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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

On Being Not Dead

By BILL HAYES NOV. 21, 2012

ONE night last year I called my friend Oliver and told him to meet me on the roof of our apartment building. He lives three flights down from me. I had pulled together a simple dinner — roast chicken, good bread, olives, cherries, wine. We ate at a picnic table. I'd forgotten wineglasses, so we traded swigs out of the bottle. It was summer. The sun was setting on the Hudson. Neighbors were enjoying themselves at nearby tables. The breeze was nice. The surrounding cityscape looked like a stage set for a musical.

What is the opposite of a perfect storm? That is what this was, one of those rare moments when the world seems to shed all shyness and display every possible permutation of beauty. Oliver said it well as we took up our plates and began heading back downstairs: "I'm glad I'm not dead." This came out rather loudly, as he is a bit deaf. Even so, he looked surprised by his own utterance, as if it were something he was feeling but didn't really mean to say aloud — a thought turned into an exclamation.

"I'm glad you're not dead, too," said a neighbor gaily, taking up the refrain. "I'm glad we're all not dead," said another. There followed a spontaneous raising of glasses on the rooftop, a toast to the setting sun, a toast to us.

I suppose it's a cliché to say you're glad to be alive, that life is short, but to say you're glad to be not dead requires a specific intimacy with loss that comes only with age or deep experience. One has to know not simply what dying is like, but to know death itself, in all its absoluteness.

After all, there are many ways to die — peacefully, violently, suddenly, slowly, happily, unhappily, too soon. But to be dead — one either is or isn't.

The same cannot be said of aliveness, of which there are countless degrees. One can be alive but half-asleep or half-noticing as the years fly, no matter how fully oxygenated the blood and brain or how steadily the heart beats. Fortunately, this is a reversible condition. One can learn to be alert to the extraordinary and press pause — to memorize moments of the everyday.

I think now about that summer night on the roof 15 months ago, and how many people I have known or loved that I've lost since then: my mother, three friends, two neighbors and, a few weeks ago, a friend who was like a second mother to me. This last one has been tough, more so for being unexpected. Her many friends and relatives came together for a memorial one afternoon last week. It was beautiful, joy-filled. Irishman that I am, I wept all the way through. Oh, well. I've come to believe that a good cry is like a carwash for the soul.

Afterward, I started walking, walked past a subway entrance on Lexington and kept going. It was dark by now, and cold. But the autumn night receded and Lex magically turned into Fifth as I called to mind a warm afternoon spent with Wendy in June. We'd had lunch and decided to walk back to her office rather than take a cab. She was about a head taller than me, so whenever I glanced at her it was against a backdrop of blue sky and high-rises and American flags fluttering on Fifth Avenue. I felt like I was on a dolly-cam, seeing her through the lens of a movie camera. She wore a big smile and a sleeveless dress. We were talking about how much we both loved New York — she as a native, I as a newcomer — and all the while, I was aware that I was glad to be here right now and wanted to remember as much of this as I could. And I do. The short clip of our walk plays on a continuous loop.

When I got home, Oliver called. "Come downstairs," he said, "everything's marinating." It's really a lucky thing to have as a neighbor your best friend. We set the table and opened a bottle. He'd grilled salmon and steamed peas. For dessert, we split an apple; a perfect meal. We turned on the radio. It was "Beethoven awareness month" on our classical radio station, and it began playing Opus 133, the "great fugue" with which he had originally ended one of his late quartets. I am

not well versed in classical music; had I not heard the announcer, I would have guessed it was something contemporary — even composed this very day. Oliver told me that in Beethoven's time the piece was considered almost unintelligible by listeners and so demanding technically as to be nearly unplayable. Conversation came to a stop and we just listened, the music at once chaotic and violent, mysterious and gorgeous.

Behind Oliver, through a large picture window facing north, Eighth Avenue unfurled as far as the eye could see. I have this thing where sometimes I try to catch the moment when all the traffic lights on Eighth align and turn red, their number multiplied countless times by the brake lights from stopped cars and taxicabs. It doesn't happen often at all, traffic lights seeming to have their own sense of time, and Oliver never quite catches it. So I watch for the two of us. Finally: "There, there it is, see?"

He turns to find a fiery red Milky Way on the streets of Manhattan.

And in a blink, the lights start turning green.

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