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Listening to Schubert in Spring



*To pass through this brief life as nature demands. To give it up without complaint.
Like an olive that ripens and falls. Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on.*

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.48.

I sat at my favorite spot on the porch one spring morning, watching the sun paint golden stripes on the trees and amusing myself with the chattering of the wild birds as they fought for seeds from the feeder. Suddenly, I was assaulted by a disquieting thought: how many more spring days like this remained for me?

I was not feeling particularly sickly – nothing beyond the usual creaks and pains of an eighty-year-plus body – but nonetheless I was seized by a growing sense of doom. Not too many spring days in store for me, I told myself.

I repaired upstairs, sat at my desk, and turned on the music of Franz Schubert, which appeared most appropriate to my state of mind. Schubert wrote several profound works in the last year of his short life, presaging his premature death. I directed my attention to my favorite among Schubert's late compositions, the Quintet in C for Strings (D. 956).

The Quintet contains a slow second movement that describes, more accurately than any writings can depict, the coming to terms with the end of life: the painful realization that death is near, the fruitless agony of rebelling against fate, the struggle to cope with the inevitable, the regret of abandoning the world of the living, and the ultimate reconciliation with one's forthcoming departure. Throughout the movement, the first violin and the cello engage in a dialogue that is at times an argument, others a joint outcry of anguish and pain, but is always filled with deep emotion.

I was listening to that Quintet and my mind turned again to the realization that it was almost time for me to let go. The joys and passions, the tears, the disappointments of living would soon recede as I approached the portal that can only be crossed once. I needed to prepare for that moment. But how?

The first order of business was balancing my books. Were there any outstanding wrongs that I needed to remedy? Had I failed to give enough attention to the needs of my friends and relatives, to the country that had welcomed me and was going through a difficult time? I made a couple of mental notes of things I could and perhaps should do, but none were too difficult or extraordinary. If I did not get any of them done, the world would not be much worse for the failure.

How about pleasurable activities that I should undertake while there was still time? "Bucket list" items that remained undone? I could think of a few, like taking a Mediterranean cruise or seeing the Pyramids. However, the death of my wife a few years earlier had left a void that could not be filled with sensory experiences, particularly solitary ones. I would have to leave riding on a camel to others, and perhaps would not regret too much missing it.

As for personal accomplishments, I had worked hard throughout my life and written a few stories and a novel or two, but all my deeds would be forgotten soon after I was gone, if not before. I would probably achieve the complete obscurity that rewards almost every human being since our species began walking on two feet. I would soon cease to exist in the memories of all but perhaps my daughter and a couple of others, and again the world would not be much worse for it.

Near the end of the second movement of Schubert's Quintet, the musical struggle comes to an end and there is a momentary stillness, as if the composer was making up his mind. The quiet is followed by a song of acceptance, neither happy nor sad. The violin's dialogue with the cello now reveals a sense of giving in, consenting to proceed to where one must go. There should be serenity in the face of death, the composer tells us.

And, listening to Schubert's final statement, I realized that I needed not fear death. Instead, I should be grateful for the opportunity of experiencing the miracle of life and, if it turned out that I had made even a minimal contribution to the betterment of the world, that would have been just fine.

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban American engineer and lawyer who, having retired from the practice of law, rediscovered the pleasures of creative writing. In addition to fiction in both English and Spanish, he has written papers on issues relating to Cuba and miscellaneous other topics. His memoir, CUBAN TRANSPLANT, was published earlier this year by Story Sanctum Publishing. You can find him @matiastraviesodiaz.com.

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