

## Essay/Personal Reflection

**Cite this article:** Kellehear A (2024). Life/time/d - Is the life shortened, a shortened life?. *Palliative and Supportive Care* 22, 197–198. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951523001086>

Received: 14 June 2023

Accepted: 21 June 2023

Email: [allan.kellehear@uvm.edu](mailto:allan.kellehear@uvm.edu)

Seventeen-year-old Fadia died about 8 weeks after our first meeting.

She had lived with a terminal childhood disease diagnosed 9 years earlier. When we met, Fadia presented as a beautiful “14-year-old” of Egyptian descent with dark braided hair, and a cheeky smile. Years of treatment and illness had taken its toll on her physical growth. We spoke about what it was like for her to know she had only a few weeks to live, especially after living with her illness for so many years (Kellehear and Ritchie 2003). She spoke frankly, intelligently, and perceptively about her feelings and concerns for her family. She described her grief, and the sadness and anxiety about the family’s bereavement to come, particularly on top of the simmering grief they had endured in the preceding years.

But she was also very funny. She mischievously disclosed to me the dark joke aimed at her brothers and sisters when she did not get what she wanted, or when she struggled to exact assurances for a “good life” without her after she died – she threatened to return to haunt them! She was a student, a dancer, a cheeky blackmailer, a shameless flirt, and she loved music, her family, and her friends “to bits.” She did not want to die, and she lived and felt and embraced every one of her days as if each were a month long.

Later, I interviewed Marion, an English 87-year-old nursing home resident who *wanted* to die. Marion had been a successful professional in the publishing business and went on to become a local government politician. Frailty reduced her life, and she documented every step of its curtailment. First, she could walk to “the shops.” Then later, she could only manage to reach the end of the street. Then she could only make the mailbox in her front garden. Finally, she could not leave the house, and eventually she could no longer leave her bedroom. Her hips had failed her twice. Future hip replacements were not possible, and she lived out her remaining mobility in a wheelchair inside a nursing home. Marion saw each day off impatiently because each brought her closer to deliverance from her ongoing misery. Life had become a burden. It had ceased being “a life.” Now, she was a lone passenger in a runaway bus without brakes. Marion waited for the inevitable, nothing more.

To outside observers, Marion had lived “a long life” when she eventually died 6 months later. To outside observers, Fadia’s life was “cut short.” And yet, Fadia described to me in endless detail the richness of her inner life and her social world. She was *full* – filled up to near-bursting – with the details of her adventures inside the tight web of her relationships. On the other hand, the 87-year-old Marion seemed to gloss over most of the details of her life, reducing these to highlights and musings on recent crises. She asked, as some others dying in their 80s sometimes asked me, “where had all the time gone?” A very good question, whatever irony the arithmetic might suggest. Perhaps Fadia and Marion lived lengths of life – both longer and shorter – that defied their years, lives misunderstood by innocent attempts by others to paint them by numbers. How might that be possible?

On a summer evening in the 1970s, I was with 2 friends driving through the back streets of our neighborhood. Just before midnight, we were hit by a speeding vehicle. This car was travelling at a speed twice that recommended for the area. The offender’s car hit the passenger side of our vehicle so forcefully that it jammed our wheels into the road, peeling our tires off on the far side. The wheel rims dug into the tarmac, and we rolled before flipping and turning in the air to collide with a telegraph pole at street sign height. Our car then slid down the pole, coming to a crunching rest at the bottom. I know these details because there was an eyewitness to the event from a late-night dog walker who saw the whole thing. Other details were furnished to us by the forensic investigation of a Police Road Accident Team who later examined the road site and car wrecks. According to the witness, the whole commotion was over in less than a minute from first to final bang. However, the experience for me was entirely different to the dog walker’s account. Here is what “really” happened.

I saw a bright light rapidly flood the inside of our car followed abruptly by a deafening bang. I felt suddenly turned upside down, and I raised my arm to brace myself against the ceiling of the car. I could smell dust in my nostrils. It smelt somehow familiar to me. Many of my teeth suddenly began to fall out, and I started to spit them out one by one (later I discovered my teeth were fine – it was safety glass exploding into my mouth from

the shattered windscreen that I was spitting out). I thought I was in a roller coaster for one disorientating moment, and I remember giving out a short giggle. I thought long and hard about identifying the smell inside the rolling car. Eventually, I was very pleased that amid the dodgem-like-spins and crashing, the constant distraction of broken teeth, the incessant rain of shrapnel, and the flailing arms of my companions, suddenly I could identify that smell as burlap. And then with another loud bang, silence. Our driver, obviously still ambulant and out of the vehicle somehow, pulled me from the car and together we staggered to the verge. He laid me down on the grass there (I had broken my hip) before going back to the car to retrieve our other companion from the car who, unlike me, was unconscious. The whole incident took at least 7 or 8 minutes.

There are 2 interesting observations to make about this account. First, my description and the dogwalker's description have very little – not none – but very little overlap. My experience was largely not his experience. The emic was not the etic as they say in anthropology, or to put it another way, the insider's (native) experience is not the outsider's (onlooker) experience. Second, the dogwalker's sense of time was not my time at all. His 1 minute was my 7 or 8. In other words, I lived through an experience that was *7 to 8 times longer than he had "witnessed."*

When I remember Fadia, I think of her 17 years, but her own description of her life suggested I was merely witnessing the tip of something much wider, deeper, and longer. Even when Marion observed her own 87 years, she was telling me about a time and a life that was dramatically shorter in her mind than my understanding of her age. Ironically, her story seemed to suggest a brevity, a speed, and a life felt as strangely fleeting. There was very little overlap it seemed between Marion's view of her life, inside her own experience of it, and my naïve view of her age. If this was true of Marion, it was probably just as true of Fadia. Is the life shortened, a "shortened" life? Just as logically we may ask, is a life lived long, a "long" life? We know that experience is not best measured by length and width, but by depth. Yet, how many of us continue to lament the "short" life and celebrate the "long" one as if comparison were existentially plausible or true-to-life? A short life can *feel* long as easily as the long life can *feel* short to some, especially for those confronting their own mortality.

The simple idea that things may not always be what they seem is widely understood. Everyone instinctively knows that many experiences can make time feel shorter or longer. Alice – brave explorer of Wonderland – offered some of the first testimony to this

truth. A little cake here, a magic drink there, a mushroom nibbled, these famously lengthened and shortened her sense of self in Lewis Carroll's fantastic story (Carroll 1865/2020). What's more, the psychological research into time distortion supports this mysterious sense of lengthening and shortening in our waking world mediated by experiences of awe or grief here, fear or boredom there, or simply the mounting years (Kostick 2017; Sackett et al. 2010; Shardlow 2022).

It seems the inner world of me is relative to the inner world of you, and both may defy the clock and calendar. The car accident in my teenage years is an example of how emotions and crisis can reset personal time, propelling us away from the everyday world of the onlooker. And so it may be for a life lived within the intimate gaze of Old Mortality (Ditum 2020; Porter 1939). Inside that gaze, a new understanding may defy our own as healers, researchers, even family caregivers. Perhaps T.S. Elliot understood this when he equated the short life of the rose with that of the ancient yew tree (Elliot 1943). As death rounds to complete a life, that life becomes a new story, best understood in its own terms by those at its center. A short or long story, we will tell the time from the dials of memory, dream, and reflection. A life examined at its looming end is a life/time/d.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

## References

- Carroll L (1865/2020) Alice's adventures in Wonderland. Project Gutenberg eBook. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm#chap01> (accessed 1 June 2023).
- Ditum S (2020) The art of survival. *The Lancet* 396(10244), 89. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31491-4
- Elliot TS (1943) "Little Gidding" in *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Kellehear A and Ritchie D (eds) (2003) *Seven Dying Australians*. Bendigo: St Lukes Innovative Resources.
- Kostick K (2017) Time perception and age: Longevity's influence on 'mind time'. <https://blogs.bcm.edu/2017/09/15/time-perception-age-longevity-influence-mind-time/> (accessed 1 June 2023).
- Porter KA (1939) "Old mortality". In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Sackett AM, Meyvis T, Nelson LD, et al. (2010) You're having fun when time flies: The hedonic consequences of subjective time progression. *Psychological Science* 21, 111–117. doi:10.1177/0956797609354832
- Shardlow J (2022) Temporal perspectives and the phenomenology of grief. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1–22. doi:10.1007/s13164-022-00659-5