

# The Weekend Essay

## 'May your own end be decades away, may you people the Earth with your courteous offspring, and may you feast and laugh and voyage and sing'



Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38009500)

*I used to think that death was the frame of our brief lives, but now I see it as the canvass on which each of us is painted. Talk about it. Let it help you put your quotidian worries and squabbles into perspective. And accept it*

**By Simon Boas**

IN February I wrote about my terminal prognosis, and how there were several reasons not to be too gloomy about it.

Astonishingly, it ended up reaching many more people than usually read the Jersey Evening Post.

It has brought me huge pleasure to know my words have resonated with so many people in so many countries, and for quite a while I even managed to write back to all those who contacted me directly.

Several suggested that I should write something longer, and that became my intention. I wanted to expand on some of the points I made – about gratitude and perspective, about the unlikely and beauty of life, about kindness, and about the inherent fineness of all the creatures (ourselves especially) who ride this merry-go-round together.

I wanted to tell a few stories against myself, just so that nobody was in any doubt about the clayiness of my feet. And, most of all, I wanted to try to explain this apparent paradox: that it is possible to leave life with a sense of equanimity not because one is fed up with it, but because one loves it so much.

Unfortunately, it seems I can't do this. I'd hoped that some last-ditch immunotherapy might buy a little extra time, but my cancer hasn't co-operated.

Instead of shrivelling like a vampire in sunlight it appears to have acquired some kind of horse, and has been galloping all over my body sowing new tumours. Liver, spine, pelvis, sternum, various soft tissues, more lung; not quite AA Gill's "Full English" but certainly the ingredients of a cheap hotdog.

I've been in hospital with various tedious complications, and although there may be one last experimental drug they can try, it seems I will be joining the choir invisible even sooner than I'd thought.

So, this is a last missive, in which I want to try to set out some final thoughts.

First of all, though, I'd like to thank the many thousands of people who've commented on my articles so kindly or written to me so profoundly.

I've been so buoyed by your love and support, and it just confirms my strongly held



Simon with his wife, Aurelie, and their dog, Pippin. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38010007)



Sitting for an artist friend in Paris

view that people are fundamentally good. To take the time to reach out with compassion to a complete stranger – opening your heart, suggesting things that might help me physically or spiritually, sharing your own thoughts and experiences – this is a truly selfless act. I'm just sorry to say that from now I probably won't be able to reply, but your words have brought me great joy.

So instead of a book called "A Beginner's Guide to Dying" (stupid title, really; "Cheer up, you buggers" might have been better), I'll sign off with a few final thoughts.

Apologies that summarised and stuck together like this they come across as a bit trite, but they join my February sentiments in representing much of what has helped me to feel so peaceful and contented.

First: Please don't fret too much about the state of the world. Nature will recover from the indignities we've chucked at it, and humans have kindness and love at their very core.

Even those who do terrible things were themselves once innocent children, and have been hurt by something they didn't choose. Evil is not a noun, it is an adjective. We should revel in the sheer good fortune of our being here at all, in our pidd beauty, and in our extraordinary ingenuity.

To steal a line from a recent Reith lecture, we are a species that has created both the Large Hadron Collider and the Eurovision Song Contest! We have so much to appreciate, so many absurdities to laugh about, and so much in common.

Second, every single person has made a huge difference to the world. You don't have to have been a philanthropist or a politician or a captain of industry. George Eliot captured it beautifully in Middlemarch: "Her full nature ... spent itself in channels which had no great name on the Earth. But the effect of her being ... was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

All our tombs will be unvisited in a few short spins of the rock around the star, but the smile you gave the check-out lady might still be rippling forward. Most films about time travel revolve around people inadvertently altering the present by changing one tiny thing in the past, but project that forward: you might radically change the future by changing one tiny thing in the present.

Whenever I hear something like "the only high I need I get from exercise" I always think "you should get out a bit more". But in truth there is a free high available to all of us, perfectly legal and almost instantaneous.

Make smiling eye contact with strangers – particularly if they look miserable or haughty or thuggish. Compliment and thank people. Say kind things about them behind their backs.

Play a game the next time someone annoys you in traffic, or says something



Taking part in mine clearance training in north Macedonia with Ukrainian civilians during a JOA trip



Visiting the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan in 2016. Simon can be seen talking to Oxfam representatives. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38009997)



Simon and then Chief Minister Ian Gorst visiting a classroom in the Zaatari refugee camp. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38009995)



Following the JOA's trip to Jordan in 2016, Simon would be appointed director of the organisation. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38010005)

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uncharitable, by imagining the ways in which they've had a terrible day, or the awful news they might just have received. Strike up conversations. I've enjoyed many different highs in my sometimes-rackety life, and this is the only one with no downside. Exercise included!

Finally, please try not to fear death so much. We hide and run from it; we follow joyless diets, or subscribe to transactional belief systems, or try to drown it out with pleasures and purchases. We change the subject. But without death we are not human.

I used to think that death was the frame of our brief lives, but now I see it as the canvass on which each of us is painted.

Talk about it. Let it help you put your quotidian worries and squabbles into perspective. And accept it. Meditation and (with a guide) psilocybin can help.

I happen to think now that death is probably not the end of our truest selves, but it doesn't really matter if I'm wrong about that. We have always been parts of a bigger whole – a pulse in the eternal mind, no less – and consciously or not, as atoms or as angels, we will return to it.

May your own end be decades away, may you people the Earth with your courteous offspring, and may you feast and laugh and voyage and sing!

I wish you every joy in all of it. And for those that are interested, once you've



Visiting an English lesson at a public school for boys in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, during a JOA trip in 2017. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38010013)



Simon being led around an informal settlement camp in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38009126)



Simon speaking to Dr Ali Elzein in Nabaa, Beirut. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38009123)



Simon at a meeting at Unicef's headquarters in Beirut. Picture: DAVID FERGUSON (38010009)

sorted the immigration formalities with St Peter or Charon, I hope to be waiting with a Scrabble board and a bottle of Muscadet.

*Simon*

● Oh, and PS: My filthy poem about cyclists is now illustrated and hidden somewhere on Amazon. Please don't be offended if you manage to find it (I used to cycle too!), and please don't read it if you are put off by the most robust of all Anglo-Saxon swear words... x