

The Opposite of Hope Isn't Hopelessness:

Meditations on Mortality and the Climate Crisis

by Ken Victor

When my grandfather, Barney, was dying from colon cancer, my dad and I met in Florida for the last ten days of his life. The two of us committed to working together so that my grandfather could die in his apartment.

It was June. Florida was hot and muggy. The air conditioner was on all the time. Barney was in a comfortable bed with side railings so he couldn't fall off. We had a chair on either side of his bed, one for each of us. My dad and I would chat, sometimes my grandfather would chime in when he had energy. Sometimes I'd read a book out loud.

Mostly I remember that when my father stepped out, Barney would want to talk to me. He'd ask about what I was up to and what my goals were. When I'd answer to his satisfaction, which—I'll confess here for the first time—meant me stringing together a series of white lies to make it sound like I had my life figured out and my path forward mapped, I would get to ask him questions. I'd ask about his childhood, how he met my grandmother and he'd whisper his answers before needing to take another nap.

Once I was indiscreet or perhaps unable to contain my curiosity and asked him what it was like to be dying. He shared that he had stopped fighting against it and that made it much better. He wanted there to be a university for dying but couldn't figure out who should be the faculty. After that conversation, a day or two later my dad exhorted my grandfather to keep fighting. I said, "and it's ok grandpa if you no longer want to fight." My father glared at me. My grandfather whispered, "thank you, thank you."

I thought of Dylan Thomas's poem *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* and realized then and there that the poem was bullshit. Cowardice. It's a poem written by someone afraid of having to cope with loss, urging the dying to stay for the livings' sake. The University for Dying would not have hired Dylan Thomas.

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Back in 2019—probably due to the fires in California and pictures of kind-hearted folks in Australia nursing koalas who'd been burned—I started the We're Fucked Club. WFC, for short. It's a small email chain of what I call realists but you may call depressives who look around and know that we're done. Meaning us, humanity. Some of my friends though, who haven't joined the club, have gotten tired of me constantly stating our fate. They haven't quite admitted it, but I can tell. Who wants to have a friend who offers nothing more than saying we're fucked? Back in 2019, they'd offer reasons to be hopeful, reciting something from a science journal or giving examples of people making a difference, and I'd tell them to get real. These are drops in the bucket, I'd tell them, and they can't possibly put out the fires.

We'd go around and around like this until my insistence wore them down and they'd go silent. I remembered, though, some quote I'd heard about how silence doesn't mean agreement. Soon enough they'd come back with more arguments for hope.

Here in 2021, I sense a shift. Maybe they'll join the WFC after all.

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On the day my grandfather Barney's colon cancer claimed him, my father and I were by his side constantly. We would talk, every so often Barney would whisper something. I remember wetting his lips with water.

In the late afternoon, I took a quick break and walked along the beach. I used the time to stroll through the history of my relationship with Barney. I remember him showing me how to peel an apple in one continuous piece, and how, when he took me to the circus at the Boston Garden, he would stop and give every panhandler money because "they need it more than I do", and how he arranged, when he was head of the local Lion's Club, for a blind boy in Spain to come to Boston for a procedure that would restore his eye sight.

When I got back into the apartment, my father told me that Barney had just fallen into a coma. I wondered if my grandfather had somehow waited to let go until he knew I had stepped out for a break. My father and I stayed by him, and in a quick hour he was gone. What happened next, I wasn't expecting. My father didn't weep; he suddenly sprung into action regarding things that needed to be done: calling the police, the insurance agent, the funeral home. When Barney finally went gentle into that good night, my father seemed to have constructed plans for avoiding being present to the moment.

I stopped him. I wanted to sit quietly with my grandfather's body. I asked my father to sit with me. The tasks could wait. He looked at me. I could feel the struggle in him, and then he nodded in agreement. We sat in silence. After a time, and without any prompting, we both stood up, walked to each other with open arms and embraced. We wept.

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I've been thinking it's time for us to seriously explore what would happen if humanity receives a terminal diagnosis, if news agencies no longer have the option of responding to the August 2021 release of IPCC's grim report with a headline like this one from the public broadcaster where I live (the Canadian Broadcast Corporation): "UN sounds alarm on irreversible climate impacts, but offers hope."

And that's what all the media were doing, letting us know that humanity still had agency, there were steps we could take, our fate wasn't sealed. I couldn't help but hear our longing for a doctor, any doctor, willing to say "listen, this is very serious, but if you change your lifestyle..."

We're not terminal. At least not yet. That's what the doctor said.

Humanity is clinging to this hopeful diagnosis: the situation is solvable, we are capable of solving it,

there's still time, so let's get to work.

Why would we think otherwise? If you flip the diagnosis on its head—the situation is unsolvable, we are not capable of solving it, we're out of time, so don't bother working on it—haven't we entered into the realm of utter, collective hopelessness? And since no one wants to live in utter hopelessness, there aren't many voices saying *it's too big to solve, we're not up to it and, anyway, it's too late*. What we get instead is the urgency, the emergency, the possibility that we can do it.

Yes, we can. Go team!

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One friend, who is opposed to the WFC and who has no time for my “negativity”, accuses me of subscribing to doomism, that apocalyptic perspective that pulls the rug out from any and all constructive action. Why fix health care or strengthen food safety or repair that pothole if we're all doomed? He's angry at the kind of apathy he thinks—if I'm not directly promoting—I'm certainly encouraging. I tell him that's not my intent, that I think there are other perspectives to take towards the climate crisis that may be uncomfortable but that need a hearing. I'm thinking mostly about patients in palliative care and the actions we take to care for them. They're doomed, aren't they, so why do we even bother changing their bed sheets?

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The term “palliative care” appeared in the mid-70's. The word “palliative” comes from the medieval Latin word for “to cloak.” Cloaking care. And what is it cloaking? Palliative care is one place where hope for recovery doesn't exist, and actions are addressed towards easing the pain—covering it with a cloak of care—of the patient's last journey towards death. The illness underlying the symptoms of the palliative patient cannot be cured.

I've been wondering what would happen if we were to take what we've learned about palliative care and apply it to humanity. The thought experiment is to declare humanity terminal and then to take some frameworks on caring for the dying and apply them to us as a collective. We'd have to be willing to think of humanity, however multi-faceted and complex, as a single person who's received bad news.

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Perhaps my thought experiment runs counter to our instincts. Rationally contemplating our collective demise isn't what our brains are designed for. Not mine. Even in my doomism, I find it easier to brainstorm *things we could do*. That's no surprise. We're prone to fight or flight; the climate crisis, however, goes right up the middle of those two instincts and offers the possibility that neither will work. If we can stay in the middle for just a moment without fighting or fleeing, what stares back at us then isn't *what do*

we do to save ourselves from extinction, but how do we want to live together in the time remaining? How do we want to experience our last journey?

The climate crisis asks us a spiritual question over and over, if only we could be still enough to hear it. Instead, we have been racing around trying to take action, typically uncoordinated and usually piecemeal. The question then gets lost in the noise.

Climate change may ask some of us about engineering, but it asks all of us about meaning.

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The first framework of palliative care I knew of is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief that she introduced in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. She never meant for the stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—to apply to humanity as a whole, only to individuals. And she never meant for them to be understood as linear; the journey isn't a straight line from denial to acceptance, nor did she mean to imply that everyone always arrives at acceptance.

Apply the five stages to humanity and it seems almost unnecessary to state that the voices of denial are never far off. As to the voices of anger, I've been thinking that they are perhaps best embodied by Greta Thunberg. She's angry and admits it. She wears it like a well-earned badge, while acknowledging that she'd rather be in school than having to rage against the dying of the light. The complex emotional pain she expresses targets our sense of blame and guilt. We carry the guilt of perpetrators; we blame ourselves; we won't forgive ourselves. It is a pain heard in Greta saying, "The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you."

Though she speaks from an us-them lens across the generations—the adults who have power and the young who don't—her voice is one we carry inside ourselves. We are like the lung cancer patient on their death bed knowing they are dying from their forty years of smoking. *We have done this to ourselves.*

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Six years after my grandfather's death, I'm in Boston accompanying my father in an ambulance that's taking him home from the hospital. He wants to die looking at the woods from the corner room in the house he's lived in for the past 25 years. I flew down a few days earlier to make sure we could rent a special hospital bed and get it situated properly in the room. In the ambulance he says to me, "I don't know how this happened so fast." He almost seems apologetic. "Two weeks ago I felt pretty good."

This time the care providers are me and a hospice volunteer. We are caring for my dad who has a colostomy bag and a catheter. The volunteer teaches me how to change them. I put a baby intercom by his bed so if I'm not in the room I can still listen and respond to what he needs. He's the smallest I've ever seen him. It's colon cancer, like Barney had.

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I understand that the pro forma requirement of an essay asserting that humanity is terminal because we've trashed the planet would be to bring in science to make its arguments. I'd bring in research about the rate of warming, about coral reefs, the Amazon, the disappearance of glaciers, the melting of the permafrost. Maybe I'd add something about incremental vs exponential change, include a bit about tipping points before bringing in cognitive science to name our biases for optimism and the status quo. But I'm no scientist. I'd be faking it, the way I faked it with my grandfather about having figured out my life.

I'm not here to argue the science. I'm here to fall in love with our mortality.

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A memory: on hot summer days when I was around ten years old, my father and I would sometimes be invited over for a swim by the one neighbour who had a pool. My father would jump in and pretend to be a whale. He'd take some water into his mouth and lie on his back and then blow the water out. I'd ask him to do it over and over again. He had a big belly that broke the surface of the water like a whale, and his whale imitation thrilled me. Now he lies in the bed, his six foot tall body a good 60 pounds less than the 220 pound whale he was in that pool of my childhood.

Now, looking at him in the bed, I find myself wanting meaningful conversation about his life, about our relationship, but that's not what he wants. He summons whatever energy he has to review what needs to be done in his absence. *Make sure this bill is paid, call these people about the roof, get this kind of water pump.* It's like he has a check-list he wants to get through before leaving. I am there to operationalize the checklist and report back to him.

Our love isn't in question and that makes it easier for me to focus on his list.

Another memory: ten years earlier at a men's retreat, I'd sat in a large circle of men each having a chance to talk about their relationship with their father. Not one of them had heard their father say *I love you*; not one had said *I love you* to their father. My father and I had been exchanging our love for one another for years. The other men in the circle wanted to interview me like I was an alien from another planet.

If my father now needs me to take care of the list, I'm going to take care of the list. That, too, is love.

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One of the reasons for launching the WFC has less to do with science and more to do with our behaviours. I think of how a team of palliative care-givers—doctor, nurse, social worker, chaplain, nurse's aide—really are a team, aligned around a common purpose. But us? I'm not so sure.

When UN Secretary General António Guterres called the August, 2021 IPCC's report a "code red for humanity", he meant it of course as a kind of emergency wake-up call. It struck me as coming from the same place as Al Gore speaking about climate change at Davos in 2009: "This is Thermopylae. This is Agincourt. This is the Battle of the Bulge. This is Dunkirk. This is 9/11."

Sound the alarm, declare loudly enough that the sky is falling, and surely we'll act together.

Yes, we can. Go team.... There is no team.

If anything, hasn't our collective response to COVID-19 confirmed this? When we need to act collectively, we can't. In the face of a virus—an enemy with no ideology and no national flag—we retreated into national tribes. Borders appeared in the European Union, nations fought over PPE, vaccine research became a competition in pursuit of the proverbial pot of gold. We were more likely to blame than to cooperate. Even nation-states fractured internally over how to respond. Our worst instincts were on parade.

Take those behaviors and turn them towards the climate crisis and it's fairly easy to declare it is too big for us to solve. There *isn't* enough time. There are too many players wearing different uniforms. We've built systems that are full of perverse incentives, that make the status quo too sticky, that support incrementalism. One action here is undone by an action there. One long term perspective there is challenged by short-term desires here. And as to the targets we've created—name one we've hit, or even come close to.

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I learned of another framework for palliative care called Total Pain, developed by the founder of the hospice movement, Cicely Saunders. Total Pain explores various pains of palliative patients, and its notion of social pain in particular helped me make sense of that list my father wanted me to operationalize when he was dying. While I saw the tasks my father focused on when Barney died as a tool to avoid his feelings, the list he tasked me with when he was on his own death bed had a deeper purpose.

The social pain of the palliative care patient is both about the pain of letting go of people, especially when we're aware they still need us, and of letting go of our social role. Sometimes they're interconnected: the breadwinner, for the family with small children, who is dying; the small business owner who has employees. They ache with concern for those whom they feel responsible for: *will they be ok? what will happen to them?* Our social role—that place where we have shown up with our competence and contributions—dissolves in front of us. Whom we thought we were—even more, whom others thought we were—is no longer valid, and it won't ever be so again. The palliative care patient's understanding of themselves in their roles with others is its own source of angst.

The list my father was holding onto was his traditional role as husband and homeowner. He wanted to know that the house would be functional for his wife after he left. Anything that wasn't just right, any

repairs that had been delayed, were suddenly vitally important to him. Much of his last energies in life went towards that list of things that needed to be done. Every time I could tell him that something on his list had been addressed, I could sense a palpable relief.

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“Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

— Genesis 1:26

And what about the social pain of Humanity? If we're terminal, if we too need to let go of our role, what is the role that we have been holding onto? What is it that defines who've been in our time here on earth and that collective acknowledgement of our terminal state would require us to release?

The metaphors of western civilization do not allow us to be “mere animals” or to see ourselves as part of nature. We have experienced ourselves as perched at the top of the hierarchy. There's us, and then there's everything else. We have reigned over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and those who scurry upon the earth. We have dominion. On this, it is likely that even evolutionists and creationists would agree: we sit on the throne of creation. They may disagree on the path that got us to the top, but whether it was through evolution or God's design, we've arrived. It's not a role one readily surrenders.

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In the framework of Total Pain, I found the physical pain the easiest to address. Maybe I couldn't fully understand that pain, but caring for my father's physical needs was concrete, specific and clear.

I remember observing how our hospice volunteer would change the colostomy dressing. I was taught how to change the bags of liquids dripping into his body. I knew when to take off and put on a morphine patch. I learned how to change the sheets without needing to have my father leave the bed, a choreography of turning my father that would've been far more difficult had he been his healthy 220 pounds. The irony of being grateful for his weight loss did not escape me.

His physical needs and pain? I was on it.

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Does our language obscure what's needed? I'm aware that I've been calling our current reality “the climate crisis”, but perhaps that's part of the problem. The climate isn't in crisis, it has no emotions (at least none that we know of), it's not panicked, it isn't desperate for help. If anything, the climate has simply adapted to what we have been doing, and it has adapted far faster than us.

Calling the situation the climate crisis puts the problem, once again, out there: the problem rests with the climate and it needs fixing. Our current situation is, more accurately, humanity's crisis, and if we relentlessly called it that, we'd know where to look to identify what's wrong. We won't fix the climate until, and unless, we fix ourselves. The two go together.

That's the real knotty problem.

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Our social role is about even more than our perch atop the hierarchy. To let go of our social role would require us to challenge what we believe has gotten us there. We've arrived at the top through being—and this is never questioned—the brightest brain in the neighbourhood. At times we may acknowledge the intelligence of dolphins, the hive mind of a bee colony or the emotions of elephants, but we never risk our demotion. We take pride in being able to split the atom and map the genome and measure cosmic radiation and, yes, design vaccines. Our identity, our social role, is tied to our belief in our ability to control and master the world that our informing myth has told us to reign over. We're the ones in control. There's a level of mastery that we alone possess.

The gift of global warming is that it is holding up a mirror to our mastery and saying “look.” The brightest brain in the neighbourhood has created things—pick your poison: the internal combustion engine, industrial agriculture, coal-fired power plants—that have damaged the neighbourhood. Could it be that the very mastery we have taken pride in might be implicated in our undoing? And what we are unable to do—restore the glacier, cool the ocean, end the drought—points to the limits of our mastery, even as there are surely people who now see these as interesting problems waiting to be solved.

Chasing mastery is, after all, an inexhaustible business. And it always seems to be seducing us with its fruits. That's why this role—the master at the top of the hierarchy—is so difficult to let go of. Every time governments talk about unleashing innovation to solve climate change, they are invoking humanity's role atop the hierarchy, and reasserting that our mastery will be sufficient. Of course, it is our innovations that have created global warming in the first place. Our position on the throne has created the crisis. What if our inability to let go of that role is precisely what sustains it?

Changing how we see ourselves is no small transformation. As John Kenneth Galbraith once said, “faced with the choice between changing...and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everybody gets busy on the proof.” We will continue to try proving we are in control until the bitter end. Being in control defines us. Not being in control terrifies us. If not us, then who? And if no one's in control, then what? Isn't that the doorway to chaos?

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When I use the stages of grief to observe our conversations about the climate, it seems that the strongest

dynamic is one in which those who are angry yell at those who are bargaining, and those who are bargaining want more time to figure things out. That third stage of Kubler-Ross' model—bargaining—would seem to be the most prevalent, at least in the political class. Maybe we can hold off on our inevitable extinction if only we act better: *would a carbon tax be enough? What if we promote electric cars?* Canada's current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, can serve as a representative political actor here. He is not in denial, he is not angry, he is seeing what he might offer that is good enough to promote some healing of the environment without too much angst inflicted upon those in denial or whose jobs might be impacted or whose votes might go elsewhere. *Can we keep capitalism if we raise that carbon tax even higher? Can we put in a pipeline if we ban plastics? We're willing to do some work if, in exchange, our dire fate is undone, or at least delayed.*

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No one in palliative care says—to riff on the CBC's headline—“Hospital sounds alarm on irreversible colon cancer, but offers hope.” Palliative care is focused on the quality of care, not the preservation of hope. If only those journalists who sell us hope were to spend time in a palliative space, they could learn that the absence of hope is not the presence of hopelessness. Despair doesn't need to be central, depression need not reign.

While acceptance is not inevitable, it is also not impossible. In palliative care, where there is no hope, we can finally discover that the opposite of hope isn't hopelessness.

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We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.

— Wendell Berry

Recently the planet has been delivering its Fire Sermon to us; it's been so loud and clear that it's impossible not to hear. This morning, before I started writing, I read a long article detailing the water crisis in the Middle East, how those living there have an unsustainable future. Scenarios of mass migration of environmental refugees are to be expected. I learned that where I live in Canada is thought to become one of the world's most desirable places as the warming continues.

A quick thought experiment: imagine some innovation appears that could suck carbon out of the atmosphere, even cool the temperature back to where it was say 60 years ago. Wouldn't we celebrate? Wouldn't there be dancing in the streets? And, most importantly, wouldn't we carry on as though the mess we had created hadn't happened? Wouldn't we continue to live in a world of “natural resources,” with all the operational subservience that term implies to those at the top of the hierarchy? We would've been

rescued from fundamental change by our technological cleverness. Problem solved. Carry on people... for now.

I wish I could have compassion for us in this thought experiment, but I can't. How would I feel towards a palliative patient with lung cancer who somehow miraculously recovers, returns to their life and starts smoking again? If we solve Humanity's Crisis without learning its lessons, how long before the crisis returns?

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In the model of Total Pain, spiritual pain is listed last. Cicely Saunders identified pains that convey the experience of the palliative patient, though for each patient the acuteness of their various pains is specific to their situation. Spiritual pain at the end of life is perhaps best understood as the experience of meaninglessness. What we know about addressing the ache of meaninglessness is to put one's life in context, to re-vision one's biography, to see the dignity beyond the regrets and failures and "if onlys". A life is a narrative waiting to be shaped and told, and often we don't shape it. The self-judgements may loom larger than they ought, the small positive actions can get lost under the tumultuous errors that happened by accident, omission and the unplanned circumstance. To heal that ache is to tell the story, not to gloss over what we wish wasn't us but to see those moments of the self in the larger context of one's life. The healing is the telling.

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There is another aspect to my father's story that stills haunts me. The hospital didn't want to release him to die at home. I made it clear in no uncertain terms that he would be coming with me in an ambulance and I would be caring for him, thank you very much. It was only a few days after he was home that I pieced together why they might have wanted to keep him.

It seems that during the last night of his hospital stay, they woke him to give him an MRI in the middle of the night. Why? Because the MRI machine was not being used, and to give him an MRI was a billable that could be sent to his insurance company. The hospital had already acknowledged that there was nothing more they could do for him and that the colon cancer had metastasized to the brain. And yet... an MRI.

The hospital was extracting money from my father's dying body.

I'd like to say what still haunts me about his last night in the hospital is about my father, about a dying individual I love who was abused, but it's not. What haunts me is at the level of the system. A system ostensibly designed for treatment, for healing and the easing of suffering, was so twisted by its business imperatives that it took actions that seem utterly counter to its core purpose.

The hospital was extracting money from my father's dying body.

Suddenly that hospital system's behavior becomes an analogy for much of what has moved us into crisis. Is it too far-fetched to say humanity has been extracting money from our planet's brutalized body? Have not our perverse incentives fostered behaviors that on one level are perfectly rational and on another utterly insane?

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Our decline accelerates in ways we can't anticipate. We're feeling fine and then we're not. We can walk on our own and then we can't. We can feed ourselves and then we can't. It's my father in the ambulance saying "I don't know how this happened so fast. Two weeks ago I felt pretty good."

Why should it be different for the body of humanity? Or the body of the planet? We decline incrementally until we don't.

As to acceptance that humanity has entered into its terminal state, which need not be depressing but simply understood as part of the great cycles of nature and civilizations, few voices are willing to explore the possibility. So caught are we in believing that the opposite of hope is hopelessness, we hardly dare look at the dangers of holding on to hope. Who hasn't experienced, at one time or another in their life, their hopes being dashed on the rocks of reality? To believe our obligation to humanity is to sustain hope is to undermine our resilience should that hope no longer be warranted. When, and if, we realize there isn't any, what would we then turn to?

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There is still a further aspect to spiritual pain than addressing meaninglessness, more than reframing the narrative of our lives. That important work necessarily looks backward, but we are also here, on a bed that we won't be leaving, in a room that we may or may not know well, in a body that is quitting. And that present tense experience is its own doorway. Conscious dying is an invitation to the spiritual at not only the deeply personal level—what has been the meaning of the particular life I have lived?—but also at the transcendent level, into accessing an awareness of belonging to something universal that is far larger than the self.

Whether or not we live with religious faith, the experience of transcendence is a doorway that doesn't discriminate regarding who can enter. And it is most ready to be opened and walked through in conscious dying. One study by Britain's National Health Institute of palliative patients revealed that most died at peace, and 90% had had a spiritual experience in their last two weeks. What does that mean? As the study put it, "perception was no longer bound to the ego" and patients were able to experience states beyond time and space, outside their physical body and "without ego-related emotions and impulses (e.g., needs, hunger, fear, and denial)".

If our mortality then is the invitation we each receive towards spirituality, despite however far away we might have kept such concerns during our lives, then perhaps our species-extinction is extending to us *an invitation to collective spirituality that we've never had.*

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Where had my father travelled in the five stages of grief? The question isn't difficult when applied to Barney. He had a kind of deep acceptance that actually made it easier for us to care for him. He wasn't depressed; he didn't even seem to be sad. Perhaps he'd navigated through that difficult terrain before I arrived to be with him in Florida. I perceived Barney as being marvellously present to his body shutting down. Before he needed a catheter to deal with his urine, my father and I would walk him to the toilet and hold him up as he peed, one of us needing to hold his penis to make sure he peed in the toilet. "Well done," he'd declare, "good aim!"

For my father things are less certain. Several years after he died, I discovered a note titled "To ask the doctor," and it was obviously questions he'd identified after he had received his diagnosis. One was simply "how much time do I have left?" I pair that with a memory of a family reunion on Cape Cod a year after all of us knew of his diagnosis. My father spent most of the weekend observing the activities; sometimes he'd sit outdoors with his eyes closed and it was clear he wasn't napping. There was a moment where I watched my father who wasn't watching any world we could see. With my eyes open, I focused on the sounds he would be listening to, let myself experience the breeze and the smell of the ocean and the light through the trees.

I've always imagined that moment as a time when my father was accepting his imminent departure. I didn't approach him for conversation, somehow thinking what he most needed was to do what he was doing without interruption, without needing to focus on those who were engaged in living. That early question to the doctor and that family reunion points me towards thinking he had moved to acceptance. And yet. The ride in the ambulance, the list he had of things he wanted done, all tell me that in those last weeks he was bargaining for more time. He didn't seem ready to go.

Until he was. And that happened in the last 48 hours of his life. I can't explain this. I don't know why I know this, but I do. My best explanation is that there was a palpable shift not so much in his energy but in his concerns. He stopped focusing on what was needed out there; instead, he would make simple requests for his comfort. I would sit by him and he wouldn't want me to get busy with things to do for the house, but rather he preferred I just sit with him. He said to me that "we leave the world to make room for the Ethans of the world." Ethan was his first grandchild, a lively eight year old at the time. I knew my father had arrived at the place where Barney had been. He was ready to go gentle.

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And us? Are we ready to go gentle? I can see no signs of it. We are full of fight. And if we were ready, we

would face the conundrum of humanity being both the patient and the caregiver. I have struggled with that problem and can only square the circle by acknowledging that we here, right now, are not both, at least not fully, at least not yet. We cast our love and caring forward into linear time. The last generation of humanity is out there, perhaps born today or to be born one-hundred years from today. It is to them we offer palliative care. They will arrive to where fighting no longer serves them. We take care of things now, knowing our actions will make their passage easier.

I imagine the last generation reaching back in time and handing us a list of things they want done before they can let go. The actions I took for my father's list on his deathbed mirrors the actions we take for the generation yet to be and who will be the last. In the love that their dying engenders in us, we can together make things right, taking actions of repair that in doing them well, doing them with care, will repair and honour both ourselves, them and our relationship to the only home we ever known. We do for the future what we wish our ancestors had done for us. We provide palliative care now for those not alive but entirely present. The last generation will come and we will have eased their passage.

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A note to, or from, the dying: when we genuinely let go of hope, when we fully accept our journey's end, we discover we're on the other side of despair. Hope was an illusion; it proved to be the prison we freely choose to lock ourselves in, and when we finally are ready to leave, when we finally step out into the light of day, we experience spaciousness; the beauty of the world, with its travails and consolations, strikes us. Our brief time here shines as the gift it always was. Our smallness, our judgements, all the wounds and grudges we've carried, are released. And those caring for us have full permission for their love to find expression, to release whatever bitterness they have towards us, for tenderness to arise, as it must when the shared experience of our fragility takes hold.

And we have always been fragile, individually and collectively. We say "there but for the grace of god go I" because we know our fragility is undeniable. In the face of a virus, disease, old age, we have but to accept and embrace what we have known all along. When we are fully present to our mortality, to its inevitability, we experience the opposite of hope and discover that it's love.

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And what would conscious dying at the level of humanity mean, were we able to accept our collective terminal condition? Many look to their religious traditions for guidance, receiving Last Rites or reciting the Shema or the Janazah or offering Tulsi leaves, and the meaning is held by the individual's participation in a particular faith community. Dying, though, is as universal as breathing. The end of humanity would be to experience together the same journey in all its diversity. It would be to sit with meaninglessness, to not turn from the narrative of who we've been or to ignore that we are participants in a larger unfolding.

As the experiment that we've named humanity begins to wind down, the invitation awaits. We can

no more deny our cruelties, our serial irresponsibilities, than we can deny our glorious creativity, our honouring of beauty, our hunger for meaning and transcendence. And in that acceptance of everything we have been and are, our actions find their place. As the individual on their death bed is surrounded by those who have offered their love to—and received love from—the dying, so to with humanity. And whom has humanity loved (and, of course, abused) and received love from? Who has been our companion? Only creation. The earth under our feet and the air around us, the water that has quenched our thirst, the animals and insects that have travelled with us, the soil that has fed us.

And now that we are departing our dearest companion, what must we do? What must be spoken? What must we admit? Yes, that we have been abusive. Yes, that we didn't respect our companion's limitations. Yes, that we created laws and economies and governance that didn't respect or account for our companion's needs. And those peoples who were the voice of that love and respect? We silenced them. We were unable to listen to what was best within us. Our greed won out.

This is not difficult to name.

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I have focused our caring towards the last generation yet to be. Let me undo that. It might be a lens that supports taking action but it still obscures what most matters. If all the work we do to fix the planet is in order to save our own skin, nothing's changed. *The planet is broken and not serving us, so let's fix it so it can continue to serve us the way it always has.* That perspective is one in which our *dominion over* remains. But if we are able to see ourselves as terminal, if we can say we won't be here because our time is up and yet still continue to do the same work to support the planet healing itself, then we will know, and demonstrate, that our work is truly not being done for our sake. If we see ourselves as co-equal with all that lives on this planet, if we see ourselves as sentient beings and not sovereigns, then actions will follow from that understanding which are radically different than what went before.

And as to those who think we are the one indispensable crown of creation and must continue and who therefore pursue fixes for our sake, the work they would do and the work of the WFC would not likely be that different. The work looks the same, but what informs the work is infinitely different. In other words, dear reader, I want you to join the WFC not so much because we have no chance of surviving, but because without the perspective that eliminates our sovereignty we won't work to heal the planet as an act of caring, as a declaration of our love for creation, but out of desperation, self-centeredness, entitlement. If we are taking actions for our sake, we've missed the point.

And the actions that are taken are not enacted as a crisis response. What I started out calling *the climate crisis* and then *humanity's crisis* is—if I am to follow my own thinking—not a crisis at all. The language of crisis is a disservice. After all, when someone receives a terminal diagnosis, do we call it a crisis? No, because it isn't. What it is is reality. And the question is how do we respond to that reality? *You have stage four metastatic colon cancer.* With that diagnosis, isn't a crisis response utterly beside the point? And so with

us collectively. There is no crisis, only a question awaiting its answer.

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But wait, why would I want us to take action after I've declared us terminal and hope irrelevant? Isn't action beside the point? Yes, to the extent that *we cannot undo the damage we have done in time to save ourselves*. No, in that the answer to *how do we want to live together in the time remaining* is best answered through action. And the actions that provide the answer cannot be informed by desperation, self-centredness, entitlement or crisis.

Think of the actions as our collective "leave no trace" camping. It's our gift to those creatures who will be here after us. It's our way of making amends for the damage we have done. We end with a great, sacred clean-up project together. Another metaphor: think of it as "closing up the summer cottage," for those of you fortunate enough to have one or, more commonly, think of it as what happens when you leave the apartment you've been renting—you leave it clean and empty for the next occupant. Earth has been our home, we were bad tenants, and now we're doing right by it. For all those who come after.

There's beautiful work to be done, not from hope, but from love. Let us begin.