Facing Sudden Death

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Introduction: Questions

The Titanic sank at 2:20 am on the morning of April 15 in 1912. About 650 people escaped in lifeboats, but about 1500 died in the icy waters of the north Atlantic. Walter Lord tells the story vividly in his book A Night to Remember. He talked with many of the survivors and pieced together a minute-by-minute account. He ends the book by asking several questions. For example, exactly how many people died? Different official inquiries after the tragedy arrived at different numbers. What did various people say? Reports from survivors vary.

Actually one can think of many other questions to ask besides Lord’s. What were people thinking and feeling as the ship went down? What was it like to be plunged into 28-degree water? (The salt prevented the water from freezing at 32 degrees.) What was it like to know that the chances of being rescued were virtually nonexistent? What would I do in that situation? We will never be certain of the answers to any of these questions. We can only speculate based on the evidence we have.

The sinking of the Titanic is eerily reminiscent of another horrifying event, namely, the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Both events were utterly shocking, almost inconceivable. Both changed many people’s preconceptions – about invincible technology in 1912, and about the invincible United States in 2001. In both cases many people were trapped and faced almost certain death. In both cases some people behaved heroically, and others behaved shamefully.

Books about 9/11 also ask questions whose answers we can only speculate about. Richard Bernstein begins his book Out of the Blue: The Story of September 11, 2001 from Jihad to Ground Zero by noting that many people (at least 60) jumped or fell from the highest floors of the Twin Towers after they were hit by airplanes. He wonders what would drive someone to such a terrifying act. And what would it be like to fall a hundred stories in about nine seconds, and hit the plaza at about 150 miles per hour? He also asks what drove the terrorists to kill themselves in a suicidal attack, or to plan the mass murder of thousands of innocent strangers.

Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn (in 102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive in the Twin Towers) focus on the survivors and ask how they managed to get out. Over 12,000 people escaped from the World Trade Center after the planes hit. (2,749 people died, including 412 rescue workers who came to help.) They also ask questions about the design of the WTC, safety procedures, and rescue operations, all of which contributed to unnecessary deaths, in their view.
Lord asks similar questions about the *Titanic*, the most infamous being "Why were there enough lifeboats for only about half the people on the ship?"

Clearly both these tragedies were large-scale, complex events that can be examined from many different angles and raise many questions. In this essay I want to limit the scope to two difficult questions. First, how did people on the *Titanic* respond to the prospect of imminent death? When passengers and crew members finally realized that the ship was definitely sinking, and that they would not be in a lifeboat but in the water, and therefore would drown, how did they respond? Based on Lord's detailed account, we can see five different ways of handling that terrible situation.

The second question is more difficult to answer. How *should* one respond to the prospect of sudden death? We can all wonder what we would do or think or feel if we were on the tilting deck of the *Titanic*, and we can never know for sure until (God forbid) we are actually there. But we can also wonder what the best response would be. Is one kind of response better than another? Could anything help? It's another question that cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, but some writers have interesting suggestions. One is Michel de Montaigne, the great French essayist, and we will look at his reflections on the question.

**How did people respond?**

*Stunned, overwhelmed, paralyzed*

One of the many surprising, ironic facts about the *Titanic* is that the designer, Thomas Andrews, was on board when it sank. After it hit the iceberg Captain Smith naturally turned to Andrews for information about how badly the ship was damaged. And it was Andrews who told him that "it was a mathematical certainty" that the ship would sink, probably in about two hours.

One of the surviving crewmen said that he saw Andrews in the smoking room at 2:10, shortly before the end. "His arms were folded over his chest; his look was stunned; all his drive and energy were gone" (71). His lifebelt was thrown on a table. When the crewman asked if Andrews wasn't going to try to escape, "there was no answer, not even a trace that he heard."

Andrews represents one kind of response to the crisis. He was overwhelmed, too stunned to act, maybe incapable of comprehending the event or of thinking clearly. No doubt many people reacted the same way. Stewardess Annie Robinson saw the ship's carpenter and said "he looked bewildered, distracted, wildly upset" (38). Elsewhere, as the crew tried to help passengers into lifeboats, "[a] hysterical woman thrashed about helplessly" (49).

People facing sudden death could feel various powerful emotions, but probably one would be fear. And great fear can be paralyzing. Andrews may have been immobilized by a tremendous sense of failure. Or depression, or even guilt. It was his design, his ship. But people can be overwhelmed
by confusion as well as by powerful emotions. Some people on the Titanic simply could not believe, literally, that the ship was sinking. When women and children were boarding the lifeboats, one remaining male passenger said he would help them return to the ship when it "steadied itself." When one of the radio operators told the other that he should send out an SOS signal because he may never have another chance to do it, the other operator "laughed at the joke" (42). The idea that the Titanic would sink and that the operators would die was so outrageous that it seemed comical. And yet they were sending pleas for help. They knew, on some level, that the ship was going down. This suggests that comprehending the enormity and finality of the situation can be partial, fitful, even contradictory. The mind can be at war with itself, or fundamental, unquestionable convictions at war with plain facts. Those cognitive conflicts can be overwhelming.

I know this feeling myself. On 9/11 at 10:30 in the morning I was standing in LaGuardia Place watching the World Trade Center burn. Thirty minutes earlier in the LSP offices I had heard on the radio that the South Tower had fallen, and I could hardly believe it. Some colleagues and I went outside to see the North Tower, which was easy to see from 3rd Street. Suddenly there was a series of booms; smoke and debris flew out of the top of the tower, and it collapsed on itself like an accordion, accelerating as it went down. The whole event took maybe four or five seconds. It sent up huge clouds of gray dust. I was literally stunned, as were my friends, almost speechless. The primary feeling during those moments was not fear, or sorrow, or anger, but disorientation. I couldn't understand what my eyes were seeing. It made no sense, like an Escher drawing, but intensified by all the other powerful emotions. The disorientation made any sort of response difficult. It was a very strange feeling, which I had never felt before and haven't felt since. I imagine people on the Titanic felt similar, but more overwhelming, kinds of confusion.

**Denial**

Other people on the Titanic responded to the threat of sudden death in a different way. They simply refused to believe that it could happen at all. They were certain that they would continue to live. Of course their bodies would drown, but they regarded this as merely a transition from one way of life to another way of life. For example, the Reverend Robert J. Bateman said to his sister-in-law, "If I don't meet you again in this world, I will in the next" (62). One passenger reported that, about an hour after the crash, he saw a large number of people gathered in the Third Class dining room holding rosaries and praying together (54). They may have been hoping for a miracle. But many probably believed that, if no miracle occurred, they would continue to live in another place, and they wanted to prepare themselves for the transition.
This second response is in some ways similar to the first. In both cases people are confronted with undeniable facts which, however, they cannot accept. In the first case, the conflict is paralyzing. In the second case, people say something like, "Yes, I know my body will be destroyed, but my soul will survive." They reinterpret the facts, or imagine additional "facts," that allow them to hold on to their belief that they will continue to live.

Struggle to survive

The third kind of response one can see on the Titanic was very different from either overwhelming confusion or confident denial. It was an energetic struggle to survive at all costs. The established policy in 1912 was that only women and children were supposed to be allowed into the lifeboats, although there were some exceptions. But a number of men attempted to get into the boats despite the crew's attempts to keep them out. Lord says:

Another wave of men rushed the boat. Seaman Scarrott beat them back with the tiller. This time Lowe pulled his gun and shouted, "If anyone else tries that, this is what he'll get!" He fired three times along the side of the ship. (60)

Other desperate men tried a different tack. A coal stoker without a lifejacket attempted to steal the radio operator's lifejacket, while he was wearing it. But the stoker was beaten senseless by others (73).

After the ship sank, men in the water struggled to survive. According to Lord, Third Class passenger Olaus Abelseth felt a man's arm clam around his neck. Somehow he wriggled loose, sputtering "Let go!" But the man grabbed him again, and it took a vigorous kick to free himself for good. (90)

This illustrates the well-known fact that people who are drowning will grab and hold their rescuers in a blind panic, so that both people end up drowning.

A similar situation occurred on 9/11. Michael Sheehan was in the South Tower when he heard the explosion of the plane hitting the North Tower. He looked out the window and saw the sky filled with smoke and a "blizzard" of paper. As Dwyer and Flynn say, "That was enough for Sheehan" (22). He made a mad dash for the stairs and ran over a stock trader named George Nemeth. But "[t]hat Sheehan himself had accidentally knocked Nemeth clear off his feet, he did not have the faintest notion" (22). Later the two survivors described that moment, but Sheehan wasn't conscious of the collision. He was in a blind panic, trying to save his life.

One of the most poignant scenes in Lord's book occurs in the minutes just after the ship sank and the people in the lifeboats 300 yards away heard the others in the water calling for help. Lord says:
Individual voices were lost in a steady, overwhelming clamor. To Fireman George Kemish, tugging at his oar in Boat 9, it sounded like a hundred thousand fans at a British football cup final. To Jack Thayer . . . , it seemed like the high-pitched hum of locusts on a midsummer night in the woods back home in Pennsylvania. (92)

Several of the crewmen in charge of the boats wanted to row back to try to pick up some of the swimmers. None of the boats was filled to capacity. Most were about half or two thirds full. But the women protested.

"Appeal to the officer not to go back," a lady begged Steward Etches as he tugged at his oar. "Why should we lose all our lives in a useless attempt to save others from the ship?" (94)

They were afraid that crowds of swimmers would capsize the boat. Only one of the 18 boats went back; it picked up four people. The other boats drifted while the occupants listened "as the cries died away."

**A moral code**

The fourth kind of response to sudden death was the one most common among the crew and among many of the passengers. The crew had jobs to do. They had a set of rules to follow for evacuating the ship, and they carried out their duties without thinking too much about impending death. One officer shouted to sleeping crewmen: "Turn out, you fellows! You haven't half an hour to live. That is from Mr. Andrews. Keep it to yourselves and let no one know" (20). They were busy dampening fires in the boiler room, attending to passengers, preparing the lifeboats, and so on. At about 2 am, after all the boats were away, Captain Smith went around to different posts and delivered the same message. To the radio operators he said: "Men, you have done your full duty. You can do no more. Abandon your cabin. Now it's every man for himself" (68). At that point many of the crewmen jumped overboard, hoping to swim to the lifeboats.

The crew had a code of conduct that they believed in, and that dictated their behavior in a crisis. Loyalty to the code outweighed any tendency to panic, or to be paralyzed by fear, or to think only of personal survival. Many passengers had a similar code. Part of it was to help women and children first, even if that meant sacrificing oneself. When one passenger's mother said she would rather stay with him than get in the lifeboat, he replied: "Don't be foolish, Mother. You and Sister go in the boat – I'll look out for myself" (45). Dan Marvin said to his new bride "It's all right . . . .You go and I'll stay a while" (44).
The rule of women and children first required great courage from both the saved and the sacrificed, and that was an explicit part of the code. "Be brave; no matter what happens, be brave,' Dr. W.T. Minahan told Mrs. Minahan as he stepped back with the other men" (44).

One word that several passengers used to sum up the various aspects of their code of honor was "gentleman" (and presumably "lady" for the women). One woman begged her husband to come with her. "'No,' Mr. Douglas replied, 'I must be a gentleman'" (45). Being a gentleman meant protecting women and children, being brave, and doing one’s duty. The code perhaps included another element that is harder to describe. A gentleman not only does his duty bravely, but he does it with flair and confidence, in a debonair manner. As Lord says, passenger Benjamin Guggenheim exemplified the ideal.

Gone was the sweater that Steward Etches made him wear. Also his life belt. Instead he and his valet now stood resplendent in evening clothes. "We've dressed in our best," he explained, "and are prepared to go down like gentlemen" (62).

The passengers and crew who had a guiding code of honor probably learned it at an early age, probably from role models. They read about brave heroes, and may have been told stories about relatives who faced death. Does this response to sudden death show that humans are made up of culture and learned behavior, more than emotions or instincts? Possibly. Or perhaps our instinct is to learn to follow rules, imitate role models, and care about what others think of us.

**Staying together**

One other response deserves mention, although it is not of the same type as the four I have described. A number of women could have boarded the lifeboats, but chose to stay with their husbands on the sinking ship. In other words, when they had to choose between living without their loved ones, or facing sudden death with their husbands, they chose to accept death, but together. Mrs. Isidor Straus said to her husband: "We have been living together for many years. Where you go, I go" (46). Another young couple was apparently just married. The woman said: "We started together, and if need be, we'll finish together" (63). For some people facing sudden death is not the most difficult crisis. Facing the loss of a spouse or loved one is more difficult.

**How should one respond?**

One of the most common ways of dealing with tragedies like the sinking of the Titanic is to try to give the pain and suffering some meaning by drawing something good from it, for example, a
lesson, a warning, an understanding. Do the ways that people responded to sudden death teach us anything? Are some ways better than others? How should one respond in a situation like that?

We started with difficult questions, like "what did people say," and "what was it like," for which we can find only approximate, speculative answers. We do not have definite information. The present question is even more challenging, for several reasons. All of us have faced various problems and solved them, but no living person has died. We know how to find a job because we have found work before. We know how to patch up a relationship because we have done it before. Even if the relationship is new, we have faced similar situations and resolved them. But no one presently alive has died or done anything like it. It is a unique problem, and it's hard to see how previous experiences could help us. It's true that we have seen or read about others who died. The people on the Titanic are examples. But studying others' deaths is not the same as facing one's own death. When others die, I continue to live. But when I die, everything stops. I cease to exist. It's a different kind of problem, for which we have no precedents.

Other factors complicate the issue. One might say that the goal is to be able to accept death without being too depressed or upset. The ancient Stoic philosophers taught that death is inevitable, and therefore it makes no sense to worry about it or dread it. One should accept reality. Futilely raging against it accomplishes nothing and only makes things worse, they said. But this advice isn't directly relevant to the question of how one should face sudden death. It may be inevitable that everyone dies, but it is not inevitable that a person dies at 2:30 am on April 15. In other words, one can never be completely certain that one will die within a short time. Even the passengers on the Titanic hoped they could swim to the lifeboats and be saved, or hoped they could tread water until a rescue ship arrived. A person on a falling airliner thinks it is just barely possible that he will survive the crash. If a near miracle is always possible (or, for some people, if a real miracle is possible), then one never gets to the point of resignation and accepting death.

Thinking about one's own sudden death is not easy. Powerful emotions are involved. Fear of the unknown, fear of pain, fear of causing pain to others by leaving them, fear of total loss, that is, nonexistence. These emotions push and pull one's mind in different directions, cloud the understanding, and lead people to accept fantasies for reality without their realizing it. Not only emotions but the culture itself discourages people from thinking about death. It's morbid, people say, unhealthy, unnatural, offensive. Actually, it is probably twenty-first century America's determined avoidance of the topic of death that is unnatural. In the past and in other places, people thought about death more than most Americans do. But the social pressure here is inhibiting.

These are all considerations that make the question difficult to answer. There are others. But such considerations are preliminaries. Let's turn to the question itself and try to find an answer, even if it is difficult. A helpful place to start is Montaigne's essay with the intriguing title, "To
philosophize is to learn how to die." Montaigne credits Cicero with that statement, and Cicero was expressing the Stoic outlook. Philosophers try to learn how to live, but every life has an end, so philosophers necessarily try to learn how to die as well. And how do we do that? Montaigne says, first, that we must prepare ahead of time. Most people avoid thinking about death, but then, when it comes, "what storms of passion overwhelm them, what cries, what fury, what despair! Have you ever seen anything brought so low, anything so changed, so confused?" (23) Instead of avoiding death, we should think about it and prepare for it.

To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness; let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death. (24)

However, this seems extreme. Montaigne is probably right that we should prepare for death before it comes, but if a person thinks of death so much, she misses the joys of life. It's almost as if Montaigne were saying that the way to overcome the fear of death is to embrace it. Make it the center of one's life. It's almost as if he were recommending suicide. That would certainly eliminate the fear of death, but it's not a viable, i.e., livable, response to the problem. It's admitting defeat. Montaigne presents a similar point of view in another place.

Our religion has never had a surer foundation than contempt for life; rational argument (though not it alone) summons us to such contempt: for why should we fear to lose something, which, once lost, cannot be regretted? (30)

Here again Montaigne goes too far. Yes, if life is contemptible, then death is nothing to fear. But this is not rational argument. It's rationalization. Montaigne is like the fox in Aesop's fable who can't reach the grapes and so decides they are probably sour anyway. "If death is going to deprive me of life, then I will develop a contempt for life, so that I can cheat death of its victory." This is not rational or wise. In his attempt to avoid the burden of death, Montaigne would make life itself a burden, i.e., contemptible, and his life could last for decades. That "solution" is worse than the problem.

We should read Montaigne's essay critically. That is, we should not swallow it whole, nor reject it completely, but use our judgment. We can take the parts that are helpful and reject the parts that are unconvincing. His proposal that we should prepare for death before it comes is useful. If a person finds himself on the Titanic and has never thought about how to face death, that person will be at the mercy of circumstances, tossed about by conflicting emotions and ideas, like a leaf in the wind. He will not be making deliberate choices, but will be a pawn. Many people facing death say their greatest fear is the loss of autonomy and dignity. But pawns have no autonomy or dignity.

Montaigne offers another useful suggestion.
And the builder says . . . "My work remains unfinished; huge walls may fall down." We ought not to plan anything on so large a scale – at least not if we are to get all worked up if we cannot see it through to the end. (26-27)

Here Montaigne hints at a helpful idea without elaborating it, but perhaps we can unpack it. People like the builder live for the future. They have grand plans, large ambitions, and working toward these huge goals gives their lives excitement and zest. But Montaigne says making such large plans is a mistake because it is likely that people will die before they reach those high goals. If our lives are organized around climbing Mount Everest, or being the best tennis player in the world, or the richest person in town, and we face death before we reach our goal, we will feel that our life was wasted and a failure.

What should we do? One possible answer is that we should develop a contempt for life. No earthly goal is worth pursuing. So when death comes, it is a release. But we said that is too extreme. It is a surrender, not a solution. But Montaigne’s comment suggests a more moderate answer. He says we should not plan anything "on so large a scale," but he doesn’t say we should not make plans or have goals. We can have incremental goals, that is, goals that are matters of degree, not all or nothing. Instead of planning to climb Mount Everest, the highest mountain on earth, we can plan to climb all kinds of mountains, and enjoy the process. Instead of becoming the richest person in town, we can work toward having a steady income, or try to make more money next year than last year. If I devote my life to eliminating poverty entirely, I will die disappointed. But if I devote my life to helping particular individuals in need, I can be very successful.

Montaigne says we should prepare for death before it comes, and thinking about values is one way to prepare. We can value things that we can actually achieve, over and over, such as helping others, or learning, or climbing mountains. Other incremental goals are developing friendships, writing poems, and nurturing a family. Then if death confronts us suddenly, we can accept it, because we have already succeeded many times. We will have lived a rich life. It's true that death will rob us of a future, and we will not be able to do more things that we want to do. But it will not be a cause for despair or anguish, as it would be for the person who wanted to climb Mount Everest but never did. With incremental goals, we can take satisfaction in all the things we have already accomplished.

The opposite of incremental goals we can call final goals, or completed goals, like climbing Everest or playing to rave reviews in Carnegie Hall. A disadvantage of final goals is that one is unlikely to reach them, especially if one faces death suddenly before old age. But another disadvantage is that one might succeed. What then? If someone devotes her life to climbing Everest, and then she gets there, what will she do for the rest of her life? Climb Everest again blindfolded? Walking backwards? These are silly variations on her real goal, which she has
accomplished. After getting there, her life is essentially over. But with incremental goals, there is always more to do. Even fame is an incremental goal. One can always try to become more famous. A person who values fame could face death calmly, so long as she values the process of becoming famous, and keeps her achieved fame in perspective.

Organizing one’s life around incremental goals is one way to prepare for death. Helping others, learning new things, developing one’s talents, restoring the environment, are all things we can achieve in some degree, and if death comes, we can take satisfaction in what we have accomplished. If death hasn’t arrived yet, we can look forward to more fulfilling activity in the future.

What would people on the Titanic or in the WTC think of this suggestion? It’s possible they could say it is useless and irrelevant. The reason is that when faced with imminent death, they didn’t think of unfulfilled goals. Almost all (whom we know about) thought of being separated from loved ones. Jack Thayer recalled that as he stood on the deck waiting for the end, he "thought of his father and his mother, of his sisters and brother" (67). Kenneth Van Auken, who died in the WTC, left a message on his wife’s answering machine, which said:

"I love you. I’m in the World Trade Center, and the building was hit by something. I don’t know if I’m going to get out, but I love you very much. I hope I’ll see you later." (Bernstein 208)

Rick Rescorla, who was in charge of security for Morgan Stanley, and who also died in the WTC, reached his wife. He said: "Stop crying. I have to get my people out of here. If something happens to me, I want you to know that you made my life" (209).

People who knew they were uttering their last words wanted to say "I love you" to the person they loved. Perhaps they were simply engulfed in many powerful feelings and wanted to express the most important one. Maybe they thought (unconsciously) that affirming the bond would somehow preserve it. Or they wanted to help the loved ones they were leaving and they thought the expression of love would make their loss easier to bear. It seems that relationships were more important to people facing death than goals, incremental or otherwise.

But the idea of incremental goals applies to relationships as much as it does to careers or self-realization or other aspirations. Good relationships are created over time. A good relationship depends on the past and the future. It requires accumulating good memories and shared experiences, as well as plans and anticipations of more joys and successes in the future. So losing a loved one is very difficult because the future side of the relationship disappears. But if one thinks of a relationship as a process, or a cumulative achievement, like playing an instrument, or becoming a better dancer, or exploring more of the world, then even in the face of death one has much to feel good about. It is a mistake to think that the only thing that matters is what hasn’t happened yet.
Actually, the dying person will lose future possibilities with the loved one, and that’s hard. But the dying person will not exist; the loved one who survives may have a harder task, because he or she will live on, but without the partner. We saw above that several of the women on the Titanic chose to stay and die with their spouses rather than live on without them.

The person facing sudden death may feel that he or she is abandoning the loved ones, and imposing this harder task on them. That sense of guilt would make death even more terrifying. Can reimagining goals as incremental diminish that pain? Perhaps, at least indirectly. The key is communication with loved ones. We learned from Montaigne that the way to face death is to prepare for it ahead of time. We should prepare together with those we care about. Talk about the possibilities. And one way to prepare is to try to adopt goals and values that are incremental, matters of degree, or an ongoing process. But of course one will share these ideas with one’s family.

If a couple feels close and fulfilled because of all the things they have shared up to now, and the man can face death more calmly because of that past, then the same attitude can help the woman face her loss as well. The way to adjust relationships to sudden death is to understand how wonderful life together is, and has been, and to communicate this understanding to each other. The loss of a future does not cancel out the meaningful past. If one understands that, death will be easier, but one must help loved ones understand as well.

**Conclusion**

The sinking of the Titanic and the attack on the World Trade Center were terrible tragedies. The ancient Greeks knew about disasters, too, and wrote poems and plays and histories about them. According to Aristotle, an essential part of a tragic drama is the "recognition" – the point near the end where the hero learns something important about life, or himself or herself, or pride, or limitations. If there were no insight, the events on stage would not be a moving work of art but merely a jumble of pain and struggle. If we learned nothing from the Titanic or the WTC, they would be meaningless calamities, pointless suffering. But by studying how people faced sudden death, we can begin to think about that frightening, forbidden topic. The victims' deaths may help us gain some portion of wisdom about ultimate matters, as Sophocles' tragedies helped the ancient Greeks. We can do more. By asking how one ought to face sudden death, we can turn the tables on death, and gain some control over how we choose to end our lives, rather than being helpless victims.
Works Cited


