

The Face of Courage

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD



THE GREAT WELSH POET Dylan Thomas published *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* in 1951 as a tribute to his sick father and as a rousing exhortation to anyone facing mortality. The poem insists that the ending of any life, no matter how well-lived, is bound to be a frustrating process that is best and most courageously met with protest and struggle. “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” is Thomas’ instruction. Go down fighting!

I’ve always felt the poem — for all the power of its famous imagery — offers rash advice for those actually dealing with death and for their circle of family, friends, and medical caregivers. Too often raging against the dying of the light gets transformed by our technological capacities into a campaign of inappropriately intensive care and false hope that is cruel rather than courageous.

That said, the sentiment of wishing and hoping that we and those we love could remain just a little longer on this side of the Narrow Divide is natural and perhaps universal. *Do Not Say Goodnight, Old Friend* is a deliberately gentle request to “stay while the staying is good” knowing that finally fate will call our number. The face of courage may sometimes wear the grimace of rage, but this poem suggests that a deep authentic courage in our confrontation with mortality is more likely to reflect grit and wistfulness. Perhaps one of our roles as physicians is to find and speak to that face of courage in our patients. **SDP**

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Do Not Say Goodnight, Old Friend

*Do not say goodnight, old friend
Although the hour is getting late
Let’s linger past the midnight bend
We’ve still grand questions to set straight*

*Do not say goodnight, old friend
I know the dark is beckoning
But there are fences yet to mend
Blown down in days past reckoning*

*Do not say farewell, old friend
We must appoint a future visit
Just for now we’ll both pretend
The world goes on and bears us with it*

*Please don’t say goodbye, old friend
Although this night’s been long approaching
Suppose that we have years to spend
In raucous boasts and soft reproaching*

*Do not say adieu, old friend
It’s just a phase you’re going through
What temporal laws can we suspend?
What amnesty applies to you?*

*Do not say sweet dreams, old friend
Immersed into that separate river
Tumbling seaward to descend
In secret streams of strange forever*

*Do not say goodnight, old friend
Yes you’re tired and reconciled
But can’t this final cycle blend
The crusty man and buoyant child?*

*Do not wave me off, old friend
Let’s take another walk together
And with the world’s sad news contend
Amidst this unpredicted weather*

*Do not say you’re done, old friend
Stay at least until tomorrow
Attach another day-on-end
From Time’s account divert or borrow*

*Don’t throw in the towel, old friend
The world will shrink without you in it
How little still I comprehend
Come teach me yet another minute*

*Do not concede defeat, dear friend
Maintain a proud and stern resistance
Only finally to attend
Not to your loss but fate’s insistence*