

Physics

written by Mike Cordle | July 30, 2021



When I was an adolescent, my parents moved our little family of four to Alaska. There we built a log house in which to live. We did not have a television. I spent most of my spare time reading. My reading was not, to use a word from Thoreau, deliberate. Not that it is wrong to so read, but for context to the following, it is important to know that my reading was pretty much according to my whim, following the discursive nature of my thought life.

That changed after hearing several sermons from the pastor who looked like the Marlboro Man of the tiny little church in Kasilof, a tiny little community on the Kenai Peninsula. I told him I was very impressed with all the history and language material he included in his sermons.

“Where do you get all that?”

He took me to his study with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Books were stacked on his desk and floor. Unceremoniously, he pulled a massive tome of a book off a shelf and handed it to me.

I read the spine: *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, by Alfred Edersheim.

Then he grabbed a big book on the archeology of the Old Testament and put it in my arms, on top of the Edersheim book. Then one on the New Testament. In a matter of moments, he had ten books weighing down my arms

“I used those in last Sunday’s sermon,” he said. “Oh, I went to seminary for the ministry. But it is these,” swept his right arm around the study, fairly pirouetting in his cowboy boots as he did so. “These,” he repeated, “are the where I ‘get all that,’ as you referred to it.

“May I be so bold as to counsel you for your future?”

I nodded my head as I began to feel the weight of the books in my arms.

“BB,” he said with a grin beneath his handlebar mustache, the one thing that

kept him from looking exactly like the Marlboro Man.

"BB?" I parroted. I had recently read Orwell's *1984* and was pretty certain he was not referring to the letters chanted by those subservient to Big Brother.

He removed the top book on the stack I held, "Any guesses how long it took for the author of this book on ancient Greek food customs to research and write it?"

"A few years?"

"Nine." He gently replaced it back on its shelf.

One by one, he removed the books I held, ceremoniously, this time, as he replaced them to their rightful space. As he did so, he told me how long it took each author to research and write their book.

By the time he got down to Alfred Edersheim's massive book, we had together counted more than 120 years.

"How long do you think you will live on this side of eternity?"

"Not that long," I answered, even as I assured myself that I had a good shot at living well into my nineties since there was a great deal of longevity on both sides of my family.

"Borrow brain," he explained, "because even if you became a scholar, which the good Lord knows I am not, you will not live long enough to do this all," he once again did his slow pirouette around his study, "on your own."

And thus, I changed how I read. That is to say, I began to read with more focus.

For example, when the first year of my marriage proved rocky and disappointing, I read a dozen or so books on marriage, including a couple books on sex.

When we were expecting our first child, I read well over a dozen books on childrearing.

Ten years into our marriage, we decided to become missionaries in Papua New Guinea. So, I read books on linguistics and anthropology.

Five years into our ministry I felt like a dismal failure, and my faith was waning, I read dozens of books defending the faith, (apologetics, for those who know the word).

By the time I was done with those books, still wallowing in doubt, I began reading philosophy and history, going to the first sources so frequently referred to in the books that were supposed to give me reason to believe.

As my first marriage fell apart and I dipped my feet into same-sex relationships, getting side-tracked from that into my second marriage with a

woman who professed Christianity but thought nothing of adultery, I read up on suicide.

Life seemed meaningless, by then, apart from hedonism, which I knew would soon enough fail to fulfill.

Why suicide? Because in my reading of philosophy, I recalled Albert Camus asserting in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."

That salvo of his always bothered me, especially if I put it next to the Karamazov brother who in so many words argued for how the lack of God's existence allowed for one to do anything they desired.

Suicide was an option.

This confounded me; it frightened me.

So, as I said above, I read about suicide. And I can't remember exactly why, but the reading up on suicide led me to volunteer as a hospice sitter, which led me to read a couple dozen books about death and dying. Plus, getting a semicolon tattooed on my right forearm. For better or for worse, that semicolon has worked a few times when I was severely depressed to move me to carry on, sometimes to see a psychotherapist, always, so far, to convince myself that I was not at the end of my life sentence.

Somewhere along the way, I began to realize that sometimes it worked to borrow brain and sometimes it did not.

Sometimes I simply had to go with my gut for if I let myself get too far bogged down in the borrowing, I became as unmoored as the most honest postmodernist.

A few years ago, shortly after my sixtieth birthday, my partner, now husband, and I were watching the television version of the New York Times podcast called *Modern Love*. We enjoyed every episode, but the one that had the bombshell line I needed to hear was Episode 6, *So He Looked Like Dad. It Was Just Dinner, Right?*

In that episode we encounter a delightful young woman innocently in need of a father figure. She found that in a teacher in need of a woman in his life. Throughout the entire episode, they are, as it were, talking and feeling past each other, not genuinely connecting. As a sort of penultimate scene, the man the woman saw as a doting father moved in to kiss her. It is obvious from the story that he misread her, and, I believe, that he was not at all predatory.

Alas, when he moves to kiss her, she is repulsed and pushes him away. He is genuinely confused, telling her he thought that was what she wanted.

She castigates him by saying, in so many words, "You're the adult here. You're old, you should know what's going on."

His response, again in so many words: "How I wish that were true. I'm just

trying to figure things out as I go. Just because I'm a lot older doesn't mean I have perfect insight."

And that and all that above about books are to get to this: Even when you do what you think are the right things to do, even when you deliberately seek to become mature, and even when you think you've sort of gotten it together, for most of us, when we're honest, we know that the main difference between who we are as an older person and who we were as a younger is that we're older.

Our bodies are older. They're past maturing. Indeed, they're falling apart.

Sherwin Nuland, in his book *How We Die*, makes it clear that there comes a point when no amount of exercise and diet will work to return our bodies to their prime. Entropy becomes the operative force, letting, among other things, gravity to take its relentless toll. Our skin sags, our abdominal organs sag down away from their original places of being. Our spines compress; an aunt of mine who is only six years older than I am has lost nearly an inch of height. Granted, some of it is due to her arthritis, but much is merely the force of gravity. And our brains. If we live long enough, not only do our brains naturally shrink throughout their entire structure, not entirely unlike a sponge that shrinks when allowed to dry, thanks to gravity, our brains rest lower in our skulls as we age.

Midway through my 62nd year I was beachcombing with my husband on the Hood Canal. We came to a line of the shore that was exquisitely crisscrossed with fallen trees from the shore, mixed with sun bleached logs that had been cast among the still living mess of evergreens and deciduous trees. It was as if Nature imitated one of Picasso's cluttered paintings.

"Wait here," I told my husband, as I breathlessly began climbing through the trees. I wanted to get a picture of him with my phone camera, using the detritus of tangled trees to frame him against the dead calm sea.

I felt empowered by the agility I still had in my limbs as I maneuvered under this tree and over that one, once swinging from the branch a massive cedar hanging from the ten-foot cliff, tipping its top in the gently lapping salt water. I consciously felt reassured that, aging though I was, I still had some of the physicality of my youth.

Unbeknownst to me, my husband had filmed me climbing through the trees.

After I showed him my pictures, he showed me the two-minute video.

There was no agility in my climbing. My springy jumps of logs laying in the sand were no more than audible thuds. Instead of lithely twisting under one tree and then the next, I saw myself moving cautiously and with absolutely no grace.

At one tree, a Pacific Madrone, I slipped on its wet surface and barely caught myself with an awkward grab.

I looked like an old man falling.

Peter Pouncy wrote a novel called *Rules for Old Men Waiting*. He doesn't say it in the book, but anyone who has read it knows that the full title very well may have been *Rules for Old Men Waiting to Die*. Addressing that process, he points out that there is a tension we feel, "between what you are falling from and what you are falling to."

As intimated a few paragraphs back, gravity is taking its toll. I've lost track how many times I have heard John Mayer's song in my head, singing sadly to myself, "gravity is working against me, and gravity wants to bring me down. Whoa, gravity, stay the hell away from me."

When one lives long enough, they become full of their past. A few years ago, after starting my job as the maintenance director of a facility for individuals with dementia, I began worrying that my memory, too, was failing. It was a natural thing to worry about, under the circumstances. In keeping with my life-long tendency to read up on things, I read a dozen or so publications related to memory and dementia. Amongst it all, I came upon someone's sardonic remark that "it's no wonder older people forget things; they have so much stuff crowded in their heads."

So, here I am, at the end of a discursive little essay about life and aging and I don't know how to end it.

Which, I think, makes sense because I don't know how my life will end.