being’s strength to go beyond herself.”³⁸ This young woman experienced this presence in the present moment as a gift; her person was unified by it, as a person, as Stinissen emphasizes: “Total presence means that you are completely engaged in the task of the moment. All your forces are gathered together. By the fact that all your attention is directed to one single task, you yourself become *whole*. Division is conquered. Being present in the now has a mysterious ability to restore inner harmony.”³⁹

Such presence to the present moment, which is perceived as a present (a gift), presupposes that time is viewed and lived through differently from the time of *chronos* or of *kairos*, so as to experience the time of *schölè*. This time is not only the time of contemplation but also the time of maturation: that which is hidden by nature is then revealed. It is the time of truth (recall that *alètheia* means “what is drawn out of its hiding place”). It is also the time of availability to the unexpected and, we might add, to what is unhopèd-for. The struggle that corresponds to this time of dying consists precisely in consenting to this total destitution, this poverty that allows a person to make himself available to the time of pure presence, the time that no longer depends on the power of the will, in short: no longer being in charge of one’s own life. It is not a matter of undergoing this time of dying passively as though it were an external constraint, but rather of acquiescing in it and confidently abandoning oneself to it. This time is the time of an apprenticeship, or of an increasing depth, through the experience of the trial. It consists of being put to the test, being deprived of all will to control, so as to consent, in an attitude of receptivity and confident availability, to

³⁸ Marie de Hennezel, “Sens et valeur du temps qui précède la mort,” in *La Fin de la vie, qui en décide?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 19–28, at 26.

³⁹ Stinissen, *Eternity in the Midst of Time*, 162.

what suddenly appears, to what comes, to the unforeseeable, to the present moment. These are the stakes in the struggle that the time of dying entails, which is so arduous in the view of contemporary man.

The Anguish of Dying

The time of dying is characterized not only by a struggle (recall the etymology) but also by anguish. This is not the place to elaborate the reasons for this anguish or its connection with death, but rather to reflect on what this anguish reveals about the human being, and more particularly about the response to it by the dying person and also by the “healthy” person. Confronted with the anguish of dying, we can choose to give in to the temptation to turn in on ourselves, relying on our freedom to control everything that thus gives us the impression of being the absolute master of our existence and of life in general—which ultimately proves to be an unrealistic idea. This temptation sees the time of dying as a time that is somehow fixed; since there is supposedly nothing more to expect, the time is thought to be devoid of all meaning and of all openness toward any potentiality. Anguish thus claims to make us declare in advance the uselessness of the time of dying, for nothing new can then come about in the future. Time is perceived as confining. This attitude—close to despair—is nicely described by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel: “Closing myself in on myself, and in doing so closing time in on myself: . . . a future, . . . since it is no longer a future for me or for anyone else, would instead be a future nothingness.”⁴⁰

The experience of anguish highlights the fundamental uncertainty of existence. Now for contemporary man, the German Philosopher Peter Wust notes, “the positive meaning precisely of being uncertain is so difficult to recognize.”⁴¹ He explains that “in the lack of security one comes to know the profound wisdom of life.”⁴² Indeed, the experience of the anguish of the time of dying invites the dying person to a response that does not consist of seeking to control what is to come—which can lead only to despair—but rather, on the contrary, to be open, in an attitude of confident availability which sets no condition for the sudden appearance of novelty or of surprise. Fiat emphasizes: “As long as there is life, there is potential. . . . But everybody nonetheless keeps some potential, however tenuous it has become, and even a man in a coma or so-called ‘vegetative state’ still has potential.”⁴³ As though

⁴⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l'espérance* (Paris: Montaigne, 1944), 80 (also in English as *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd [New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962], 60).

⁴¹ Peter Wust, *Ungewissheit und Wagnis* (1937), 2nd ed. (Munich: Kösel, 1986), 27.

⁴² Wust, *Ungewissheit und Wagnis*, 30.

⁴³ Fiat, *Corps et âme*, 194–95.

echoing the philosopher, Claude Couturier, who has Alzheimer's disease, writes: "We still have possibilities." Even though "I am less high-performing . . . so what? I find that being alive is already an accomplishment . . . and living each moment is even my principal occupation from now on."⁴⁴

Although his situation is different from that of the dying person in general, they share the same relation to time: that of openness to the break-in of a new possibility at the heart of existence. The time of dying, like no other time whatsoever, is set within a constant actualization of novelty, of un hoped-for possibilities. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas neatly emphasizes this dimension of time: "Time adds something new to being, something absolutely new." And he explains a few lines further on: "Time is the non-definitiveness of the definitive, an ever recommencing alterity [otherness] of the accomplished—the 'ever' of this recommencement."⁴⁵ We find this dynamic of human life again in the writings of the French writer Robert Linhart, who compares the life of the factory worker to

a war of attrition, death versus life and life versus death. Death: being caught up in the line, the imperturbable gliding of the cars, the repetition of identical gestures, the work that's never finished. Is a car done? . . . Has the soldering been done? Not, it's waiting. Has it been done once and for all this time? No, it's got to be done again, it's always waiting to be done, it's never done—as though there were no more movement, no result from the movements, no change. . . . And suppose you said to yourself that nothing matters, that you need only get used to making the same movements in the same way in the same period of time, aspiring to no more than the placid perfection of a machine? A temptation to death. But life kicks against it and resists. The organism resists. The muscles resist. The nerves resist. Something, in the body and the head, braces itself against repetition and nothingness. Life shows itself in more rapid movement, an arm lowered at the wrong time, a slower step, a second's irregularity, an awkward gesture, getting ahead, slipping back, tactics at the station; everything, in the wretched square of resistance against the empty eternity of the work station, indicates that there are still human incidents, even if they're minute; there's still time, even if it's dragged out to abnormal lengths.

⁴⁴ Claude Couturier, *Puzzle: Journal d'une Alzheimer* (1999) (Paris: Josette Lyon, 2004), 144–45.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, 2011), 283 [originally *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (1961) (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1992), 316].

This clumsiness, this unnecessary movement away from routine, this sudden acceleration, this soldering that's gone wrong, this hand that has to do it all over again, the man who makes a face, the man who's out of step, this shows that life is hanging on. It is seen in everything that yells silently within every man on the line. "I'm not a machine!"⁴⁶

The obligatory choice in the struggle or the agony that belongs to the time of dying consists of affirming that that time cannot be compared to the time of a machine that has stopped running, is no longer efficient, and therefore should be unplugged. We are not in the presence of a time that is under the control of an individual who thinks that he is the sole trustee of its meaning, but rather of a time within which a subject allows himself to be seized by a new dimension of being. The time of dying is a time of trial and struggle during which one may experience the original confidence in the goodness of existence and, more particularly, the gratuitous dimension of this existence, the first gift that was granted to us. The dying person is invited to rely, with complete confidence, by a free act, on the first movement of life which is characterized by hope. This is also the insight of the Czech essayist Vaclav Havel in the speech that he gave when being inducted into the (French) Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1992. Wrongly thinking that "time belonged [to him]," in the name of a rationality founded on "the perverse certainty of being the absolute master of reality," contemporary man observes that waiting "must express a kind of respect for the intrinsic movement and the unfolding of Being, for the nature of things, their autonomous existence and dynamic that resist all violent manipulation; this waiting must count on the willingness to give to every phenomenon the freedom to reveal its own foundation, its true substance." He explains: "Thus distinguishing itself from a machine, the world refuses to submit to absolute control," even during the time of dying. He concludes his speech as follows: "Waiting which has a meaning, because it is generated by hope and not by despair, by faith and not by hopelessness, . . . is not accompanied by boredom but by tension. Such waiting is more than simply waiting. It is life, life as joyous participation in the miracle of Being."⁴⁷

The struggle at the heart of agony reveals the difficulty that the dying

⁴⁶ Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: John Calder, 1981), 16–17 [originally *L'établi* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978), 13–14].

⁴⁷ Vaclav Havel, "Associé étranger," Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Institut de France, academiesciencesmoraletpolitiques.fr/1992/10/27/installation-de-m-vaclav-havel-comme-membre-associe-etrangeur-au-fauteuil-laisse-vacant-par-le-deces-de-ugo-papi/.

person has in relinquishing all control so as to agree to enter into hope. In order for hope to blossom, Marcel emphasizes, he must be “entirely free from the obstructions of possession in all its forms,”⁴⁸ including the obstructions of controlling reality and the self. The German philosopher Josef Pieper explains that he must “abandon rational self-control and autarchy.”⁴⁹ The anguish of dying reflects how difficult it is to stop choosing to decide everything by oneself or to conform reality to one’s own plans; it is a matter of deliberately renouncing self-centeredness and control. In short, a matter of relinquishing oneself so as confidently to allow oneself to be seized by the movement of life. The temptation to despair, in the time of dying, can be overcome only by hope, as the French writer Georges Bernanos nicely summarizes: “Hope is despair that has been overcome.”⁵⁰ He thus follows the lead of Marcel, who says that hope can arise “only where the temptation to despair intervenes,” in other words that “hope is the act by which this temptation [to despair] is actively or victoriously overcome.”⁵¹ He specifies: “The hope is for something which, according to the order of nature, does not depend upon us (it is absolutely outside the zone where stoicism can be practised). At the root of the hope is the consciousness of a state of things which invites us to despair (illness, damnation, etc.). To hope is to put one’s trust in the reality [and, we might add, ‘in the other’], and to assert that it contains the means of triumphing over this danger.”⁵²

We find again this fundamental attitude of hope in view of life in the writings of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: “If he does not hope for what cannot be hoped, he will not discover it, since it cannot be explored and is inaccessible.”⁵³ Or, as the French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien puts it, “Knowing how to hope is knowing that you cannot attain by yourself what you hope for, and therefore is also learning to receive incessantly.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 82 (English, 61).

⁴⁹ Josef Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness: On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2000), 70 [originally “Begeisterung und göttlicher Wahnsinn,” in *Werke in acht Bänden*, ed. Berthold Wald, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), 248–331, at 305].

⁵⁰ Georges Bernanos, *La liberté pour quoi faire ?* (1953), in *Essais et écrits de combats*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1995), 1259–383, 1263.

⁵¹ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 49 (English, 36).

⁵² Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (London: Dacre, 1949), 74 [originally *Être et Avoir* (Paris: Aubier, Mouton, 1935), 108].

⁵³ Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. Marcel Conche, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), 245.

⁵⁴ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L’Inoubliable et l’Inespéré*, new enlarged ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), 162.

Contemporary man's refusal to live through the time of dying, because it is supposedly a lost time or a time devoid of meaning, ultimately comes down to an act of despair. It is likewise the consequence of the "modern rejection of the idea that there is anything beyond the control of the subject," the sociologist and philosopher Hartmut Rosa explains—"that there is any limit to our control beyond what is technically possible."⁵⁵ In contrast, the dying person who chooses to be open to hope agrees to stop being master of his life and is willing to throw himself, without a safety net, into the uncertainty that characterizes what is yet to come.

Conclusion

The time of dying can thus be one of the outstanding places for consent to life: a consent that involves confidently and hopefully relinquishing all will to control. In a way, this relinquishing affirms that, despite everything, a path of life remains possible in the time remaining in which to live, even if the meaning or the foundation of this confidence eludes all calculating rationality. This experience of the dying person's radical vulnerability, in his existential uncertainty, is what enables him to abandon himself to life. To choose to abandon oneself in this way is to have an experience of freedom in the fundamental sense—something that contemporary man's absolute will to autonomy refuses to do. Indeed, thanks to the abandonment of all control—as is the case in the time of dying—we experience a true freedom, when we allow ourselves to be seized. This concept of freedom therefore does not consist of choices to spend our time as we wish according to subjective criteria of maximizing profits and pleasures (if we think, for example, about the notion of quality of life). More positively, a person can experience his freedom as a gift: it is granted to me to be—to live—and to be free to welcome my life as a gift.

My freedom thus consists of consenting to my existence and to my being, as defined by a particular nature with inherent finalities, a nature that exists independently of my freedom. The human being is neither his own proprietor nor his own origin, nor his own lawgiver; he is the trustee of a life that is received, in which he participates with gratitude. In fact, true confrontation with the time of dying, while avoiding all attempts at control, confirms that existence is not a problem to be solved, but rather a mystery to be lived. A human being can live fully only if he learns again to make himself available to

⁵⁵ Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 84 [Originally *Unverfügbarkeit*, 2nd ed. (Vienna: Residenz, 2019), 96].

reality, of which he is a part, in an attitude of receptivity and abandonment of the will to control everything solely according to his own ends, so as to be open to a dimension of being that is given to him gratuitously, just as one experiences it particularly in an authentic love.⁵⁶ The time of dying reveals that at a given moment a human being can no longer exercise power: he is called to consent to the movement of life which unceasingly gives itself and is given. He is called to be open voluntarily to a dimension of being that he can receive only as a gift.

Paradoxically, this attitude enables a person to adopt an attitude of welcoming, confident availability and, ultimately, to acquiesce in the hope that involves an unconditional openness to otherness. The time of dying thus unveils to us the very heart of human life, which is hope. Indeed, only when I have relinquished all will to control, in other words, stated more positively, when I adopt an attitude of availability with regard to life itself, can I be seized by hope. The latter appears suddenly when I am deprived, when I experience my radical poverty. It is by consenting to lose one's life that one receives it fully, in hope.

Seen this way, the time of dying is not lost time but, quite the contrary, an abundant, nourishing time, as the French poet Christian Bobin summarizes it: "Love for lost time. Lost time is like the bread forgotten on the table, stale bread. You can give it to the sparrows. You can also toss it out. You can even eat it, as in childhood you ate 'lost bread' (French toast): dipped in milk to soften it, covered with egg yolk and sugar and cooked in a pan. 'Lost bread' is not lost, since you eat it. Lost time is not lost, because in it you touch the end of times and in it you eat your death, at each second, in each mouthful. Lost time is abundant, nourishing time."⁵⁷

Thus we can say that the time of dying opens the eyes of the "healthy" person by reminding him that the essential thing is not to be found in Franklin's injunction, "Time is money," but in "losing" one's time in order to gain it, if one considers all the life that is still contained in it. This "loss" of time is the condition for receiving what is essential, which can be revealed at the end of all ends only by relinquishing control, which then opens onto hope. It is by losing one's time (*chronos*) that one discovers the time (*kairos*) that is open to hope.

⁵⁶ See Josef Pieper, *On Love* (1972), trans. Richard and Clara Winston, in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 139–281 [originally *Über die Liebe, in Werke in acht Bänden*, ed. Berthold Wald, vol. 4 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), 296–414].

⁵⁷ Christian Bobin, *La Part manquante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 90–91.