CHASING DAYLIGHT

How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life

A final account

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A Gift

I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live.

You think that to put those two sentences back to back, I must be joking. Or crazy. Perhaps that I lived a miserable, unfulfilled life, and the sooner it was done, the better.

Hardly. I loved my life. Adored my family. Enjoyed my friends, the career I had, the big-hearted organizations I was part of, the golf I played. And I'm quite sane. And also quite serious: The verdict I received the last week of May 2005—that it was unlikely I'd make it to my daughter Gina's first day of eighth grade, the opening week of September—turned out to be a gift. Honestly.

Because I was forced to think seriously about my own death. Which meant I was forced to think more deeply

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about my life than I'd ever done. Unpleasant as it was, I forced myself to acknowledge that I was in the final stage of life, forced myself to decide how to spend my last 100 days (give or take a few weeks), forced myself to act on those decisions.

In short, I asked myself to answer two questions: *Must the end of life be the worst part?* And, *Can it be made a constructive experience—even the best part of life?*

No. Yes. That's how I would answer those questions, respectively. I was able to approach the end while still mentally lucid (usually) and physically fit (sort of), with my loved ones near.

As I said: a blessing.

Of course, almost no one thinks in detail about one's actual death. Until I had to I didn't—not really. We feel general and profound anxiety about it, but figuring out the nuts and bolts of how to make the best of one's last days, and then how to ensure that one follows the planned course of action for the benefit of oneself and one's loved ones, are not typical habits of the dying, and most certainly not of the healthy and hearty. Some people don't think about death because it comes suddenly and prematurely. Quite a few who die this way—in a car accident, say—had not yet even begun to think of themselves as mortal. My death, on the other hand, while somewhat premature (I was 53 at the time of the verdict) could not be called sudden

(anyway, you couldn't call it that two weeks after the death sentence had sunk in), since I was informed quite explicitly that my final day on this Earth would happen during the 2005 calendar year.

Some people don't think about how to make the most of their last stage because, by the time their end has clearly come upon them, they are no longer in a position, mental or physical, to make of their final days what they might have. Relief of pain is their primary concern.

Not me. I would not suffer like that. Starting weeks before the diagnosis, when atypical (if largely unnoticed) things began happening to me, I had no pain, not an ounce. Later, I was told that the very end would be similarly free of pain. The shadows that had begun very slowly to darken my mind would lengthen, just as they do on the golf course in late afternoon, that magical time, my favorite time to be out there. The light would flatten. The hole—the object of my focus—would become gradually harder and harder to pick out. Eventually it would be difficult even to name. Brightness would fade. I would lapse into a coma. Night would fall. I would die.

Because of the factors surrounding my dying—my relative youth, my continued possession of mental facility and otherwise good physical health, my freedom from daily pain, and the proximity of loved ones, most of whom were themselves still in their prime—I took a different approach

to my last 100 days, one that required that I keep my eyes as wide open as possible. Even with blurry vision.

Oh, yes . . . there was one more factor, probably the primary one, that influenced the way I approached my demise: my brain. The way I thought. First as an accountant, then as an ambitious businessman, and finally as the CEO of a major American firm. My sensibilities about work and accomplishment, about consistency and continuity and commitment, were so ingrained in me from my professional life, and had served me so well in that life, that I couldn't imagine *not* applying them to my final task. Just as a successful executive is driven to be as strategic and prepared as possible to "win" at everything, so I was now driven to be as methodical as possible during my last hundred days. The skill set of a CEO (ability to see the big picture, to deal with a wide range of problems, to plan for contingencies, etc.) aided me in preparing for my death. (And—not to be overlooked—my final experience taught me some things that, had I known them earlier, would have made me a better CEO and person.) In approaching my last project so systematically, I hoped to make it a positive experience for those around me, as well as the best three months of my life.

I was a lucky guy.

Suppose I hadn't been given just 100 days. What might I have been doing?

Thinking about my next business trip, probably to Asia. Planning how to attract new business while managing the accounts we already had. Formulating initiatives for six months down the road, a year, five years. My executive calendar was always plotted out 12 to 18 months hence; it came with the job. My position demanded that I think constantly about the future. How to build on the firm's success. How to ensure the continued quality of what we provided. Yes, technically I lived in the present, but my eyes were forever focused on a more elusive, seemingly more important spot in time. (Before the diagnosis, my last thought every night before falling asleep usually concerned something that was to happen one month to six months later. After the diagnosis, my last thought before falling asleep was . . . the next day.) In 2002, when I was elected chairman and chief executive officer of KPMG (U.S.), it was for a term of six years. But in 2006, if all went according to plan, I expected I might become chairman of the global organization, probably for a term of four years. In 2010? Retirement, probably.

I was not a man given to hypotheticals—too straight-ahead in my thinking for that—but just for a moment, suppose there had been no death sentence. Wouldn't it be nice still to be planning and building and leading and cage-rattling like I had been, for years to come? Yes and no. Yes, because of course I'd like to have been around for certain

things. To see my daughter Gina graduate from high school and college and marry and have children and reinvent the future (in whatever order she ends up doing all that). To spend next Christmas Eve day, the day before my older daughter Marianne's birthday, in last-minute gift shopping with her, eating and talking and laughing the way we did every year on that day. To travel and play golf with my wife of 27 years, Corinne, the girl of my dreams, and to share with her the easeful retirement in Arizona we'd fantasized about and planned for so long. To see my firm, the one I'd been with since before I graduated from business school and had worked at for more than three decades, establish new standards for quality and success. To witness the Yankees win another World Series, or three. To attend the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. To see my grandchildren grow up.

But I also say no. No, because, thanks to my situation, I'd attained a new level of awareness, one I didn't possess the first 53 years of my life. It's just about impossible for me to imagine going back to that other way of thinking, when this new way has enriched me so. I lost something precious, but I also gained something precious.

One day not long ago, I sat atop the world. From this perch I had an overview that was relatively rare in American business, a perspective that allowed me access to the inner workings of many of the world's finest, most suc-

cessful companies, across all industries, and the extraordinary minds that ran them. I could see what was going on around me. I could make a good guess at how things might unfold economically over the near future. At times, I felt like a great eagle on a mountaintop—not because of any invincibility I felt, but for the overall picture it afforded me.

Overnight, I found myself sitting in a very different perch: a hard metal chair, looking across a desk at a doctor whose expression was way too full of empathy for my, or anyone's, liking.

His eyes told me I would die soon. It was late spring. I had seen my last autumn in New York.

All the plans I'd made as CEO were shattered—at least, as far as my seeing them come to pass. While I believed we'd made great progress on my vision for the firm, someone else would now have to lead the effort. All the plans that Corinne and I had made for our future had to be junked. It was hard not to lament that one of the big reasons we'd sacrificed so much time together, across so many years, as I traveled the world and worked ungodly hours—namely, so that on the other side of it we could enjoy a prosperous retirement together—had been a tease, only we hadn't known it. In my wallet I even carried a photo of the dream spot to which we planned to retire—Stone Canyon, Arizona—but that dream was gone now. Same with all my other personal goals for 2006, 2007, and every year after that.

I'd always been a goal-driven person. So was Corinne. Throughout our lives together, we'd figured out our long-term goals, then worked backward from there. That is, we structured short-term goals to give us the best chance of meeting the big ones down the road. Any time the situation changed—which was all the time—we re-evaluated our goals, both short and long, and made adjustments so we had the greatest possibility of a good overall result. The goals I'd had the week before the doctor stared at me in that unfortunate way were no longer achievable by me. The quicker I scrapped plans for a life that no longer existed, the better.

I needed to come up with new goals. Fast.

A capacity to confront reality had served me well throughout life. I remember doing so 40 years before, on a much smaller scale, but one that still felt profound. Growing up in Bayside, Queens, a middle-class bedroom community within the confines of New York City but seemingly not of it, I adored baseball. I played all the time. I pitched for my high school team. I thought I was pretty good. I even got written up in the local paper once for getting our team out of a bases-loaded, no-out jam in the last inning to preserve the victory. I thought I might be able to go further.

One day when I was 14, my mother, who for years had witnessed my passion for the sport, told me it was important to distinguish that from talent.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You may have the passion to be a great baseball player," she said, "but not the talent."

It took me the better part of that summer to adjust to what my mother had, lovingly, told me. She wanted me to hold onto my passion while also following a path where my talent could flower. I didn't stop playing ball, or being a fan, and I eventually came to see she was right. Freshman year at Penn State, I tried to win a spot on the team as a walk-on but I didn't make it. I didn't have as much talent as my brother, and even he wasn't good enough to get past a certain level.

Like it or not, that was my reality. I adjusted. As I got older, I learned to adjust faster. I cultivated an ability to make big shifts quickly, almost instantly. When something in my life no longer worked, I could abandon it with little sentiment. I did not look back, nor did I digress from my new path. It seemed to me that no good came from pretending that what used to be true was still true when clearly it wasn't, or that what really was true, no matter how unpleasant, really wasn't. The quicker one got on with it, the better. It was a particularly useful skill in business, a world at least as fast-moving and unforgiving as the larger world.

Within a very few days of that dark moment at the doctor's, I acknowledged my timeline was no longer like most people's. *This is the way it is now*, I admitted to myself. Now

I needed to come up with goals that were achievable within that timeline.

Fortunately, because I'd pursued a career for which I seemed to have had talent (and ultimately passion, as well), I could now use my skills and knowledge to take full advantage of this sobering new reality. Instead of figuring out how we as a firm needed to reposition swiftly to adjust to the new circumstances of the marketplace, I would have to figure out how I as an individual needed to reposition swiftly to adjust to the new circumstances of my life. My experience and outlook gave me the potential to manage my endgame better than most, and I considered that opportunity a gift.

The key word in the previous sentence is not *gift* or *opportunity*. It's *potential*. To turn this opportunity into a real gift, one that could never be taken away from me or my family and friends, would be the greatest challenge of my life.

This may all seem a little hard to believe. I understand.

After all, who deals with death this way? How can the end *not* get messy—even for an accountant? How can you *not* fall into despair? How can you *not* immerse yourself in denial and an endless, if quixotic, chase for miracles?

Can death really be approached constructively—like every other phase of life? With brightness (if not hope)?

Isn't there an implicit contradiction here? And, perhaps most unbelievable of all, how on Earth can you possibly turn this awful time into the single best period of your life, ever?

For most people, the specter of death is brutally hard to accept. They don't want to spend even a minute thinking about it. They'd rather put it out of their mind, to be thought about—*if* it's thought about—at a later date. Much, much later.

When people met me, however, they could no longer ignore the notion of death—premature, unplanned-for death. I could see it in their eyes. I looked so much older than my 53 years—70 at least, maybe 75. The right side of my face drooped. I looked as if I'd had a stroke, a bad one. Soon my head would be bald from radiation, and the skin on my skull was the texture of tissue paper. (My daughter Gina said I looked like a kindly Dr. Evil, from *Austin Powers*.) My speech was sometimes garbled, as if I were chewing on marbles. One colleague said it sounded like I had suddenly acquired a Massachusetts accent. Now and then it took a few tries for even family members and lifelong friends to understand what I was saying. Often I was beseeched to pursue—*please*—some radical course of treatment, in the hope that a miracle might occur. Some friends and colleagues seemed almost offended by my attitude and chosen course, as if I had laid bare the fact that mira-

cles, or their possibility, were ultimately worth rejecting. (Of *course* a part of me hoped that the front page of tomorrow's *New York Times* would announce the miraculous medical breakthrough that would buy me a couple more decades. But I couldn't afford to spend an ounce of energy on that possibility.) Most of the people I met wanted me to live forever—or at least for several more years. That way, the immediacy of what I represented could be made less immediate—to them.

People have written their own eulogies. Certainly they've picked out their cemetery plots and made very clear whether they want to be buried or cremated or to donate their bodies to medical science. But before I came up with the final and most important to-do list of my life, I hadn't known anyone who tried to manage his own death in such a conscious fashion. I did not start out doing it to influence others. I did it simply because that was who I was: methodical, organized, unequivocating, thorough. What can I say? I was an accountant not only by trade, but by manner, as well. The same traits that made me someone who might flourish in the world of finance and accounting also made me someone who did not know how to do anything unplanned—dying included.

I had long believed that a successful businessperson could, if so inclined, live a spiritual life, and that to do so it wasn't necessary to quit the boardroom, chuck it all, and

live on an ashram, as if only a physical departure that dramatic would confirm a depth of feeling about larger issues, including one's soul. After my diagnosis, I still believed that. But I also discovered depths to which a businessperson rarely goes, and learned how worthwhile it was to visit there, and sooner rather than later, because it may bring one greater success as a businessperson and as a human being. You can call what I went through a spiritual journey, a journey of the soul. A journey that allowed me to experience what was there all along but had been hidden, thanks to the distractions of the world.

Because I learned so much in my final weeks that seemed remarkable to me (as I suspected I would), I felt the tug to help people see this stage as something worth experiencing *if* you prepare for it. A couple of weeks after my diagnosis, as I strolled through Central Park on a gorgeous day with one of my closest friends, the mentor who had groomed me for my final job, I told him, "Most people don't get this chance. They're either too sick or they have no clue death is about to happen. I have the unique opportunity to plan this about as well as it can be planned." The look he gave me was, I think, more admiration than curiosity, but I can't say for sure.

Back when I was CEO, I expanded our firm's mentoring program so that everyone would have a mentor. Later, as I was dying, I couldn't help but think that learning all I

did about death's approach had forced on me the responsibility to share my experience. I wanted to mentor someone, even one person, with this knowledge I had gained. Knowledge about winding down relationships. About enjoying each moment so much that time seems actually to slow down. About the one thing that's more important than time (and I don't mean love). About clarity and simplicity. About the death of spontaneity, and the need to rekindle it in our lives. Weren't these things that healthy people could learn, or must you have a terminal illness before the ideas penetrate? Morbid as it sounds, my experience taught me that we should all spend time thinking about our death, and what we want to do with our final days, insofar as it's within our control.

I came to wonder, almost marvel, over this question: *if how we die is one of the most important decisions we can make* (again, in those situations where it's somewhat within our control, or, at least, its occurrence is approximately known), *then why do most people abrogate this responsibility?* And, in so doing, sacrifice benefits both for themselves and for the ones they leave behind? As for those considering taking the time someday to plan their final weeks and months, three words of advice: *Move it up*. If you're 50 and you'd planned to think about it at 55, move it up. If you're 30 and had planned to think about it in 20 years, move it up. Just as a person with a terminal illness is motivated to adhere to a

more souped-up schedule, so a person in good health has little motivation to address the situation even one minute before it's time, which may already be too late. That's your disadvantage, maybe even your curse. *Move it up*. A close friend who was invited to participate in a "Renaissance Weekend"—those high-octane gatherings of politicians, artists, academics, captains of industry, Nobel Prize winners, and others—told me that, at the end of the weekend, a select few attendees are asked to give a short speech to everyone assembled. The speechmaker is given no more than three minutes and is instructed to imagine that, as soon as the talk concludes, he or she dies. My friend said that the speeches were uniformly riveting, but, more notably, they were surprising. The men and women charged with the honor of giving these speeches clearly thought hard about what was most essential for them to say, and often it wasn't at all what you might expect from a senator, a world-renowned physicist, or a CFO.

Move it up.

That's not to say I got it completely right. I had lots of work to do. I got a lot of it wrong. When I aimed to be fully conscious and in the moment, I often had trouble keeping my mind from wandering to the future or the past. I got angry. Frequently I cried. Occasionally I got obsessed. I experienced repeated failure at what I was trying to do. But not once did I regret that I had exercised control over

my life, the final and most precious inches of my life, for the last real time I was able to.

What is wrong with this picture?

I couldn't seriously go into death thinking that my businessman's mindset would now expand to reveal great truths to me, and the world at large, about the profoundest issues we all face, could I? No, I couldn't. That would be arrogance. I was never an overly reflective or philosophical person. While I do believe that the business mindset is, in important ways, useful at the end of life (just as it was useful back when I felt vigorous, indefatigable, and damn near immortal), it sounds pretty weird to try to be CEO of one's own death.

Given the profoundness of dying, and how different its quality felt from the life I led, I had to *undo* at least as many business habits as I tried to maintain. Indeed, though I didn't always have time to reflect on it, it was the struggle between these two poles—the old me and the me that had to be created day by day—that was my biggest challenge, not the dying itself. It was hard to tell myself to be a leader and manager, on the one hand, and, on the other, to release myself once and for all from thinking that way. Which part of me stayed? Which part of me strayed? Which would help me? Which would fail me? Did I become some sort of before-and-after hybrid? Was that a good thing?

An unavoidable thing? Would the right self triumph in the end?

And what might others learn from this tension in my life, and take away for their own benefit?

I tell my story so that those who haven't been given my "gift" may find in here something useful for their future (a long one, I hope) and/or their present (a deep one, I hope). I'll be glad if they come to see the value of confronting their own mortality, and the issues surrounding it, sooner rather than later, and that my approach and perspective might provide help for a better death—and for a better life right now.

Almost exactly 14 years ago, on the day my daughter Gina was born, the nurse placed her in Corinne's arms. I moved closer to my wife and baby girl, awed by what lay before me. My newborn daughter was staggeringly beautiful, if a bit squashed from the journey. Before I could touch her, she reached out, startling me, and grabbed my finger. She held on tightly.

A look of shock darkened my face.

That day and the next I walked around as if in a fog. Corinne picked up on my odd, distracted behavior. Finally, she confronted me.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "You're acting very strange."

I looked away.

"What is it?" she asked. "Tell me."

I couldn't hide it any longer. "The moment she grabbed my finger," I said, "it hit me that someday I'll have to say good-bye to her."

It's a blessing. It's a curse. It's what you get for saying hello to people. At some point, a good-bye is coming, too. Not just to all the people you love and who love you back, but to the world as well.

I loved being a business leader, but then the day came when I could be that man no more. Before the light in my mind faded and the shadows lengthened too much for me to see anymore, I chose at least, at last, to be master of my farewell.