

1 **THE JOYFUL EXISTENTIALIST**

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3 Edwin F. Taylor

4 [eftaylor@mit.edu](mailto:eftaylor@mit.edu)

5 First Church in Belmont MA, Unitarian Universalist

6 [uubelmont.org](http://uubelmont.org)

7

8 The Existentialist tells us that we are all going to die (Duh!), that we are helpless against  
9 random losses and catastrophes, and that life is meaningless. The Humanist agrees that life  
10 is short and difficult, but suggests ways for us to get along tolerably. The Joyful Existentialist  
11 comes to terms with random loss and death, then turns life into joyful celebration.  
12

13 This sermon text and audio recording available at <http://eftaylor.com/thoughts/>

14 Plastic wallet card, placed in each seat of every pew before the service

**FOUR FEARS; MANY VISIONS**

- A. FOUR FEARS: Life is unfair, deeply random, drenched in loss, and hurtling toward death.
- B. Trying to avoid or deny the Four Fears leads to compulsions, superficial diversions, and organized evil.
- C. VISIONS: Every attempt to grasp Nature or life yields a Vision, a "slant of light" on experience.
- D. Science and its applications are Visions, "free creations" that deliver exquisite descriptions, not guidance.
- E. Medicine, capitalism, democracy, the law, a story. . . every one is a Vision.

15

**THE JOYFUL EXISTENTIALIST**

1. Take supreme delight in the vision of this moment.
2. Bathe each aspect of life---ego, family, profession, and every person you meet---in multiple visions.
3. Every vision is partial & incomplete, a potential trap.
4. No vision or set of visions fully describes Nature, the human condition, or even a single person.
5. Accept and let go of the unfair, the random, and the losses in a quiet, maturing undertone of compassion, self-grieving, and courage.

SERMON AT: <http://eftaylor.com/thoughts/>

16

17 **SERMON**

18 As I look out at this old world, it seems to me that life is unfair, deeply random, drenched in  
19 loss, and hurtling toward death. Call these *my Four Fears*. This sermon explores how I and  
20 those who share these and similar fears --- perhaps including you? --- can come to terms with  
21 them, then turn life into joyful celebration.

22  
23 Let's look at each of my Four Fears.

24  
25 First fear: Life is unfair. In Belmont, Massachusetts, however, life's unfairness often falls in  
26 our favor. We do not live in a war zone; gangs of thugs do not roam our streets and invade  
27 our homes; we eat too much rather than too little. But unfairness can turn against you in a  
28 heartbeat, bringing accident, illness, unemployment. Each of us knows personally several  
29 people, especially children, to whom life has dealt a bad hand. Life, seems to me, is unfair.

30  
31 Second fear: Life is deeply random. The Googol is a made-up large number, defined as the  
32 numeral one followed by one hundred zeros. (Googol the number came long before Google  
33 the website.) The estimated total number of atoms in the observable Universe is a teeny-tiny  
34 fraction of one Googol. In contrast, a geneticist told me that the number of *different* ways that  
35 your parents' genes could be arranged to determine your personal genetic makeup is one  
36 hundred trillion times a Googol times a Googol times a Googol times a Googol. The chance  
37 that you would end up with the genetic makeup that you actually have is the number one  
38 divided by this *huge* number. And all that in just *one* generation. It's a wonder that any of us  
39 are here at all! I think life is deeply random.

40  
41 Third and fourth fears: Life is drenched in loss and hurtling toward death. At middle age  
42 many of us realize that our accomplishments are few and our remaining time limited. Listen  
43 to Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist:

44 *A person spends years coming into his own, developing his talent, his unique gifts,*  
45 *perfecting his discriminations about the world, broadening and sharpening his appetite,*  
46 *learning to bear the disappointments of life, becoming mature, seasoned---finally a unique*  
47 *creature . . . standing with some dignity and nobility . . . And then the real tragedy . . .*  
48 *that it takes sixty years of incredible suffering and effort to make such an individual, and*  
49 *then he is good only for dying. . .*

50

51 Notice that Becker describes the *very best* that we can hope for; no mention here of illness or  
52 decline! You and I can be perfectly healthy and mentally sharp right up to the final instant,  
53 and Becker still describes the tragic loss that always accompanies death.

54

55 What should our emotional response be to inevitable loss and death? Seems to me that the  
56 healthy response is grieving, call it *self-grieving*. Self-grieving is an honest emotion. Two  
57 alternatives to self-grieving are avoidance and denial. In my opinion these are traps.  
58 Avoidance and denial of our fears can lead to compulsive attempts to remain young, to prove  
59 potency with sexual conquests, to amass wealth and power, and in general to seek safety  
60 where none exists. Ernest Becker goes so far as to say that avoidance and denial of loss and  
61 death lead to personal and organized *evil*.

62

63 Is Becker's vision of loss and death all that we can hope for?

64

65 Here is one possible alternative: Every workday morning I go swimming at the Arlington  
66 Boys and Girls Club, then sit down to my bliss, which is writing an undergraduate textbook  
67 on gravity. My co-author is an absolute master of the subject. I recite to myself the fragment  
68 of a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson about the aging hero Odysseus, who yearns for one final  
69 adventure. Odysseus exclaims:

70

*Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.*

71

*Death closes all; but something ere the end,*

72

*Some work of noble note, may yet be done,*

73

*Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.*

74

75 Actually, I have no memory of striving with gods. Later Odysseus says:

76

*. . . Come, my friends,*

77

*'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.*

78

*Push off, and sitting well in order smite*

79

*The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds*

80

*To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths*

81

*Of all the western stars, until I die.*

82

83 Thus inspired, I begin my workday among the galaxies.

84

85 Which vision of old age resonates with you? Becker's vision of loss and defeat? Tennyson's  
86 vision of mature adventure? Do we have to choose between them? Could it be that both  
87 visions are true but incomplete? If so, their incompleteness is a potential trap: If we  
88 concentrate on Becker's dark vision, we miss many satisfactions and new initiatives of old  
89 age. If we focus only on Odysseus' adventure, we soft-pedal our inevitable demise.

90

91 Becker and Tennyson each create a *vision* of old age. I make a bold claim: *We grasp life ONLY*  
92 *through visions*. Can this be true? Are human-constructed visions our only way of knowing?  
93 Many feel strongly there is another way: that science and technology tell us *directly* about  
94 reality itself. But I disagree; here is a single sentence by Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld  
95 that changed my life:

96 *Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind and are not, however it may*  
97 *seem, determined by the external world.*

98

99 What does this mean? It means that Isaac Newton *invented* the force of gravity, and Albert  
100 Einstein *invented* curved spacetime. These two visions of gravity are *radically* different from  
101 one another. Yet each of them (almost) perfectly predicts the motion of every planet in our  
102 solar system.

103

104 This is not to say that gravity is unreal; anything that can kill you is definitely real! People my  
105 age often injure themselves in a fall. Gravity is real all right, but our theories of gravity are  
106 visions. In my opinion every other field of science is also a vision, an attempt to construct a  
107 picture of the physical world.

108

109 Science *is* unique in one respect: it has a complex social system, based on experiment and  
110 observation, which helps us to agree when a scientific vision has been verified. But every  
111 scientific vision, every field of science, is partial and incomplete, a potential trap. For me, one  
112 such trap is *science fundamentalism*, also called *scientism*. Scientism believes that *only* science  
113 gives us a "real" picture of the world. True, science and its applications *do* deliver exquisite  
114 descriptions, but in my opinion no guidance. I feel that science cannot help me directly with  
115 my Four Fears of unfairness, randomness, loss, and death.

116

117 William Blake was an artist, engraver, poet, and eccentric visionary. Two centuries ago Blake  
118 essentially summarized this sermon in a rather weird six-line poem. Listen:

119           *Now I fourfold vision see*  
120           *And a fourfold vision is given to me*  
121           *Tis fourfold in my supreme delight*  
122           *And three fold in soft Beulahs night*  
123           *And twofold Always. May God us keep*  
124           *From Single vision & Newtons sleep*

125

126 Strange, but to me powerful. Blake was deeply aware of the danger that a single scientific  
127 vision, such as Newton's mechanics, can reduce life to numbers and equations, robbing its  
128 riches. Blake warns us that a single vision distorts any subject; he recommends many  
129 overlapping visions to add depth and richness. I believe this is especially true when you  
130 describe a person: Everybody is complex and deserves description with multiple visions.  
131 How many visions are enough: fourfold? tenfold? Seems to me that *no* collection of visions  
132 *fully* describes even a single person, much less the entire human condition.

133

134 Still, I feel that visions *can* be immensely practical: Marriage *can* harness human sexuality to  
135 family stability. Capitalism *can* harness human greed to economic stability. Democracy *can*  
136 harness human lust for power to social stability.

137

138 So much for visions. Where is the refuge from my Four Fears? I can find no way to remove  
139 from life its unfairness, randomness, loss, and death.

140

141 One movement that thought deeply about fears is existentialism. The existentialist rubs your  
142 nose in the Four Fears and urges you to face them with courage; but as far as I can tell the  
143 existentialist gives us little advice about how to *overcome* our fears. If possible, we want to be  
144 joyful. How can we become *Joyful* Existentialists?

145

146 At least one person in history faced the Four Fears head on: The Buddha.

147 Legend says that almost 2600 years ago, a pampered provincial prince in what is now Nepal,  
148 on trips out of his luxurious palace, saw: a decrepit old man, then a person wracked with  
149 disease, then a corpse. The prince realized that life is utterly different from what *he* had  
150 experienced. He left his palace to find a solution to human suffering. Years of ascetic self-  
151 denial did not bring him answers. Finally he sat down under a fig tree to meditate,

152 determined not to rise again until he had the solution. When he arose he had become The  
153 Buddha, The Awakened One.  
154

155 There are many meditation methods. I use one of the simplest, for beginners, called *guided*  
156 *meditation*. Bring each fear into focal awareness, let it sink in, name it, regard it deeply but  
157 without panic. With practice, something strange and wonderful happens: We *accept* each fear  
158 and also *let it go*. We still *have* fears, but we no longer *suffer* from them.

159 There are other ways to face our fears besides meditation. The literary critic Harold Bloom  
160 writes that Emily Dickinson “*thought her way to the other side of feeling.*” Like The Buddha,  
161 Emily faced life’s terrors head on, with a courage that carried her beyond fear itself. The pure,  
162 unflinching vision of Dickinson and other writers, playwrights, movie makers enrich our  
163 vision of the Four Fears, helping us to examine them deeply, and to illuminate them with a  
164 new “slant of light.”  
165

166 Some organ pieces have what is called a *pedal point* or *pedal tone*: the organist holds down a  
167 single bass pedal with her foot that sounds steadily as she plays tunes in the upper registers.  
168 Alfa Radford! Give us a 20-second example of a pedal tone . . .  
169

170 I calm my Four Fears into a pedal tone that sounds quietly under everyday life. Have the  
171 Four Fears disappeared? Of course not! We are human and can never be rid of them. But if  
172 we have come to terms with our fears, much of their sting is gone. The Four Fears, living in  
173 the pedal tone, rarely interfere with the everyday joy of living.  
174

175 The latest development in my aging is arthritic knees. Frustration and even resentment about  
176 the knees drain off into the pedal tone. There’s no need to obsess about my knees.  
177

178 What *is* Joyful Existentialism? It too is a vision. Like every vision, Joyful Existentialism is  
179 partial and incomplete. It may calm our fears and help us in other ways, but it cannot solve  
180 *all* of our problems!  
181

182 Now I relish life as a Joyful Existentialist. With the pedal tone rumbling along below, I take  
183 supreme delight in every passing vision: Which of the Four Fears will the next TV

184 commercial pretend to cure? What perceptive joke or story will my swimming buddies tell?  
185 What insight and enchantment come from the next movie, play, PBS program, concert, book,  
186 museum, magazine, poem --- or sermon? I love and revel in every vision while treasuring its  
187 imperfections, just as I love and revel in every friend while treasuring their imperfections.

188

189 What vision lights *your* fire? Would *you* like to be a Joyful Existentialist? Will it change your  
190 life? Thinking about this sermon changed mine. It would be *wonderful* if we could explore  
191 Joyful Existentialism --- together.

192

## 193 NOTES

194 The phrase "slant of light" is from Emily Dickinson's poem that begins:

195

196 *There's a certain Slant of light,*

197 *Winter Afternoons -*

198 *That oppresses, like the Heft*

199 *Of Cathedral Tunes -*

200

201 ---*The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*, Edited by R. W. Franklin, 1998,  
202 The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge. Poem number 320.

203

204 Full excerpt from Ernest Becker *The Denial of Death*, 1973, New York, Simon and Schuster,  
205 pages 168-169:

206

207 *A person spends years coming into his own, developing his talent, his unique gifts,*  
208 *perfecting his discriminations about the world, broadening and sharpening his appetite,*  
209 *learning to bear the disappointments of life, becoming mature, seasoned---finally a unique*  
210 *creature in nature, standing with some dignity and nobility and transcending the animal*  
211 *condition; no longer driven, no longer a complete reflex, not stamped out of any mold.*  
212 *And then the real tragedy, as Andre Malraux wrote in The Human Condition: that it*  
213 *takes sixty years of incredible suffering and effort to make such an individual, and then*  
214 *he is good only for dying. This painful paradox is not lost on the person himself---least of*  
215 *all himself. He feels agonizingly unique, and yet he knows that this doesn't make any*  
216 *difference as far as ultimates are concerned. He has to go the way of the grasshopper, even*  
217 *though it takes longer.*

218

219 Full excerpt from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Ulysses* (the Roman name for  
220 Odysseus). *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third Edition, 1983, W. W. Norton, New  
221 York, pages 704-705:

222

223 *Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.*  
224 *Death closes all; but something ere the end,*  
225 *Some work of noble note, may yet be done,*  
226 *Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.*  
227 *The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;*  
228 *The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep*  
229 *Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,*

230           *'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.*  
231           *Push off, and sitting well in order smite*  
232           *The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds*  
233           *To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths*  
234           *Of all the western stars, until I die.*  
235

236 Quote from Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, "the free creation of the human mind":  
237 *The Evolution of Physics*, 1938, New York, Simon and Schuster, page 31.  
238

239 William Blake's Vision Statement: letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802.  
240

241 Brief account of the trips out of his palace by the pampered provincial prince and his  
242 transformation into The Buddha: Huston Smith *The World's Religions*, 1997, San  
243 Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, pages 82ff.  
244

245 Stephen Batchelor's reconstruction of the original Buddhism of its founder and his own  
246 instructions on guided meditation: *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, 1997, New York, Riverhead  
247 Books (only 115 pages total!).  
248

249 Harold Bloom's quote about Emily Dickinson: *The Western Canon*, 1994, New York,  
250 Harcourt Brace, page 301.  
251

252 Deeply random genetics: The Googol is the number  $10^{100}$ . The estimated number of atoms in  
253 the observable Universe is between  $10^{79}$  and  $10^{80}$ ; even the larger number is the teeny-tiny  
254 fraction  $10^{-20}$  of a Googol. Here is a private communication from geneticist Jeff Gore,  
255 Department of Physics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Each of us has 23 pairs of  
256 chromosomes. Each chromosome that we pass on is a mixture of the maternal and paternal  
257 versions of that chromosome. There are something like a billion [ $10^9$ ] ways that this mixture  
258 can take place within a single chromosome, meaning that the total number of possible ways  
259 to pass on your genes is about  $(10^9)^{23} = 10^{207}$ . Your wife has a similar number, yielding  $10^{414}$   
260 possible offspring, even without considering mutations." Numerical summary:  $10^{207} \times 10^{207} =$   
261  $10^{414} = 100 \times 10^{12} \times 10^{100} \times 10^{100} \times 10^{100} \times 10^{100} =$  one hundred trillion times a Googol times a  
262 Googol times a Googol times a Googol.  
263

264 Richard H. Lyon completed the recording of the original sermon, now available ---  
265 including Alfa Radford's sample of an organ pedal tone --- as JoyfulExistAudio.wma at  
266 the website <http://eftaylor.com/thoughts/>  
267