

COMMENTARY

Death be not proud



Here's some news you may not have considered urgently enough, lately: One day soon you'll die.

Me too, which is why I bring it up.

The question is, what are we going to do about it? And I have an idea, good for any who still breathe. But let me get to that later. I doubt it will surprise you.

Meanwhile, among the public deaths that occurred last week in the United States, I was struck not so much by a sense of loss as by a sense of sadness at lives squandered. Not wasted, necessarily, but squandered.

I don't know how to judge a death like Michael Jackson's, for example. I know little about his life and less about his music, except that some people appreciate it and I don't. But it's music. It's a note and a float in the American parade, a contribution, and I revere that in itself.

Once, he was a spectacular athlete — he could dance like a dream.

On the other hand, judging by the pictures I saw of him in recent decades, I suspect he'd become a man lost in despair. His face continually reshaped itself, his nostrils rising and expanding until his nose nearly disappeared above them. He looked like an exotic and nervous grazing animal from a

distant grassland imported to a zoo frequented only by paparazzi. That makes me sad.

And I imagine the Texas beauty Farrah Fawcett was pretty sad, too, or at least pretty frustrated. I borrowed that phrase from a news report somewhere: "The Texas Beauty." I like saying it because it's impersonal and glorious. You can toss it out like a rich guy with a stable of horses and Derby pretensions: "That Texas Beauty can really run."

Horses are only horseflesh and beauties are only beautyflesh, I guess.

But as their looks begin to vanish and the beautiful fortress begins to crumble under the assault of time and human experience and disease and all of it, people who have anchored themselves to their bodies and their appearances, like she did in Hollywood, can't be happy.

The public deaths, though, didn't affect me nearly as much as the recent private deaths of people I didn't know, or knew only slightly. Inevitably, they reminded me of people I did know, who died in former days.

All of us — well, maybe not a few among us who are young — have these stories, and can tell them.

A friend's roommate through four tough years at the nation's premier service academy died of a heart condition at 54 last week, just out of the blue — he'd forged a spectacular career in the Navy, and left two children and an adoring wife, I learned.

And a man whom I'd come to know in

recent months, a longtime friend of my wife's, died too, violently. He was 70.

Only days earlier, he'd given my younger sons several robust palladiums he'd grown himself and potted for them — that was with one arm, since he was saddled permanently to a wheelchair after a debilitating stroke had rendered him almost paralyzed.

My oldest son had begun going to his apartment to read to him each week from the biographical novel the man had in progress (he typed with one arm and one finger, of course, because he never gave up; he was a former Marine).

He took in people in trouble, and one of them, a whacko, murdered him in his Lee County apartment (he was a former Marine, too, authorities said).

All of this managed to fire up my own remembrance of things past (to borrow from Proust), unwanted though it sometimes may be: young friends who died when I was young, family members who died too young themselves, the rest of it.

Mortality sitting there ready to pop you on any given day, which is news to no one.

That's the reason I admire so much those who salute the reaper by throttling up a *joie de vivre* every single day, and carrying on.

Both the friend who lost his roommate — for him, the equivalent of losing a brother, which had literally happened to him in the past — and a friend of the murdered man who gave him years of attentive care as unselfishly as a saint, can do that. That's instructive to me, however difficult it is for them.

It's also a beautiful and loving trib-

ute to the lost — one that defies death in the spirit of the English poet John Donne: "Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."

Which brings me back to the question: What are we going to do about our mortality?

Not too long ago, I wandered over to the home of Burdie Baker, my spiritual advisor.

Burdie was standing by his truck in the driveway, where he'd just flattened a mass of beer and pop cans to run down to the recycling center.

He'd been fishing, too, and usually that makes him happy. What made him less than happy, though, was his required appearance at a funeral, where a huge outpouring of affection would occur for a man who'd been uncelebrated in life.

"I don't want none of this, myself," Burdie said. "All these flowers and nice words and hoop-de-da — don't give me that. If you're going to do something, do it while I'm alive. Do it while I'm standing here. You want to give me flowers? Well pick 'em and come on over. I can smell 'em and see 'em now. I won't be smelling any flowers later. You want to say something nice about me? Come on over here and say it. I won't mind hearing it. Won't do me any good later."

I was so startled, I pulled out my ever-present back-pocket notebook, and wrote down those comments.

That's what you do about all this dying. You go say what you have to say, and do what you have to do, before it happens. And afterward, you celebrate. ■

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