

THE END

Death will come when it will come.

Hamlet

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

As funerals go, this one was pretty well attended. The man in the casket was a small-screen star some years back, appearing in a number of sitcoms in the '60s and '70s. Although he had long since vanished from the public eye, baby boomers occasionally recognized him. In his heyday, his manager convinced him to invest the money he made in television into real estate in the San Fernando Valley, so at the time of his death he was also fairly wealthy.

Few people considered him old because he always looked healthy, and as a result, everyone who knew him was surprised when he went to sleep one night and never woke up. The doctor said he had an aneurism deep in his brain and probably died very quickly.

On the front row of the dark chapel sat the man's current wife, his fourth. She was considerably younger than he was, and the two had lived apart for most of the last year. Seated just behind her was a daughter from his first marriage, but none of the other seven children from his previous marriages showed up. Neither did any of his former wives. Not even his first, though he had been married to her for more than 20 years. His lawyer was there.

Several of the cast members from his TV days and a guy he played golf with now and then made it to the funeral. Three of the former cast members got up and made brief comments, generally talking about characters he had played in the sitcoms. They drew quite a bit of laughter when they imitated phrases and expressions he had invented for some of his more memorable characters. The priest commented on the laughter the man had brought to millions and his generosity to certain charitable causes.

Near the end of the 45-minute ceremony, I began to feel a little uncomfortable. I'd listened to person after person talk about roles and characters, and we all remembered funny episodes and bloopers, but by the end of the funeral I had learned little about this man. I heard about the characters he played, but the funeral service provided little more than a view from the grandstands as he walked the red carpet of life. I felt as if I were watching a compilation of

reruns on TV. Even his wife talked about things I had read in the newspapers.

Where were the stories from his children? How about memories his wife had that would give me insight into the man? No one mentioned any brothers or sisters, although I'd read that he had a brother and two sisters. Who were his friends? Not costars who knew him as the same characters I did, but longtime friends who would tell us about this man's heart, his faith, his fears?

I began to wonder if *anyone* really knew him. We all knew he was a husband and father. He was respected in his field. He was recognized in his community. But who was he when the camera was off, when he put aside the familiar masks of the characters he had created? Did he hide who he really was, or did he just lose sight of himself? The dressing room of our mind will only hold so many people, so perhaps his real self simply excused itself from the room because the man favored the characters he played more than the person he was.

For all his wealth and fame, I couldn't help but feel a loss for a man who never lived. We celebrated the lives of TV characters but barely mentioned the man in the casket. Later, as the cars pulled away from the cemetery and the workers lowered the body into the ground, I found myself thinking, *Who was that man in the casket?*

The End of Your Life

Have you stopped to consider that your funeral will be your last event in this life? It is the end of the presence of your body among the living. At that point, whatever you were aiming for, whatever you had as life goals, whatever you considered as important will reach its end. All that you've done, owned, and experienced in life will be finished. Your possessions will be in someone else's hands. Your job and other roles will be over.

Picture yourself in an open casket at the front of a large room. Suppose for a moment that as you lie there you are somehow aware of what is going on in the room around you. You hear music and the sound of people as they move step-by-step down the hardwood floors. You also detect the quiet muffled sound of whispering. You have reached the end of what some call the game of life. You can change nothing, and you have nothing left to do. As you wait for the funeral service to start, you can't help but wonder how you did. You feel almost as if you're waiting for a verdict or a score from the judges.

In the 2004 Olympics in Athens, a sharp-shooting athlete was one shot from an Olympic gold medal. Leading after nine shots, he needed only to hit the target anywhere near the bulls-eye to win the gold.

He had spent his life preparing for this moment, and his confidence level was high. The expert rifleman aimed at the target, took a deep breath, relaxed his body, and squeezed off the shot. It was straight and true and hit its mark exactly. He paused and waited for the judges to declare him the winner. There was only one problem. He had hit the bulls-eye of the wrong target.

The shooter inadvertently aimed one lane over and made an expert shot at the wrong goal. Although he hit exactly what he was aiming for, his score for that round was a zero, and he dropped from a certain gold medal to eighth place. He had been prepared, dedicated, and certain. But none of that mattered. He might as well have fired the shot into the air. No second chance, no do-overs. The event was over.

Who Were You?

Shortly after you have passed from the world you've known to the world unknown, your friends and family will set aside a few minutes just for you. In that brief period of time, they will sum up your life. Most funerals are short, generally lasting less than half an hour. Doesn't it seem strange that your life could be memorialized in such a wisp of time?

While a fat résumé might be an impressive part of the ceremony, the professional honors and accolades begin to seem trite next to the personal stories and anecdotes your family and friends will share. This is where the persona attached to the résumé crumples like yellowed, brittle parchment and gives way to the person that people knew you to be. Your last words may be mentioned. Someone will probably talk about the last time he saw you. A couple of people will be asked to say a few words because family or friends thought they were the ones who knew you best.

You lie and wait. Who is there? What will they say? Who isn't there? Why? You squeezed off your shot, and it's out of your hands. It is time for those you knew, and those who knew you, to review your life.

Six Men to Carry My Casket

Absent some sort of "you have three months to live" edict from a doctor, most of us take life in stride and figure the end will take care of itself. When it does come, it often comes out of nowhere: You leave for work one morning but never return home. William Shakespeare was right on point when he wrote in *Hamlet* that death will come when it will come, and a man to say about it.

One morning I was having coffee with a longtime friend at a little bakery in downtown Franklin, Tennessee. My friend told me about a conference he had just attended where a guy was talking about why he left the church he had been attending. Apparently the man looked around one Sunday morning at church and realized he didn't even know six guys who could carry his casket if he died. All the programs and activities at the church didn't matter if he didn't really know a few men and if they didn't know him well enough to walk alongside his casket. So he left. One can hardly blame him. Men are consumed with providing for their families, and the chore of keeping up with the stress of daily life can be exhausting. Every day you face changing demands at home, at work, and even in your own body. But one thing doesn't really change. While men function pretty well alone on a day-to-day basis, no one wants to be alone when he dies.

The man who left the church because he didn't know six men who would carry his casket wasn't making the decision to leave because he faced imminent death. Presumably he had no foreknowledge of when he was going to die. Comedian Steven Wright said he knows when he is going to die because his birth certificate has an expiration date on it, but really, none of us know when and how the end will come. This man looked ahead and concluded that a future certainty required an immediate correction in his life course.

The Rules of Life

Of course, some people never realize that what they are doing isn't working. They live in blissful ignorance. Others sense the void but assume they just need more of the same...more money, more sex, more stuff. They may blame the hollowness on those around them: *If only I had a different wife or a different boss, or I lived in a different city.*

However, the largest group of men just keep plugging along. They sense a hole in their lives, but they suck it up and take it in stride. Routine becomes both their comfort and their cross. So why do so many people reach the end of their lives feeling empty, sensing that they somehow missed the meaning of it all?

I remember as a boy I found a board game at a local drugstore that was marked down from about four dollars to fifty cents! I opened the box, and all the pieces appeared to be intact, so I paid for the game with the fifty cents I'd earned mowing lawns. I ran home as fast as I could and made arrangements for a friend to come over and play the game with me.

The game was a war game called Guadalcanal, and as we were setting it up, I discovered that the directions or rules of play were missing. Undaunted, we played the game according to

the rules and strategies we assumed were appropriate for a war game.

After playing the game literally all night and throughout the next day, we finally gave up because we had no idea how to win. We had all the pieces and gave it a lot of time, but the rules we used led nowhere.

My friend and I had wasted nearly two days of our precious summer vacation, but many of us waste a large chunk of our lives doing essentially the same thing. We may play with zeal, we may play with seeming purpose, but at some point most of us realize that our objectives and strategies don't lead to where we thought they would. We are engaged in the game, but we don't know how to win.

The Tale of Two Men

I grew up in a small town in eastern Oregon. When I was 12 years old, a young man in his twenties was killed instantly in an industrial accident. Just a few weeks earlier, on New Year's Eve, he was at church with his young wife and two small children. As the clock passed midnight, he joined everyone else at the front of the church to start the new year with prayer.

As the clock reached 12:15 AM that first day of January, people began to leave the altar and mingle as they left the church. But this man stayed at the front and prayed for some time all alone. On the way home his wife was talking about events in the upcoming year when Burt made the comment, "I won't be here." His wife looked at him and said, "What do you mean you won't be here, Burt?" He just looked at her and said, "I won't be here."

Burt told his wife that while he was praying, he believed God had told him he was going to die soon even though he was just in his mid-twenties and had no medical issues. Interestingly, just two months earlier Burt had purchased a life insurance policy following a somewhat spontaneous meeting. His wife felt that paying the premium would be a struggle, but they managed to make their first payment in the middle of December.

Around ten o'clock on January 4, Burt's supervisor at the lumbermill asked him to climb to the top of a large machine that had stopped working because the sudden extreme cold weather had caused some material inside to freeze together. Burt grabbed a long metal pole and climbed the side ladder, and then he started to jam the pole into the frozen material to break it up. As he raised the pole again in preparation to plunge it down, the top of the pole hit a high-voltage city power line, and Burt was killed instantly. The insurance company initially thought Burt committed suicide, but the investigation clearly showed that Burt was not suicidal, and no one could have planned this kind of accident.

His funeral was the very first funeral I attended. As I entered the packed church, I squeezed between two people on the back row and looked toward the front through a sea of shoulders. I instantly froze as I saw this man's pale, lifeless body lying slightly elevated above the edge of the half-opened casket at the front of the church. A wave of memories came rushing through my mind.

When I was in third grade, Burt had been my Sunday school teacher. While most men his age during the '60s were chasing girls and having fun, Burt spent his Saturday afternoons taking a handful of obnoxious eight-year-old boys to the park or sledding, and then he spent Sunday morning teaching us about what was important to him: his faith. As I looked at him in the casket, I remembered the Sunday nights at Shakey's Pizza parlor, the rides in his black 1934 Ford coupe, and flying down a snowy hill on a toboggan with his wife, Connie. He was dead, but he is still vividly alive in my mind 35 years later.

I recently read a newspaper story about another man, a 48-year-old guy named Edward who lived in New Hampshire. Edward was a likable guy who, together with his girlfriend, had two children. He got along well with people and was a frequent babysitter for friends and neighbors. The kids called him Uncle Buddha.

Unfortunately, Edward died from liver failure. He did not have proper identification when he was admitted to the hospital, so his fingerprints were submitted to authorities for analysis.

The police discovered that 17 years earlier, Edward had another family—complete with wife and children—and lived in Vermont. But Edward vanished when authorities charged him with sexually assaulting his daughter, and he eventually carved out a new life in the state next door. His new family and friends didn't know he was a fugitive. Even after 17 years and two kids, no one in New Hampshire seems to have actually known Edward.

Around the time of his funeral, Edward's two families met for the first time. A reporter asked Ed, Edward's 23-year-old namesake from his abandoned family, how they were all handling the shock of Edward's dual lives. He told the reporter, "Now that it's over, it's over. That's pretty much our take on it. But...it's just starting for them."

Ed continued, "He was a good person, but he had a dark side, and he hid it from these people."

Edward's two children in New Hampshire might spend years sifting through the ashes of their memories, trying to construct some realistic image of Edward. The two families could spend months struggling to answer the question, who was in that casket? Then again, after a few days or weeks, neither family—or anyone else—may give Edward much thought. When the

image of a person is ruptured beyond repair, the idea that they ever lived sometimes evaporates.

As I read the article, my mind flashed back to the funeral 35 years earlier. Edward's story was in such contrast to Burt's story that I could not help but think of the many years of Edward's life that were suddenly meaningless. I realized that I still think about Burt and his influence on my life. His name is still spoken in the land of the living. But the truth erased Edward's life in an instant.

Edward probably did not choose to have his life end that way. In fact, the opposite is probably closer to the truth: Edward did not choose *not* to have his life end that way.

Reassessing the Future

Many of us give little thought to the end other than ensuring that we will have provided for the financial security of our loved ones and perhaps that we have, in some way, made peace with our Maker. Although these are important, the truth is that the things that will have the biggest impact on our loved ones cannot be left in a will. And making peace with God should release you to live life on a higher level now, not merely provide some sort of comfort as you gasp your last breath.

Perhaps that is why as some people get older they begin to question the direction and priorities of their lives. These people become unsure of who they really are, and they realize that most of the people closest to them don't really know them either. And in all honesty, they recognize that they don't really know the people they care the most about. When they see the gaping hole they are willing to risk what they spent most of their lives pursuing just for a chance to obtain a token of what they assigned little value to in the prime of their life.

We've all known both men and women who have amassed money, power, and prestige, only to set it aside to focus on their family. Robert Reich, former United States Secretary of Labor, left his position to spend time with his sons during their teenage years. Former senior presidential adviser Karen Hughes left her job to focus on her family relationships.

Although we often hear high-profile "relationships trump money and power" stories like these, abrupt life decisions aren't limited to the rich or powerful. People in your community might make decisions like that every day. A man of modest means works decades to set aside just enough money for retirement. But newspapers don't report his decision to spend it all in an attempt to reestablish a stunted relationship with a son or daughter.

Know Thyself

But this book is not about death, nor is it about decisions you make in your twilight years. It isn't just about relationships either. Rather, the chapters that follow are about life—about making sure that you really live before you die. To use a computer software analogy, this book is about identifying a program that is—and has been—running undetected in your system your whole life. Although you probably don't see it on your “desktop,” it affects the way both your hardware and software work. It is a program designed to lead you toward a certain objective, and its intent is to keep bringing you back toward your original design each time you get distracted by other endeavors and appetites.

Look down the road for a moment. Ask yourself these questions: If I continue the direction I'm heading right now, where will I end up in 10 years? In 20 years? Where am I going?

Or picture yourself on a shooting range. Before you squeeze the trigger, pull your head back from the scope of the rifle for just a moment and take a wider look. What have you been focusing on? Is that the right target for you?

You are not on this earth by accident. God was intentional when He made you. Your life has an internal sense of direction, and you can really live only if you embrace the person God made you to be. But as we will see, most of us aren't necessarily headed in the direction God wants us to go. Consequently, we will continue to be restless until we begin the journey back to who we really are. We must follow the ancient admonition to “know thyself.”

The Invisible Man

Several years ago I realized my life was not going the way I wanted it to go. I didn't have a crisis in my life, and things weren't going badly. In fact, it was just the opposite. Things were going very well in my family life, business life, and academic studies. Yet in spite of this I was still unsettled—a little restless.

I had experienced the same feeling years before when the situation was just the opposite—things *were* going badly. At that time life felt futile on hand and unexplored on the other. During those days I dreamed of the time when things would change for the better and I could experience the sense of satisfaction that seemed to elude me. Yet here I was in the good times, and both settledness and satisfaction remained at a distance. I had traveled through years of life only to find I was no closer to where I thought I wanted to be. Why?

Over the next year or so I was forced to wrestle with the whole idea of life and living. Why did I have an underlying sense of dissatisfaction—regardless of what I did? Was I just a

malcontent, or was something missing? If something *was* missing, then that *something* was determined to harangue me.

It was almost as if the person God made me to be was somehow detached from the person I had become. Why? Where was the *real* me? What happened to sever him from who I had become?

At some point way back when, I think I may have begun to live a life of quiet expectations. What did the teachers expect? What did my parents expect? What did my boss expect? What did my pastor expect? What did my coworkers expect? I'm not talking about assignments, chores, tasks, or promises. Those are easy—they are stated.

No, I'm talking about the unstated expectations—the kind you don't recognize until you sense you may have violated them. Or, the ones you put on yourself simply because you feel you *should* be a certain way, or thing. Some men recoil when they sense other people's expectations. Other men put them on like a coat when they sense people perceive qualities they know inside they do not have. We either chase them or run from them. But whether we embrace or recoil from expectations, they end up changing us.

I began to sense that the real me was on the edge of disappearing altogether. I spent enormous time and effort trying to become the person I thought I needed to be—at the time. Father. Husband. Scholar. Executive. Christian. Each one felt like a role I played in a particular situation. But if my life was measured by who I was in one of these situations—or by who I needed to be in any of these situations—then perhaps my life as a whole had lost its meaning.

Was Marcus Ryan a person? Or was he just playing varying roles, like the '70s sitcom actor? At that man's funeral people imitated characters from the roles he played and mimicked the lines he delivered. But who *was* he? If I were to die right then, would anyone at my funeral who knew me from a segment or role I played recognize the whole man?

Could the man God made me to be fade away, somehow replaced by a caricature? Would the real me pass into eternity never having matured, while the imitation me staggers restlessly across the earth for decades?

Many people believe life is a test, meant to determine our fitness for the next world. I don't. I think life is a journey during which we begin to live in eternity and influence certain others around us to do the same. The alternative is either to try to hit moving targets, to build a statue of the person we think we should be, or never to give any serious consideration to the destination—to the man who will lie in the casket at the end of his days.

I had to find and embrace the man God made me to be regardless of who that man was.

That man must live before I will die, or I would never have really lived. I may have made money, earned academic degrees, sired children, and attained a modicum of power. But all of these would mean little unless they were directly related to the man God made. By themselves they would only have momentary meaning. However, if they *are* part of that man, then all those things—money, degrees, power—would have meaning and value as contributions to the process of becoming a vessel of honor.

But how could I do that? I didn't even know where to begin looking. As I discussed this struggle with my wife and a couple of close friends I sensed that they saw in me things I hadn't seen. I began to suspect that they could be valuable in the process of recovering my true identity. To know myself, I had to allow myself to be known—by certain other people and by God. My desire to engage life and recapture my purpose would necessarily include a quest to be known.

I believe the same may be true for you. Whether you realize it or not, your entire life is driven by one thing: To be known. The only motivation even close to it is to know someone else. All other drives and motives such as money, fame, and even sex are mere means to this end. Your life will be complete and meaningful or unfulfilled and pointless based on the degree to which you “know thyself,” to which you are uniquely known, and to which you uniquely know others.

Undiagnosed Symptoms

Life is a quest to be known?

A few men I've talked with said they hadn't given life's purpose much thought. But these same men readily admitted they sensed that something wasn't right in their life. And although they didn't know what it was, they felt that they were getting farther and farther off a course they couldn't seem to find.

Other men spoke of a feeling of restlessness. This was certainly true for those who were going through changes such as a divorce, job issues, and problems with children. But the restlessness was just as common in men with an established routine. Sometimes these men expressed it as an unsettledness— an uneasy feeling. Is restlessness just part of the male baggage?

Or is the restlessness a symptom of something else? On the good side, restlessness keeps us in the fight—it forces us to continue to struggle. It reminds us that something isn't right. Unfortunately, too many men ignore the restlessness and settle for futility.

A large, silent group of men are convinced that their family would be better off without them.

A pastor in California recently told me that he had two calls the previous week from men who confided that exact feeling to him. They both independently said, “Pastor, I just feel my family would be better off financially, emotionally—in pretty much every way—if I weren’t here.” The pastor knew “if I weren’t here” meant “if I were dead.” He said that this wasn’t the only time he’d heard these words. In fact, he hears them all the time, and each man who shares these feelings thinks he is the only one who feels that way.

Would your wife and kids exchange you for enough money to solve their current financial problems? Do you ever feel the people around you would be better off if you just quietly stepped away? I have stopped being amazed at the number of men who feel this way, or who feel restless or off course. But what *does* still amaze me is how men can hide their feelings so effectively their words and appearance. How can feelings so widespread, so pervasive, and so destructive lie just beneath the surface of so many men, and yet go undetected by their friends and family?

The Center of Your Being

Distilled to their essence, the feelings of restlessness, unsettledness, uneasiness, and inadequacy—and others such as futility, despair, and worthlessness—come from a sense of being “unknown,” both by yourself and by others.

I was on the telephone with a new acquaintance when the subject of this book came up. The man I was speaking with had been very successful in real estate and other ventures, and he was also known for his strong personal faith. He told me that for many years people had asked if he had a favorite Bible verse. He candidly responded that he really didn’t.

Then one day on a business trip to Louisiana he was reading the Bible and came across the phrase “to be known.” He said, “I felt as if something had touched a nerve deep in my heart. I had no idea that there was a desire more intense than love, success, or even a strong faith.” He instantly realized there was a need at the very core of his life that he had to somehow understand because, in retrospect, he could see how it drove every other desire and motive.

The new Segway Human Transporter is a fascinating invention, a form of personal transportation that moves when it senses subtle shifts in the rider’s body weight. The user holds on to handles as he stands on a platform with two big wheels. He then accelerates or slows down by gently leaning forward or backward. The cycle’s forward motion and ability to keep itself and the rider upright are both handled by a high-tech gyroscope.

The gyroscope gives the cycle its direction and stability, and it sets the Segway apart from any other type of personal transportation. You can't move a Segway by pushing buttons or even by using your legs to push it like you would an old-fashioned scooter. You have to trust yourself to the function of the gyroscope.

A similar device is at the core of your being. It is a spiritual gyroscope, and its purpose is to move you down the path of being known. When you realize it is there, and if you will trust it, it will keep you balanced and move you forward. You can pursue success, physical pleasure, or extreme sports and not necessarily move forward. You may spin in place, and that feeling might be exhilarating. But at the end of the day, at the end of your life, you will realize you went nowhere. You missed the mark.

Why? Because that is how you are made. As you will discover in the next chapters, that core need to be known for who you really are is what makes you different from animals in this life, and it relates to what happens after death.

The River of Life

When I was young, I went stream fishing with my father. He was an aggressive fisherman, and I was a daydreamer. He would wade the deep water, move down the stream from rock to rock, and sometimes push through thick brush on the bank of the river. This went on for miles.

I would lag behind, eventually laying aside my fishing pole in favor of skipping rocks across the water. I would find a handful of flat rocks along the bank of the river and side-arm them one at a time, skipping them along the surface. The objective was to make the most skips across the surface before the rock either sank or landed on the other side.

These two activities portray two approaches to life. Many people are just like me skipping rocks. Their life objective is to traverse the surface of living, making as many splashes as possible before ending up safely on the other side of life, safe and secure in the afterlife. They then look back on how many splashes they made and how cool they looked, and they are elated that they didn't end up sinking somewhere along the way.

But what if more of us lived the way my father fished the south fork of the Sprague River? He knew the area, but each time he walked the river, he explored new holes and revisited older ones. He discovered and rediscovered the river. He expected change, but he also renewed his knowledge of the river by going deeper, dealing with thick brush, and spending time to reach the hard-to-get-to places. He knew the river and the river seemed to know him. He was comfortable with the fact that he had to tease the fish out of the river each time he went.

Reflection

I am convinced that if you will commit to going deeper into understanding yourself, if you will allow God to push back the thick brush surrounding the places you've hidden from yourself and others, and if you will trust that God has a path for your life, you will hit the target. At the end you can only look back. Today you can look forward. Then, the end will be what it is. Now, the end will be what you make it. You can still adjust your aim before you squeeze the trigger.

You do not have to end your life alone. Six men who truly know you can put their shoulder to the weight of your casket and stand as witnesses to your life. You can leave this world and enter a place where you know, even as you are known. Instead of hearing, "I never knew you; depart from me," you can hear God summon you by name. You can hear His voice joyfully exclaim, "My son...I take great pride in who you are. Come home! Enter into your rest."

Just as importantly, you can better understand how to live here and now. And as you'll see in the next chapter, that understanding will come as you engage a very special quest.