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Living in the Face of Mortality

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A number of years ago, one of my cousins died in an industrial accident. He had been helping load some railway cars at a grain terminal when a cable pulling the cars away snapped, sprung back with thousands of pounds of tension, and literally cut him in half. He died enroute to the hospital. He was young, in the prime of his life, and a talented athlete who enjoyed playing sports on a number of local teams.

Tragic and sad as was his death, his family and loved ones had some consolations: His last days had been good, his last touches had been warm. He had dropped in for lunch with his mother just a few days prior to his death, enjoyed a great visit, and, on leaving, had kissed her a warm goodbye, assuring her of his affection. Several weeks earlier, he had taken his youngest brother, who idolized him, on a short vacation to watch baseball games. He had, as far as anyone knew, parted on peaceful terms with everyone and, he had died doing his job. Loading grain cars was his job and when that cable snapped and killed him, he was standing where he was supposed to be standing at that moment. Indeed, had he not been there, someone else would have been and that person would have suffered his fate. He died at his post, doing his job, working honestly, earning a living, a victim of contingency, standing where he was supposed to be standing.

Ultimately that is all we can try to assure for ourselves. We can try to be standing where we are supposed to be standing.

All of us, without exception, irrespective of age and health, are vulnerable, contingent, mortal, one heartbeat away from leaving this planet, one stroke away from losing control of our lives, one accident away from knowing how illusory is the sense of our own strength, and one broken cable away from dying in an ambulance. We can be careful with our lives, live prudently, try to ensure our own safety and the safety of our loved ones, but ultimately we are inadequate. We cannot ensure our own continued heartbeat.

So what can we do?

We can live prudent lives, care for our health and safety, and, if we have faith, we can pray for God's protection and providence. These are good, no doubt. But we can do something else too, something even more important.

We can try always to be standing where we are supposed to be standing. We can try always to keep our touches warm, in case they are our last ones. We can have lunch with our mother and assure her of our affection. We can take a loved one to a ball game and we can try to be on peaceful terms with everyone. In essence, we can be faithful, true to those whom we love and true to what we believe in. We can be at our post, in commitment, love, and duty.

In the end, that is all we can do and, in the end, that is enough. Awareness of our vulnerability and mortality is not meant to make us fearful, morbid, timid about life, or guilty about enjoyment. Nor is it meant to make us other-worldly at the cost of denigrating this life. Conversely, it is not meant to drive us to hedonism because life is short and unpredictable. It is an invitation to be faithful; to try always to stand where we are supposed to be standing, in warmth, love, duty, and enjoyment.

John Powell once wrote that there are only two potential tragedies in life, and that dying young is not one of them. These are the two potential tragedies: To live and to not love and to love and to never express that affection and appreciation. How true.

Maybe it's my age or maybe it was just an exceptional time, but during the past year, not a single month went by when death did not take away someone I loved. More than ever before, I have become aware of how fragile is life. More superficially this challenged me to look at my own health: Am I taking proper care of myself? Exercising enough? Eating properly? Resting enough?

More deeply however it has challenged me to look at my wider health: Am I standing where I'm supposed to be standing? Am I being faithful enough to who I am and what I believe in so as to be comfortable that, if today is my last day, I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing? Have my touches been warm?

I try every day to be faithful - to pray, to celebrate the Eucharist, to be warm to people, to do my job as best I can, knowing that, if I do that, I am standing where I am supposed to be standing, and that I can then enjoy this wonderful life, without guilt or fear, ready, standing in honesty, should the cable snap.

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