

TriCorner News

from *The Lakeville Journal*,
The Millerton News and *The Winsted Journal*

Published on *TriCorner News* (<http://tricornernews.com>)

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By Charles R. Church

I will speak, after all, about old age and death — two ineluctable realities we fear the most and try our hardest not to think about.

If — like me — you have more than 70 years, you probably have seen your physical self dwindling, and felt it grown creaky. Maybe a few inches of height have been lost. Most likely you stoop a bit.

Old age seems to creep up on people, surprise them. “Oh, that’s down the road!” we say. Our parents got old — sadly for us — but we believed ourselves middle-aged. Safe. At least until age 65, when we started refusing to classify our age, or stopped thinking about it at all, if we could. But our parents died, and then no buffer stood between us and you-know-what. And the thoughts would come.

Even if our minds still remain sharp, we worry that the sharpness will go away — inescapably, precipitously and too soon. For we have watched helplessly as close family members fell into the grasp of that horrible malady first identified by Dr. Alzheimer. While we may show no sign of having fallen into its clutches, how near does it lurk? And medical science, for all its advances, has not found a way to save us, if that veil descends.

At times, have you not fancied hearing the snickering of Prufrock’s Footman? Or at least wondered how close by he stands? My parents both died at 90, and that should be a comfort, but my sister died within the same 12 months, and she was but 63. The Reaper can cut whenever — and wherever — he damn well pleases. We may protest that we have much to do. After all, the great American educator Horace Mann famously warned: “Until you have done something for humanity, you should be ashamed to die.” Like King Ethelred, we all are all unready. But the Reaper says, “So what?”

When despair begins to take hold amid such wintry thoughts, Britain’s poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, shows us the way forward in his eternal “Ulysses.” Most remember its protagonist as Odysseus, the contriver of that brilliant stratagem — the Trojan Horse — that brought a seemingly endless war to a close. We recall how many trials lay before him before he could reach home, where his faithful wife, Penelope, and dutiful son, Telemachus, awaited him.

Tennyson has his hero describe his tortuous travels this way:

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known; cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honoured of them all....

Ulysses has drunk "life to the lees." Greatly has he suffered, "both with those that loved [him] and alone." He wants to do more, but knows he does not have much time. "Little remains: but every hour is saved/ From that eternal silence, something more,/ A bringer of new things."

He wants to live those last days fully and well. "Death closes all: but something ere the end,/ Some work of noble note, may yet be done...." So "Come my friends,/ 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...."

Though much is taken, much abides; and though

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

That's the way, my friends. We can all, in our own ways, be heroes. If there is little time left, then our deeds are just that much more heroic. Let's get out there!

Charles R. Church is an attorney practicing in Salisbury who focuses primarily on Guantanamo Bay, detention, torture, habeas corpus and related issues.

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