

afflicted by hope



Anthony Bourdain's suicide at age 61 has got me thinking.

I know suicide isn't the exclusive domain of any particular age group, but recently I've been troubled by the number of well-known and highly successful men who have ended their own lives in their 60s.

The reasons for Bourdain's suicide aren't yet known. He was working on a new series of his television show when he died. He was in a new relationship, was exercising, and had given up his two-pack-a-day cigarette habit. All good signs. And yet...

I won't speculate on a topic I know nothing about. But, as I said, Bourdain's is just one of a long list of self-inflicted deaths of successful 60-something men. In 2004, writer and actor Spalding Gray, 62, drowned himself after suffering from depression that resulted from the debilitating effects of a severe car accident some years earlier.

Legendary Chilean footballer Eduardo Bonvallet, 60, hanged himself in 2015 after struggling with stomach cancer for several years.

Likewise, Tony Scott, 68, the director of such films as *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop II*, and *Crimson Tide*, jumped from a bridge in LA in 2012 after fighting a lengthy battle with cancer.

And comedian and actor, Robin Williams, 63, while also previously struggling with depression, alcoholism and drug addiction, ended his own life in 2014 as a result of the effects of Lewy body dementia, which had been incorrectly diagnosed as Parkinson's Disease.

In all these cases, the decision to end their lives came as a result of feeling diminished by illness.

And then some men in their 60s choose to kill themselves because their careers have plateaued or their talent has begun to ebb away.

In 2005, journalist and writer Hunter S Thompson, 67, shot himself after feeling that the excitement of his early life and the energy he had for work wasn't being sustained into old age. He left his wife a suicide note that said that life was **"No More Fun"**.

Perhaps the most famous example of 60-something ennui is another American writer, Ernest Hemingway, who also died at age 61.

Battling depression, alcoholism, and bipolar mood disorder, the final straw for Hemingway occurred when he was asked to contribute a short piece to a book of collected essays for the inauguration of John F Kennedy. He couldn't find the words to even write a single sentence. Believing his life was "in ruins" he shot himself in his home in Idaho.

What is it with men who, having achieved great success in their chosen careers, find themselves shrinking in their 60s? In all the cases I've mentioned, the men in question felt that life was ebbing away, reducing in scope, diminishing due to illness or circumstance. Instead of growing steadily larger, their lives increasing in scope and effect, they found themselves contracting, "shrivelling" as Hemingway put it.

Do we peak in our 40s or 50s and then fade slowly into old age? If so, that's a dreadful thought for many men.

In his book ***Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning***, James Dittes makes the claim that *hope* is the defining trait of masculinity. Indeed, as the title of his books says, men are driven by hope, and even the most annoying aspects of our behaviour can be traced back to this single driver.

For example, Dittes suggests the refusal of many men to ask for directions when lost is not mere stubbornness, it's hope. Hope in a kind of personal intuition to get him out of his **'lostness'**.

Likewise, unhelpful traits such as aloofness, or fear of commitment, or emotional withholding are redeemed by Dittes as expressions of an accurate intuition that life is a distorted imitation (and promise) of the real thing and cannot command unreserved devotion.

Dittes isn't excusing the worst aspects of male behavior. He's simply suggesting they derive from a basically good source. He asks us to see the traits of zealousness and drivenness, and the driving of others, as the accepting of a call, however clumsily, to take part in moving life along toward

its intended destiny, instead of merely as performance anxiety or hunger for power.

Dittes writes, **“Men are expectant. Men live a life that feels chronically destined, ever on the verge – intended for something that is never quite arrived at, an unending not-yet, the perpetual pilgrimage of almost.”**

It is this affliction of being chronically destined that explains so much of what we usually identify as masculine behaviour. Dittes continues, **“Something beckons and promises a man but also eludes and teases – something hinted at in the life he knows but something unmistakably beyond, just beyond naming, ever beyond grasping, intimate and sure yet elusive – that life which is truly his and yet never his.”**

But James Dittes goes further, suggesting that all these traits that we often couch in negative terms are in fact expressions of the religious yearnings of all men:

“In religious terms, men are afflicted with hope. Hope means living a life that awaits, longingly, a fulfillment that must come from beyond the everyday domain, since it doesn’t seem to come from within that domain. Life is lived – and is meant to be lived – in a kind of in-betweenness. Life is not (yet) what it is meant to be; life is meant to be what it is not (yet). A man lives in the kingdom of God but also knows himself separated from that kingdom. Life is in between, on the way, not comfortably here, not yet there, destined.”

Why should we be surprised when men, driven by hope, reach their 60s and finding no way to fulfill their yearning, decide to end it all? In this respect, hope is indeed an affliction. Or more specifically, unrealized hope.

It is as if we have intuited the world as it is meant to be and we throw ourselves into building it. But when we do this in our own strength, and driven by self-interested motives, we necessarily fail. By our 60s there’s no escaping this fact. And as we see our strength fail or our talent recede, what point is there in having hope?

The only hope really is to learn how to live in the shadow of your own destiny. By that I mean we need to retain hope in a world-waiting-to-be-born, while coming to terms with our limited contribution to building such a world.

Hope might be a universal religious yearning, but it must be balanced by humility, a far more rare human trait. It takes humility to realise the world we’re working toward can only be achieved by a force greater than

ourselves. Living in the shadow of your own destiny is bearable when you know that it's God's work to fulfil that destiny, to usher in the kingdom in the return of his son, Jesus Christ.

We shouldn't condemn men for hoping for more, but as they age we need to teach them the power and beauty of humility. We need to help free them from endlessly rowing toward God and show them how to fall on their knees before that God.

When I'm in my 60s (and beyond) I know my strength will be abating, what then will I do with all the blazing hope that has been driving me all my life?

I trust I'll be humble enough to open myself to God's ongoing work in me – to embrace serenity, peace, gentleness, to see the work of my late years to be a blessing to others in their contribution to God's kingdom.

So, aging men do well to see that growth can still occur, but the growing we undertake in our later years is the humble, expansive work of mentoring, coaching, championing, and celebrating others.

As Henri Nouwen once said, "At a certain point in our lives the question is no longer: 'What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution?' Instead we should ask: 'How can I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing to others in my world?'"

At some point in life we should stop working on our agenda and begin to work on our obituary.

Rev Dr Mike Frost