

The Godless and the Gutless

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I'm optimistic about death. For the first time in the history of life on Earth, it is possible—not easy, but possible—for conscious animals like us to have a good death. A good death is a great triumph, something to be sought and accepted. Indeed, a good death should be recorded and broadcast as a moral example to us all.

What do I mean by a good death? I do not mean opiate-fueled euthanasia, or heroic self-sacrifice during flash-bang tactical ops, or a grudgingly tolerated end to a century of grasping longevity. I do not mean a painless, clean, or even dignified death. I mean a death that shows a gutsy, scientifically informed existential courage in the face of personal extinction. I mean a death that shows the world that we secular humanists really mean it.

There is, of course, no way to escape the hardwired fears and reactions that motivate humans to avoid death. Suffocate me, and I'll struggle. Shoot me, and I'll scream. The brain stem and amygdala will always do their job of struggling to preserve one's life at any cost.

The question is how one's cortex faces death. Does it collapse in mortal terror like a deflated soufflé? Or does it face the end of individual consciousness with iron-clad confidence in the persistence of virtually identical consciousnesses in other human bodies? My optimism is that in this millennium, well-informed individuals will have a realistic prospect of sustaining this second perspective right through the end of life, despite death's pain and panic.

When I die in fifty years, or next week, or whenever, here's what I hope I remember:

- My genes, proteins, neural networks, beliefs, and desires are practically identical to those sustaining the consciousness of 6 billion other humans and countless other animals, whose experiences will continue when mine do not.
- Since life must be common throughout the universe and resilient across time, such subjective experiences will continue not just on Earth in the short term but across many worlds, for billions of years.

- There is no spooky personal afterlife to fear or hope for, only this wondrous diversity of subjectivity that trillions of individuals get to partake in.
- The more science one knows, the more certain and comforting this knowledge is.

These life lessons are, to me, the distilled wisdom of evolutionary psychology.

Many people resist this knowledge. They listen only to the hair-trigger anxieties of the amygdala—which constantly whispers “Fear death, fear death.” They construct pathetic ideologies of self-comfort to plug their ears against such mortal terror. They nuzzle into reality’s coarse pelt for a lost teat of supernatural succor.

I call them the Gutless, because they aren’t bright enough or brave enough to understand their true place in the universe. A whole new branch of psychology called terror management theory studies the Gutless and their death-denying delusions.

A great ideological war is raging between the Godless (people like me, who trust life) and the Gutless—the talking heads of the extreme religious right, who fear death, fear the Godless, fear ongoing life in the future, when they no longer exist.

I’m also optimistic about the outcome of this war, because people respect guts and integrity. People want moral role models who can show them how to live good lives and die good deaths. People want to believe that they are participating in something vastly greater and more wonderful than their solipsism. Science quenches that thirst far more effectively, in my experience, than any supernatural teat sought by the Gutless.