



# Creation and Dust: The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

**THE FIELD OF MEDICINE** blends optimism and pessimism, scientific progress and philosophical fatalism. We are cheerleaders for our patients' recoveries and symbolic pallbearers at their inevitable funerals. We are the purveyors of hopefulness and the truth tellers of mortality. As with clinical practice, so with broad aspects of our society's health. Age-adjusted cardiovascular disease has been reduced by potent drugs and interventions but more patients are now living with severe congestive heart failure. Rates of COPD are down but rates of asthma are up. Psychiatric medications are better but rates of depression and suicide are increasing. Treatment options for diabetes have expanded while rates of obesity and its comorbidities continue to rise.

Perhaps this notion of the world as triumph and terror is encoded in human nature itself. There is a teaching story attributed to the Hasidic Rabbi Bunim, who lived in what is now Poland in the late 18th and early 19th century, that has always struck me as an apt summary of this dual nature of our lives:

*Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: "For my sake was the world created."*

*But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes."*

In this poem, "Creation and Dust," I have taken this notion by Rabbi Bunim and used it in a rhyming meditation on the modern world with both its incredible range of progress and its discouraging trends. **SDP**



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## Creation And Dust

The screen streams continuous outrage  
While tragedies beg to be solved  
Dopamined pleasure and rampage  
Keep us thrilled yet scarcely involved

Superficial is hotly debated  
Essential is barely discussed  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust

The voices of kindness and reason  
Too often drowned out by the crowd  
To point out the truth can be treason  
For saying what's so and out loud

Virtue becomes dissipated  
While ambition's ascent is robust  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust

The staunchest agreements can fumble  
Unless they are freshly renewed  
The strongest of structures can crumble  
Breaking down to bacterial food

Chemical laws demonstrate it  
Oxidation turns steel to rust  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust

We question the notion of progress  
Of rising tides raising all boats  
Our ship seems hijacked by pirates  
Who are holding their shivs to our throats

With hope for the future deflated  
Our vision's been forced to adjust  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust

Then what kind of map guides our travel?  
Which are the standards to choose?  
With conventional wisdom unravelled  
And all the old knots shaken loose

Success may be much overrated  
But failure's an ongoing bust  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust

Take into account all these features  
Our species blends scoundrel and saint  
The most contradictory creatures  
A mosaic of crime and restraint

Render your plans calibrated  
Do what you can and you must  
For you the world was created  
You are nothing but ashes and dust