

In Sickness | March 1, 2019

SERMON FROM THE SCAFFOLD

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In 1777, Samuel Johnson offered us some quotable wisdom: “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

232 years later, Christopher Hitchens reevaluated its wisdom, and shortly after, found himself confronting a fortnight of his very own. At this time, Johnson’s aphorism was not repudiated.

10 years later, I find myself re-evaluating it.

I adore the wit of Samuel Johnson. I admire the keen skepticism of Christopher Hitchens. And I was hopeful that I could spend my remaining time basking in that promised state of precise and permanent focus. But when death is approaching, its footsteps clunking in the distance, you don’t get focused. That would be a sentimental parting gift, but... sorry kiddo, there is no Santa.

When forced to confront the possibility of one’s sooner-than-expected passing, you get depressed. And exhausted. All of that brooding and panicky moping really wears a guy out.

You know what *does* concentrate the mind, though?

Trying not to get caught. Being sneaky. Doing something you shouldn’t be doing. Because nothing sharpens our attention like risky mischief.

Once upon a time, long, long-ish ago, there lived a man named William Dodd. He was a clergyman, but he was also a huckster. During each episode of huckstering, I have no doubt his mind was roiling and racing, silently roaring. Because in that moment, he had a lot to lose, and that lot was highly vulnerable. A failure of vigilance, even just a brief lapse in attention, promised life-altering tragedy. *Those* are the kinds of circumstances that wonderfully concentrate a mind.

Dodd focused his way through a few successful swindles, and then he was caught, tried, and sentenced. He was imprisoned for a bit, and then he was hanged.

After the imprisonment but before the hanging, Samuel Johnson wrote a sermon on his behalf. *The Convict’s Address to His Unhappy Brethren*. That’s what it was called.

It was supposed to stave off the noose. That part didn’t work. But it did rally the public; more than 20,000 people signed a petition that sought Dodd’s pardon.

That's the kind of writer Samuel Johnson was. In this case, it's the kind of *ghost* writer he was.

When Dodd's authorship was doubted, Johnson attested to the sermon's authenticity while, at the same time, offering future lovers of wit his still-in-circulation aphorism: When a man knows he is to be hanged...

Despite the rallying of the common folk, Dodd was still executed. Probably because, deep down, everyone knew he didn't write it. He couldn't have. In part, Johnson was the only one smart and clever enough to write those words. But also, Dodd surely lacked the clarity and concentration required to write anything even coherent. He was about to be killed. And you're asking him to think clearly? "Just calm down, Dodd, calm down. Let's try some multiplication tables and then I want you to write a sermon."

When a lion is swaggering toward you, twines of drool oozing from its fangs, and you have no means of escape, you're going to be a pretty lousy computer programmer. Or physicist. Or sermon writer.

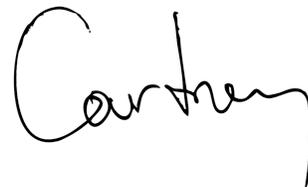
Johnson may have been brilliant, but he wasn't confronting the scaffold. And I doubt the man who was felt at all *concentrated* by it. I know Johnson didn't, years later, when the hangman's gout-ridden footfalls could be heard arthritically swaggering in *his* direction.

Only a vacant hedonist, blind to tomorrow, could thrive in such a situation. As for me, momentary satisfaction motivates nearly no decision. Almost every verb I submit to is one that positions me for forthcoming success. It makes the future better. That's what brings *me* joy: knowing tomorrow's sunrise will be just a little bit brighter than today's. That's what concentrates *my* mind.

When illness or a scaffold uncouples my work from its compensation – when my day's investment is denied its rightful dividend – how am I supposed to remain motivated? How am I supposed to muster concentration enough to accomplish *anything*? Do fear and depression make you *more* productive? Or do they just keep you up at night?

When the reaper can be seen in the distance, sharpening his scythe, you have to find something *else* to maintain your wits. The grinding sound of whetstone on steel won't nurture any inner genius. That's the reason I have such a hard time reading the writing of the dying. I'm sure there's a lot to learn about living, but it's scribbled incoherently on the pages. I find myself wishing they could gather their thoughts like they could when they were younger and free from vincibility's most urgent reminders.

I think that's, at least in part, the reason death continues to be such a mysterious topic. As we make its acquaintance, we lose our ability to tell our story, to understand and articulate our emotions, or contribute a witty aphorism to the annals of English just before the noose is fastened.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Courtney". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'C'.