In My Time of Dying: How I Came Face to Face with the Idea of an Afterlife

(Sebastian Junger)

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I am not sure how often most people think about death. For myself, I think about my death several dozen times per day. This is not a morbid fixation, merely focused self-interest combined with practicality. I have never understood those who refuse to think about their own deaths, or who do things such as decline to buy life insurance because it reminds them that, as an Orthodox morning prayer says, "Of a sudden, the Judge will come, and the deeds of each shall be laid bare." But every man and woman approaches the topic differently. This short book is a fascinating look by a nuanced writer at his own very close brush with death, and how it changed his own thinking.

The author, Sebastian Junger, has made a career of writing books exploring aspects of the human psyche. He is most known for *The Perfect Storm*, the book which brought him to prominence, about the loss of a Massachusetts fishing vessel in 1991, later made into a very successful film, and for his grunt-eye views of Americans fighting in Afghanistan, both in magazine articles and in the book *War*. Less well-known are *Tribe* and *Freedom*, which are more philosophical in nature. To his credit Junger, who holds liberal political views, never lets those opinions infect his books. And, because he is obsessed with conveying and analyzing reality, always through the lens of activities in which only men actually participate, almost everything he says comes across as right-wing, in the general rather than specifically political sense. This makes his books much more valuable than if they were written in the typical modern ideologically tendentious manner, and the reader invariably comes away with much food for thought.

In My Time of Dying is no exception. It is the account of how, one summer day in 2020, Junger nearly died from an unexpected rupture of an abdominal artery. Junger had come close to death before—not only in Afghanistan, from bullets and shells, but also when he nearly drowned surfing in his youth, an episode with which he begins the book. In fact, much of his life seems to have been occupied with high risk activity—not just spending time in war zones, but working in jobs

such as timbering. Prior to his arterial rupture, however, Junger seems not to have spent a lot of time thinking about dying. On the other hand, he seems to have led much of his life with what was once the standard, commonplace view—that death gives meaning to life.

For thousands of years it has been noted that part of what gives the *Iliad* its timeless pull is the stark essential contrast between men and gods. The position of the gods in the *Iliad* seems superior and desirable, but their existence is in fact meaningless, because they are merely immortal versions of very powerful mortals, for whom no decision carries actual final consequence, while the lives of the mortal heroes before the gates of Troy are full of meaning, because they risk and suffer death. Junger points out that all people aim at both meaning and survival, which are in tension, because meaning often results from situations where survival is uncertain, and in any case meaning must take precedence over survival for meaning to truly exist. But every person has to find his own balance, though searching for meaning, just as with searching for happiness, inevitably means failure to achieve the goal. Rather, meaning is achieved as a byproduct of other actions, which take each man and woman out of himself, and make him part of, and make him feel part of, something larger. For men, this usually involves conflict; for women, usually it involves giving and nurturing life (again, creating a type of antithesis, this time between men and women, because these aims also often conflict). "Without death, life does not require focus or courage or choice. Without death, life is just an extraordinary stunt that won't stop."

What Junger does not point out, but is true, is that modernity has turned survival, "bare life" in the words of Giorgio Agamben, into the prime goal of human action, deprecating meaning and fundamentally dehumanizing the human person. This has tremendous real-world consequences, notably in the insane overreaction to the Wuhan Plague, where the lives of millions of young people at no risk from the disease were destroyed so that old people already near death, at some risk from the disease, could slightly improve their chances of living a little longer. More broadly, it results in people searching for meaning in safe, stay-at-home pursuits, most of all adoption of ideologies which promise their adherents meaning, usually Left ideologies which instill in believers a feeling that they are part of creating a utopia. Even then, the search for

meaning through risk not infrequently manifests itself, as we have seen in recent weeks with the inevitable upsurge in Left violence, the result of their feeling that utopia, and therefore meaning, is slipping away.

Nonetheless, as Junger notes, death is often random, rather than the result of choosing to pursue meaning. He had plenty to live for, and little reason to take fresh risks. He had a new wife, two young children (even though he was pushing sixty), and a pleasant existence with no major problems, at least none he mentions. His own brush with death was certainly random—the result of a rare physiological condition, present from birth, where the main artery feeding the abdomen, the celiac artery, is pinched by a ligament as it enters the abdomen, shunting blood flow to secondary arteries, which in consequence must carry more blood than they are designed for. Over the years, those arteries may balloon and rupture under the extra load, which is what happened to Junger. He had little warning, though he had been having unexplained severe abdominal pain for months; he seems to be one of those many men who unwisely ignore health conditions that others would immediately have evaluated.

Without fanfare, one afternoon Junger began to bleed out internally, losing a pint of blood every half hour or faster, though he had no idea what was wrong, other than feeling very "off." He offers a fascinating inside view, minute-to-minute, of this process, and its treatment, though when the paramedics arrived, he nearly sent them away, thinking maybe he just had heat exhaustion. Apparently a healthy vascular system masks the signs of shock; as Junger quotes a doctor, "Younger people are famous for looking pretty good and then just falling off the cliff." I have some experience with this myself; a few years ago I went into full-bore anaphylactic shock from a previously-unknown food allergy. When the paramedics arrived, after I had already hit myself with an epinephrine auto-injector, my blood pressure was 67/37, consternating the paramedics, who said "That can't be right; measure the other arm," which yielded the same result. Yet I was still fully conscious and walking. Fortunately, I did not fall off the cliff.

All this is extremely interesting, but it is not the point of the book, which would not really bear writing if it was just a chronicle of a medical procedure. Junger stayed mostly conscious as the doctors massively infused him with blood through a jugular catheter, while trying to figure

out from where he was losing blood. He "became aware of a dark pit below me and to the left. The pit was the purest black and so infinitely deep that it had no real depth at all. . . . It exerted a pull that was slow but unanswerable, and I knew that if I went into the hole, I was never coming back." And then his dead father manifested himself.

"He'd been dead eight years, but there he was, not so much floating as simply existing above me and slightly to my left. . . . My father exuded reassurance and seemed to be inviting me to go with him. 'It's okay, there's nothing to be scared of,' he seemed to be saying. 'Don't fight it. I'll take care of you.' " "He was not so much a vision as a mass of energy configured in a deeply familiar way as my father." At the time, however, rather than welcoming this as a revelation, Junger recoiled from the suggestion. It reminds me of a favorite song of mine, Blitzen Trapper's "Across the River," presumably about a similar event: "Then a man appeared before me / Though I try I can't deny / That he had my father's face and hands / But his eyes shone like the sky / He said my son you come too soon / You better get on out of here / You know I'd let you stay but 'round here / A day is much like a thousand years."

The reader soon comes to realize that the central figure of the book is not really Junger, but his father, both in life and in death. Miguel Junger was Spanish, but left Spain as a child with his father, who was a Communist who fled Spain at the end of the Spanish Civil War, fearing justice. (The only major flaw in this book, which also shows up in other Junger books, is that Junger repeatedly offers gross historical errors about that civil war, no doubt fed to him by his father. He seems to think that the Communists were wonderful people, plucky mountain guerillas similar to Fidel Castro who eventually conquered Madrid, but were then defeated by the evil fascist Francisco Franco. The less said about this bizarre "history" the better.) Regardless, in America Miguel Junger became a physicist, and Junger discourses at some length on early- and mid-twentieth century physicists, including Erwin Schrödinger, who had an affair with Junger's great aunt Ithi, whom Schrödinger got pregnant when she was a teenager (and he was forty-one). The focus on physics is not mere family interest, however. Junger is groping toward an explanation of how it could be that his father, a blinkered rationalist who rejected the idea that anything he could not quantify could be real, appeared to him as he lay dying.

Junger is certain that he did not hallucinate his father, nor dream his presence and retcon it into a memory. He confirmed with others that it was the first thing he spoke of when he woke up from surgery (something he also describes in minute and interesting detail). He discusses a nurse with whom he talked about the vision of his father, who told him, "Instead of thinking of it as something scary, try thinking of it as something sacred." When he later tried to locate the nurse, nobody knew of any nurse meeting that description. But what to make of it? This is the topic of the second half of the book, or, more broadly, the topic is near-death experiences, NDEs, of which Junger's experience was one.

At first, though, his survival seems to have triggered a type of existential crisis, of worry about his death from follow-on complications, a repeat of the same problem, or the fatal eruption of something unrelated. When he wasn't panicking, he reflected that "The extra years that had been returned to me were too terrifying to be beautiful and too precious to be ordinary." Eventually, however, he began to dwell more on his NDE. His doctors were not interested in the least in discussing it, but he quickly realized such experiences are common. All are anecdotal and inherently subjective, but none are really possible to explain, especially given they demonstrate (and it has been shown on active brain scans of a few dying people) massively increased brain activity at a time when the brain's supplies of blood and glucose have been severely reduced or entirely shut off, whereas in all other circumstances even a small reduction in either blood or glucose leads to "disorganized and compromised cerebral function."

NDE experiences share broad similarities across cultures and times. Most of those who have NDEs report the classic tunnel or void followed by a bright light; a feeling of peace and love; and seeing dead relatives. They often experience a "life review," the classic "life flashing before your eyes." Often they report floating above their own body, and, anecdotally at least, are able to see occurrences that would have been impossible for them to see, for example, events happening in other rooms. Frequently the individual believes himself to have chosen to return, either of his own volition or instructed to do so. Skeptics, unsurprisingly, view all these events as hallucinations, brought on by lack of oxygen or the theorized creation of psychedelic compounds by a dying brain. That, of course, does not explain NDEs in those falling from heights or in

those in a car crash the moment it occurs, both common events. NDEs also bear a vague resemblance to temporal lobe seizures, which can be induced with electricity. In Junger's view, however, and he is probably correct, what truly distinguishes NDEs as paranormal is the presence of the dead. Stories of how the dying see the dead are legion—including many documented cases where the dying person did not know the dead person was dead. Studies have also been done on those blind from birth, who do not dream in a visual manner. Yet their NDEs contain markedly visual aspects the same as sighted people. None of this can be "proven," however, because you can't video subjective mental experiences. Thus, all NDEs can be dismissed as anecdotal.

The central tension of this book is that Junger wants, very much, to believe that there is an afterlife, but he cannot bring himself to any kind of religious faith, other than vague (and false) bromides about all religions teaching basically the same morality. After some musing, he concludes, "The overwhelming likelihood is that our sense of another reality is just a comforting illusion that helps us live our lives." Why this should be, which is not obvious, he does not say, nor does he reason to this conclusion. No matter; it's clear he doesn't believe it, because he immediately pivots to the correct and obvious point that we have no idea if we understand even the tiniest portion of reality. It is, of course, impossible to assign any likelihood to reality being markedly different than we perceive it. It may be unlikely, it may be likely, but there is no way to assign a probability. We have no way of knowing. And as Junger points out, that our universe permits life on Earth is itself unbelievably unlikely, the result of numerous extremely specific physical events and constants. In fact, it is unlikely to a degree that can be, allegedly, calculated—ten to the negative 230. Which is unimaginably unlikely, and proves the unlikely is not impossible, and perhaps is not unlikely at all, because what we perceive as chance is actually directed by Will.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Junger turns to what the barely known might tell us about the unknowable. Primarily, this is quantum mechanics, where it has been conclusively demonstrated that a conscious observer affects the collapse of a wave function into particles, suggesting a crucial, perhaps entirely pivotal, role for consciousness at the very base structure of the universe. Quantum experiments have, in fact, supposedly demonstrated "retrocausality"—the effect of a conscious

observer collapsing a wave function changing the state of an entangled quantum particle in the past. Nobody has any idea whatsoever about what consciousness is, how it works, or how it arises. The midwit naïve claim that consciousness is just computing power, and if we have enough computing power organized the right way, consciousness will emerge, is cope by materialists, because there is zero evidence for such a happening. Maybe consciousness is a quantum effect. At the end, though, Junger admits he just doesn't know, and as far as I can tell, he is still an atheist.

NDEs offer both promise and challenge for Christians. The very essence of Christianity is the promise of eternal life. As Saint Paul said, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Thus, to the extent NDEs show a foretaste of the life to come, perhaps one perceptually limited by being filtered through our present capabilities, they partially confirm Christian belief. Nor are NDEs in any way fundamentally incompatible with Christian belief; what incompatibility there is comes from imperfect overlap with Christian belief, not wholly contradictory happenings, and NDEs align better with Christian belief than with any other religion.

The relevant core belief of Christians is that the judgment of Christ, the Particular Judgment, is the immediate event that all those who die face. This is an absolute, binary event—it happens completely, and it happens once. "[I]t is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." As an Orthodox priest once said to me, in this area the Orthodox Church only teaches as doctrine two facts—that each human soul will face the Particular Judgment and the General Judgment. "Everything else is speculation." Nearly all Christian denominations hold essentially the same belief.

Many NDEs bear some similarity to the Particular Judgment—the encounter with an all-powerful being of light who reviews your life (often with the individual ushered by other beings, analogous to angels). Christians most definitely do not believe we will be subsumed in some greater whole, dissolving our consciousness, as do Buddhists, and NDEs always imply continuation of the individual personality. Also relevant to overlap with Christian belief is something Junger does not discuss—"negative NDEs," which involve feelings of abandonment, demonic figures, and being dragged down into darkness. Such NDEs

are less talked about, but do occur. (Arguably Junger's "dark pit" contained elements of this.) Broadly speaking, then, NDEs comport with Christian belief, and to some limited extent are confirmatory. Yet there are cultural overlays—Christians report meeting Jesus Christ; Hindus sometimes report meeting Krishna, who, after all, most Christians view as a demon. This suggests an origin inside the individual consciousness, conditioned by what the dying person already believes.

From a Christian perspective, NDEs might be viewed as a warning, not an actual set of steps on the path to the Particular Judgment, no different than any other manifestation of the saintly or divine in this life. Certainly, there are innumerable reliable accounts of the saints, and even sometimes of Christ or of the Orthodox "uncreated light," appearing to mortals on this side of the great divide. On the other hand, there is rarely any focus in NDEs on an individual's specific failings, sins, the review and discussion of which in Christian doctrine are an essential part of the initial steps into the afterlife, though many who experience NDEs who were not previously Christian repent of their sins and convert to Christianity.

The classic Orthodox work, and probably the only Orthodox work, that discusses NDEs in the modern sense is Seraphim Rose's *The Soul After Death*, published in 1980. I have not read this, though I have a copy. I am somewhat skeptical of Rose, in part because he is a proponent of "aerial tollhouses," the belief of some Orthodox that after death but before the soul appears before Christ, each person's soul is tested by demons, one set for each major group of sins. This belief is not heretical, but it is not doctrine, in any way at all, and in fact its origins very clearly lie in early gnostic heresies. It has always struck me as dubious. As another priest once said to me about this belief, with some sarcasm, "Why would Christ outsource his judgment to demons?"

In any case, Rose was skeptical of NDEs, not rejecting them entirely but regarding their more comforting, universalist themes as likely demonic deceptions, intended to lull the soul into a state of carefree ease and relaxation, discouraging vigilant struggle, which all Scripture and the Fathers emphasize as the road to salvation. And there are other reasons to be skeptical. As with psychedelics, where some claim they talk to spirits or machine elves, no new knowledge is ever revealed—that is, verifiable previously-unknown facts about our own existence in this

universe (except, sometimes, the death of someone else not known to have died). This suggests, again, a purely internal mechanism specific to the dying person.

But perhaps the straightforward vision of the Particular Judgment—the soul is ushered into a giant hall where Christ sits enthroned, where He reviews your life in the same way as an earthly judge and passes judgment—is overly simplistic. In *The Last Battle*, the final book of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis portrays the particular judgment of sapient creatures at the end of a world as a mere meeting of the eyes of Christ and the individual, whereupon the creature reacts in terror and dismay, turning to one side, or reacts with joy, and turns to the other. The judgment of Christ is not, after all, a legal case where we get to argue our side, despite the frequent Orthodox prayer for "a good defense before the judgment seat of Christ." It is an apocalypse, an unveiling, of how God has judged the choices each man and woman has made. And at the end of the day, and at the end of all days, knowing this is all we need to know.