

## THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

Often, in the unattended moments of life, we never know what sort of a legacy we will leave behind as an earthly testimony for passing through this life. Occasionally we have the opportunity to craft an unexpected and timeless memorial to our existence. The following is such a case.

In the summer of 1811, a then 18-year-old William Cullen Bryant, was heartsick and disappointed that the dream he had worked so hard to achieve to enter Yale University in the Autumn would never come to pass. His family was large and extremely poor, and he had just been informed by his father that the tuition was beyond their means. William was an avid outdoorsman so in an attempt to deal with his disappointment and bitterness, he took a long walk deep into the woods. He tried to rationalize his dilemma in terms of the inevitable end of life. Slowly he walked back to his house, and poetic words, concerning nature and the cycle of life, kept coming into his head: "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim thy growth, to be resolved to earth again. All that tread the globe is but a handful to the tribes that slumber in its bosom." That was fairly heavy and eloquent material for an 18-year-old so, upon reaching his home, he went to his room, closed the door and wrote a poem, "Thanatopsis", which was destined to become the third most popular poem in American literary history!

Obviously distraught over the loss of his dream, an almost death-like experience, Bryant chose to title his masterpiece from the Greek, Thanatos (death) and Opsi (view); so the poem literally means *A View of Death*. Called the first truly great poem produced in America; it has also been called "the world's most inspiring poem about death". Its principle theme is the communion of human existence and its destiny as it interacts with nature's natural cycle of order for all creation. It opens with these beautiful and profound lines:

*To him who in love of Nature holds,  
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks  
A various language; for his gayer hours,  
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile  
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides  
Into his darker musings, with a mild  
And healing sympathy, that steals away  
Their sharpness, ere he is aware.*

While William Cullen Bryant had no idea his melancholy musings would have such an impact (the poem remained in his dresser drawer for six years until his father found it and sent "Thanatopsis," off to the North American Review.) It became an overnight sensation.

However, the legacy far exceeds the sensational response to this poem. Only one could have imagined that 131 years later, in 1942, an about to be executed American flier, Lieutenant William G. Farrow, would write one last letter to his mother and quote "Thanatopsis". Farrow was one of the fliers in the Doolittle Raid on Japan. He and his crew were shot down over enemy territory and captured. All were condemned by the Japanese and subsequently executed. This letter was never sent but was discovered after the war in a file in the War Ministry Building in Tokyo. It was sent home and soon appeared in newspapers across the nation.

In closing, Lieutenant Farrow wrote to his mother: "Don't let this get you down. Just remember God will make everything right and that I'll see you all again in the hereafter. Read "Thanatopsis" by Bryant if you want to know how I am taking this. My faith in God is complete so I am unafraid." Of course young Farrow, in this moment at the end of his life, gave simple but eloquent words of courage and faith that inspired many and continue to live on long after him. The most famous part of the poem is the last nine lines – the last verse. This is no doubt, what Lieutenant Farrow was asking his mother to read.

*So, live, that when thy summons comes to join  
The innumerable caravan, which moves  
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,*

*Thou do not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach the grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him and lies down to pleasant dreams.*

*Service, Will*

*In His*