

EPIPHANY AT MORNINGSIDE

Coming to grips with the stark reality of aging

Last weekend I drove my mother and her sister Donna to visit a friend of the family over in the lovely town of South Haven on Lake Michigan. Kathleen is a contemporary of theirs—they're all in their early 80s now—and went to school with my mom at Western Michigan in Kalamazoo. She has lived in the house on Center Street her whole life and worked in the South Haven Library until she retired perhaps a decade ago. For those of us in the family who made a happy annual Thanksgiving pilgrimage to that house, it was always "Jim and Kathleen."

Then, in 2004, Jim, her husband, died. I really miss Jim. He and I were often the only men at these Turkey Day gatherings, natives of Michigan every year cursing the usually abysmal play of the Detroit Lions. Plus, I'd often get some disdainful comments from him about the US government—"I didn't fight the Nazis so they could do this!"—which lent moral support to my frequently expressed libertarian sentiments back then. Anyway, good times and good people.

Jim and Kathleen were active in the community, and would meet with their friends downtown at the bakery for breakfast several times a week. And other things. [I recall Katy telling me of a birdie chip-in she made as a novice on a local golf course, probably twenty years ago (when she was close to my age now), the same hole that regular-golfer Jim double-bogeyed.] As time goes on, the close-knit customs would fade away as more members of the coffee klatch/retirees' club passed on. And as more of them lost the mobility they enjoyed in their 60s and 70s.

The Brighter Side of Morningside

Did I say 60s and 70s? It just so happens birthday Five-Niner hath writ its moving hand on me before the weekend visit! Thus, I was paying special attention to numbers as we visited Kathleen in the Morningside Nursing Home. Following the departure of her beloved Jim, Kathleen's body and mind did seem to deteriorate more rapidly. She has always been thin... now if she turns sideways, you can lose her. More disturbing, however, is she started forgetting to pay her gas bills and who people were. Her brother's son (my much older bone-surgeon cousin) generously manned up to help her sell the house and arrange her affairs. He found Morningside here in South Haven.

It's fine, definitely not the Taj Mahal of senior care facilities, but certainly not One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, either... if you'll forgive the mixed, and stretched, metaphors. Even though the floors are clean and the staff seems professional and caring, candidly, the place unsettles me. It has the combined ambience of a hospital wing, a county jail, and a VFW hall. There are two or three quite large communal spaces that the ambulatory patients like to spend most of their time in.

We arrive later than intended thanks to someone's sure-thing shortcut from Allegan. But Kathleen is clearly happy that we got here, and she's cogent—I'm sure she recognizes and feels very good about the three of us, but I doubt she'd pass a quiz on our names. We spend an additional 15 minutes with her in the primary rec room, sitting around a table near the big-screen TV. [I can see we're impinging on the hymn singalong at 4:00. As much as I'd like to take part in that, doggone it, we simply have to be going.]

On the way out, we stop off at another common room that contains a miniature aviary of sorts. Several species of (small) birds are confined in a well-lit, large, china-cabinet-like enclosure singing their little hearts out. I've never seen anything like this, and I marvel at how the invention fits with the "hope-springs-eternal" theme of the facility. Katy also carries on about how wonderful everyone is here and how she has all these things to do... "and did you check out that lovely view of the dandelions in the back yard?!" So there you are: such modest touches make our girl happy as a clam. She always did look on the bright side of things, and who's going to argue?

The Darker Side of Morningside

It's on the way out that I experience the flash of insight:

The birds are great, and sure most of the citizens here are ambulatory. But I can't help noticing several of the patients have to use wheel chairs, and further it looks like hard labor for many. This one lady in

particular is having a hell of a time. When we were far down the hall at Katy's room this lady moved by the doorway at a snail's pace, all contorted and struggling. And she didn't seem to be able to talk or register who was around her, only roll her eyes and move one slow inch at a time.

One of the nurses must have come and wheeled her to the front (a distance of perhaps a football field), because this same lady is now outside the door of the aviary viewing room. Then sitting directly in front of the bird cage is yet another old woman in a wheel chair, so twisted down in her seat and absent of sensibility that she makes the first one look athletic. Yet there's something special about this one, let's call her Lois: she seems to be smiling directly at me... not that she has that many teeth or can really see much.

Believe it or not, in the middle of the Morningside aviary room, while one of Lois's alarm buzzers is blaring full-tilt boogie and competing with all the birdsong—Mom is trying (unsuccessfully) to flag down a nurse to squelch the damned thing—Lois and I 'share a moment.' I don't know what it was, but throughout the visit I've been my normal gregarious self, smiling, nodding, and saying hello to the people who make eye contact with me. For some reason, Lois senses the good will and responds in kind: she reaches out and I hold her hand. Whether or not she's actually aware of me as an individual I'll never know, but I swear each of us is responding to the other's "benevolence of being there."

Now I've been reading Eckhart Tolle lately and am fully convinced that when one realizes spiritual enlightenment—when pure consciousness inhabits one's entire being—the essence of a person comes through, and age becomes irrelevant... well, almost. Lois is still conscious, but I suspect realistically it's of the reflexive variety of a light still flickering before going out. What's sad is watching person after person in this largely comfortable yet undignified twilight going thru the last stages of the ultimate killer disease: senescence. And I know not what course others may take, but I'd rather have nothing to do with it.

Because if you accept the natural progression of the disease (and nothing kills you first) I'm going to be Lois—well, okay, Lewis—in a few short decades... and my mom and Aunt Donna are closing in on the Lois syndrome within 10 years, maybe, with Katy looking at 10 months. So I start to project how splendidly I'll mix my drool and vomit cocktails at 90, or what my peers (particularly my regular golf foursome) are going to look like in their final days. Not a pretty picture. And we don't even want to think about the economics: what happens when one teenage grocery bagger is financing Medicaid and Medicare for the Baby Boomer Alzheimer's ward? If ever there were a time for rejuvenation technology to kick in, this is it!

The Prospect of Transcendence

My regular readers are aware of the imminence of serious rejuvenation treatments and where I think we are headed in terms of transhumanism—I've reviewed Kurzweil's books, *Fantastic Voyage* and *The Singularity is Near*. Further, I've commented on the "insurance" angle that Robert Ettinger's breathtaking body of work on cryonics represents—both the book(s) and the movement. I'm not going to stand on my soap box (again), but I do wonder why human consciousness has held back so far in terms of embracing these literally life-saving technologies. From the purely technical and scientific standpoint, probably Dr. Aubrey De Grey and his SENS concept (strategies for engineering negligible senescence) are as close as anything to breaking through the collective unconscious.

There is some irony for me now in considering imminent technological immortality from a spiritual dimension. As I stated, Eckhart Tolle has become a mentor, and I'm beginning to view the essence of my consciousness (or anyone else's) as effectively eternal and not necessarily affected by the exigencies of life—what the Buddhists tell us is "refusing to be trapped in the illusion of form." [This belief system gives one an "I am the master of my fate" sort of gratification (plus it makes that triple bogey on the par 3 easier to deal with).]

But Eckhart and the Buddha most likely never met Lois at the Morningside Nursing Home. If they had, I believe they'd understand and even embrace the desire to keep sufficient "form" to at least know where you are and who you are and to process a complete cycle of nourishment without assistance. Hey, we don't have to look like ageless movie stars or models, nobody's getting greedy here. An increasing number of us would simply like to extend the youthful, vigorous, aware life span to something closer to a reasonable 80 decades than to a paltry 8.

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