

# Three Books About Life and Death

Daniel Asia

Sebastian Junger, *In My Time of Dying: How I Came Face to Face with the Idea of an Afterlife*. Simon & Schuster, 176pp., \$28 cloth.

Joseph Epstein, *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life, Especially If You've Had a Lucky Life*. Free Press, 304pp., \$30 cloth.

Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*. Belknap Press, 176pp. \$20 paper.

**O**N JUNE 16, 2020, SEBASTIAN Junger experienced an aneurysm that should have killed him. Because of expert doctoring and luck, it didn't. His book, *In My Time of Dying, How I Came Face-to-Face with the Idea of an Afterlife*, is an account of his experience, some biographical materials that pertain to the experience itself, and existential ponderings on occurrences during his travail and its aftermath.

Junger is a journalist by profession and a rationalist by upbringing. His father, a Jewish physicist, inculcated the value of being able to “prove,” to let the data talk. He “didn't believe in anything that he couldn't measure and test.” This is perfect for a journalist—get the facts straight. Clear debris out of the way. Junger knows how to capture the essence of an event with all of its layers, textures, and details, and as importantly, to make it colorful. His writing is straightforward. His extensive listing of the materials used for his surgery is almost

Maileresque in its delineation. He interviewed his doctors, nurses, and emergency medicine handlers. His bibliography is extensive, citing articles that he admits he couldn't fully comprehend. The math is past his capability to keep up, but he understands the conclusions.

His father, though a rationalist, was also a bit of a mystic, which influenced Junger's approach to the world and his contemplation of humankind after his experience. The fundamental contradiction that the book explores is the quite extraordinary state of science and medicine—our highly developed understanding of how the body works and how to fix it when it goes wrong—and our lack of knowledge about the hidden nature of consciousness itself, or how the body and soul combine to make what we call life. He came up against the wall of human rationality, what it can and cannot tell us about ourselves and our relationship to the universe. He was a super-rationalist before his illness; afterwards, less so.

What happened to effectuate this change? After surgery, he began to ponder death: “Not death on his terms... but on *its* terms.”

Junger had a dream that shook him to the core. He was conducting research for a book (it must have been *A Perfect Storm*, although he doesn't mention it specifically). In it, the dead men he was researching appeared on a beach where he had long ago gone surfing and almost drowned. They waved him over and seemed to be saying, “We've been expecting you.” Another dream followed days later. His wife and daughter were crying while he hovered oddly over their heads. Death, or premonitions of death, are close to Junger. After all, he was a war correspondent in Afghanistan and other war zones, where death, or its possibility, was always near at hand. Nonetheless, these dreams unsettled him.

## Mourning for humans is not lugubrious, but an active form of meaning-making and flourishing.

And then the attack occurred. A pain struck in his abdomen that almost floored him. He had had lesser pains over the previous six months and had ignored them. He and his wife were at their rustic Cape Cod home in an outbuilding with no telephone or cell service. Once she had returned to civilization, his wife, Barbara, called 911, and medics arrived and took him to the hospital. Later, he deduced that he was losing blood at a fast pace. He was “just coherent enough to know that I wasn't entirely.” Upon arrival at the hospital, the trauma doctors knew immediately that he was in terrible shape, the sickest person in the hospital, so he was given priority attention. They had to find out from whence the bleeding

was originating. Eventually, it was determined that he had had a rupture of “one of the small arteries that supply blood to the pancreas and duodenum.”

In unraveling his condition and its treatment, in good journalistic form, many medical definitions are explored: hypothermia, low blood oxygen, massive transfusion protocols, and the like. He was in and out of consciousness, but still able to ask questions. You're putting in a particular line, “in case there's an emergency?” he foggily asked. The doctor responded “This is the emergency.” As his condition became more dire, he

*became aware of a dark pit below me and to my 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 just when it seemed unavoidable, I became aware of something else: My father exuded reassurance and seemed to be inviting me to go with him. “It's okay, there's nothing to be scared of...don't fight it. I'll take care of you.”*

The rest of the book is an attempt to understand this appearance and experience of his deceased father, and its relationship to the possibility of an afterlife. This term must not be thought of in a simplistic schema of heaven and hell, or in the image of the bones of the dead jangling their way back to life upon the arrival of the Messiah, as in the Biblical book of Ezekiel. Instead, the thought is that consciousness is part of the universe, as are we. And that consciousness might survive our bodily deaths. He ponders this possibility from the perspective of Near Death Experiences (NDE) and the sciences, and quantum physics of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Among the aspects of NDEs is the life review. It is just that, and it takes place in an instant. He relates this experience of one of his buddies, Carroll, who is an army medic, and was severely wounded in combat. “My whole life flashed before my eyes from birth to

the present moment... I thought of my wife. I thought of my mom. I thought of how much love I had for them...It's okay. Let go. You were loved. You loved them. Nothing else matters. It was just this total acceptance of what was happening.” Junger comments “The life review was one of the most powerful and comforting of these visions. It is characterized by the conviction that you have sweeping knowledge of all things and can simultaneously re-experience your entire life.”

“Sweeping knowledge of all things” means knowing about things that sound impossible. A man dies, comes back to life, and relates what he saw in another part of the hospital. The nurse tells him that this did indeed occur. The dead person sees himself and the scene around him as if from above, and describes what happened.

Just before death and after death an explosion of gamma rays is released by the brain. How can this happen after? About one quarter of all those who experience NDEs report encountering the dead, as did Junger. It is usually relatives who are “seen.” Junger asks the simple question: “Why do the dying—and only the dying—keep seeing the dead in their last days and hours?” He cites cases presented by reputable doctors of these occurrences, as well as the statement of a doctor, a sceptic of NDEs, who had just such an experience.

He examines what scientists know about our world, particularly theoretical physicists, for it is they, of all scientists, who understand the universe as a mysterious place. Energy and matter are just different forms of the same thing. Einstein said, “Matter is spirit reduced to the point of visibility—there is no matter.” Notice the use of the word spirit. Heisenberg “demonstrated that subatomic particles changed behavior when observed.” Namely, that humans affect the atomic structure of the universe just by watching it.” And Schrodinger's thought experiment suggested

that a cat could simultaneously be dead and alive. (In a fit of unacknowledged synchronicity, Schrodinger tutored Junger's father's twin aunts during the summer of 1926.)

And then there is the brain and consciousness. The brain is constituted of over an estimated hundred trillion neural connections. They give rise to what we call consciousness, which we have yet to understand. How does it arise, and why does it exist? Since it exists, it must have been part of the possibilities of the universe from its beginning, part of the “cosmic fabric.” As Sir Arthur Eddington said: “Something unknown is doing we don't know what.”

Junger's father was a rationalist and a romantic. We know the latter adjective applies, because he found the night sky so beautiful that he couldn't look at it. Did it belie his rationalist stance? Sebastian Junger goes where his father couldn't. As a journalist, he must follow what the evidence and science tell him:

*Given that existence itself is almost infinitely unlikely, what if there were some kind of post-death existence? What if the dead were not entirely gone, in the sense that we understand that word, and the living were not entirely bound by time and space? What if the great mysteries of the world—the spirits and ghosts and coincidences and telepathy and predictive dreams and everything else that humans have always noticed but couldn't quite make sense of—actually had a rational explanation? How would that possibly work?*

How indeed.

To have a good life, live by bourgeois values. Get a good education. Be honest and forthright. Have respect for law and authority. Have the courage to stand up for what is right. This is all well and good. But as Joseph Epstein suggests in his new book, *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life, Especially If You've Had a Lucky Life*, having a little luck never hurts. Epstein's memoir displays his mostly lucky life in spades. Or it may just be that he

always sees the cup as half-full, because part of his life wasn't quite so simple or easy, but that was partly of his own doing. Epstein seems to be a happy-go-lucky guy, who finds joy in most of existence, and certainly in his own.

The memoir scoots along from his life's beginnings to now. There are encounters with some famous people along the way, a bit of sociological comment—in Epstein's view, the earlier years were indeed better than the latter for America, with the dividing line being the mid-60s. There were a few disgraces and defeats along the way, but nothing that took Epstein's (the Jewish *Ep-stine* being the correct pronunciation) life off the rails.

He grew up a "petit bourgeois, Jewish, Midwest American," and that worked out well. Epstein isn't one for deep introspection; he skates just a bit on the surface of his life's occurrences, but as with some music, that surface is appealing enough to keep us entertained, if not enriched. It is the story of how a kid who "lived on playgrounds, hung out at drug and school stores... and was a wise guy," ended up as a writer and intellectual. In that quote I left out "and at drive in movies, where I was never allowed to go as far with the young girls of my generation as I ardently desired." He admits that in his teenage years he visited prostitutes with his buddies. He might have had a drink or two, but no drugs.

And unlike many of our current cultural critics, Epstein thinks that the culture of the time, post-World-War-II America, was "for all its flaws, the most interesting, the most generous, the grandest country in the world." He still does. And that culture promoted the formation of those bourgeois values mentioned above, unlike ours, which fosters the lightweight characteristics of self-esteem and freedom from stress.

For Epstein, being lucky meant, first and foremost, having good and decent parents. Like most parents of the 1950s and 1960s, his parents left him alone. They loved and trusted him, but didn't hover over him. There weren't

lots of hugs or deep discussions of his feelings, just quiet support. He could come and go as he pleased. The streets and playgrounds were safe. As a teenager, he held a job and therefore learned about earning money and responsibility. It was a time of the "pre-therapeutic state," which he finds better than our current age of overwhelming attention given to our "feelings." He did okay at school, but nothing stellar, as it didn't interest him much. And then, getting into college wasn't such a big deal. He started at the University of Illinois, in a fraternity, of course, but then ended up at the University of Chicago. He wasn't a particularly good student and had no strong interests. He thought he might end up like his dad, a salesman.

Epstein's mother and father were characters. His father Maurice never finished high school, but for years ran a successful business, which was his life. He worked six days a week selling cheap tchotchkes. He was fair, never showed any favoritism, and while not a member of any synagogue and an agnostic, he contributed liberally to Jewish charities and to relatives and poor individuals. His father encouraged him to go his own way, as he thought work was the most important aspect of a man's life. His mother Belle was not beautiful, but was nonetheless, "stunning." She played cards, provided all that was needed at home, and sponsored Jewish and non-Jewish charity events. She loved language and used it well, but wasn't in any way literary. He is doubtful that she ever read any of his books or articles. Their collective family life was mostly restricted to extended family and celebrating with them the Jewish holidays.

Childhood was in a furnished apartment off Lake Michigan in Chicago. The war "suffused all of American life," and America has never been as unified since then. While Chicago was a largely Catholic city, Epstein was brought up Jewish: he went to Hebrew school, had a Bar Mitzvah, likes to be part of the Jewish people, and happens to enjoy being part of a

distinguished minority in America. His father read him children's stories from the Old Testament and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Can a better combination of being Jewish and American be had?

Epstein went to college because all of his friends did. That college was the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, because it was cheap and let in almost everyone. He went into a fraternity, with all of its trappings: silly hazing, but also companionship and decent food. Frats were strictly Gentile or Jewish, with nothing in between. Epstein had no idea what he would study. But he did discover he could write with decent "clarity." After residence in the frat for one term, he tired of it and moved out. He began also to feel that the university was dull, tedious, and too large and impersonal. But then he was kicked out of school for having sold a stolen exam!

**Lear pushes back on such nihilism with the notion that, in fact, there is something marvelous and good about us and the goodness and beauty we have brought into the world.**

After holding down a job for a bit, he sought out an alternative college experience, and applied to the University of Chicago. Lo and behold, he discovered that he had been accepted. He thinks that his experience there changed his life. It wasn't so much the classroom talk, but the readings and general

atmosphere. He felt quite out of the mainstream of his very well-educated and suave fellow students, but he wanted to participate, so he worked and studied hard. Not knowing what else to choose, after a year and a half he became an English major. At this time, he also discovered small magazines, e.g. *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, et al. He was entranced, and began to entertain the possibility that maybe he could become a writer, like those who appeared in these journals. After working as a sub-editor for the college rag, it also occurred to him that he might find work as an editor.

His following two-year stint in the army was a leveling agent, as he was surrounded by American types that he hadn't come across before. He found it salutary, and it gave him time to think about what he might do with his life. He wrote for the base newspaper in Texas, then fatefully ended up doing the same in Little Rock.

Fatefully, because it is here that he met his first wife, with whom he had two children. She already had two, was a waitress, came from a poor background, hadn't much education, nor was she exactly Jewish. His parents weren't thrilled. The couple divorced after ten years. And the kicker was that she demanded he take all four children or none, and so he did.

But in the intervening ten years his career began. He started with the *Kiwanis* magazine in Chicago, then moved to working for the *New Leader* in New York. He met many up-and-comers there, and the name dropping is severe. But if you knew them, why not flaunt it? We come across the likes of Walter Laqueur, Dwight MacDonald, John Simon, and Hilton Kramer, among others. He couldn't find a job after leaving the *New Leader*, and he and the family moved back to Little Rock with the hope of finding better employment there. He did, finding a job there in anti-poverty work as a public relations man. He wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine* on the subject, which instantly gained him fame in the field

and many opportunities at the national level. It also resulted in his becoming the director of the anti-poverty program in Pulaski County, Arkansas. During his tenure there, he began to believe that while poverty might partly be political and economic, its primary source is cultural. Looking for another job, he found one working for *Encyclopedia Britannica* in, of all places, Chicago.

*Encyclopedia Britannica* was going through its great self-introspection, trying to find a new path. Epstein was hired to help. Never having had, or read, an encyclopedia, he wasn't much. The machinations of this time make for some prosaic reading, about lunches, dull meetings, and half-interesting co-workers. The job's only saving grace was that he met his second wife there (or as she asked his publishers to write, his "final wife").

Epstein recounts the growth, successes, and failures of his four sons (he and his second wife have no children). One son graduated with honors from Stanford; another died of an overdose at age twenty-eight. He says there is no such thing as closure. (Fair enough, but there might be a little more rumination on what these occurrences meant to him.) Fortunately, he develops a strong relationship with the deceased son's daughter.

In the early seventies, after writing a contentious article on homosexuality, he was still hired to teach at Northwestern University and, then soon thereafter, to the editorship of Phi Beta Kappa's quarterly, *The American Scholar*. He notes that this would not be possible in these times, since he took on these positions with no advanced degree, and not having been made a member of Phi Beta Kappa. But Beethoven had no Doctor of Musical Arts degree and Dostoyevsky no Ph.D. in literature, and somehow they managed to produce decent music and literature. Epstein had already demonstrated his gifts as a writer and editor in the "real" world.

He taught a couple of classes each of three quarters at Northwestern, although

it was never an easy experience for him. "Not that I ever entered a classroom as a teacher completely free from nervousness. I worried about filling my full ninety-minute classes; I worried about boring my students; I worried about betraying inexcusable ignorance of one or another kind." He retired at the tender age of sixty-five in 2002, which he figures was timed perfectly, as it preceded the onslaught of political correctness. As a free-thinker of a conservative bent, he wouldn't have survived.

Which he didn't from his job at *The American Scholar*. That job came about, he thinks, as the result of wonderful recommendations from his friend Hilton Kramer, the *New York Times* art critic and co-founder and then-editor of *The New Criterion*. By his account, it was a cushy job. At twenty grand, he was paid half of a professor's salary. While the office was in Washington, DC., he only needed to commute there four times a year from his hometown of Chicago. He had numerous underlings, who could help him with his editorial work. "They did most of the work on the journal, while I got all of the credit." It gave him time to continue work as a freelance writer and teach his now one course per quarter at Northwestern. And happily, writing a 6500-word article at the beginning of each edition turned him into a fine essayist, which carried over into his book and article writing.

His demise was quick and almost painless. The Skirball Foundation "threatened" to give the magazine a few million dollars. Three members of the Senate, rowdies on the left, saw it as a gambit to keep him in his position indefinitely. A coup was undertaken, and only one friend voted for his retention. It caused a bit of a public stir, but it was only a momentary historical blip.

Joseph Epstein has written thirty-one books in his eighty-eight years. I wouldn't be surprised if he is working on one now as I write, as he makes no mention of stopping

after writing this autobiography. Elliott Carter wrote music until he died at 103, so let's not put anything out of the realm of possibility for Epstein, who writes easily and fluently.

He misses his deceased friends. Doesn't go to the movies much anymore, but doesn't miss them. He realizes he is lucky to have a loving wife, son, and grandchildren. He still retains his love of writing, reading, and a sense of humor: he "would hate to check out while reading, say, a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* with the title "Thailand fights for Democracy." As he says:

*I was able to teach at a university without having to undergo the tedium of acquiring any advanced degrees. I was appointed editor of a magazine, The American Scholar, the quarterly journal of Phi Beta Kappa, without having to be concerned about its finances or having been a Phi Beta Kappa myself. I have not had to go into an office over the past 50 or so years. Above all, through my adult life, I've been allowed to do the work I love, writing about what I pleased, expressing my true views, and being well rewarded, financially as well as psychologically, while doing so.*

Mr. Joseph Epstein really has led a lucky life, as his aptly titled book notes. May he live *bis ein hundred und zwanzig* (until a hundred and twenty); and in good health, of course.

**M**uch of Jonathan Lear's new book, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, first appeared as lectures at the Newberry Library in Chicago. They then appeared separately in publication. The result is a book that is mildly repetitive, occasionally colloquial, and—as his conceptual frameworks are philosophical and psychoanalytical—displays unnecessary jargon. There are also chapters that probably never should have found their way into this book, but more about that later.

There are times in Lear's life when he hears something that becomes the source of an extended rumination. The first chapter begins with just one of these moments. He was

listening to a lecture about climate change and its resultant ecological catastrophe. At the end of the discussion, a young academic stood up and said, "Let me tell you something: we will not be missed." This "joke" suggests that if humanity is gone, there will be no one to miss us and, even more insidiously, that we are not worthy of being missed. Lear claims that the key takeaway from this line of reasoning is that we as individuals are not just the bad guys, and it's not just that "civilization is under threat." Indeed, civilization itself is the bad guy, "responsible for its own undoing." Lear latches onto the term "miss" in the joke to introduce the central motif of the book, stating "we are threatened with the loss of the special kind of missing that is characteristic of human beings: mourning...a living-on in the hearts and minds of others." Mourning for humans is not lugubrious, but an active form of meaning-making and flourishing. We "get busy emotionally, imaginatively, and cognitively" in response to a loss: "We mourners, through our suffering, transform what would otherwise be a mere change into a ...way we create and maintain an absence in the world."

The flip side of the joke and its environmental context, he argues, implies a punishment involved in not being missed, in imposing catastrophic civilization upon the earth: "...we are confronted with the prospect of the end of mourning itself. We...are thus to be the last generation of mourners. Insofar as there is any mourning left to be done, we have the last chance."

Lear pushes back on such nihilism with the notion that, in fact, there is something marvelous and good about us and the goodness and beauty we have brought into the world. Is this not worth mourning? Mourning usually applies to death, not at an approach to death. Until actual death, there is always the possibility of the continuance of life. For Freud and Aristotle, mourning gives meaning to the life that is no longer and to the relationships that death has severed. The feelings of love,

and therefore the loss of the loved one, are as real as any physical object. As consciousness is part of the universe, so are they. “Mourning broadly understood is pervasive in human life” (emphasis in original).

Lear then introduces two words that he would like to place in relation to mourning: morality and *kalon*. He takes from Bernard Williams the notion that morality implies certain obligations, and that blame, shame, and guilt are baked into the system. Yet “mourning provides relief from all of this.” *Kalon*, an Aristotelean idea, combines aspects of the noble, beautiful, and the fine, and of acting well. We would describe it as something that makes us happy, and gives life meaning. He gives the example of a generous person doing generous acts. In the Jewish tradition, this would include he who gives money to the poor; she who provides a job; they who support an institution that offers experiences for beauty; and the community that supports orphans and widows. But *kalon* is also mourning, according to Lear, as we do the good deed of attending to the dead. Again, in Judaism, taking care of the dead is considered a holy act, as the deceased can provide nothing in return. We are acknowledging their effect on us and the universe, and sustaining their image through our thoughts. Mourning, then, is part of the universe, which would be less if mourning didn’t exist.

The author next turns to “On Transience,” a short 1916 essay by Freud. In it, Freud describes how he, and a friend, who is a famous young poet, take a walk, talking about transience and beauty, and what civilization now means in a time of war. The First World War “shattered their pride” in European civilization and undermined their faith in its philosophy and the concept of “Man,” as well as in the progress and science that drove it. He notes that there have been wars throughout history, and that humanity had to adapt to their consequences. The destruction of the Second Temple for the Jews in 70 CE caused a

complete change in how the Jews approached God, from sacrifice to prayer. Lear was doing this soul-searching during Covid, but only a severe pessimist, one susceptible to hysteria, could equate the world war and the pandemic. Roughly 16 to 19 million people died as a result of World War I, while deaths in the Covid pandemic numbered 7 million. While the latter is lamentable, it is not equivalent to the former in terms of casualties.

## ***Kalon*, an Aristotelean idea, combines aspects of the noble, beautiful, and the fine, and of acting well. We would describe it as something that makes us happy, and gives life meaning.**

On the other hand, Covid-19 was indeed a creation of science, as its release from a scientific lab into the world population was not unavoidable. As were the ensuing fallacies of science, which we now know took place (the six-foot rule and mask mandates, etc.). So, while the event may not have “shattered the pride” of humanity, it, by and large, devastated our faith in medical authority and our previous naïve inclination to “trust the science”, or politicized scientists.

The concern of the poet and the friend comes down to how to mourn the passing of beauty. They revolt against its transience, which is, in a sense, an infantile revolt against the transience of life, which, too, has an end. At the article’s conclusion, Freud finds hope in the possibility of rebuilding. Is this not, after

all, what humanity has always done? For example, in the Jewish tradition, optimism must be retained and held; it accepts that both overcoming evil and welcoming joy are part of the journey. For Albert Murray—the eminent twentieth-century novelist and cultural critic—to be genuinely human is to accept and overcome the blues. Lear and Murray insist that this makes the human journey not mundane and vapid, but heroic. “Freud expresses the hope of building back up again all the good that catastrophe has destroyed, but maybe in this next generation it will be even better.”

In Chapter Three, “Exemplars and the End of the World,” Lear believes that panic over “climate change and ecological catastrophe, threats to the democratic political order, as well as the menace of the pandemic” will allow our imaginations to overwhelm our ability to apply a sense of perspective, not to say optimism, about the human capability to overcome such challenges. He looks at universal and local exemplars to understand this approach. These include Aristotle’s teaching about King Priam of Homer’s *Iliad*, who, as a noble person, had to cope with his world coming to an end as he knew it. He also mentions Confucius, Jesus, and Socrates in the context of Linda Zagzebski’s *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford, 2017), which he admires. I wonder why he does not include Abraham or Moses (although Zagzebski mentions Abraham in passing), since an exemplar, although he never so states, exemplifies: deeds that are of *kalon*. One also wonders why Lear fails to mention Job, who, no matter how much evil God brought upon him, never gave up his humanity, belief in his goodness, and his faith in God.

He reinforces Aristotle’s view that *kalon* cannot be taken away once it has been achieved, even amid catastrophe: “Although achieving the *kalon* is constitutive of our happiness, and although extreme misfortune—such as world catastrophe—can destroy our

happiness, *once the kalon has been achieved, nothing can completely destroy it in us. A kernel remains that is inalienable.* That is Aristotle’s teaching.” Unfortunately, we know that this is not true. In Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, many Nazi concentration camp inmates soon lost their *kalon*, sense of self-worth, and self-understanding and descended into death. I am also reminded of a passage from Ezekiel (28:11-17), which mourns the fall of the king of Tyre, which later Christian writings reference in terms of Lucifer’s Fall: “You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God... You were an anointed guardian cherub.” However, God laments his ensuing wickedness: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth.”

Lear relates an experience of a teacher, a “local exemplar” in his terminology, who reprimanded him on the playground, and this event has stayed with him since childhood (another example of a lifelong rumination.) At ten, he was “pretty confident that he said, ‘Goddammit.’” When a classmate reported it, a teacher, Mr. McMahon, merely said in response, ‘We do not use profane language on the playground’...That was it.” This leads to a long exegesis of his subsequent thought. He surely did not know what the word meant as a child, and that it is often connected to the word “sacred.” This he was later to discover. The teacher’s response was generous—as no further punishment was given, and there was no retaliation or retribution. The encounter with this wonderful man gave him much to ponder over the years. He returns to it repeatedly throughout his life, with its repetition also being informed by novelty or an active participation with the world. While I respect the memory, I wonder if the teacher rises to the level of “hero” that Lear ascribes to him. In my view, the trivial and uninspiring nature of the personal anecdote—which I

assume the author found to be its strong point—detracts from the larger-scale claims of the book and its argument.

Lear once again returns to Freud, and draws upon his essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” Melancholia, a now-rarely used clinical term, denotes a psychological state in which the patient is so detached from the world that no joyful participation in it can be had. Mourning, in contradistinction, allows the mourner, perhaps in a state of sadness, to celebrate the deceased’s life, maybe even with joy, albeit tinged with sadness. At the end of his wondering and pondering, he suggests that mourning is an inappropriate response, as is melancholia, to our imaginings of the end of the world. “Precisely because we face such huge challenges to the continued existence of the world, we are simultaneously challenged to take seriously the *healthy* use of our imaginations” (my italics).

Lear then takes on the relationship between the humanities and mourning. Unfortunately, he first takes us through the saga of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s marriage—or marriages. He does so to explore issues of authenticity, “living a meaningful life,” in the context of tradition versus our current lack of respect for it. One can throw in living by *kalon* or by religious precepts. This approach to these topics, while maybe useful in an undergraduate lecture class, is inappropriate here. The Harry and Meghan exemplar is as trivial and unimpressive (as he acknowledges), as is his earlier anecdote on Mr. McMahon, and should not have been used.

This leads back to the humanities, and their importance. Lear links the humanities with mourning, which seems to be a stretch. He says: “We are historical beings because we have pasts that matter to us—that is, pasts that partially constitute our present by shaping our sense of what is important. Thus mourning, when done well, is this special manner of our distinctive form of flourishing.” One could equally well use the words ‘*celebrating*’ or

‘*remembering*’. Lear’s reasoning and language are opaque and superficial here at best, as is the relationship between mourning and the humanities he espouses. In his conclusion, he thinks the Harry and Meghan exemplar leads us to an important question about the humanities: “What is worth conserving?” His first answer, “teachers—*proper* teachers,” which he states are those who promote the humanities as intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, is valuable.

But in the end, he doubles down on the question of conserving in the traditional or “familiar political sense” as “problematic,” and wants to promote a more “*ethical* reading of the question (original emphasis). Here he surprisingly repudiates Aristotelian *kalon* as hearkening back to a time when nobility was “dissolute,” when beauty was “detached from the ethical” (he could not be more wrong here), and when the fine was “vague” and ill-placed. We live in an unjust world of social hierarchy, just as Aristotle did. Instead, he justifies using the imperfect concept of *kalon* as a way to remind us that there is a gap in our understanding of being human, that we may not have the cognitive mechanism to understand ourselves well.

This view of conservation—and of cultural relativism—is what quite tragically (in the saddest sense of loss and mourning, actually) brought about the destruction of the curriculum in our universities over the last sixty years or so. He thinks we cannot accept what the past says is true, good, and beautiful, since we cannot make such normative judgments vis-à-vis our historical cultural output. On the contrary, a compelling and common-sense response was given twenty-three years ago by Charles Murray in his book *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 BC to 1950* (Harper Perennial, 2004). Murray says that the legacy opinion of humankind tells us differently; that we can ascertain definitive information on what to conserve. He basically

says, get a few experts together, have them state who they think are the best in their genre, plot the intersection, and you have an objective answer. In music, it would be Bach, Mozart, Beethoven; in painting, it would be Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Picasso. The process is not exclusionary, it is open-ended and subject to revision, and it is not limited to the West. It might suggest a starting point for anyone serious about exploring the humanities.

## Even though we find it nearly impossible to comprehend the circumstances of some deaths, we must go on.

Lear’s final comment on the matter is “What seems to be worth conserving is the spirit of making our best efforts...to travel all over the world—across space-time, and cultures...in study and imagination to discover and conserve what we take to be the deepest attempts of other humans to understand and express the human condition.” A run-on sentence that expresses something true about the humanities, it nevertheless says nothing about its supposed relationship to mourning.

When he was a boy, Lear learned the Gettysburg Address by heart. As a man, he revisits it to come to a few startling realizations. We must distinguish between mourning and memorialization, and valorization. All men in death are equal in their human dignity. They deserve decent burials, and to be mourned by their loved ones. In the context of the Civil War and slavery, we should regard the defeated Southerners as *misguided men*... men who fought for a cause that was

fortunately defeated. He draws this idea from a quote by General Meade found in Gregory A. Coco’s *A Strange and Blighted Land, Gettysburg: The Aftermath of a Battle* (Thomas Publications, 1995). He has “sympathy for people who are trying to live a *kalon* life, but who, for historical and cultural reasons, along with character flaws of their own, get caught in a vision that is wildly wrong and profoundly unjust due to misunderstandings and misperceptions and social pressures—and then waste their lives, sometimes doing terrible harm in the cloud of misapprehension and falsity” (p.91). As he tries to apply his thesis to the world today, I have to say that this is hard to say about Nazis and Hamas operatives, who brutalized, raped, burned, mutilated, and beheaded men, women, children, and babies. Does philosophy pertain here, or become inoperative?

Lear confronts this question posing the “The Difficulty of Reality and a Revolt against Mourning.” He reviews the work of Cora Diamond, who, in turn, looks at a poem by Ted Hughes. Diamond looks “less on the psychological state of the sufferer than on the *difficulty of reality* to which that suffering bears witness.” Hughes’s poem refers to a picture of six young men who were then tragically killed in World War II. His response is just such a revolt against reality. Freud’s young poet reappears, who also cannot bear reality. The problem is, in part, accepting death, even in unspeakable circumstances, as part of life. Even though we find it nearly impossible to comprehend the circumstances of some deaths, we must go on. What should our response be, not just in the face of death, but of evil (a word that Lear rarely uses)? We could rededicate ourselves to the memory of the lost; to work for the eradication of evil, a never-ending task. We might acknowledge the paradox of life and death in our mourning.

“Meditations on Gratitude and Meaning” concludes this book. In so doing, Lear refers to Melanie Klein’s classic essay “Envy and

Gratitude,” Aristotle (yet again and finally), Wittgenstein, and a host of minor participants. He acknowledges that psychoanalysis mostly focuses on pathology, while the question of gratitude has to do with health. Gratitude, according to Aristotle, is an emotion that takes place in a social context. It acknowledges that something is given without asking anything in return. Lear repeats this general idea *ad infinitum*, with the simplest of variations. Klein meditates on the breast “to be the source of nourishment...The good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego.” Lear opines that “the container is never just a container, and the contained is never just contained.” One must be a true believer in psychoanalytic theory to enjoy this. Wittgenstein, in his *Ethics*, notes that words cannot define, nor actually portray, experience. Then again, ethics is not used with its customary meaning, but is rather used to describe “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the

world should exist.” And that it would seem that meaningfulness exists in the universe. Lear thinks this is an expression of gratitude. But it could equally be an expression of awe and wonder, akin to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s approach to the world of “radical amazement.” Lear sees this as “part of an expanded idea of mourning....” Why or how remains unclear, as do his views about what gratitude and meaningfulness have to do with mourning and the ethical life that is the title of this book.

This brings Lear to the possibility of a God, and prayer as an expression of gratitude. What a long way to travel, to get to a place where religious traditions worldwide started thousands of years ago. This is the main reason to read this book, to the extent that his ruminations can allow the reader to think about God. Yet, I am not sure that thinking of mourning in the way he advocates is the proper way to get there. 1