

**A Dummy's Guide To Surviving Acute Myeloid Leukemia
or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Nurses**

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Prologue

I, Howard Brian Prossnitz, together with your help, am going to make the Chicago Literary Club great again! We are going to build a wall, not some namby- pamby fence, but an honest- to- goodness impenetrable bulwark of concrete and steel with razor sharp barbed wire on top ---- at 51st Street. And we are going to make the University of Chicago pay for it! When Hyde Park sends us its people, it is not sending us its worst. It is sending those who consider themselves to be its best. They come up here to the top floor of the Borg Warner Building and they bring with them ---- a smug sense of perverse self-satisfaction as they deliver esoteric papers on arcane subjects which only they can understand. Some, I assume are good people without PhD's.

The entrenched establishment here consists of a small cadre of professionals who have spent their entire lives reading. Many of them have ties to what they call THE University. Others can not stop talking about Harvard. We are going to break these barriers wide open and include Stanford graduates. We are going to return this Club to the long suffering forgotten class of fuzzy thinkers – the mediocre writer, the person who has trouble putting together a single coherent sentence or articulating one rational thought. We are going to drain the Hyde Park/ Cambridge swamp forever.

I got to this podium by promising the Committee on Arrangements and Exercises that I would write a paper and read it. Now, however, that I have been elected as your speaker, I completely renounce those promises. Instead, I plan to present a one hour infomercial, especially since so few of you bought my novel. Please give the gift of life by writing a tax-deductible check for \$100 payable to the Lurie Cancer Center at Northwestern. On the reference

line, please write “Prossnitz”. That will ensure that the money goes directly to the research lab of my oncologists, Olga Frankfurt and Jessica Altman who are doing ground breaking research. Between them, they have close to one hundred fifty publications. (Special thanks to Yolanda Deen, Tom Pado, and Don Wroblewski for already making donations.)

Background

As of eight days ago, I am a one year stem cell transplant survivor. Although the transplant failed and the donor cells were rejected, I am in remission. There was a forty-two percent chance that I would not be here today.¹ What better way to celebrate than to read a paper about myself to this Club?

My goal in writing this essay was simple: to have it published at the end of the year as one of the two best papers of the season. I have been a member of this august organization since 1989 . Not one of my prior essays has been selected for publication -- a travesty if I say so myself. Putting aside all questions of merit or quality, based on longevity alone and the law of statistics, at least one of my seven prior papers over the last twenty-seven years should have been a contender for publication, but I am confident that none were.

Why not? They were too funny, too amusing. The way to be published is to be serious, to pick an interesting topic, to write well and to be a thought leader. I served on the Publications Committee so I know first- hand that it is important to be philosophical and to think big. As a pragmatist, just the thought of deep thinking scares me. However, I reminded myself that every luminary has copied someone else. Einstein followed Newton. Mick Jagger walked in the shoes of Bo Diddley. Lady Gaga succeeded Madonna.

But who could I follow? I would have to emulate none other than our distinguished member Clark Wagner. He does not even have to write a paper to get it published. I decided to

look at one of Clark's essays and analyze its qualities. His paper which just happened to be lying on my desk is entitled "Death". Perfect, I almost died this year. Surely, I could write about that subject. Going through his essay, I discovered that I would have to make a self reference to the Chicago Literary Club and its members (which I have already done), to use lots of footnotes, to quote Shakespeare, to work in the ancient Greeks, and most dauntingly, to have at least one original defensible thought.

Since the title "Death" was already taken, I thought about calling this paper "Life", but that seemed way too cheerful. The current title came to me in the middle of the night in the intensive care unit while I was on heavy dosages of steroids. I was told by the Chairman of Arrangements and Exercises that I could not possibly use this title since it flouted one of the very few unwritten rules of this Club that it be impossible to determine the subject of a paper from its title. Simultaneously, the Webmaster told me that while my title was repugnant to him, he would defend my right to use it. This was good - my paper was getting attention even before one word had been written!

My Story

Prior to August 1, 2015, I spent little, if any time, thinking about my mortality. My father, educated as a lawyer in Bratislava, was a Holocaust survivor; he worked on his travel business well into his eighties; he went on his final African safari at age eighty-eight; and he passed away at age eighty-nine. He was sharp as a tack until the day he died.

My mother was born in Rochford, Essex, England. She was one of the first women in her circle to take business courses in forestry – in anticipation of taking over her father's booming lumber business. When WWII came, however, she wanted to do something to help so she went back to school to be a surgical nurse. After moving to the States, she fox hunted

around Elizabeth, Illinois on a retired race horse until age eighty-eighty; she traveled to Paris on her own at eighty-nine; and she was demanding a new lap top the day before she died at age ninety. I took it for granted that I would live to ninety.

There was nothing tragic about the final days of my parents. When I visited my father in the hospital, there was no nurse hovering over his bed. Instead, she was in it -- holding his hand. Similarly, my mother always aspired to die in bed -- at the hands of a jealous spouse.

They had a simple formula for longevity and happiness which I religiously followed: swim twenty-two laps a day in the pool at Michigan Shores Club, treasure your children and grandchildren, have lots of friends, enjoy your work, maintain a sense of humor, eat whatever you want, go to Europe two or three times a year, and balance work and pleasure. I did this through age sixty-three and was fully expecting more of the same for another twenty-seven years. My philosophy towards life was drawn from Woody Allen, "I am not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens."²

On Friday, July 31, 2015, I wrapped up a big case and was contemplating either full or partial retirement. Everything changed the very next day, Saturday, August 1, 2015. I had spent the prior week on my knees in the grass painting our white picket fence. I noticed what looked like an insect bite on my leg. It was a bright red round spot. It did not go away and started to grow larger. I went to the Northwestern Immediate Care Center with what I was now thinking was an inflamed spider bite. The nurse took out a black marker and drew a circle around the perimeter of the redness. She told me to go the Emergency Room if the redness started going beyond the circle. Five hours later, I was in the ER.

The resident brought in a doctor who could tell the difference between the bites of brown recluse, hobo and Brazilian wandering spiders. Routine blood tests were run. The results came

back showing alarmingly high white cell counts. The doctors started asking me if I had any chronic disease. They decided to run the tests again because the person in front of them did not look ill. Perhaps there had been a mix up in the lab. Unfortunately, that was not to be the case. Instead, the emergency room resident told me , “I am going to lay all my cards on the table, I think you have acute myeloid leukemia.” I said nothing.

I did not leave the hospital for the next thirty days. The reason for my admission was duly recorded as “bug bite”. In an instant, my world changed. Weeks earlier, I had been strategizing on out maneuvering Skadden, Cravath and Sullivan Cromwell. Now, instead of meeting lawyers in dark suits in Manhattan walnut panelled conference rooms, I was hosting roving bands of doctors wearing white coats in gleaming bright hospital room.

I always knew how I would deal with illness and death. I would do my best to follow my mother’s example – keep a stiff upper lip and cloak myself with a British sense of humor. A few days after having a colonoscopy and being assured that there was no malignancy, she had exploratory surgery for her bowel obstruction and was discovered to in fact have Stage IV colon cancer. The doctors in Dubuque said that the cancer was incurable and implied that she should accept her diagnosis without treatment. We, however, persuaded her to undergo chemotherapy at the University of Chicago Hospital. Once a week, she drove herself on the three hundred twenty mile round trip from Galena to Hyde Park with her raucous Golden Retrievers running wild in the back of her Subaru.

On one trip, she left her car at our house in Oak Park and took a taxi to the hospital. She was wearing a fanny pack that administered her chemo. It started beeping in loud strident tones because the chemo was about to run out. These beeps produced complete panic in the taxi

driver. He thought that he had the world's oldest suicide bomber in the back seat, and he gunned the accelerator to get to the hospital in record time.

My mother got two more good years including a final trip to Provence. I still treasure the photograph that I have of her floating on her back in the swimming pool of the villa. She was serving as the badminton net. On either side are my two daughters brandishing rackets and hitting the birdie over her. She kept her British sense of humor to the very end – sending her nurses emails with cartoon headers of animated horses jumping over fences and complaining to her doctors about the high cost of dying.

I got very little sleep that night in the ER. Liza had gone home about 10 p.m. I called her to ask if she realized how serious it was. She said she did, but did not have too much else to say.

I had time for self reflection. I was so happy that I had not deferred living until retirement. For instance, when I joined this Club and sat down at the long table for the first time in the old Cliff Dwellers at the top of Orchestra Hall, I was forty years younger than the average member. I have enjoyed this place for nearly three decades. The only sad part is that I have seen so many good friends go over the years, people like Tony Batko, Roger Ball, Ray Greenblatt, John Broeksmit, Leon Carrow, Herman Lackner, David Lehman, Manley Mumford, and Francis Straus to mention a few. These were people of great warmth, grace, kindness, and intelligence.

The following morning a young oncology fellow appeared. Most of my doctors would be in their twenties and cheerful. Northwestern has a policy against hiring overtly depressed people. I cut to the chase and asked, “how much longer do I have to live?” She deflected the question and instead sang the praises of how nice my room would be at the top of Prentice Women's Hospital. Getting onto the leukemia floor requires passing through a Star Trek type air chamber to minimize the chance of visitors bringing in germs. I had great views of the Museum

of Contemporary Art and Water Tower Place. The private room was well appointed with wood paneled walls and a built in window seat that folded out as a bed for overnight visitors.

I had romanticized that being on the leukemia floor would be like moving into my college dorm freshman year with lots of new friends, people constantly popping in and out of my room and late night bull sessions. It is not like that at all. Most of the people are very sick. Many of them do not get out of bed. There were a few people who routinely walked around the halls for exercise like myself. I did have some conversations with other patients and these conversations turned very intense very quickly. As a survivor, I can look back with an upbeat attitude, but there is nothing funny about an acute leukemia diagnosis. The disease strikes with almost no warning and it is deadly in a short period of time if left untreated. The internet is full of stories of people who died within days or weeks of their diagnosis.

After I was ensconced in my new room, my team of freshly scrubbed doctors arrived. Just like there are no overtly depressed physicians, there are no overtly filthy physicians. My oncologist, Jessica Altman, was short, had an untamed Jewish Afro, bright intense sparkling eyes. spoke like a N.P.R. announcer, and looked to be about forty which set her apart from the youngsters. She told me that her goal was to cure me. That word brought instant hope. It was in stark contrast to the Dubuque doctor whose first words to me were that my mother's cancer was incurable.

Liza was cuddled next to me in the bed at the time. This led to a pronouncement from Jessica that there was to be no sex in the hospital. In true Eastern liberal arts college fashion, she did not simply issue a blanket admonition. Instead, she went on to elaborate, "that is for a lot of different reasons" and she started to enumerate these reasons one at a time.

I was not quite sure why Jessica felt that she and her team were about to witness public fornication. The response that was running through my head was “Jessica, I know that you went to Brown, not Haverford, and that you undoubtedly spent most of your college years running around naked with your fellow artsy types and engaged in mock sword fights like Annie and I witnessed when we visited the campus, and this may come as a total shock to you, but Liza and I have not made a habit of having public sex, and we do not intend to start now simply because I have leukemia.”

I decided to be open about my illness. The thought of being private did not occur to me. I had worked hard to maintain lifelong friendships and why should I stop now? I also knew that the support of my friends was critical to my mental well being and probably also contributed to my physical health. I asked all my nurses whether patients with a positive mental attitude did better. The unequivocal answer was “yes”.

I have a group of sixty friends on my gmail contact list. They come from all chapters in my life: Evanston High School, Haverford College, Stanford Law School, Sonnenschein, Abramson and Fox, Antonow and Fink, the Public Investors Arbitration Association, this Club, London, Provence, and Forest Avenue in Oak Park. I did not sugar coat the news to friends. An early email to my good friend Bob Birndorf says, “.. there is a pretty good chance that I have acute myeloid leukemia which is an aggressive cancer that requires immediate treatment”.

People responded in different ways:

“I feel like I have been punched in the stomach.”

“Your friends will keep you in mind every day.”

“I will start by urging you to use this as a wake up call to put your affairs in order.”

“This is by no means a hopeless situation.”

“I will come to see you often.”

Annie created a blog for me entitled “Cancer Fighting Man”, subtitled “ All I hear is the charge of marching charging immature white blood cells and the time is right for fighting in the veins, boys!” Post number one reports in part:

Mr. Prossnitz explained to his doctors that he swims 22 laps a day; that he eats healthy; that he has never smoked; that he was never obese; and that he manages stress through frequent use of a yacht, Porsche and trips to villas in Provence, London, and St. Barts. He rarely works more than 30 hours a week.³

In those early days, I had no clear idea what my chances were. If you asked me then what the probability was for me to be delivering a paper to this club tonight, I would have said 50/50.

I had peripherally inserted central catheter or PICC lines put in my right arm so at all times I was hooked up to plastic bags containing chemo and other medicines. Wherever I went, I was attached to a wheeled pole holding these bags. Twenty-four/ seven chemotherapy started a week after admission. I lost most of my hair, experienced severe nausea, and shed twenty pounds. Unfortunately, the weight loss came from my face not my stomach. I obsessed about eating apple pancakes from Walker Brothers, lemon ices from Taylor Street, and apple cinnamon crisp bagels from Au Bon Pain. Liza and the girls would dutifully retrieve these items. I would take a few bites and then vomit.

What was daily life like in the hospital? Not bad to tell you the truth. I started the day walking around the floor, then reading more than I had in a long time, sending and receiving emails, writing on my blog, and talking to friends on the phone. I reconnected on a deeper level with people whom I had been in casual contact for many years, but never had time to talk to in length. I sent an email to my entire college class, one hundred eighty in number, and instantly

heard from many classmates. Literary Club members Michael Koenigskecht, Yolanda Dean, Philip Liebson, Luigi Mumford, Don Wrobelski, Tom Pado and Lee Hamilton checked up on me. My college suite mate, Bill Ross, called me every day. Law school friends Wendy Erb, Peter Osinoff, Eric Marcus, George Carrier, and Steve Sim regularly called. Nancy Carter, Carole Towne, Liz Rorke, Jeff Cappel, Bob Byron, Bob Birndorf, Stacey Birndorf, Greg Borgeson and Kevin Murphy visited me at the hospital. Stacey Birndorf also wrote to me weekly. Catherine Cappel left numerous meals at the doorstep of our house. Northwestern doctors who I had known from high school and college, Dan Fintel and Jane Winter, came by to see me. Having so much contact from so many friends filled me with joy. Instead of despairing over the possibility of death, I was overwhelmed with gratitude about having so many people care about me. I had zero regrets and not once did I think, I wish I had done x, y or z.

Unwavering love and stalwart support came from Liza, Meg and Annie. Liza would come before work, deliver the *New York Times* and breakfast rolls when I could tolerate eating. Some days, she would set up shop in my hospital room. The nurses would get confused and think that she was talking to them when she told associates in her authority voice to “start thinking clearly”. Meg would hold my hand and make me feel like a million dollars. Annie took a two month leave of absence from her job in Paris to be at my side, to be my private webmaster and to comfort me.

One task I pursued unsuccessfully was trying to line up husbands for my daughters. There was promising material with graduates of New Trier, Phillips Exeter Academy, Yale, Brown, Harvard Medical School, University of Chicago Medical School, and even Stanford Business School. The ones I identified as the most promising turned out to be engaged, married or gay.

In the first month of chemotherapy, I took an unexpected detour into intensive care. My blood pressure had dropped precipitously. Within minutes, a swarm of doctors and nurses materialized. I had pulmonary edema – my lungs were filling with fluid from all the liquids being pumped into me. I became the first patient of Jessica to be sent to intensive care during initial chemotherapy. The trip to the ICU was straight out of Marcus Welby, M.D. I was wheeled down the hall hooked up to an IV with a gaggle of white coats around me. A tall handsome resident was holding my hand and asking me if I was doing O.K.

Jessica was not on duty that day. Instead, a blonde bombshell named Olga walked into my intensive care room. I thought to myself, “how lucky can one guy get?” First, a Jewish intellectual from Brown, and now a European Jayne Mansfield! She introduced herself as Dr. Frankfort and said, “what is your excuse for being here, you look fine!” I insisted that she had to be from Germany based on her last name and her accent. The more I repeated it, the more agitated she got. So I failed to correctly a Belarus accent. We still bonded right away.

My stay in the ICU was short and I returned to the oncology floor. I gave my blog readers at top Ten List for dealing with leukemia:

10. Be treated at a good nationally ranked research hospital.
9. Live your life before diagnosis with no regrets.
8. Be nice to the nurses.
7. If you happen to be a litigator and eight people walk into your room, remember that these are not opposing counsel.
6. Do not hide your disease.
5. If needed, set limits on visitors.
4. Schedule your admission for the weekend of August 15th

so you get a free front row seat for the Air and Water Show.

3. Get as much sleep as you can.

2. Do not hesitate to express wants and needs.

1. If you want to induce horror into your nurses, hook up speakers up to your iphone, crank it up and play *Sister Morphine* by the Stones:

In another post, I did not spare my blog readers the nitty gritty details:

So far, I have experienced constant diarrhea, and I am unable to keep any food down. If I have a cup of soup or milk shake, I vomit immediately. I was able to tolerate a cracker. I am not experiencing nausea. I just can not keep the food down. . Today, I am going to have Liza bring down a blender so I can concoct my own smoothies.

On Day Number 18, I posted a picture of myself and my team of six doctors. They were all wearing the Team Howard T shirts that I ordered for them. The t shirts had a picture of myself looking incredibly healthy in cycling gear outside Lacoste in Provence. The photo had been taken thirty-five days before my admission.

Good news came on Day 20:

The preliminary results are in from the second bone marrow test and the chemo is doing exactly what it is supposed to — killing off the evil cancer cells in my bone marrow. I get a more detailed report Tuesday.

Victory was confirmed on Day 22 when the final results came in. A waiting game then ensued for my neutrophil count, good white blood cells, to get back to 500 so I could leave the hospital. Day 28 brought home sweet home. One of my attending physicians, Dr. Ma, said she had never seen anyone bounce back from chemo as fast as I did. So far so good.

On September 3, 2015, I wrote:

As everyone knows, cancer is a dangerous strange beast. It can go into hiding and then come back to bite you in the ass in ways you could never have foreseen. Hence, your time horizon as a cancer patient becomes one week at a time, if not one day at a time.

I will have two rounds of consolidation chemo — each lasting about a week at a time followed by recovery at home. No more long hospital stays!

I concocted all sorts of plans while I was hospitalized: I would retire completely, I would work one day a week, I would work twenty-five hours a week, I would travel one week a month, I would build a carriage house with a five car garage, I would landscape the yard with a fire pit, I would sail across the lake, I would raise \$100,000 at my birthday party for cancer research, I would only do class actions, and I would only do securities arbitrations. In actuality, the only thing I did for sure was to drive my family crazy.

In my September 3, 2016 blog posting, I had this to say:

Life has a spiritual quality/ meaning that can not be ignored regardless of whether you are a Jew, Muslim, Protestant, agnostic, or born again Christian. I am not terribly religious, but at the end of the day, I have to believe that there is some meaning to life that is more than human beings just emerging out of the primordial mud through evolution.

I thank my lucky stars for having the best wife, daughters, and set of friends that anyone could ever hope for.

That perhaps is what Life is all about...

There were bumps in the road ahead that I could not know about. I remained on a very short leash to the hospital, having to go back several times a week for blood draws. Since September 1, 2015, I have had one hundred fifty-five doctor appointments. I lost count of how many different physicians I have seen – my best guess is somewhere between fifty and seventy-five.

My September 15, 2015 blog notes:

I have become an expert at absorbing needle pricks. Since

getting out of the hospital, I have had umpteen blood draws including one where I got back to the office and I received a call from a nurse who told me that according to the hemoglobin level of my recent draw, I should be clinically dead. She asked how I felt. I said that I had divy biked the two miles to the hospital that morning and to the best of my knowledge, I was still alive. A second blood test showed everything was ok.

What was to follow would be the most painful part of the whole experience -- emotional pain – not physical suffering. I had long discussions with Jessica and Olga about whether to have a stem cell transplant. In this procedure, your own blood forming stem cells are replaced by cells from a genetically matched donor. If it worked, I would be cured. If it did not work, there could be lifelong effects of graft host disease or even death. A college classmate, Ron Swaab, an oncologist, said that the best strategy is to hit cancer as hard as you can when you are still feeling good. As a risk taker, I decided to go for it.

The greatest chance of success with a stem cell is to have a sibling donor. This worried me. My brother had stopped talking to me eight years earlier after a lifetime of serious conflict. I “reached out” to him, told him of my illness and for good measure offered him the Porsche and yacht if I did not make it. This worked briefly. There was a 25% chance that he would be a match and he was. I was very happy. The happiness was short-lived. Without telling me in advance, he sent a seven page email rant to all my doctors telling them that they were trying to give him leukemia, impliedly threatening them with legal action for failure to make proper disclosures, and saying that he would not be a donor. The actual odds of any adverse consequences to him were less than one percent; and the notion that he might get leukemia from being a donor was nothing short of crazy. After a last minute alarm about whether my non-relative donor could proceed, I was cleared for a transplant.

I entered the hospital on Friday, November 13, 2015 for a round of preparatory chemotherapy, received the stem cells intravenously on November 20, 2015, made a video of the procedure using *Start Me Up* as the audio much to the amusement of my nurses, spent last Thanksgiving in the hospital, and was released on December 1, 2015. I never really felt my normal self between December 2015 and February 2016. The donor cells were supposed to reach 100% and completely replace my own cells, but they never got higher than 60%. I started to run low grade fevers and to have weird rashes. Things started to unravel on February 23, 2016. I was in the hospital for regular blood counts which revealed that my platelets had dropped to a dangerously low level of four. I was at risk of potentially fatal internal bleeding. My blood pressure was uncharacteristically low. I was losing the graft. A platelet infusion was given and with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, I should have never been sent home until my blood pressure returned to normal.

On the night of February 25, 2016, I lost all vision in my right eye. We went to the ER at 2:00 a.m. and I was admitted into intensive care where I stayed for a week. My lungs had once again filled with fluid so I was on oxygen. Things slowly improved; a small portion of eyesight came back in my right eye; and I was released on March 7, 2016. I have avoided hospital admission since then. Neither my doctors, nor I, know exactly why I am in remission. On my last visit, Olga told me that there is a hit and run theory about stem cell transplants killing off cancer cells even if the graft is ultimately lost, but there is no hard evidence to support this theory. While my sub-title mentions learning to love my nurses, I will leave that part entirely to your imaginations.

Thinking Big

My experience gave me plenty of time to ponder:

What is a life well lived?

What is a life that matters?

What should I do with the time I have left– be it one year or twenty-five?

In preparing this paper, I decided to look at how great minds have answered these questions over the ages. I began with *Plato at the Googleplex - Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*, by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. She talks about answers from the Greeks. Dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides embraced what Goldstein coins as the Ethos of the Extraordinary – in order to achieve a life worth living one must do something incredible. The ordinary humdrum life is no good. Goldstein summarizes this concept, “(o)ne must live so that one will be spoken about, by as many speakers as possible and for as long as possible. It is, in the end, the only kind of immortality for which we may hope”.⁴

Achilles was the poster boy for the Ethos of the Extraordinary.

Mother tells me,
the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
that two fates bear me on to the day of death.
If I hold out here and lay siege to Troy,
my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
my pride, my glory dies ... true,
but the life that's left me will be long,
the stroke of death will not come on me quickly.⁵

We still worship with a special reverence celebrities who die young. Think of J.F.K., Princess Diana, James Dean, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, John Lennon, and Brian Jones. Only the Queen of England gets to be simultaneously happy and glorious according to the lyrics of *God Save the Queen*. My moment of glory ended long ago at Evanston Township High School with back-to-back state championships in master debating and extemporaneous speaking, neither of which proved to be fatal events. I needed another model for a life well lived.

I moved on to the teachings of the son of an Athenian stone mason – Socrates. Socrates wanted to know what was essential in order to have a worthwhile life. He did not know the answers, but he relentlessly pursued the questions. Socrates was asked to make a choice between banishment from Athens or living a life in silence without questioning anything. He chose death over both alternatives. “I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day...”⁶ He most famously declares that the unexamined life is not worth living. What does this mean? It means that we live a life of reason, that we think, that we make decisions based on logic, and that we develop a set of values to guide our lives. Living well is not something we just stumble into. It requires work. Goldstein explains:

Could you live a life worth living, the life of *arete*, (the Greek word which is usually translated as virtue) by fortunate accident – that is without living the examined life? Socrates is saying no. ... *Arete* can’t happen by happy accident, no more than knowledge can. *Arete*, like knowledge, requires an accounting, a logos.⁷

The critics say that Socrates is an elitist; and that only the privileged few have the luxury to examine their lives. I disagree. Socrates’ teachings can be followed by both free citizen and slave alike – each can live a virtuous life. What does living an examined life look like in 2016? It includes asking why we make the decisions we do, determining what is important to us, and then having the will power to put those goals first. It also means that we examine what is fair and just for our society as a whole and to act accordingly.

Unlike Socrates, our next thinker was of noble birth. He was dubbed Platon by his wrestling coach because of his broad shoulders. As a child, Plato was taught grammar, music, painting, and gymnastics by the most accomplished teachers in Athens. He was privileged enough to be able to choose poetry as his first profession before turning to philosophy. In *The Republic*, he tells us that living the good life requires more than examining it. The individual

must strive to promote his community. The just soul and the just man will have a good life.⁸ Virtue is something that each individual must attain on his own.⁹ In the dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus, the message is that money alone does not bring a good life. Family and religious duties must be fulfilled.¹⁰ Another important part of his thinking is that in the good life, the intellect, spirit and physical need to be balanced so that reason can lead us to truth.¹¹ The criticism of elitism fits Plato better than Socrates. His philosopher kings were to come from the highest social classes for whom education and true knowledge was reserved.

Aristotle was a physician's son. His name means best purpose. When he started his education at Plato's Academy, he was only sixteen while Plato was sixty. Plato died some twenty years later. Aristotle left the Academy to travel and to become the tutor of Alexander the Great. In 334 BC, he returned to Athens to found the Lyceum. He died at sixty-two at the height of his career.¹²

Aristotle taught that happiness is achieved by living a virtuous life.¹³ Happiness is not a momentary feeling of pleasure, but rather something to be realized over an entire lifetime.¹⁴ It is not a means to achieve anything else because it is the ultimate end in itself. A paramount virtue for Aristotle is friendship which is something permanent and hard to attain, not simply a transitory connection based on utility or pleasure. The good life is spent acquiring intellectual virtues. Contemplation alone is not enough. Character virtues like common sense, courage, temperance and generosity are essential. These virtues are to be exercised in moderation. Only then can eudaimonia or happiness be realized.¹⁵

Aristotle was another elitist, especially when it came to education. He posited that there is agreement between the educated and uneducated that happiness equates with the good life. However, the uneducated believe that the good life comes from plain and simple things like

wealth, pleasure and honor.¹⁶ Mincing no words, he writes that “the vast majority shows themselves to be absolute slaves in choosing the kind of life lived by cattle”.¹⁷ Further, “(a) life of making money is contrary to nature”.¹⁸ The key to happiness is to exercise our human potential for a life of reason and contemplation.

Born in 106 B.C. to a well to family, Marcus Tullius Cicero spent most of his life as a lawyer and a statesman. He agreed with the Stoics that humans should strive for virtue and that reason should guide our lives. Pleasure is acceptable in moderation. A Stoic relies on self control and fortitude to deal with the vicissitudes of life. In the words of Epictetus, who was born as a slave, “sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy”.¹⁹ Cicero also had a prescription which should resonate well in this Club, “(r)ead at every wait; read at all hours; read within leisure; read in times of labor; read as one goes in; read as one goes out. The task of the educated mind is simply put: read to lead.”²⁰

Our next philosopher’s big ideas were matched by a remarkably mundane life. Born in Konigsberg in 1724, Immanuel Kant spent almost his entire life there. His father was a saddle maker. The family lived modestly with pious Protestant beliefs. He did not earn a decent living until he finally got tenure in his fifties. Physically, he was ugly and frail, but this did not stop him from being a social butterfly. When he hosted dinner parties, he imposed a strict code of behavior. First, guests were to swap stories. Then, they were to engage in reflective conversation, and finally, there was to be a closing period of hilarity so everyone left in a good mood.²¹ I urge immediate adoption of this format for all our meetings.

Kant would have been right at home in Illinois because he thought all humans are inherently bent towards corruption. Like Aristotle, he theorized that the ultimate good is to

achieve happiness and virtue. Doing the right thing does not always lead to happiness. Human reason is not to make us happy, but to assist us in being virtuous.²² Kant's categorical imperative dictates that one should never act in such a way that the action could not be willed to be a universal law. The virtuous person has sufficient strength not to give into bodily inclinations. He reasoned that we can only achieve both virtue and happiness if God exists. Kant felt that appreciation of art and beauty, especially roses, birds and apple trees, brought out the best in us.

Kant's ethical system was not without its shortcomings. In his world, all duties are absolute so we are left in a quandary when duties collide – when a killer appears at the front door asking where our children are – do we follow the duty to tell the truth or the duty to protect our family/ Further, he discounts empathy, love and emotion as valid motivators for action. Only duty counts. This is wrong in my view. We care about people because of love, not just out of duty.

In 1844, Nietzsche was born in eastern Germany. He was the son of a priest and proved to be a stellar student becoming a professor of Greek in his mid twenties. He later quit teaching and moved to the Swiss Alps to write. Things were not so great in his personal life: he did not like his mother, he could not stand his sister's voice, his books did not sell and women rejected him. At age forty-four, he had a nervous breakdown after seeing a horse being flogged on the street. He ran up to the horse and screamed, "I understand you".

Nietzsche used long words such as *selbstüberwindung* (for self-overcoming), and *übermensch* (superman). He took opposite views from Kant. For him, living a meaningful life started with accepting that "God is Dead". He thought compassion and equality stood in the way of achieving excellence and individual nobility. Suffering and struggle are needed to achieve excellence. In his view, an individual has lived well if he loves his own fate and can

look back at his life and want nothing to be different.²³ In my mind, Nietzsche goes off the deep end when he attacks Socrates as a decadent, ugly buffoon whose dialectic methods were baseless entertainment. I disagree. In fact, my primary mode of conversing with people is to use the Socratic method much to the disgust of my wife.

Martin Heidegger, born in 1889, and has been described as the most incomprehensible German philosopher that ever lived which is high praise indeed given the inaccessibility of Immanuel Kant. Indeed, he leaves Nietzsche in the dust when it comes to using long German words. There is *seinsvergessenheit* (the oblivion of being), *bodenständigkeit* (rootedness in soil), and *wesensverfassung* (essential constitution). Heidegger was trained to be a priest, but left the church before the end of WWI. He was a provincial rural man who liked living in a hut, walking in the countryside and picking mushrooms.

Heidegger felt that we have lost touch with the wonder of being alive. Only at rare times when we are all alone do we encounter the strangeness of everything. We are constantly running away from *Das Nichts* – the nothing. In our daily lives, we forget the unity of all life.²⁴ We also forget to live in freedom. He believed that a good life means living on your own terms and not allowing others to set expectations for us. Only when we encounter the nearness of death can we cast aside the day-to-day. When asked in a 1961 lecture how we should go about improving our lives and recovering authenticity, Heidegger responded that we should spend more time in graveyards.^{25 26}

The common thread of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Nietzsche is that they all believe that life can have meaning and that individuals can find virtue and happiness, albeit through different paths. The opposite belief is expressed by Macbeth,

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.²⁷

Or as Nobel laureate Bob Dylan puts it in *All Along the Watchtower*:

“There must be some way out of here”, said the joker to the thief,
“There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief.
Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth ...

Let’s call this existentialism, the philosophy which I can most easily understand and most easily reject. Jean Paul Sartre believed that one can never achieve happiness by looking for the meaning for life. In his novel, *Nausea*. Antoine Roquentin, a historian and writer, starts a journal to chronicle the sickening feelings that have come over him. He is besieged by vertigo, anxiety and depression. Roquentin writes:

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition.²⁸

Camus was of the same ilk. His atheism informed his belief that our existence is absurd; and that life is meaningless in its absurdity. He offers us a reed of hope – we can revolt against the absurd so suicide is not necessary. Sisyphus could find meaning in life by scorning the gods and living passionately in the moment with full knowledge of the futility of rolling the boulder up the hill. Why existentialist texts are read first in many high schools escapes me. They can only incite more teen age angst. The Greeks would be a better starting point.

What Do I Think?

Where do I come out? I am squarely in the shoes of two people that I did not discuss yet, Epicurus and Simone de Beauvoir. Epicurus got it completely right when he said in his

Guide to Happiness, “(o)f all the means to insure happiness throughout the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.”²⁹

Simone de Beauvoir, exhibits a more optimistic view of the human condition than did her partner Sartre, when she writes:

One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion. When this is so, then there are still valid reasons for activity or speech. People are often advised to 'prepare' for old age. But if this merely applies to setting aside money, choosing the place for retirement and laying on hobbies, we shall not be much the better for it when the day comes. It is far better not to think about it too much, but to live a fairly committed, fairly justified life so that one may go on in the same path even when all illusions have vanished and one's zeal for life has died away.³⁰

My experience is that family and friendship are what gives my life ultimate meaning – not money, nor some sense of duty fulfilled.

Conclusion

Now that I have had the luxury of spending time with the world's greatest philosophers, I return to the question of what I will do with the rest of my life. I will take seriously what Steve Jobs had to say at the 2005 Stanford commencement. He admonished graduates to live every day as their last for most certainly they would eventually be correct.

I will continue to do what I always I have done – to follow the precepts of Plato and Aristotle by living a life of balance, moderation and hedonism. I will hold my family and friends close; I will represent the poor, oppressed and downtrodden; I will not write a second novel because I have nothing to more to say about sex, greed and violence; I will travel to Andalucia as well as Provence; I will come to meetings of the Chicago Literary Club; I will enjoy our new puppy Angie; I will try to read more serious books; and last but not least, I will swim twenty-two laps a day.

Notes

¹ http://bloodcell.transplant.hrsa.gov/RESEARCH/Transplant_Data/US_Tx_Data/Survival_Data/survival.aspx.

² https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10356.Woody_Allen.

³ <https://wordpress.com/stats/day/cancerfightingman.wordpress.com>.

⁴ Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*, 9 (2014).

⁵ Homer, *Iliad*, 9:497-505, Fagles Translation, (1990).

⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 38A.

⁷ Goldstein, *supra*, 329.

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 353e.

⁹ Goldstein, *supra*, 292.

¹⁰ Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 313 (1968).

¹¹ <https://www.reference.com/world-view/good-life-according-plato-b076670e5c0b92d2#>.

¹² Bassham, *The Philosophy Book*, 74 (2016).

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098 a 15.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 1101 a10.

¹⁵ *Philosophy - The Good Life: Aristotle*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFPBf1AZOQg>.

¹⁶ *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, 316 (Translations by Creed and Wardman) (Signet 2003).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 317.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 264 (1945).

²⁰ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1036802/Marcus-Tullius-Cicero-Read-at-every-wait-read-at-all-hours>.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsgAsw4XGvU>

²² *Philosophy - The Good Life: Kant*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6UQLiHB0k0>.

²³ *Philosophy - The Good Life: Nietzsche*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMFkSM5bHMo>.

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br1sGrA7XTU>.

²⁵ <https://sites.psu.edu/philosophyandeverydaylife/2015/09/18/post-2-how-can-we-live-authentic-lives-heidegger/>.

²⁶ I am not going into the question of whether Heidegger who joined the Nazi party was anti-Semitic because it is a complicated enough question to be worthy of its own paper with evidence pointing both ways.

²⁷ *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5, Lines 20 - 31.

²⁸ As quoted in White, *The Burden of History*, 38 (1966).

²⁹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/169363-of-all-the-means-to-insure-happiness-throughout-the-whole>.

³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 541 (W.W. Norton first paperback ed. 1996).