

## A Life Well Lived

“Nothing in nature truly ends; the cessation of life in one organism means sustenance for another and the subsequent transformation into something else. The Iroquois believe we as humans have been given this form of life so we may become sensual beings, to learn what it is like to understand birth, struggle, love, death and renewal”. This sentiment was taken from an online article written by Doug George-Kanentiio who shared some of the Mohawk people’s rituals around death. This perspective on mortality is quite different from our mainstream, contemporary North American culture’s perspective. The theme of mortality is not given much space in our culture and is often denied more than it is acknowledged, such as the “forever young” people depicted in advertisements, anti-wrinkle creams and the existence of cosmetic surgeries. In the two stories, "Joyas Voladores" by Brian Doyle and "My Periodic Table" by Oliver Sacks, the authors tackle this abstract theme of mortality with their own figurative language by using metaphors as a tool to bridge the reader from the mainstream perspective into a thoughtful and personal perspective of mortality. In "Joyas Voladores", Doyle discusses the physical and emotional capacity of the heart to highlight the fragility and finitude of life. In "My Periodic Table", Sacks shares how his passion for the physical sciences has provided him solace throughout his life when faced with loss and even now provides him with that same comfort when faced with his own death. These texts have huge value because they make the abstract concept of death accessible to college students, they are written in a creative way with the use of metaphors, which is worth studying and learning, and they are written by two renowned authors

whom those same college students should be familiar with because of their wide range of perspectives on the human experience in our modern world.

Mortality is something that all humans experience and despite the average, young age of college students, some may have already experienced death in their lives. Anytime someone experiences a death in their life, it can be very challenging. Yet, experiencing someone close to you dying can also provide opportunities of profound healing through forgiveness and sharing memories. It's unfortunate that in our mainstream North American culture it's more common to relate to mortality from a state of fear and denial or something taboo rather than surrendering and embracing it. Stephen Jenkinson, MTS, MSW is an author who served as program director of a palliative care center in Toronto. During which he provided counseling to hundreds of families and patients facing death. Jenkinson's life work is to shift the paradigm around death and bring it out of the shadows by inviting people to treat death as another life event such as a birthday or wedding. In a 2015 interview with Jenkinson by Erik Hoffner, Hoffner summarizes a scene from Jenkinson's documentary, *Griefwalker*, "In one scene he talks to a woman with terminal cancer who has had a hospital bed delivered to her home but hides it away rather than use it. When he asks why, she says she doesn't want to be reminded of what's to come. Jenkinson advises her not to 'put away' her dying for some future date but to treat it as a 'prized possession,' because it's the awareness of death — and not happiness or positivity or stoicism — that allows us to live fully in the time we have. If we think there will always be more time down the road, we put off both our dreams and our obligations". Jenkinson's documentary, *Griefwalker* brings death out of the shadows and showcases it, not in a morbid way but in a raw, real, approachable way. He supports the woman with terminal cancer to acknowledge her death in hopes to allow her to live

the rest of her days more fully because there is a finite number of them. This fact of our finite nature is not just true for terminally ill people, but it is true for everyone - we all have a finite number of days to live. It can be beneficial to our culture for people to acknowledge that and to live their lives pursuing their dreams now rather than later. The sooner we take death out of the box buried in the recesses of our minds and acknowledge that death is an inevitable experience that every human eventually encounters, maybe then we can begin to live life more fully. It's important to note that Sacks wrote "My Periodic Table" a few months before passing away from metastatic cancer. Comparatively, Doyle wrote "Joyas Voladores" 13 years before his passing, but it can be assumed that the story was inspired by his son, Liam who was born with three chambers in his heart, rather than four, requiring many invasive surgeries from the time he was born. Let's take a moment to look at one way Doyle breaks the taboo theme of mortality in "Joyas Voladores" by highlighting the preciousness of our lives, "Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can choose to spend them slowly, like a tortoise, and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast, like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old". Doyle's way of acknowledging our finitude can provoke thoughtful questions for the reader, such as, "*How do I want to live out the rest of my time here? Do I really want to sit at this computer for 40 hours every week? Might there be gifts on the other side of my fears of traveling, skydiving or telling someone I love them? Might it be beneficial to forgive my mom and dad now, rather than later?*". It can be assumed that both authors wrote these stories from a place of pondering similar questions. The fact that Doyle and Sacks dare to discuss their own mortality breaks the taboo, which should be broken, providing college students with a rare and personal discussion of the very human experience of mortality.

Without the use of figurative language, the theme of mortality can easily be portrayed as morbid, depressing or clinical which can perpetuate our culture's fear of it. In "Joyas Voladores" and "My Periodic Table", both authors discuss the theme of mortality in an approachable and creative way with the use of metaphors. *The Little Seagull Handbook 3E* defines that "Metaphors are words used imaginatively rather than literally. They can help readers understand an abstract point by comparing something they are familiar with or can easily imagine". The use of metaphors can be a valuable tool for a college student to have. However, metaphors can be tricky to compose so it's good to have credible examples. The authors of "Joyas Voladores" and "My Periodic Table" both accomplish the use of metaphor to construct and address their unique take on mortality. A great example of a metaphor in action is Sacks' passage from "My Periodic Table", "Times of stress throughout my life have led me to turn, or return, to the physical sciences, a world where there is no life, but also no death. And now, at this juncture, when death is no longer an abstract concept, but a presence- and all-too-close, not-to-be-denied presence- I am again surrounding myself, as I did when I was a boy, with metals and minerals, little emblems of eternity". In this sentiment, Sacks shares his very personal relationship to the physical sciences as not only a career path, but a way to cope with loss and his own impending death. He compares his relationship to death and how it's evolved from being an abstract concept to a "not-to-be-denied presence." The way Sacks refers to metals and minerals as "little emblems of eternity" makes me imagine how someone facing their death could find comfort in knowing that their family will be taken care of and can live on without them. Perhaps that is what Sacks means from this passage - that he is comforted to know that the world and all of it's metals and minerals will continue to live on, long after he is gone. Another great example of a metaphor at

work is Doyle's passage from "Joyas Voladores", "So much held in a heart in a lifetime. So much held in a heart in a day, an hour, a moment. We are utterly open with no one in the end - not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each but we live alone in the house of the heart". Taken literally, this doesn't make sense. No one lives in a heart and you may ask, what does he mean by opening windows to each? However, taken metaphorically it's quite deep. He highlights that our emotional experiences can never be understood by another person in the exact same way that we experience them, no matter how close we are to another person. Throughout our lifetime, we will share many parts of our life with many different people, but when it comes to matters of the heart, not one person will truly ever know what it feels like to experience what we have gone through. Both of the authors demonstrate a way for college students to understand the concept of metaphor in action and apply it as a skill or technique.

Oliver Sacks and Brian Doyle most likely did not know one another and it is more likely that Doyle knew the works of Sacks, rather than Sacks knowing the works of Doyle. They also came from different upbringings, Sacks grew up in London in a Jewish family and later considered himself "an Atheist Jew", whereas Doyle grew up in New York in a Christian family and remained faithful to his religion throughout his life. However, despite their different upbringings, religions and career paths, both Sacks and Doyle had a deep passion for literature and the human experience in which both passions are reflected ever so beautifully in some of their final pieces of writing. The following is an excerpt from Sacks' public announcement of his cancer diagnosis, "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in

return; I have read and traveled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure". This piece of writing can be found online through the *New York Times* and includes over 800 comments from readers in the comments. To have free access to such a beautiful and personal piece of writing including reflections from over 800 readers from around the world is truly a gift. Similar to Sacks public announcement, Doyle shared a public piece titled, "Last Prayer" in one of his final books, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer*, "I could complain a little right here about the long years of back pain and the occasional awful heartbreak, but Lord, those things were infinitesimal against the slather of gifts You gave mere me, a muddle of a man, so often selfish and small. But no man was ever more grateful for Your profligate generosity, and here at the very end, here in my last lines, I close my eyes and weep with joy that I was alive, and blessed beyond measure, and might well be headed back home to the incomprehensible Love from which I came, mewling, many years ago". Doyle expresses feelings of gratitude, self awareness and humility similar to Sacks in this writing piece but in his own unique way and his connection to his religion is reflected in a beautiful way. Both authors have left a legacy with their writings and college students can greatly benefit from being familiar with them because of their understanding of the human experience which is reflected in their works. If college students were familiar with these contemporary authors, it could provide them with an immense selection of writings to reference and get inspiration from and may perhaps inspire or enlighten them in profound ways.

To develop a deeper appreciation for life, reflecting on our own finite nature is something that every college student should do for at least one moment in their lives. "My Periodic Table" and "Joyas Voladores" can be a catalyst for such reflections to be explored. Writing about such reflections does not have to be sad, terrifying or morbid - but can be written in an approachable, thoughtful way and there are literary tools, such as metaphors which can help in the process. Both Doyle and Sacks provide examples of that in "Joyas Voladores" and "My Periodic Table". Being familiar with the works of Oliver Sacks and Brian Doyle can provide valuable literary examples for college students to reference from. Additionally, despite their vast differences in belief systems and writing pieces, both authors seemed to have embodied, in their own unique way, the Iroquois sentiment that the purpose of life is "to learn what it is like to understand birth, struggle, love, death and renewal".

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