

Liberalism's False Freedoms: What's Wrong with the "Cancer Battle"?

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Theme: [History](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

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In her last book before she died, UK author Jennifer Diski wrote, "Under no circumstances is anyone to say that I lost a battle with cancer. ... [I] will have nothing whatever to do with any notion of desert, punishment, fairness or unfairness, or any kind of moral causality."

Two friends say they don't like the "battle" because it makes winners and losers. They just got lucky, they say.

Of course, luck makes winners and losers. My own dislike is for *how* we win or lose. When I have no choice but to stare at the lights of an oncoming train, I'm a loser. When I again embrace the false belief in a guaranteed future, I win.

In truth, we are all on the train tracks, just as portrayed in Alex Colville's famous painting. When cancer withdraws its threat, and my prognosis improves, annihilation is still speeding toward me.

Ah, but we mustn't talk that way.

In Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Settembrini, the sunny liberal optimist, despises "the tie that binds [us] ... to disease and death". Yet Settembrini is dying. Lauding Progress and Science, and denying his own condition, he's like "ancient Gauls who shot their arrows against Heaven".

Part of Mann's point to post-war Europe was that Liberalism was taking human beings out of nature, forgetting that we're subject to laws of nature, like everything else in the universe. Individuals have power to seize their destiny, the slogan went (and goes). Settembrini couldn't seize his. More significant, he didn't know it.

Sensitive thinkers say the art of dying and the art of living are the same. The reason is simple: All life, including human life, involves decay. Every moment involves change, which is loss. We live better, with less fear, if we see things as they are. Illusions create false expectations, which fail, causing misery.

We don't teach such philosophers. They are usually Asian, Indigenous, African or Latin American. Philosophy departments across Canada teach only the wisdom of white, mostly English-speaking philosophers of North Atlantic descent and/or education. Every two or ten years, a course on African or First Nations philosophy is taught but as an elective, with little impact.

And so we shore up the battle imagery. Like Settembrini, we want no truck with nature's

“evil, irrational power”.

German playwright, Bertoldt Brecht , found in ancient Chinese theatre his lifelong strategy for hard times: the best resistance is no resistance. It doesn't mean to cave. It means to go along with open eyes, finding unexpected opportunity. Brecht contrasted this idea with one common in European theatre: the individual “standing tall” against the storm, beating the wind, declaring it shouldn't happen.

The problem with the “cancer battle” is that it obscures another struggle: that to come to terms with essential vulnerability and the ultimate unpredictability of existence, despite science. Acknowledging existential insecurity is an achievement because it is shared by all, cancer or no cancer.

It is shared by rich white southern Ontarians and the people of Attawapiskat. Activists following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission urge non-native Canadians not to “help” but to recognize our personal stake in the well-being of the country's first citizens. This is hard to do if we see ourselves as “lucky” and “privileged” in self-satisfied ignorance of mutual dependence.

I don't blame medical practitioners. I blame Humanities scholars paid to provide society's conceptual tools. They're shooting arrows at the Heavens, seduced by Liberalism's false freedoms. We need a conception of health that looks squarely at the lights down the tracks and tells us how to live *with* that reality, freely and well.

It'd be a more durable victory, and more interesting.

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