

Character and . . .

Inevitability

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ANNALEE R. WARD

Character and Inevitability

Articles

DONOVAN E. TANN

*Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another
Story about Climate*

KATIE E. BOYER

Aging Well

DALE H. EASLEY

The Inevitability of Dying

DANIEL P. FLEMING

Attention and Digital Mourning

Response

ABRAM VAN ENGEN

The Sense of an Ending



Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor

Mary K. Bryant, Managing Editor

The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Inevitability

Annalee R. Ward

Dread. Deep down fear. Imagine enjoying an idyllic vacation in Thailand, watching something strange happening to the ocean, and then seeing a wall of water. Tom and Arlette Stuij dropped their breakfast, turned and ran as that crashing, roiling water chased them. The water inevitably rushed past the shoreline, inundating the community. A 9.1 magnitude earthquake near Indonesia caused massive tsunamis, ultimately killing over 230,000 people and destroying infrastructure for years to come.¹

Inevitability raises questions of fatalism or determinism. It calls forth that feeling we get when we know we have to face something distasteful or unpleasant. The water rushes in and it cannot be stopped. This journal issue challenges determinism by weaving moral character into conversation with inevitability. In doing so, it highlights the ways habits of good character and habits of thinking about alternatives move us forward in the face of the seemingly inevitable.



*Habits of good character
and habits of thinking about
alternatives move us forward
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inevitable.*

With the assumption that each human being embodies dignity and worth as image-bearers of God, the authors called one another into their stories of inevitability. In reading together, we framed our work in reminders about the need for a life of character from Christian Miller's *The Character Gap*. We learned from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* that it is possible to live through awful things with a vision that finds purpose and meaning despite the circumstances. It may call for therapeutic processing, but the possibility to find the way forward with hope exists. Our discussions on the inevitabilities of aging and death continued with *Aging*, by priests and educators Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney. They name the dark side of aging but counter it with the light, noting the gifts of aging. Nevertheless, we

are human and need to face the realities of our natures, as Atul Gawande, author of *Being Mortal*, gently and elegantly reminds us.

As the authors wrestled with their writing, the relationships between them deepened into relationships of trust. From there they challenged each other to change the stories of inevitability to stories of empowerment, seeing possibilities. This semester-long process formed the authors into a team—reading together, talking, arguing, writing, and editing.

Inevitability seems like a very strange topic to write about, especially in connection with character. If it's inevitable then why bother thinking about it? We are powerless to affect it. I must admit that I, too, wondered if we could extend our understanding of character as we thought about inevitability. But as these authors worked together, the recognition of personal agency in how we face what may seem to be determined projected a vision of hope. It reminded us of our own power to act through the work of telling and writing different stories.

Donovan Tann's "Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate" encapsulates the authors'

overall response to the topic of inevitability. Using the example of climate change, he acknowledges the angst that so many people find themselves experiencing. "Anxiety and apathy in the face of climate inevitability become more understandable when doing the right thing becomes ever more muddled and unclear."² Rather than accepting the common narratives of doom and only calling for sustainable personal change in habits (although he affirms that action too), Tann calls for adapting by imagining new stories, new visions of the possible not only as individuals, but as communities. Echoing Charles Taylor's push for "horizons of significance" to shape



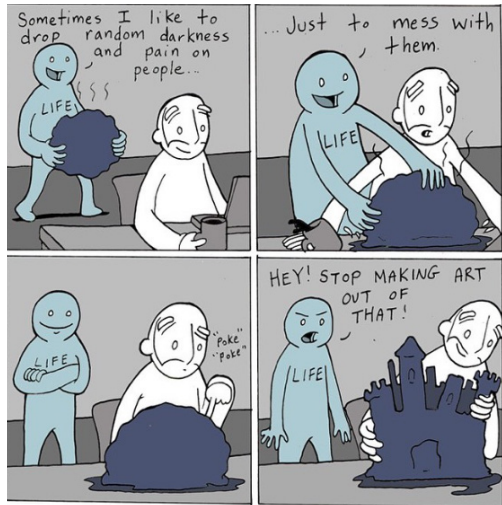
Changing the story

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our identity as people of good character, Tann recognizes we have a responsibility to act with vision and hope.³

One fact of inevitability common to humanity lies in our vary natures—we are designed as creatures who age. How do we do that in ways that express good character? Katie Boyer asserts in “Aging Well” that how we handle the changes of aging expresses our character. Mindset matters. Choosing to narrate the inevitable changes with positivity and relational connection affects quality of life. Building healthy habits to sustain one’s intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, environmental, *and* physical health becomes an outcome of good character practices—practices that rely on virtues such as perseverance, steadfastness, and discernment—all contributors to a life of integrity.

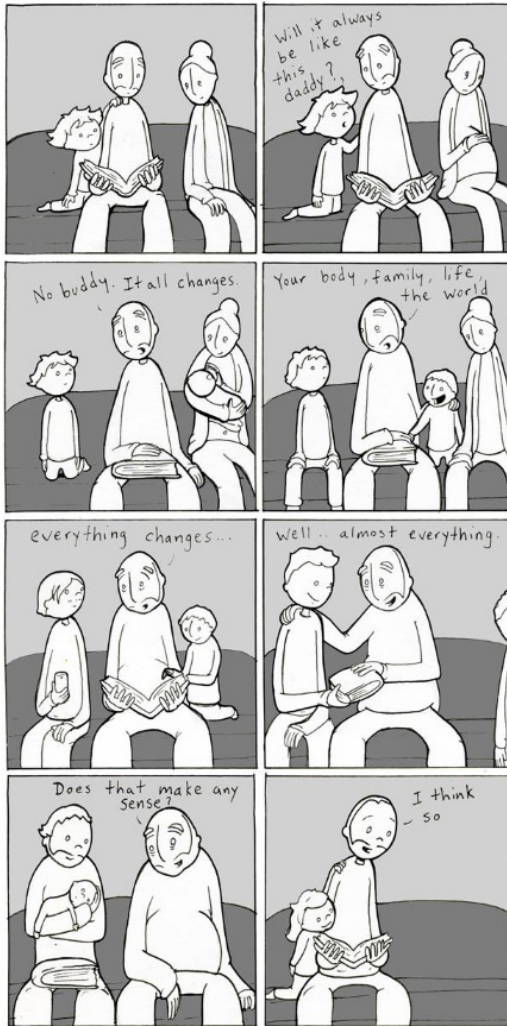
Highlighting the need for other character virtues such as courage, compassion, and tenderness, Dale Easley considers how they apply to the ultimate inevitability—death. Death challenges our sense of meaning. In “The Inevitability of Dying,” Easley wrestles with his experiences of the death of a student and loved ones. Using Viktor Frankl’s work and practices from cognitive behavioral therapy, Easley takes up the challenge to find meaning. Pushing through depression and despair, he works to change the stories. He presents the storytelling options he faces when he chooses to tell of the haunting negative experiences or instead to focus on the positive memories in order to change his thinking. He finds in his memory’s stories what Rabbi Steve Leder calls “the beauty of what remains.”⁴ Surviving the death of friends and family is no easy task. Storytelling contributes to the way forward. It takes the pain and “makes art” out of it.



Making art out of pain

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Dan Fleming’s article, “Attention and Digital Mourning,” extends the conversation on the inevitability of death and mourning to the need for better habits of attentiveness, especially as the online experiences of mourning increase. Character-informed attentiveness means “offering a



"Change is inevitable"

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gift to the person before me," showing up with the whole, integrated self and a willingness to focus on the other.⁵ What that looks like in virtual worlds may differ from that of actual presence. The divide between life online and offline, nevertheless, diminishes every day. It only makes sense that mourning would find expression in this integrated virtual world. As we struggle with our grief, we may turn to support groups online, to virtual tributes and memorials, or even stumble across that loved one's digital footprints. Mourning with the kind of character that makes a positive difference in the world calls for deep attention, something the nature of the digital medium fights against. Deep attention leads to good mourning both on and offline.

Our respondent, Abram Van Engen, elegantly pushes us to think deeply about the narratives we construct and the telos or ends toward which

they are directed. Telling different stories about ourselves is possible in the context of developing habits and practices that move us in better directions. Positive habits shape better character, grow virtue. All of this, note Van Engen and the authors, is best accomplished in the context of community, of relationship.

"Change is inevitable," purports Taoist philosophy.⁶ Change comes in many forms. This issue is meant to begin conversations on how we live and die with the inevitabilities of being human. We can wring our hands with despair or explore ways to act with the hope that action brings. From the

exigencies of global climate change to the realities of aging, to the pain of death, and finally to the attention we give to mourning, we must responsibly embrace our humanity with the grace of integrity and the just expression of compassion. Narrative and relationships operate as key tools for this work. May we exercise the character to persevere with wisdom.

As of fall 2024, Annalee R. Ward has transitioned from her role as the Director of the Wendt Center for Character Education to Director Emerita at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Through programming and curriculum, the Wendt Character Initiative seeks to shape character for lives of purpose. Ward researches and writes on communication, ethics, and popular culture.

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Notes

1. BBC News, "Tsunami Stories."
2. Tann, "Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate," 11.
3. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.
4. Leder, *The Beauty of What Remains*, 6.
5. Fleming, "Attention and Digital Mourning," 64.
6. The Enlightenment Journey, "Taoist Teachings."

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