



August 2017 – *WHAT CALLS ONE AWAY IS BETTER*

In October 1949, C.S. Lewis wrote a letter to Dr. Warfield M. Firor, a professor of surgery at Johns Hopkins, who had regularly sent him food parcels during the time of austerity after World War II. In the letter, Lewis confided that, for some days, the subject uppermost in his mind had been “Old Age”:

You are a bit further on the road than I am and will probably smile at a man whose fifty-first birthday is still several weeks ahead starting his meditation *de senectute*.¹ Yet why? The realisation must *begin* sometime. In [two ways] it began much earlier. (1.) With the growing realisation that there were a great many things one would never have time to do... (2.) Harder to express ... the end of that period when every good, besides being itself, was ... [a] promise of much more to come...

What has come lately is much harsher — the arctic wind of the future catching me, so to speak, at a corner. The particular corner was the sharp realisation that I shall be compulsorily ‘retired’ in 1959, and the infernal *nuisance* (to put it no higher) of patching up some new sort of life somewhere... You will not suppose I am putting these things as lamentations... They are merely the *data*. (Add, of course, among them, the probable loss of friends...). And, as usual the result of all this (would you agree?) is almost entirely good.



Have you ever thought what it would be like if (all other things remaining as they are) old age and death had been made optional? *All other things remaining*: i.e. it would still be true that our real destiny was elsewhere, that we have no abiding city here and no true happiness, *but* the un-hitching from this life was left to be accomplished by our own will as an act of obedience & faith. I suppose the percentage of *di-ers* would be about the same as the percentage of Trappists is now. Apparently the world is made that way... You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.¹

I am therefore (with some help from the weather and rheumatism!) trying to profit by this new realisation of my mortality. To begin to die, to loosen a few of the tentacles which the octopus-world has fastened on one. But of course it is continuings, not beginnings, that are the point. A good night’s sleep, a sunny morning, a success with my next book — any of these will, I know, alter the whole thing. Which alteration, by the bye, being in reality a relapse from partial waking into the old stupor, would nevertheless be regarded by most people as a return to health from a ‘morbid’ mood!

Well, it’s certainly not that. But it is a very partial waking. One ought not to need the gloomy moments of life for beginning detachment, nor be re-intangled by the bright ones. One ought to be able to enjoy the bright ones to the full and at that very same moment have the perfect readiness to leave them, confident that what calls one away is better.²

Whatever our age, it may be helpful to ponder Lewis’s suggestion that we “ought to be able to enjoy the bright [moments of life] to the full and at that very same moment have the perfect readiness to leave them, confident that what calls one away is better.”

“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

HEBREWS 11:16 (ESV)

¹ “on old age”; an allusion to Cicero’s work of that name.

² *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, vol. II, Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931-1949*, edited by Walter Hooper, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, pp. 985-987