



Fate

Life Is Measured Out

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

IN THE MYTHOLOGY of ancient Greece, the Fates were envisioned as three sisters. Clotho spun the thread of life. Lachesis measured out the specific length allocated to a person. Atropos – the most feared of the sisters – cut the life-thread when their time had come. So powerful was their work that even the Olympian Gods had to defer to them. The words “fatal” and “fatalism” carry the meaning into English.

Modern medicine is assigned the task of interrupting the work of these sisters. Reproductive technologies allow the life thread to be spun where it would otherwise not be possible. Day-to-day medicine and surgery extends the length of the life thread of patients with everything from abdominal aortic aneurysm to zoster. Emergency interventions in the ED, OR, and ICU push away the horrible scissors of

Atropos, at least for a while.

And yet we know our medical victories are only temporary. Sometimes I only half-jokingly say to my long-term primary care patients that medicine doesn’t really prevent anything, it just delays things. Our work puts off fate – the Fates – for another day, but only does that. The patient whose unstable angina has been relieved by a stent or bypass is still at high risk for progressive atherosclerosis. The cancer patient in remission knows all too well that hidden chemo-resistant malignant cells pose a recurrence threat. Even the most successful total hip replacement has a limited durability. In medicine we know that we will eventually lose the war with disease. It is our particular and distinct assignment to win as many battles as we can on the way to that loss.

Life Is Measured Out is an acknowledgment that all human endeavors operate inside the limits prescribed by the fates of our genes and our circumstances. We learn, along with the proud and powerful Olympian gods, that the Three Sisters will have their due. **SDP**

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*Life is measured out in string
Each day a portion’s severed
No prayer or magic spell can bring
The separate ends together*

*Life is measured out in thread
A hidden spool unraveling
Influencing till you’re dead
The boundaries of your traveling*

*Life is measured out in rope
Silken bits and knotted
Fashioned into dream and hope
And wrapped round your carotid*

*Life is measured out in string
Each day you get your section
A fickle circumstantial thing
Sent off in one direction*

*Life is measured out in thread
Some longer, others shorter
All your rush to get ahead
Will scarce affect that order*

*Life is measured out in rope
A final length is scissored
Years of “yes” then one last “nope”
You’re off to see the Wizard.*