

# Session 5

## Finitude, Virtues, and the Question of A Duty to Die

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# The Shape and Value of Human Life is Rooted in Finitude

- “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.”

--Emily Dickinson, poem 1,741



# That It Will Never Come Again

That it will never come again  
Is what makes life so sweet.  
Believing what we don't believe  
Does not exhilarate.

That if it be, it be at best  
An ablative estate --  
This instigates an appetite  
Precisely opposite.

# Virtues of Finitude

- The central values in life—love, beauty, joy, loyalty, compassion, justice, authenticity—have little meaning in a life without limits, a life that comes to an end.
- “The particular beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability.”  
--Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*
- “Death is the mother of beauty...”  
--Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning”

# Odysseus and Kalypso





# End as Telos

- As mortal beings, death is not simply the end result, but the **telos**—our aim, or purpose ; not only where life does lead, but where it is meant to lead, where it *should* lead.
- Deep down, most of us have a sense of not only the *right way* to die, but the *right time* to die.  
e.g., it is possible to live “too long”

# Natural Death

- Professional Definition: death “caused by age-related declines in cognition, function and will to live” in the absence of any fatal disease.  
--Jack McCue, *The Naturalness of Dying*
- Popular Definition: death without (unwanted) life-supporting technologies, e.g., feeding tubes, respirators, pacemakers, renal dialysis, etc. *Death as it was meant to be.*

# Two Kinds of Cellular Death

- Apoptosis (ἀπόπτωσης, "falling off") pre-determined biological cell death, which determines when a person dies, if there is no illness that accelerates the timing of death.
- Necrosis (νέκρωση) is cell death caused by factors external to the cell or tissue, such as infection, toxins, or trauma.



# Blessings of Finitude

- “Death frees us from the feigning of our senses, the tyranny of our passions, the vagaries of thought, the bondage of desire.”  
--Marcus Aurelius, *The Emperor's Handbook*

My death fulfills the unspoken desires of those I dearly love for me to move on.

--Marcus Aurelius

# Jonathan Swift's *Struldbrugs*



# Blessings of Finitude

- Release from Burdens and Boredom of Never-Ending Life
- Eternal Life, or Being in the Kingdom of God, is life not time on a biological clock, not a time after this time, but no longer existing in time.
- “Dying is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier” --Walt Whitman



# Virtues Needed for Dying Well

- Virtues have meaning only because of our finitude
  - “Dying Well” means a dying marked by at least some of these virtues
1. Courage
  2. Love
  3. Forgiveness
  4. Hope
  5. Gratitude

# Principles/Virtues

- **Principles** are guides to action that justify choices and actions. . .head work.  
Example: "Truth telling," e.g., "She told the truth." "Her statements accord with the facts."
- **Virtues** describes states of character, and are the more dispositional and habitual patterns of ethics. . .heart work.  
Example: "Being truthful," e.g., "She takes joy in the truth." Or "She seeks candor and avoids deception."



# What do Winston Churchill and Maya Angelou agree on re: virtues?



# The Primacy of Courage

- Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities. . . because it is the quality that guarantees all the others.

*--Winston Churchill*

- Courage is the most important of the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

*--Maya Angelou*

# “Miracle on the Hudson” Courage Both an Act and a Practice



# Love--the Greeks had a word for it

- Eros ἔρως--passionate, physical love, longing and desire, "falling in love"
- Philia φιλία--love between friends, high-minded affection of people who recognize something valuable in each other
- Agape ἀγάπη--spiritually-inspired, sacrificial love
- Storge' στοργή-- the affection that emerges from the mutual care of daily life, as in a family; not "falling in love" but "standing in a place of love." This is the one most likely to be available when you really need it, at the end of life.

# Forgiveness

## Hannah Arendt 1906-1975



- Forgiveness stops the cycle of revenge (act/react), and punishment
- Personal and political
- Jesus' teachings is that forgiveness starts with humankind; "If in your hearts you forgive, God will do likewise"

--*The Human Condition*, 239 ff.

# Hope—not optimism

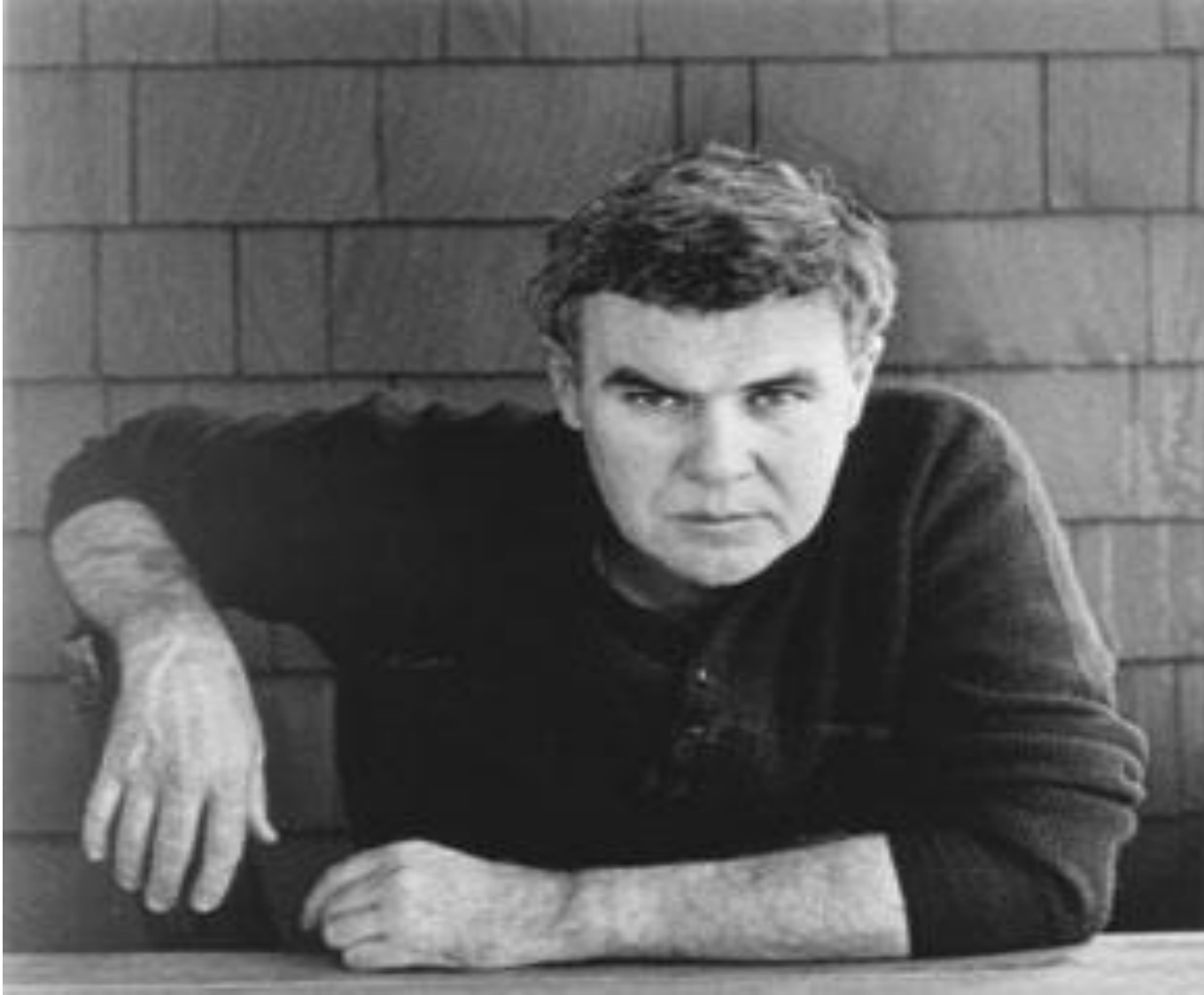
- **Optimism** – the U.S. “state ideology”; a compulsive cheeriness, “I can do anything;” sometimes takes the form of magical thinking
- Springs from denial of limits and a fear of failure
- **Hope**--realism about the facts; yet openness to the idea that something good, as yet unknown or even unimagined, can emerge. . .
- “open hope”, “radical hope”
- Springs from the human ability to overcome despair

--Judith Andre, *Worldly Virtue*  
(Lexington, 2015)



**GRATITUDE**

**Raymond Carver, 1938-1988**



# *Gravy* -- R. Carver, 1988

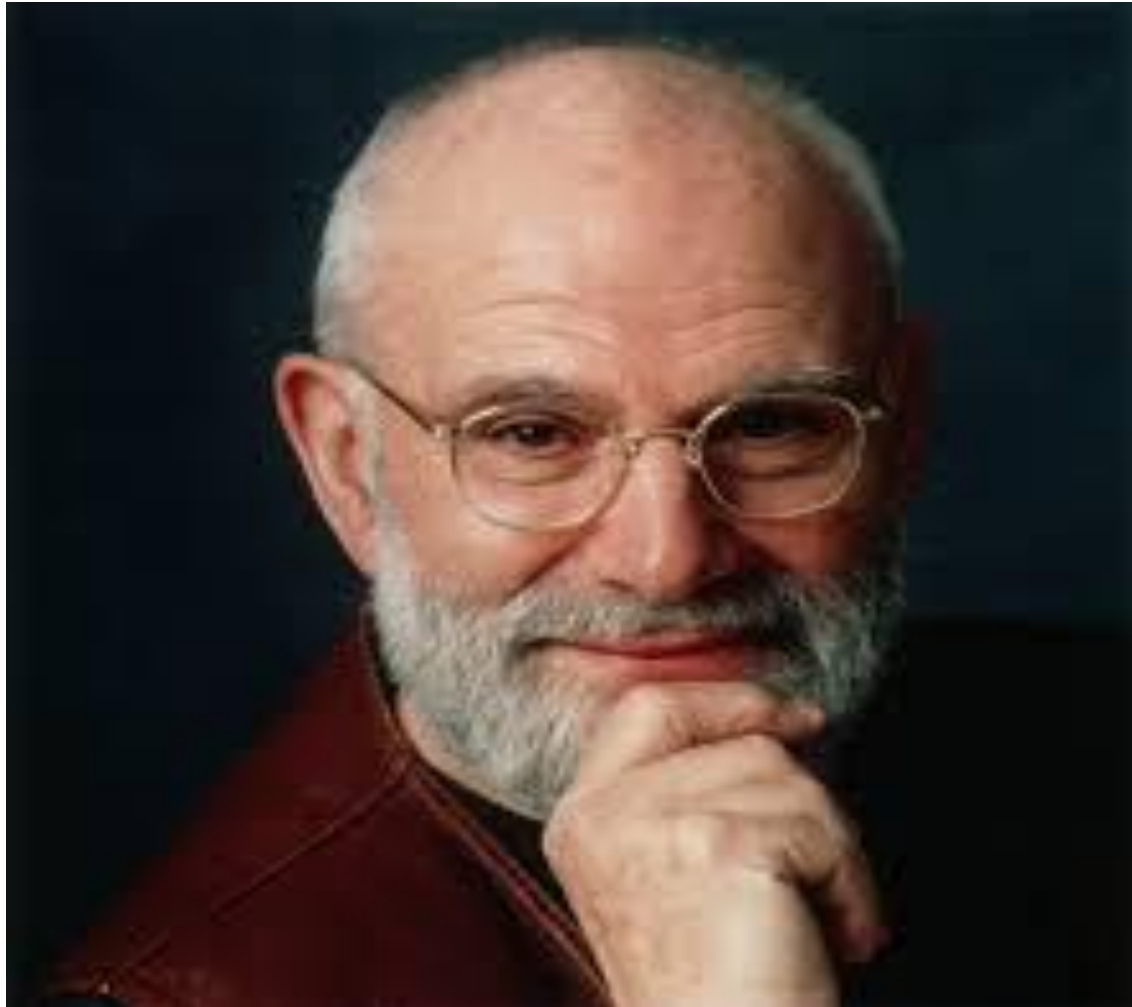
“No other word will do. For that’s what it was.

Gravy.

Gravy, these past ten years.

Alive, sober, working, loving, and  
being loved by a good woman. Eleven years  
ago he was told he had six months to live. . .”

# *Gratitude* from Oliver Sacks, 1933-2015



# *Gratitude, p. 18-20*

- “Over the last few days I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. . . .”
- “I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude... above all I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and it has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”





# Is There A Duty to Die?

- “Do your duty—never mind whether you are . . . dying or doing something else. Yes, even dying is an act of life and should be done, like everything else, ‘to the best of your abilities’.”  
--Marcus Aurelius, *The Emperor's Handbook*



# Can There be a Duty to End your Life?

- Mrs. A, 87-year-old woman was dying of congestive heart failure. All prognostic tests said she had less than a 50% chance of living another six months. She was lucid, assertive and terrified of death. She opted for the most aggressive life-prolonging treatments, which kept her alive for another 2 years with increasing debilitation.

# Mrs. A (cont.)

- Mrs. A's daughter, 55, her sole surviving family, was her caregiver and the chief source for the cost of her care, after Medicare. The daughter faithfully cared for her mother, but before Mrs. A died, her illness had cost the daughter all her savings, her home, her job, and her career.

--Adapted from John Hardwig, *Is There a Duty to Die?*

# Hardwig's question

Which is the greater burden?

A. To lose a 50% chance of six or more months of life at age 87?

B. To lose all your savings, your home, your job and your career at age 55?

# Supposing there is a Duty to Die, when is it likely to arise?

- When continuing to live will impose substantial burdens—emotional, financial--forfeiting future prospects for one's family or loved ones.
- A duty to die becomes greater as we grow older. Fewer life years are lost. "To have reached the age of 75 or 80, and not be ready to die is a moral failing, the sign of a life out of touch with basic realities."

# Duty to die likely to arise IF:

- You have lived a rich and full life
- Your loved ones have made great sacrifices already to make your life a good one
- You cannot make a good adjustment to your illness, increasing the burden on others
- The part of you that is loved is gone or seriously compromised
- Your lavish lifestyle, and little savings, increase the burden to your family or loved ones

-- Hardwig, *Is There a Duty to Die?*, p. 129.

# John Hardwig, Prof. Emeritus Univ. of Tennessee





# Aries on “acceptable death”

- “An acceptable death is one that can be accepted or tolerated by the survivors.”

--Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*

# Further thoughts

- Ironically, it is our ability to preserve life and prolong dying that helps to create a duty to die.
- A medical/legal system that only asks us what we want and gives us options based on “preferences” fosters a perverse ethics. Our medical, legal and religious systems needs to ask us what is most important to us, and what we want our deaths to mean, for ourselves and others.

# Religious Sources of a Duty to Die?

- “Christian commitment of stewardship prohibits the extension of one’s life at a great cost to the neighbor [not to mention one’s family!]. . . and such a gesture should not appear to us as a sacrifice, but as the ordinary virtue entailed by a just social conscience.”
- “If the next generation is to flower and flourish we must practice the wisdom of giving ground when our time comes.”

# What about a duty to oneself?

- Hardwig focuses almost entirely on duties to others. Do I also have not just a wish but also a duty to myself, to try to honor that sense of self that I prize, through a dying that I help to time and orchestrate?
- But...is trying to honor the self selfish?

# Possible Hazards of Promoting a Duty to Die

- Ageism
- The ill, weak and elderly may be especially vulnerable
- Government agencies and/or insurers will enact policies that ignore the ill elderly, rather than protect and care for them
- Social norms will become intolerant and increasingly barbaric (the slippery slope)
- Could promote a kind of egoism?

# Duty to Die: Assets and Liabilities

- Can we embrace the value of a duty to die (under certain circumstances) as a personal virtue
- AND forbid it as a public policy?



# To Pursue in Last Session

- Permission to die
- Caregivers and partners, experiences and needs
- What do we mean by a “natural” death?
- Having enjoyed a full life, why continue only to face the problems of aging?
- Feelings around a close relative with dementia
- Natural burial, cremation. . .