

Life'll Kill Ya: Warren Zevon, Martin Heidegger, and Authentic Being-Towards-Death

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It's hard to listen to or think about Warren Zevon without thinking about death, and not just because of how he died. The shadow of death looms large over his entire musical catalogue. Many of his songs were either directly about death and dying or told stories of people who either died, flirted with death, killed people, or all the above. His characters form quite the colourful ensemble: Thompson-toting mercenary ghosts, excitable boys, gangsters, gamblers, cowboys, even boxers, who all play their part in an often gleefully violent theater of murder and death. But Zevon often took a more personal approach. On his 1995 album *Mutineer*, we find him “contemplating eternity beneath the vast indifference of heaven.” *Life'll Kill Ya*, released in 2000, takes mortality as an explicit theme, containing several tracks about aging, sickness, and dying that are poignant and darkly funny in equal measure. The press kit for 2002's *My Ride's Here* described it as “a meditation on death.” As his friend Billy Bob Thornton said of Zevon's songs, “the Grim Reaper made a cameo in most of them.” (*Inside Out*, VH1, 2004). Warren Zevon was one of the great songwriters of death, and all this *before* he found out he was dying of cancer.

Zevon has become known not only for his music, but for the remarkable way he approached his suddenly very real mortality, the attitude he took up in the face of death, one displayed in his actions, on his final album, and in his public speech in interviews and TV appearances. Here, I will consider the philosophical significance of Zevon's conduct in the

months leading up to his death, linking it to an idea from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger: authentic being-towards-death. Like Zevon's music, philosophy has also always been concerned with death. Questions about how we should understand, approach, and come to terms with death have plagued humans ever since there were humans, and philosophers ever since Plato (through the mouth of Socrates) characterized philosophy as "training for dying" (*Phaedo*, 67e). Throughout history, philosophers of all stripes have tried to make sense not just of the fact of death and what it means, but the existential angst it produces in us, a defining characteristic of the human condition and one that directly shapes our lives. But what impact does death have on how we live, what can the case of Warren Zevon tell us about this, and how can we link it to Heidegger's philosophy?

My Shit's Fucked Up: Warren Zevon's Diagnosis

A journal entry from Zevon, dated August 28, 2002, reads:

Rough day. I went to the doctors. They tell me I have lung cancer. They say I only have three months left to live. In the time I have left, I want to record as many songs as fast as I can. Right now, it's the best way I can think of to say goodbye to my friends and kids. (*Inside Out*, VH1, 2004)

To accomplish this, Zevon made a couple of what we might call "controversial decisions," one being the refusal of a medical treatment that could, possibly, have prolonged his life. However, the treatment was potentially very debilitating, and he wanted to put whatever energy he had left into making another record. The second decision was going totally public about his illness, hoping to use his predicament to his benefit. In Crystal Zevon's biography, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead*, Zevon's manager, Bridgette Barr, remembers what he said to her after getting the news:

“we have to go into showbiz mode. I’m giving you permission to use my illness in any way that you see fit to further my career right now.” Some people would prefer to keep such news private, or only tell close friends and family. Very few people, for example, knew David Bowie was ill before the announcement of his death two days after the release of his final album. Warren went the opposite route. He told everyone, did interviews, got some significant recording money, appeared on David Letterman one last time, and was even the subject of a documentary that chronicled the making of what would be his final album.

The resulting record, *The Wind*, was in many ways the perfect farewell, classic Zevon, the one we’d always known. Songs of dark, country-tinged rock, blistering guitar solos, all mixed with an intelligent, black-as-coal gallows humour. The filthy blues grind of “Rub Me Raw” and the raucous “Disorder in the House” exemplify this aspect of the album well: hard rocking, dryly funny, utterly defiant. But *The Wind* was also a farewell to family, friends and fans, a deeply personal reflection on his life and impending death. It’s an album that balances beautifully between these two aspects: it begins with the words “sometimes I feel like my shadow’s casting me” and ends with “keep me in your heart for a while.” *The Wind* ranks among Zevon’s best, belonging in the same category as albums like David Bowie’s *Blackstar* and Leonard Cohen’s *You Want It Darker*, works of great artists who knew the end was coming and made that knowledge musical.

Obviously, we shouldn’t define Zevon’s career entirely by how it ended, because he consistently produced brilliant music since his breakthrough 1976 album *Warren Zevon*. But his career has become particularly notable for its ending, which had a great impact on his public reputation and how his previous work is perceived. Songs like “My Shit’s Fucked Up” and “Don’t Let Us Get Sick” sound positively eerie when you know they were written by a man who would soon find out he was dying, as though he somehow, on some level, knew it was coming. Zevon was asked about this profound “irony” on his famous final appearance on the

David Letterman show. He said he didn't know why he was writing those songs at the time but supposed that "artists have some instincts or feelings about things that can't be put into words" that might have alerted him to his situation on an unconscious level before he actually knew about it (*The Late Show with David Letterman*, October 30, 2002). These instincts, coupled with an intimate familiarity with drugs and alcohol, meant he probably wasn't entirely surprised at his newfound situation.

Well, I can't really complain. [...] I think I chose a certain path and lived like Jim Morrison and got to live thirty more years, who knows why? You have to make choices and live with the consequences, and there's always consequences.

(*The Late Show with David Letterman*, October 30, 2002)

Except during the late seventies, around the time of the release of *Excitable Boy*, Zevon was never as famous as he would have perhaps liked to have been. But with his diagnosis, how public he went with it and his final album, he became more famous than he had been since this previous career high-point. Due to the open, highly documented nature of his final months, we know a fair amount about how he thought and spoke about dying, how his mortality influenced him, the decisions he made, and his attitude towards his existence. Despite the tragic nature of his final year and the sadness involved in watching these late interviews and public appearances, there is something remarkable about how he conducted himself in the face of his death—and perhaps we can learn something from it. His often-quoted injunction to "enjoy every sandwich," from his last Letterman appearance, is a simple, direct statement of the importance of appreciating even the smallest moments of our lives, because even they are marvelous, and they won't keep coming forever. Although he says in the same interview that he'd always felt like he'd enjoyed himself and treasured these moments, his illness made him aware of just how much you're supposed to do this. I would suggest that, from a philosophical

or existential point of view, what is interesting about Zevon is the fact that he refused medical treatment to pursue making a final artistic statement. What should we make of someone who does this? Is it right or wrong? Can it *be* right or wrong, or does it vary from person to person? What can it tell us about the human confrontation with mortality?

Zevon did say how he thought his actions should *not* be interpreted. To his disappointment, many of his fans had voiced this interpretation on-line.

They're all saying it's like, heroic, that I won't get treatment, and I think there's something so incredibly morbid about that. You know I stalled the discussion of having treatment so I could finish the record 'cause I didn't want any drastic alterations to my health other than dying, and boy I was really kinda shocked and disappointed in people when I read that. "That's why he's our hero, because he won't get treatment" [...] I think it's a sin not to want to live. (*Inside Out*, VH1, 2004)

This perception of his actions clearly displeased him, but why? Two things stand out here: he seemed not to think that refusing the treatment was "heroic," and he didn't refuse treatment because he didn't want to live. He did want to live, but in a particular way and on his own terms. He wanted as little impact on his health as possible apart from actually dying so he could live relatively as he wanted to (but for a shorter time) and make a final album. He also directly authorized his manager to use his illness to further his career, be properly in the public eye once more, and ultimately have a say in how he will be remembered. He even commissioned his ex-wife and lifetime friend Crystal to write his biography, which he insisted tell the unflinching truth about him, warts and all.

When faced with his imminent death, Warren Zevon took ownership of his life and legacy to have a say about how he would go and how he would be remembered when he did. Without necessarily saying this is "heroic," there is something existentially significant about

this fact. There might be many reasons for refusing treatment in this situation, but Zevon's was about seizing hold of the time he had left, living it on his own terms and delivering a final artistic flourish.

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*

In thinking about all this, it could be interesting to link Zevon with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, specifically the idea of "authentic being-towards-death" from his 1927 masterpiece, *Being and Time*. Warren was actually familiar with this book, since a 1995 diary entry reveals he once gave it as a birthday present to fellow songwriter J. D. Souther. (Zevon 2007, 322) Heidegger's philosophy was driven by the word "being" from start to finish. Specifically, he wanted to answer *the question of what "being" means*. Heidegger thought no one had ever been able to answer to this question, which is a concern, because he also thought that all other questions lead back to it. We can't expect to know what a molecule *is*, what knowledge *is* or what evil *is* until we know what the "is" means. Heidegger accused the history of philosophy of "forgetting" the question of being and failing to investigate it properly. Almost all his philosophy is dedicated to trying to correct this mistake, and his most famous attempt at doing it, the work he is remembered for more than any other, is *Being and Time*.

In this landmark text, Heidegger undertakes a painstaking analysis of human existence, attempting to figure out how it is structured, what its important and defining elements are. The guiding idea is this: to find out what being means, we should find out what it means for a particular type of entity to be, and human beings are special because only we can raise the question of being. Heidegger chose to analyze the existence of the entity which can raise the question he wanted to answer. He actually called the entity he wanted to analyse "Dasein" (an everyday German word for existence) rather than "human being". Humans are a type of Dasein

(they must be because we can raise the question of Being), but Heidegger argued that Dasein might not be limited to humans, so his use of “Dasein” meant that, really, he was doing something different to analysing human existence. This is a controversial claim in Heidegger scholarship, but since what Heidegger wrote about Dasein clearly also applies to human beings, so here I will just speak of humans.

One of the driving insights of *Being and Time* is that if we want to ask, understand, or answer a question, we must know what it is about our existence that allows us to ask, understand or answer questions. What is it about us that gives us our incredible capacity for philosophical wonder, the capacity to contemplate justice, God, time, the nature of existence, or the meaning of being? Heidegger’s rationale was to start here, hoping this would provide a solid foundation for dealing with the question of being adequately. Whether or not Heidegger ever answered this question is debatable, but his attempt at it is one of the most fascinating philosophical projects of the past century, although a very difficult one. Heidegger’s writing is notoriously abstract and full of jargon words that he made up because he wanted to avoid overused traditional philosophical language, but his work concerns the most fundamental issues about what it means to be human.

One of the things Heidegger tries to do in *Being and Time* is identify what he calls “existential structures”—things that feature in *every* case of human existence, without which we wouldn’t really be human. Intuitively, death seems to be one of these structures—every human being dies. But even though death is clearly part of the human condition, Heidegger points out that death is not actually part of our existence. We never experience being dead. Death is the end of our existence, so it cannot be a part of it. Heidegger says that death is always a “possibility,” never an “actuality.” We never *actually* experience death and are only aware of it as a constant *possibility* hanging over us. So how can death be an existential structure if it is not actually part of our existence?

For Heidegger, it is not so much about our actual death, but the way the possibility of death determines how we live. What we do, think, consider important or meaningful, what motivates us, how we act around other people, the way we organise our worlds, our entire existence is shaped, structured by the fact that our lives are finite. Things wouldn't mean what they mean to us if we could keep experiencing them forever. This doesn't necessarily mean that we're always thinking about death, but even when we're not thinking about it, death is playing an integral role in the fabric of our being. We are always, as Heidegger puts it, in a state of "being-towards-death," and this is an existential structure. From the moment we begin to exist, we are hurtling towards our death, and this fact plays a part in everything we do.

Authentic and Inauthentic Being-Towards-Death

But does this mean everyone is being-towards-death in the same way, or that everyone takes up the same attitude towards death? Heidegger claims that there are two different ways we can be—"authentic" and "inauthentic." We can be-towards-death "authentically" or "inauthentically." (It's worth noticing that the word for "authenticity" in Heidegger's German is "eigentlichkeit," which contains the word "eigen," meaning "own," so the original German has connotations of "owning" that the English translation does not, which is important for Heidegger's use of the term.) Heidegger argues that, by default, we are inauthentic, and we spend most of our time this way. Nobody is authentic all the time. Instead, we only achieve it in certain situations, with the right attitude.

Authenticity is connected importantly with Heidegger's analysis of other people. Being among others, being part of a social community, plays an obviously important role in our lives. It teaches us how to be a person, how to act around people, what social norms are, how to live within them, and generally what is important about being human. Other people play a crucial role in the formation of our identity. In fact, Heidegger claims that we owe our identity to other

people. He argues that what makes us who we are as individuals is not those unique features that distinguish us from everybody else, but the fact that *we do not distinguish ourselves* from other people. We know who we are by knowing that we belong to a social community, that we are human, like everybody else. This commonality with others, rather than what distinguishes us from them, is the basis for our individual identities.

But this is not the whole story, for Heidegger. Because other people play this important role in shaping our identities, it's easy to go unthinkingly along with what everyone else does and thinks. Rather than shouldering the heavy burden of deciding for ourselves who we want to be, we can unknowingly become dominated by the mood, opinions, and norms of our culture. Not only does this highlight the difference between authenticity and inauthenticity, it's also where Heidegger's idea of the "they" comes in. When we are inauthentic, we just go along with what "they," other people in general, do. Not this person or that one, this group or another, but the neutral, indeterminate mass—*they*—that exerts this profound influence on your life because you are a social creature. Being inauthentic means succumbing to the inconspicuous power, the herd mentality of the "they," without properly taking responsibility for your existence, your thoughts, opinions, actions and choices. One of Heidegger's most famous passages says that when we are inauthentic "we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge," and "we find shocking what *they* find shocking" (*Being and Time*, p. 164). While it is impossible to escape fully from *their* influence, being authentic involves not letting your life be completely determined by it, forging your own path within the social space and taking responsibility for your identity, your choices, your being. To be authentic is to *own* your life, while to be inauthentic is to have your life owned by *them*.

Heidegger suggests that being truly authentic is difficult, and therefore not something we can do all the time. If you were totally rebellious against the "they" concerning every little

thing, you would surely go insane. But authenticity is a state of being you can achieve with the right attitude in the right situations. So, being authentic requires confronting your mortality. You must understand life for what it is and live accordingly, with no illusions about the fact that your life is finite. Otherwise, you would not understand life on its own terms. While we all at some point realize that we will die, coming to terms with this fact is a different thing altogether. Not everyone manages this, which shows that it is one of the most difficult things about being human. To fail to appreciate, to think about or accept your mortality fully, would be “inauthentic being-towards-death,” in Heidegger’s terms. You would still be being-towards-death, but without confronting this fact adequately, simply going along with life without really considering the significance of your finitude. One troublesome aspect of Heidegger’s thoughts on this is that he *insists* that being inauthentic is not “worse” than being authentic. His intention is simply to describe the structure of our existence and the possibilities that lie within it. But we do not have to follow him on this. Would it not be better to be authentic, at least some of the time, when it matters?

Learning to accept your mortality is a difficult task, but one everyone must face up to. It comes to us all eventually: “life’ll kill ya,” indeed. For Heidegger, authentic being-towards-death involves consciously taking ownership of your life, its direction, and meaning, which cannot be achieved without a serious reckoning with your mortality, which is also your own. No one can die for you. It’s not that you must develop a morbid obsession with death that you’re always thinking about, but once you come to terms with your death, it affects everything about how you live your life. To think about death is to think about your existence, as a whole. An encounter with your death, unpleasant as it may be, is the only way to make complete sense of your life, and you cannot live authentically without it. What can we learn about Warren Zevon’s case from all of this? What questions can we use Heidegger’s philosophy to ask about it?

Warren Zevon's Authentic Being-Towards-Death

Whatever you think the right thing to do in his situation would have been, you cannot accuse Zevon of failing to take responsibility for his life for the time he had left. He knew what he wanted to do, had a vision about how he wanted to do it, and used everything at his disposal to get it done on his own terms. His final album was probably as close to a perfect final Zevon album as was possible, one that contained something of every musical side of him that we'd seen throughout his career and represented a powerful attempt to make sense artistically of his life and death. His actions in the run-up to his death show a man who was (in his own way) putting his affairs in order, forcefully having a say in how he would be perceived and remembered. This seems to me to be a direct manifestation of what Heidegger called "authentic being-towards-death," because Zevon properly took hold of his life and choices in light of his impending death and lived his remaining life on his own terms. Zevon's case was quite a drastic one, given how little time he was given to live after his diagnosis. Not every case of authentic being-towards-death has to be this drastic, but it is plausible that it can arise from the right contexts, especially those which starkly confront a person with their mortality.

An important question you might have here is, was Zevon right to do what he did? Perhaps the "right" thing to do in this situation would not be the same for everyone, because what is authentic or inauthentic also would vary from person to person. People have very different lives, emerge from very different social contexts, have different political views, different senses of what is good, bad, right, or wrong, so "authentic" cannot mean the same thing for everyone. What counts as authentic is something you must figure out for yourself, on your own, for your own reasons.

We are not all underrated artists who want to make a final statement. Some people, in Zevon's situation, would probably snatch the treatment he rejected with both hands, eager to prolong their lives as much as possible, to secure every possible extra day on this earth to spend with loved ones, doing the things they love. If this comes at the cost of being debilitated and living at a reduced capacity, so be it. They would want to live, for as long as possible, whatever that meant. For a certain type of person, with a certain worldview and type of life, could this not be just as authentic as what Zevon did? For such a person, this could be an authentic vision of owning the time that remained to them. It could be, and no doubt has been, for many people. How you authentically face up to your death is a solitary matter that requires you to make your own decisions about. But precisely because it is so solitary and because people are so different, authenticity is clearly not going to manifest itself in the same way for everyone.

But if what Zevon did was authentic, for him, why was he so adamant that it wasn't heroic? Presumably, he thought it was the right, perhaps the authentic, thing to do, so why wouldn't we view his manner of confronting death as somewhat heroic? Truly, this is a hard question to answer, and I have not been able to find anything else that Warren said about this point. If it has anything to do with authenticity, perhaps it is because it is not necessarily heroic to be authentic, but part and parcel of the task of being human. It's your job to be a functioning person and to figure out for yourself the direction you want to take your life in, and who you want to be. It's your job to own your life and your choices, and not have them be determined by others. No one gets a medal for that. Zevon said "it's a sin not to want to live," so presumably it would be unheroic to give up and refuse treatment for that reason. His reason for refusing treatment was different because he wanted to live on his own terms. But it's not heroic to want to live either – you're supposed to.

Warren Zevon was one of the great songwriters of death, from the beginning to the very end, and his conduct in the face of death presents an interesting case for philosophers to

contemplate from an existential point of view. I hope to have shown this by referring to Heidegger's idea of "authentic being-towards-death," which I have argued Zevon, when confronted with his mortality, personified in his behaviour and conveyed in his art. His music consistently took death as a theme, but *The Wind* is one of the great musical attempts to make sense of the fact of impending death, while offering a final artistic statement. But it is also, in many ways, a classic Warren Zevon album that contains everything we've come to know and love about his music. There are probably many ways that authentic being-towards-death can be manifested from person to person, but, faced with his own death, Zevon immediately went public with his illness, assumed responsibility for his public perception and legacy, and recorded one last album. If this can't be described in terms of heroism, perhaps it can be described in terms in Heidegger's sense of authenticity.