

# Faith & Reason Look at Death



Readings at the University of  
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UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE LIBRARIES  
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**John Bluth Gill**  
**Massimo Pigliucci**



University of Tennessee Libraries  
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At Death's Door—  
What I Learned at the Far Edge of Life  
John Bluth Gill

On Death—Thoughts of an Optimistic Atheist  
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## John Bluth Gill



Rev. John Bluth Gill has been the minister at Church of the Savior, UCC, in Knoxville, since 1993. He also serves as the Regional Board Chair of the National Conference for Community and Justice and is extensively involved in local peace and justice efforts. His writing includes poetry, prayers, liturgical pieces, articles and sermons. Before entering the ministry, John Gill was an environmental biologist and educator. Rev. Gill holds a Bachelor of Science from Juniata College and a Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School.

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## At Death's Door— What I Learned at the Far Edge of Life

John Bluth Gill

*I want to thank Pamela Schoenewaldt, the UT Libraries' Writer in Residence, for including writers of all kinds and all levels of experience in this series. I am both pleased and humbled to represent a certain group of writers who often go unnoticed—the many ministers and pastors who write, day in and day out, week in and week out, for their congregations. (This, of course, excludes those who use [desperatepreachers.com](http://desperatepreachers.com) and other similar websites.)*

*Now, I know some of you “real” writers will cringe at the notion of including the lowly pastor in your ranks, but it's true. If I am not writing every single day, I am thinking about something I am writing. In addition to sermons, I write brief articles, prayers, poems, liturgical pieces, occasional lectures, words of celebration for weddings, and words of remembrance for funerals.*

*My weekly sermons, or “meditations” as I prefer to call them, include elements of biography, autobiography, philosophy, theology, science, dramatic dialogue, pure fantasy and more. Sometimes they are even biblical! While I never recall dangling my congregation on a spider's thread over the pits of hell, I certainly try to lead them to places where the waters of the Spirit always run deep and still.*

*Sometimes I succeed. Out of the 40 or 50 sermons I write every year, I hope to come up with at least six that are excellent—the kind that make the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I write. I also give myself permission to produce six really bad*





## Introduction

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the  
hard ground.

So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:

Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.

Crowned with lilies and laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

From "Dirge Without Music"  
by Edna St. Vincent Millay<sup>1</sup>

Let's get one thing straight at the outset. There is nothing good about death. Generally speaking, it is an ugly, nasty and painful process. The only other life process that comes close to it in difficulty is birth. I'm not saying that death is evil in some deep ontological sense. After all, as so many people are fond of saying today, it is just another part of life. It is natural. Indeed! But so are lice, the flu and food poisoning, and I don't approve of any of them either.

Natural? Of course it is. Each one of us will one day lie with a breathless and gaping mouth. But that doesn't make it all right with me. I have seen too many beautiful people go into that dark tunnel of loss to call it good—fine people, better than me by a long shot, reduced to hollow shells by a process of suffering that would break down the most hardened CIA operative.

It's not the exit that kills you. It's not the last breath from the gaping hole that used to be a mouth that makes you ask how this could be a natural part of any world called good. All too often, that closing moment *IS* good, but only as an end to the





listened to the cries and offered the sound of my voice even when it appeared to accomplish nothing. I held trembling hands and kissed foreheads creased with confusion and pain.

Needless to say, it was tremendously draining. Once in a while, a surprising word or smile would spring from the lips of one of the residents, but it was rare. To be honest, I often found reasons not to go at all, or retreated to the second area of my responsibility, another floor called Ramage 2.

Ramage was a skilled nursing unit where residents were also in a bad way physically, but more lucid and capable of communication. I can still see many of them in their chairs and beds: Mildred, who always told me to go away, Barbara who made passes at me, and Madge, a round-faced and curly-haired immigrant from Scotland. In her 60s, Madge was the youngest person on the floor. Bedridden by MS, she had been abandoned by her husband. By the time I got to Ramage, she was nearly paralyzed by the disease and had to talk between short gasps for breath. Nevertheless, she was the widely recognized floor general. Social events could not begin or proceed without her blessing. "Where's Madge?" the women always asked, and nothing began until her bed was rolled into place where she could see and comment upon whatever was going on.

Madge also served as the primary practical and theological trainer for each new student chaplain who appeared on the floor. I will never forget the twinkle in her eyes (or was it a fire?) that communicated both affection and disdain for me at the very same time. Like everyone else who lived or worked on Ramage, it did not take me long to learn to defer to her in group settings. Somehow, perhaps through mere stubbornness, she transcended the circumstances of her body and lived defiantly in the presence of a death that was everyday consuming her life a little bit more.

But she was the exception. Death held sway on Ramage and everybody knew it. Nearly every month, at least one person died or moved on to another floor where critical care was offered. Few who took that short journey ever returned. Often, I learned, you could sense death coming to someone in the form of a weakening of the

will or a visible slackening of the jaw. At other times, you were not aware of it until the day you arrived on the floor to find an empty bed.

## **Mirabel Kelt**

Eventually, I found refuge in the room of Mirabel Kelt, one of the least communicative of all the residents on the floor. Mirabel was 98 years old. She had totally white hair, a solid New England kind of face with a sharp nose, and thick glasses that made her liquid eyes look unnaturally large. Mirabel never seemed to be out of bed. When the nurses insisted that she get up, the process of moving her to a chair looked, and sounded, quite painful. Most of the time, I found her lying in bed, a soft, silent lump of human flesh hidden under the sheets and blankets.

In fact, even if Mirabel happened to be awake when I stopped by, she would say, “Oh, hello,” and that was about it. Questions about her health or feelings yielded only curt answers like, “Oh, I’m fine...Kind of tired...” and then silence.

I learned to like the silence. In a way, it was a relief to find a place where I could just be, without trying to figure out what someone was saying to me. On days when I was especially tired, I often found my way to Mirabel’s room for a rest.

“Oh, hello,” she said each time.

“Mind if I sit here awhile?” I asked.”

“Why should I mind?” she responded. So I sat in the blessed quiet until I was ready to go again. I had a feeling this was not the kind of ministry of presence that Ray had in mind, but I didn’t care. It kept me sane.

After one particularly hard day of visiting on the floor, I retreated to Mirabel’s room as the sun was setting beyond the hills outside her window. As usual, she was silent, barely even acknowledging my presence. But, as the room slowly filled with evening light, I heard a sound, which I suddenly recognized as a voice, strong and firm, rising from the old, broken body in the bed.



“What?” she asked.

“So many of your loved ones are gone now. It must be hard to be so alone.”

I guess I was trying to relate to her suffering like a good chaplain. Instead, her eyes flashed. “Oh, I am not alone,” she said, looking right at me with wide-open eyes. “They are all here...right now...gathered around my bed.”

A shiver ran through me. “Oh no, I’m *never* alone,” Mirabel continued, still looking at me. Then she chuckled and spoke in a lower tone. “Sometimes I talk to them. The nurses think I’m crazy, but I don’t care. I know they are here. I can feel their love.”

I had an impulse to look over my shoulder. Suddenly, the room seemed crowded with people encircling Mirabel’s bed, people from the old stories and others I knew nothing about, all around her.

Then it hit me. “I too am one of them.” Through our friendship, I had stepped into the circle of love that began on the day she was born and which surrounded her even now. I stood shoulder to shoulder with people I didn’t know, people I could not know, but with whom I was connected across time and space by the love we shared for Mirabel.

Almost immediately, in that same moment, I also understood deep in my bones, that there was a circle of love around me, and that Mirabel herself stood in it. It struck me like a thunderbolt: one day, I will be in the bed and she will be one of many gathered around me. I will speak to her. The nurses will think I’m crazy, but it won’t really matter. At that point in my crumbling existence, only love will matter. Love is the only thing that ever really matters.

Tears filled my eyes. Mirabel looked at me. I had been quiet for a while. “Are you okay?” she said.

“Yes, Mirabel, I’m okay,” I said. And I meant it.

The last time I went to see Mirabel Kelt, I knew it would be our final visit together. I was going away to live in Ecuador for two years or more. Given her condition, there was little chance that Mirabel would live that long. I stood by her bed and choked out the news.

Then I couldn't speak any more, not one word. Tears poured down my face. Maybe it was because of all the funerals I had missed, all those goodbyes that were left unsaid. I don't know. But I couldn't stop crying. Mirabel took my hand and talked for both of us. "Well, I'm so thankful for all your visits," she said. "It really has meant a lot to me." I couldn't say a word. "You are going to be a good minister. You have the gift," she said, handing me yet another gift with her words.

I stood there for a while, holding her hand, reluctant to go. She spoke quietly about a variety of things: how exciting my travels would be, how much I was going to learn, including Spanish, of course. "That will be wonderful," she said.

My tears flowed and flowed, but with far more joy and gratitude than despair. Mirabel had taught me so much about death and the journey of life. In her broken body I found a beautiful soul and a kindred spirit. In her friendship I discovered the true nature of ministry. Standing with her near the end of her life, I began to understand that I am part of a circle of love and life that is always beginning anew.

A comfortable silence finally fell between us.

"Good-bye, Mirabel," I said at last, and leaned far over the railing to kiss her forehead.

She smiled at me. "*Vaya con Dios,*" said the old Spanish teacher. "And God will go with you."

## Conclusion

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels," wrote the Apostle Paul. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed everyday."





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## On Death— Thoughts of an Optimistic Atheist

Massimo Pigliucci

When I was fifteen, I was having serious doubts about the existence of a supernatural entity benevolently looking over me, and—perhaps even more disturbingly—about the possibility of an afterlife in which I would again see my friends and relatives and exist happily ever after. It was at that point that I started reading the writings of Bertrand Russell,<sup>1,2</sup> one of the most controversial philosophers and political activists of the Twentieth century. Those writings made a lasting impression on me, especially these words:

I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.

It took me more than twenty years to really understand what Russell meant, and I'd like to share it with you, with the optimistic hope of perhaps providing other people with somewhat of a shortcut through their philosophical and emotional journey.

*“I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.”* People often refer to death as a mystery, the



incurable optimist about the future of humanity (despite all the evidence to the contrary), and a firm believer in the human spirit (by which I mean the resilience, ingenuity, and love for each other that our species can display in its best moments).

Where does this love of life come from? Biologically, from our genes: simply put, organisms that did not have a zest for life perished earlier than others, and probably left fewer progeny. Which means that only the optimists are left standing. From a human perspective, love for life comes from the knowledge of other people's love for us, from the ability to make our way through the world, from the chance to decide what is meaningful for us.

It is a precious gift from nature, and one that is unfortunately increasingly rare in some parts of the world. I cannot imagine the desperation that leads a young Palestinian to volunteer as a suicide bomber. The combination of not seeing a future for one's own family, and the religion-instilled illusion of an eternal reward in the afterlife, result in a deadly cocktail that after September 11, 2001 has become an all-too-familiar feature of our own existence.

Love for life is not something that we can take for granted. We have to create the conditions for it, for ourselves as well as for other people. This means that it is not with coercion or weapons that we will defeat our enemies, here or abroad. It is by taking away the reasons for other people to despise life to the point of taking the lives of their fellow human beings, of being willing to give up their own life at the push of a button. The war against crime is a perpetual failure, and so is the war against terror. We will overcome crime and terror only by realizing that people don't go around stealing and killing if they have something to live for, if they can provide food, education, and a future to their children—if, in other words, we make it possible for them as well as for us to love life.

*"But I scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation."*  
Actually, here I disagree with Russell: I really do not like the prospect of annihilation (though I'm surely not spending most of my time shivering with terror while thinking about it). As another of my favorite philosophers, Woody Allen, said, "I don't want to be







Death is a serious issue, even though it is not mysterious. In the last two years I have seen its specter two times, when both of my parents were diagnosed with cancer and both had to struggle to survive and add a few more years to my pleasure of seeing them in this world. I still am not completely over the death of two of my grandparents, with whom I grew up. I regularly see them in my dreams, talk to them, and wish very hard that they could still be with me. But I know they won't, and what I need to do is to take care of those that love me now and are still around to see that I love them.

When it comes to death, it is hard to walk the rope between the rational and the emotional, the scientific and the philosophical, to understand how death can be faced without the belief in a god or in an afterlife, to inquire into how human dignity and moral strength can be maintained even in a universe that doesn't care about us, and it is nevertheless our only home. Still, it is our choice and privilege to make that home as pleasant for us and for our fellow creatures as we possibly can. There is much to be done, and Moretti's meter is getting shorter every day.

