



Temporary (Like a Dog)

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

CONTEMPLATING DEATH has a long philosophical tradition. In the *Maranassati Sutta*, Buddha taught that it was the ultimate meditation. Plato, in *The Phaedo*, called it the very basis of wisdom. Renaissance painters would remind the viewer of the *lurking presence of mortality* by posing a skull in an otherwise beautiful setting, such as in the *Still Life with Crystal Ball* (1625) by Pieter Claesz seen above.

Aging and mortality are constant houseguests in a long-term primary care medical practice such as the one I've been part of for the past 35 years. Inevitably many of my beloved patients have sickened and died. The frayed telomeres, the scarred conduction system, the thinning aneurysm, or the tired immune system trigger some final, fatal event. Ecologists are fond of saying "nature bats last." In medicine we might say that *time* bats last. In the long run, our best efforts at prevention and treatment are doomed to failure. Medicinal interventions are, at most, a series of delaying tactics. A cure, seen in this gloomy light, is "nothing more" than a setup for the next crisis, and doctors are merely comic relief artists in the grand tragedy of life.

Speaking of comic relief artists, how can I not mention Izzy, the 31-pound dachshund-cattle dog mix who has been my constant companion for the past eight years, both in and out of the clinic? He is a proudly uncertified service dog, a stoic listener, a meditation teacher, a snoring metronome and an effective foot warmer on cold nights. His whiskers, like mine, are gray now. We, like my 94-year-old father, like every one of my adult patients, are growing old together and apart.

Temporary (Like a Dog)

Everything is temporary.
That dogs age seven times as fast as we do
Simply brings that fact into high relief.

When we got you at 2, you became my second teenage son
At 5, you were my junior colleague in the office
At 8 years and 8 months, (according to the graph I drew)
We celebrated turning 60 together
Now, at 10, you are my wizened confidant.

You can still make it onto the high master bed
Although now, it's front paws up and then a scramble
Your hind legs tearing at the quilt during your ascent.
I am eyeing the bed ramps at the pet store.
In four years you'll catch up to my father
If you both make it.

As I say, everything *is* temporary:
your life,
my life,
my father's life,
my son's life,
this poem,
and you, dear Reader.

This poem, "Temporary Like a Dog," is a meditation on the process of temporal change. If the philosophers and artists are right, such meditation can bring — besides wistfulness — a measure of peace and *even* loving kindness. To imagine yourself aging along with Izzy will at the very least place you in very good company. **SDP**



Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is on the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and is a longtime contributor to San Diego Physician.