Living Dyingly: A Review of *Mortality* by Christopher Hitchens

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An avowed atheist, a celebrated intellectual, a TV debater, and wit, Christopher Hitchens was well known for his numerous books, essays in *Vanity Fair*, and bestsellers: *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; *Hitch-22: A Memoir*; and *Arguably*. Christopher Hitchens’ debating skills were legendary. He was never happier than when he was on stage demolishing the arguments of numerous Christian apologists, rabbis, believers and spiritualists of all kinds. He enjoyed the respect of intellectuals and political theorists, hangers-on, and just plain folks. Having been a member of the Left for many years, he angered many Leftists when he switched sides during the Iraq war and sided with President Bush on Regime Change in Iraq. He infuriated the Right with a devastating book critical of Henry Kissinger and liberals with another calling Mother Teresa a fake and a scam artist.

*Mortality* is a slight hard-bound book of 106 pages, consisting of some several essays that appeared in *Vanity Fair*; a foreword by Hitchens’ editor, Graydon Carter; and an afterword by his wife Carol Blue. In the Foreword to the book Carter refers to Christopher Hitchens as “one of life’s singular characters—a wit, a charmer, a troublemaker,” and a friend. “He was a man of insatiable appetites—for cigarettes, for scotch, for company, for great writing, and above all, for conversation.” His wife, Carol Blue, points to his ability to capture audiences on stage. “If you ever saw him at the podium, you may not share Richard Dawkins’s assessment that ‘he was the greatest orator of our time,’ but you will know what I mean…he was an impossible act to follow.”
Much like the poet, hard drinker, and superb conversationalist Dylan Thomas before him, Hitchens, loved late-night imbibing of strong liquor, intellectual bouts of the mind with friends and opponents, and wowing audiences with his verbal dexterity, not to mention a beautiful command of English. Also like Thomas his voice was distinctive and strikingly melodious. To appreciate Hitchens one must hear his voice, the sonorous depth, his cadences, his ironies sprinkled with a biting wit. To listen to Hitchens at his best one need only go on You Tube and type his name on search.

Having read God Is not Great in 2007 and seeing debates on TV and You Tube, I looked forward in Mortality to Hitchens’ characteristic verbal dexterity and clever insights into that greatest of all of life’s experiences, death. As a fan of Hitchens I expected perhaps a philosophical tour de force, many nuggets of masterful prose, and clever, witty remarks about how he sees modern death. I expected he would undertake a dissection of his own mortality as he did with the Believers in debate and defeat it with articulate language and clever turns of phrase, and exemplary skills in debate. I expected a kind of challenge to “Death be not proud.” That is not what the book does. Overall somber and serious, as befitting the topic, yet interspersed with some of the characteristic Hitchens humor, these essays deal primarily with the pains and inconveniences of dying in modern America. Hitchens’ wit and insights about “living dyingly” come through, as well as his typical use of metaphor. But at times the seriousness and irony of dying with cancer of the throat strikes through like the pain of an incision. Writing or reading about dying is not easy.

Curiously, in the Preface to Hitch 22 he comments on a preoccupation with death or impending death in the book’s first three chapters and other passages. The “Prologue with Premonitions” of that book begins with his seeing in Face to Face magazine in 2009 a notice of
a show by his friend Martin Amis which showed a photograph and caption which referred to the late Christopher Hitchens. “So there it is in cold print, the plain unadorned phrase that will one day become unarguably true.” He recites further ruminations about death and the realization that we are all “dead men on leave.” He refers to the “good cheer” of Mark Twain who declared the report to be an exaggeration; and to Ernest Hemmingway reading obituaries with a glass of champagne until the final “unshipping” of his shotgun; to others such as Bob Hope who was twice declared dead by the media. Farther along in the memoir he recounts the suicide of his mother Yvonne in Athens when he was only twenty-four and just beginning his radical life as a Socialist. He thinks that he cannot be certain of having another birthday. He says then that “I want to stare death in the eye,” which turned out to be not just bravado. In Mortality he is forced to do just that.

His father had died at seventy-nine, ironically also of esophageal cancer. At sixty-one he found himself in similar circumstances. He ticks off the Kubler-Ross five stages of dying, taking each in its progression from denial, rage, bargaining, depression, and “the eventual bliss” of acceptance, which for him he is not willing to accept. Yet he does resent the sense of waste, of not being around to see the marriage of his three children or of enjoying the obituaries of “such villains” as Henry Kissinger or Joseph Ratzinger. He reflects on the image of struggle brought to him by well wishers, and for the so-called “combat” with cancer, the cliché that “people don’t have cancer: They are reported to be battling cancer.” A supposed fight to the finish. But Hitchens refuses to do battle or “rage against the dying of the light,” as did Dylan Thomas, or see Death as animate and a “proud” opponent like John Donne. Much like e.e. cummings, for him it was the dying part, and he faced it with stoicism, while all the while hoping for eventual survival.
Like John Keats, who knew he would die from tuberculosis, Hitchens learned at 61 years of age of the disease that would kill him. On a book tour for *Hitch 22* in 2010 he received the news that he had esophageal cancer. That morning in early summer he was awakened in a New York hotel room feeling ill. The first sentences of *Mortality* open with, “I have more than once in my life woken up feeling like death. But nothing prepared me for the early morning in June when I came to consciousness feeling as if I were actually shackled to my own corpse.” When emergency professionals arrived in his room, he felt himself being transported from “…the country of the well across the stark frontier that marks off the land of malady.”

He found that new land welcoming and “lacking in racism, generally egalitarian, and terribly efficient.” Even so he disliked the probing and the needles “sunk into my clavicle area,” as well as the “lingua franca that manages to be both dull and difficult.” He was soon shocked at the eventual discovery that his cancer had spread to the lymph glands, that it had metastasized, and “the alien had colonized” into his right clavicle and lung. He found that the “chemotherapy poison” that “death dealing stuff” had made him “strangely neuter. With the loss of hair, beard, and shaved chest as well as Eros, he began “to look like somebody’s maiden auntie.”

He consistently held out hope for an eventual victory over the cancer demon even so. On his side was “a group of brilliant and selfless physicians plus an astonishing number of prayer groups.” To those who said they were praying for him he wrote back and asked: “Praying for what?” He discovered that a few religionist websites were praying for “God’s revenge” of terminal throat cancer for his atheistic blasphemy. They gloated over the hope for his agonizing death and a quick descent into hell. He points out that “There are numerous passages in Holy Scripture and religious tradition for this mainstream belief.” Of course some religious websites were certain that he would certainly recant his atheism and seek God before the end. For his part
Hitchens commented that like Voltaire, who when dying was urged to renounce the Devil, said, “...this was no time to be making enemies.” Yet, he thinks mischievously, perhaps he should undertake Pascal’s wager as “the safest conclusion.”

Then of course there were other groups which designated September 20, 2010 as “Everybody pray for Hitchens Day.” He pointed to the “Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer” which had determined there is no positive correlation for the effects of prayer; however, it did find a negative one for some patients who suffered form a loss of morale if they did not get well, and that good morale was a factor necessary for survival. “What if” he says, “I pulled through?” and concludes impishly that it would be for the people who pray “...somewhat irritating.” Hitchens refers hopefully to the work of Dr. Francis Collins, and his work on the Human Genome Project, stem cells, and “targeted” gene based treatments. Dr. Collins, a Christian, had been kind enough to visit him and suggest some new treatments that might be of benefit to his case, and he did not suggest prayer.

Throughout the book there is a clear sense that Hitchens desired, as he says, to “do” death in the active sense.”” He wanted to be stoic and “face” death squarely, to be conscious and awake when the end comes. There is throughout the book an optimistic strain of hope, hope that he will be among the five to twenty percent of people who survive with his type of cancer. This feeling is particularly true in the essays in the book that were published in Vanity Fair. Yet Hitchens doesn’t skip over the dross of being a patient. He mentions all the discomfort, the pain which is ameliorated by the next fix of pain killers, the loss of weight and hair (even in the nose), the cold feet caused by peripheral neuropathy, the biopsies, and “the alien burrowing into me even as I wrote the jaunty words about my own prematurely announced death” (in Hitch 22).
The last chapter of the book, VIII, is a collection of jottings and notes written in the hospital and unfinished at the time of his death which often reveal the chaotic thoughts going through his mind. In one he reminds himself to “take absolute care not to be self-pitying or self-centered.” Some are incomplete paragraphs, such as the one that begins with “Prayer: Interesting contradictions at the expense of those who offer it—too easy a Pascalian escape hatch with me on the right side of the wager this time....” There are single sentences: “I’m not fighting cancer— it’s fighting me.” Some are incomplete: “Not even a race for a cure..., or “Misery of seeing oneself on old videos or You-Tubes....” Many reveal his desire to live and have more to say, such as: “The banality of cancer: Entire pest-house of side-effects.” He quotes others such as Saul Bellow: “Death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are able to see anything.”

One thing that stands out about what Hitchens calls “living dyingly” is that he doesn’t resort to his gift of English humor as a way of deflecting the difficulty of his subject—which is not to say that he is never funny or that there aren’t flashes of his characteristic wit throughout, but that he doesn’t allow irony or humor to override the truth-telling that is basis of the book. He does not use that considerable comic gift as a way of not facing up to his own mortality, which itself is what the book is about and details so graphically. Even so at the beginning of Essay VI he can’t help but quote his old friend Kingsley Amis with the doggerel poem:

    Death has this much to say for it:
    You don’t have to get out of bed for it’
    Wherever you happen to be
    They bring it to you—free.

For me the most poignant part of the book comes in the afterword by his wife, Carol Blue, who has “The Last Word.” She reminisces about the many “raucous, joyous, impromptu
eight-hour dinners at home ‘crammed with people,’” the toasts, the laughter, the talk, and the poetry. Christopher would propose a toast that “could go on for a stirring, spellbinding, hysterically funny twenty minutes of poetry and limerick reciting, a call to arms for a cause, and jokes…in his perfect voice.” She says, “The new world of living dyingly” lasted nineteen months. Christopher had been ambivalent about writing of his illness in VF, out of respect for the family’s privacy. He thought she says: “When he was admitted to the hospital for the last time we thought it would be for a brief stay.” He had told his editor “I’ll be back soon.” But the end came unexpectedly. Later when she was at home looking at his books and papers, and all his notes, notes, Carol says, she hears his voice, and: “He has the last word.”

Another “last word” appeared in the June 2011 issue of Vanity Fair when he wrote: “My chief consolation in this year of living dyingly has been the presence of friends.”

I found the book very moving and powerful in Hitchens’ quiet acceptance of what he had been dealt at the end of his life, his understanding of the reality of dying, and his stoicism in the face of the hardships in the land of malady. He handled it all with courage and quiet good humor. He spoke of what he had to go through, not with rancor or rage, but with a simple humanity. We all must die; Hitchens managed it with quiet dignity and honor. Let us hope we can all do so well.