

Waiting for My Turn

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In February 2014, I wrote a piece called "I'm Frail" that included the fact that "the ultimate course is a downward one."¹

Given that my condition could only get worse, I hoped that frailty would be the shortest stage of my life, with one exception. My wife Käthe was "my primary joy and reason to get up in the morning," but she died on October 20, 2014. We knew that death was moving in on us, so Käthe had composed a prayer for us that ended, "I hope we die together." But she got the first turn at it. Now I am waiting for my turn.

The problem is that we are not created with an off switch. My doctor said he couldn't help me, at least not legally. An RN in this assisted living facility said I had an irregular pulse and laughingly scolded me for being "in a hurry" to die. A Geriatric Nurse Practitioner said she had no crystal ball. These responses reflected the fact that doctors cannot reliably predict how long even terminally-ill people will live.²

So I tried the ePrognosis website. Answering the questions as best I could, ePrognosis estimated my likelihood of dying within next six months as only 17%.³ Not encouraging.

Since Käthe's death, I have spent most of my days writing. I wrote a piece on "Bereavement: Long Term."⁴ I have done writing for the *Wikipedia* and even took a stab at completing an article I first drafted in 1980. That has mostly occupied my time between breakfast and going to bed right after dinner, still no sleeping during the day. When my brain gets tired, I refresh it with computer card games.

1. Victor G. Cicirelli, *Older Adults' Views on Death* (Springer, 2002), p. 4.

2. Pauline W. Chen, M.D., "Why Doctors Can't Predict How Long a Patient Will Live" at <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/19/why-doctors-cant-predict-how-long-a-patient-will-live/>

3. <http://eprognosis.ucsf.edu/default.php>

4. Online at <http://www.ahpcc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/milton-crum---bereavement.pdf>

However, I am becoming bored with what I am able to do. I can think of many things I would like to do if Käthe were still living and we were both healthy enough. But in my present world, I can't think of activities that would remove boredom.

Perhaps my problem will be solved by being bored to death, literally. A 2010 story in the London *Daily Mail*, reported that "you really can be bored to death, scientists discover."⁵ The social network Reddit.com receives posts from people who are tired of living. One person wrote about "the utter boredom of waiting to die."

I could get no help from medical professionals in predicting my waiting time, so I'll try a self-prognosis. I can tell that I am running down both physically and mentally.

I am losing ground mentally. My brain seems confined in a box with little interest in the larger world, not even family. I find less of interest in *Time* magazine and the newspaper. I don't watch TV. In the little world of my room, personal hygiene, dressing, and other activities of daily living demand that my brain remembers to do them. A task as simple as writing this paper taxes my brain. I get tired mentally and physically. That makes life less enjoyable, but I don't see it as speeding up my dying.

I am losing ground physically. My physical decline might suggest a shorter prognosis. I'm tired all the time. Right now I am pushing myself. I feel like lying down. I am in bed more than thirteen hours at night, getting the intermittent sleep of an old man, and it is still hard to get up for breakfast. I understand why there is so much dozing and sleeping in this place. Maybe the way I'll go will be a gradual running down with increasing care by the aides until the end. As Dr. Gillick describes it, "before death comes a no-man's-land in which many people merely exist—unproductive, unvalued, and often unwell, but alive."⁶

Maybe the running down won't last for years as it has for some other residents who were already decrepit when I moved in here more than two years ago. I can feel my irregular pulse the RN

5. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1249073/You-really-bored-death-scientists-discover.html>

6. Muriel R. Gillick, *The Denial of Aging*

noticed. Fast beats, slow beats, no beat for a second or two. I am winded by slight exertion or by lying down. Maybe my heart's failing offers the best hope.

My legs are stiff and they are painful especially in bed. I am on the verge of using a walker for the 100' walk to the dining area. But I don't have any hope for my legs taking me out, unless they cause a bad fall. At my age, my chance of falling is more than 50%.

My digestive system is out of whack. On the one hand, I take Miralax to prevent constipation. On the other hand, whatever I eat turns to gas. This makes for discomfort and air pollution, but not for death.

I have a few other symptoms not worth mentioning. So I find two things in the running for taking me out naturally: an age-related running down or my heart's failing. There are ways for taking oneself out, but they are not yet in serious consideration.

There is another potential answer to my problem: pneumonia. An article "Pneumonia, Friend of the Elderly" asserts that "there is good reason to think of pneumonia as a blessing in some cases." Then, it would be better for the patient to forego treatment.⁷ Thus, pneumonia has been called "the old man's friend" because without treatment, sufferers often slip away peacefully in their sleep.⁸

I am waiting, trying to make some worthwhile use of my time and not just "kill time" as another infirm resident puts it. Writing this piece leaves me backing three candidates for taking me out: my heart's failing, gradually running down, and pneumonia. Then there is the possibility of a dark horse such as a bad fall or the resident an RN told me about. He was active and still driving, but he went out suddenly while sitting in his chair.

"When [God takes] their breath, they die." (Psalm 104:29)

7. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1071117/>

8. <http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/ate/cancer/202478.html>