

DRAINING THE STYX

Taking
the Mystery
Out of Death
and Hell



SHAWN BOONSTRA

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I Want to *Know* . . .

Any book on a subject as emotionally engaging as death is bound to be incomplete and thus leave the reader somewhat dissatisfied. We have been wrestling with the subject for thousands of years, yet sage philosophers and theologians still haven't exhausted the questions that can be asked. The key problem, of course, is that there aren't many people who have experienced death and can tell us what happened.

The dead don't talk.

There are some people, of course, who claim to have died and captured a glimpse of the afterlife. Bookstores almost always have one or two titles authored by supposed survivors: *Proof of Heaven*, *My Last Breath*, *The Birth Called Death*. You're almost guaranteed to find *something* on the shelf. Most of these books are the stories of people who have tiptoed up to the edge of the abyss and very briefly peeked into it. It's never for more than a few moments, and then the defibrillator suddenly jerks them back into the present world. They never actually fall into the abyss. We are remarkably short on first-person accounts by people who have been dead for several days before they come back. We have Jesus and Lazarus, of course, but none of us lives next door to someone like these two whom we can question—which means that there are limits to what a writer can say about death.

This book doesn't contain the usual first-person accounts, except in passing. Nor is it a detailed scientific analysis of death. Instead, what you are about to read is a collection of musings by a middle-aged preacher who is keenly aware of his own mortality, along with some religious history and some honest, heartfelt inquiries into what Scripture says about the subject. This book isn't meant to answer all of your questions. It is intended to start you on a journey into the subject. You will, with the rest of the human race,

complete your inquiry finally and completely at a later date.

I am hoping that once you put this little book down, you will pick up another and another. I hope you will keep studying—and in particular that you'll take the time to examine what the Judeo-Christian Scripture actually says about human nature, about living, dying, and eternity. During the past two thousand years or so, folk tales and superstitions have been woven into the story. The modern thinker, then, needs to diligently distinguish these intrusions from what our ancestors actually taught.

It would be an understatement to say that our society is obsessed with death. Perhaps the reason we subject ourselves to so many violent portrayals of it on the big screen—and now on the oversized LCD screens in our family rooms—is to inoculate ourselves against our worst fear. Maybe if we see enough of it, we'll understand it more and fear it less. Of course, the opposite could be argued: the fact that most of the onscreen deaths we witness are violent, pointless, and indifferent might mean that our entertainment choices are actually worsening our dread.

It is interesting, nevertheless, that as we increasingly immerse ourselves in a culture of death through the entertainment industry, we spend less and less time confronting the real thing. Our ancestors—in European cultures, at any rate—used to keep the bodies of family members on display in their homes for several days before the burial, providing a close-up experience with death. Now, yesterday's wake has been reduced to a short viewing at the funeral home.

I'm hoping that as you read through this book, you'll slow down enough to ponder the topic. After all, no matter how cleverly we disguise death with silk-lined caskets and magnificent bouquets, we can't stop the inevitable: we—you as well as I—*will* die. It is well and fine for our mourners to share heartfelt stories and mournful songs, but they'll be going home, and we will still be in our caskets.

Is that blunt enough?

Personally, when it comes to death, I don't want fairy tales. As much as I enjoy a good story and the myths of ancient civilizations, I want to know what's actually going to happen when I die. From a very young age, I have noticed that death has been stalking me. I am keenly aware that my turn is coming, and when the rest of you go downstairs to the church basement for light refreshments, I will be left alone in the cold ground, waiting for a

backhoe to conceal my remains.

I don't want stories. I'm standing on the bridge between youth and age, and I want to *know*. "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread," the Bible warns us, "till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Life is hard, and then you die. That's not just a bumper-sticker truism or an Internet meme; it's the truth.

I know the end will come, but then what?

I don't want stories. I want to *know*.

Why Fight Death?

I once heard somebody say that among young people, only an unusual few think about death; but among the old, only an unusual few do not. As a kid, I was one of the unusual few. At a very young age, I seemed to be aware that I was on borrowed time.

Most guys suddenly become aware of their mortality somewhere in their late thirties to midforties, and they panic: new car, new career, new wife. Anything to assuage the fear that they have blown it—to make them feel as if there is still plenty of time left to build their dreams.

The middle-aged man looks into the mirror to discover that he is turning into his father and grandfather. The hair that used to grow near the front of his forehead is migrating to his earlobes and shoulders, and some (or much!) of what is left is turning gray. His eyes are not as bright. The days of eating an entire pizza with impunity are long gone. His waistline has expanded over time, like a tree that adds a ring each year.

He still has an old pair of jeans in the bottom drawer of his dresser that hails from the low thirties of pant sizes. The jeans might even date all the way back to high school. If he can suck in his stomach enough to get the button done up, it quietly pops underneath the abdominal overhang when he finally exhales. He has barely used the exercise equipment in the basement. About once a year, he panics about his declining athletic ability and begins to work out. Six weeks later, he decides that his situation isn't all that bad, and he retreats back to his mediocre life, shackled to a desk under fluorescent lights forty or fifty hours a week. If he's lucky enough to work outside, his lower back and tired joints team up every morning to remind him that he's no longer a member of the track team.

He's getting old, but he refuses to admit it. He's using comb-overs, Grecian Formula dye, chemically whitened teeth—whatever it takes to fool himself into thinking that he's still young. He is, however, the *only* one who is being fooled; the general public has no problem determining his vintage.

I remember the moment when I was rudely surprised by the revelation that I was no longer considered a youth. I was on a plane flying from Los Angeles to Singapore, and a young woman, twenty-six years old, was sitting in the seat next to me. To my delight, she was a gifted conversationalist, and we had no problem running down the clock as we crossed the Pacific.

At one point, she revealed that her father taught Frisian history in a college on the East Coast.

"You're kidding!" I said. "My father was born in Friesland!" I had no idea that anybody outside of our own tribe cared to read about Friesland, let alone study it professionally.

"Listen," I said, "I'd really love to contact your father sometime. Is there some way you and I can stay in touch?"

"Well, how about e-mail?" she asked.

"No, that won't work. I almost never make it through my e-mails. There are hundreds every day."

She tried again. "What about a cell number?"

"No, same problem. I almost never answer the stupid thing."

I really wanted to contact her father. But how? Then it dawned on me: "Hey, I know! Do you have a Facebook account?"

Of course she did. Facebook had gone mainstream, and everybody was getting an account. Problem solved.

The plane had landed and pulled up to the gate, and I was standing in the aisle when it happened—when she delivered the deathblow to my youth. "You know, I'm impressed," she said. "I didn't think people your age used Facebook."

What! People my age?

I was horrified. I suddenly felt like the guy who is turned away at the door of an uppity restaurant for not being influential or important enough. Or the guy whose credit card is declined at the worst possible moment. I was no longer in the club. I was an *old guy*.

More serious reminders

Since that day, I've had some more serious reminders that I am speedily plowing through my life span. After the age of forty, I unexpectedly picked up a strange bug overseas that nearly took me out. I became horrifically ill, and there were a few moments when I was certain I was sitting in the departure lounge. The idea that I was mortal was no longer a theory.

I suppose the most troubling thing about life is that nobody quite knows when it will end. I have no way of knowing for sure whether I'm at the halfway point or the three-quarters point. A generation ago, lots of guys dropped dead in their sixties. Some still do. And then there are people like the otherwise healthy guy in my neighborhood who got a bad flu one Christmas and died of pneumonia in his *forties*. Nobody expected that to happen.

I have no idea when it's going to happen to me, but one thing is absolutely certain: I do have an expiry date. The problem is that nobody bothered to stamp that date on my birth certificate. Statistically, I can make an educated guess: the Social Security Administration and insurance companies have actuary tables designed to inform them of the most likely date of my demise. There are even a few Web sites where you can plug in the date of your birth and a few other personal details and the site's computer will start counting down to a "guesstimated" date for your death in *seconds*. It's all based on averages.

I remember the first time I discovered one of those Web sites. I had a problem with my lower back stemming from an old injury; and one morning, when I was in an airport in Bucharest, my back wrenched, my legs gave out, and I dropped to the floor. I couldn't get back up, and as I lay on the floor writhing in agony, I imagined that the locals were thinking I had a bit of a drinking problem, especially since the airport bar apparently opened for business at six o'clock in the morning.

A good friend (who has since died) helped me onto a plane, and I made an excruciating trip back to Los Angeles, where an orthopedic surgeon assured me, after looking at my MRI, that if he didn't operate I stood a good chance of becoming incontinent. Up to that point, I had been resisting the idea that I might need surgery. The thought of wetting my pants uncontrollably convinced me. In fact, I pulled my Swiss Army knife out of

my pocket, laid it on his desk, and told him, “You can start right now.” He laughed. So did I . . . sort of.

That was Thursday. By the next Wednesday, I was on a surgical table. And when I came to, I spent the next nine weeks with a laptop in a zero-gravity lawn chair.

Before long, I felt as though I had managed to surf all the way to the end of the Internet. I’d seen it all. Incredibly bored, I snapped the computer shut and wondered what I could do to make life more interesting. *I know*, I thought, *I’ll go pester the kids*.

I carefully got out of my chair, grabbed my walker, and made my way down the hallway as quietly as I could, because it was after eight o’clock. The kids were supposed to be sleeping, and I didn’t want my wife, Jean, to know that I was about to disturb them.

Our youngest, Naomi, was about four or five years old, and I tried her room first. No luck; she was sound asleep. I moved on to the eight-year-old, Natalie.

When I opened the door to Natalie’s room, I heard a scramble and then a click as she snapped off a flashlight. She was reading under the covers—past curfew!

“Oh, don’t worry, honey,” I assured her through the dark. “It’s *Daddy*.”

The flashlight clicked back on, and her little head poked out from under the blanket. With the flashlight illuminating her face, she looked like someone trying to tell a ghost story by a campfire.

“What do you want, Daddy?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing. I just want to hang out and talk because I’m bored.”

I hobbled my way over to the edge of the bed and carefully sat down.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asked. Her eyes danced with anticipation.

“Anything!” I declared.

We both have the gift of gab, so we talked, and talked, and talked. Half an hour later, after basking in her youth, I suddenly felt a twinge of jealousy. *She’s only eight*, I thought. *She still has her whole life in front of her, and she can do anything she wants. And if she’s smart, she won’t have to make the mistakes that I made.*

“Listen, honey,” I said. “What do you want to do with your life?”

She crinkled her nose for a moment. Then she said, quite thoughtfully,

“I want to be a doctor or a teacher or a mommy.”

“You can do *all* those things!” I told her.

“Really?”

“Yep—you sure can. First, become a doctor. Then go back to school and teach other doctors. And you can be a mommy too.”

Natalie squirmed with excitement.

I was curious about what drove her ambition. “Why do you want to do those things?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I just want to *help* people.”

I couldn’t have been prouder. I kissed her forehead and slowly, painfully, got up to leave. When I was just about to limp my way out of her room, she suddenly continued, “And besides, Daddy, the next time you need surgery, I can do it!”

I laughed. “But Daddy’s not going to need surgery for a long, long time, honey. Maybe never.”

“No, that’s not true!” she protested. “You’re getting old! And pretty soon you’re going to need a hip replacement and a knee replacement and maybe even a plate in your head!” (A plate in my head? Where in the world did she get *that*?) “And Daddy, I’ll do it *all* for you!”

I went to bed that night feeling terrible. At about 2:30 in the morning, I grabbed Jean’s shoulder and shook her awake.

“Honey,” I said, “it’s *terrible*. I’ve already burned through more than half a tank, and I have no idea how much is left!”

She was groggy. “What do you mean? You’re not even driving yet!”

“No, not the car—*me* ! I’ve burned through half my life. *At least* half my life—maybe more! I have no idea how much is left, and I don’t even know if I lived the first half well!”

Welcome to your midlife crisis, buddy.

“Go back to sleep,” Jean said. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

I didn’t. Not long after the sun came up, I was back online trying to figure out if other guys my age felt that way. They did. *Millions* of them. And that’s when I found it: the Internet Death Clock. It’s a Web site dedicated to making men’s lives even more miserable. It asked for my birthday, my gender, and a few health details, and then told me, based on the national average, *exactly* how long I can expect to live as measured in seconds. And a clock popped up on the screen and started counting them

down.

True, I had something like 1.8 billion seconds left, but that really isn't much. There are 3,600 seconds in an hour; 86,400 seconds in a day; and 2.5 million of them in a month. When I sat down to write this book, I went back to the Web site to check the clock and discovered that I'd already spent nearly a quarter billion of them. *A quarter billion!*

Even if I'm granted a perfectly normal, average life span, I'm running out of time faster than I want to. There are things I can do to live a bit longer—diet, exercise, careful living. But ultimately I can't put it off forever. I'm going to die.

The perfect word

Death. It's such a perfect word for what's going to happen. It starts rudely and ends with an icy whisper, sounding like someone who's hit with a blunt object and slips into unconsciousness. As you finish the word, it leaps out of your mouth, spitefully leaving the tip of your tongue trapped between your teeth. It's almost onomatopoeic.

The noted essayist Brian Jay Stanley contrasts the word *death* with one of its well-known euphemistic replacements:

The word *death* is a strong and solid word that does not blush or flinch, calling life's terminus by its first name, without apology. But most people euphemize death with the softer phrase "passed away." To pass away suggests a gentle and painless transition from one state to another, like chilled water passing imperceptibly into ice. Thereby words conceal from our thoughts the horrors of violent accidents and the wracking agonies of terminal illness, as if everyone, instead of only a lucky few, died peacefully in their sleep. And where we peacefully pass is "away," a nebulous word that does not suggest a termination but neither does it specify a destination. It is a kind of leaving off, a gesture of open-endedness, a set of ellipsis points at sentence's end. It is, accordingly, the perfect word for the skeptical yet sentimental modern mind, which cannot accept annihilation nor easily believe in immortality. "Passed away" allows vague hope without dogma, as if to say, "He has gone somewhere else, please don't ask for details."¹

Create all the soft replacement words you want, but we still know exactly what you're talking about. It's still *death*. We don't like to use that word because it's too real, so we've come up with dozens—maybe hundreds—of euphemisms and dysphemisms. Some are soft, intended to mitigate the impact. Others are meant to encourage us to shrug it off with a laugh: "Buy a pine condo." "Take a dirt nap." "Assume room temperature." My favorite: "Suffered a negative patient-care outcome."

But it's hard to smile when it really happens, when you stand at the grave of someone you love after he or she has been rudely snatched away. The loss is painful, but it's also a grim reminder that we've all pulled a number out of the ticket-spitter, and there's no display on the wall of life to tell us whose number will be called next.

There is nothing I can do to avoid aging. Something in my makeup instinctively fights it, but I know that it's a battle I am guaranteed to lose. Sooner than I want, I will slip irreversibly into the dark. I fight it, but I cannot win.

Family burial plots are curious things; they sometimes display, inadvertently, an admission of defeat by a surviving spouse. Etched in the headstone next to the name of the deceased is the name of the survivor, and immediately beneath it, the date of his or her birth, followed by a dash, followed by a blank. They don't know the closing date, but they have already admitted—in stone—that it is coming. "I am waiting for you," taunts the grave.

Perhaps fortunately, my wife and I do not yet own a burial plot. We are middle-aged; we are not part of the generation that presently buys plots because we still feel too young to make such an investment. Yet even though I presently have no idea where I will be buried, my as-yet unmarked grave still calls, reminding me that I will lose the battle.

Why fight it?

What other battles do we fight in which the odds are so completely against us? Why do we stand our ground and push back when defeat is inevitable? Where does that instinct come from?

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote that we should rage against the dying of the light. I'm glad he said it, but most of us don't need a reminder. We *will* rage against it because the thought of a world that continues without us is troubling—far more troubling than the thought of a world that existed before we were born.

Why should life have to stop? The shortness of our life span seems cruel, especially when we get closer to the finish line and we realize how much we stand to lose. Why spend decades building relationships, accumulating knowledge, and learning skills, only to have your efforts suddenly come to nothing?

The wisdom acquired over a lifetime goes quietly into the grave with your body. Except for the scant few thoughts you managed to scribble down on paper, or the handful of posts and photos that survive online, everything you are and everything you believe will be lost. Nobody will be able to reassemble your thoughts or personality once you're gone. People might be able to pull together a few odds and ends and pretend that they're doing justice to your memory. There will likely be someone who knows you well enough to deliver a eulogy; but the tragic reality is that even those few imperfect recollections will fade with time because the day after you're buried, everybody else will still have to get on with their own lives.

A few years ago, my daughters gave me a couple of identical blank journals for Father's Day. I'm supposed to record something of myself in them: my likes, wishes, accomplishments, favorite memories, struggles. It's a bit like an extended résumé, just more personal. Or, for that matter, like a 128-page personal ad: "I like long walks on the beach, hiking in the mountains, classical music . . ."

It's an invitation to write my own eulogy, I suppose. There are dedicated pages for all of the usual chapters in a person's life. There's a place to trace out my family tree, a place to remember my wedding day, a place to record my travels. It's a great idea, but I have yet to complete a single page. They're all still blank. I've discovered that even *I* don't know how to

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