

Character and . . .

Inevitability

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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



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The Sense of an Ending

Abram Van Engen

Inevitability speaks of endings. No matter what choices we make or what resistance we offer, we head toward the same destination. A series of paths might lie before us, as though we had options, but agency is an illusion. In the end, all paths meet in the same place. No choice could have changed it. That's inevitability.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the essays in this issue dwell a good deal on death, for death can never be outwitted or outrun. In the remarkable poem "Aubade" by the poet Philip Larkin, he awakens before dawn to the realization that each day draws him closer to "unresting death." Nothing he does can change its approach. Courage or conviction make no difference: "Death is no different whined at than withstood."¹ Choices will not, seemingly, matter. In the end, he will die.



Dawning sense of the inevitable

This sense of an inevitable ending places us in a world of time, a chronological progression. In doing so, inevitability casts itself as a *story*. When we focus on inevitability, we tell a certain kind of tale. Inevitability starts from the finale and works its way backward in the form of a story where the ending is known.

Yet in narrating our way to a certain end, inevitability also quite often produces that end. It propels us toward the end it predicts. Inevitability stories become self-fulfilling. If I believe that an ending cannot be avoided no matter what I do, then I'll be far less likely to do anything that might avoid it.



"Tiger Woods Effect"

In sports, such a self-fulfilling inevitability-function happens all the time. Consider the well-known and psychologically intriguing "Tiger Woods Effect": at his height, Tiger Woods was considered unbeatable. As a result, whenever he joined a tournament, all the other good players actually *played worse* than normal. They gave up trying to win. Lo and behold, they lost.²

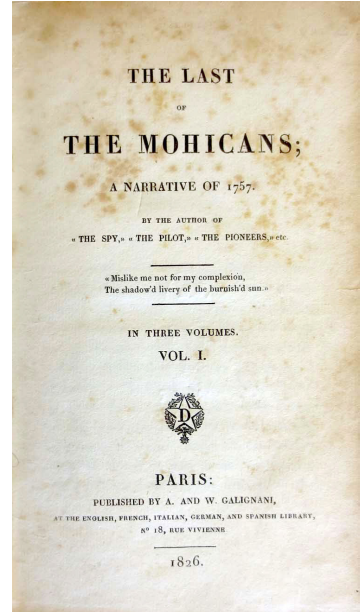
Inevitability has a shaping influence not just on the stories we tell, therefore, but on how we live into those stories from day

to day. Donovan E. Tann makes that point well, arguing that when climate change becomes an apocalyptic tale of inevitability, we quit undertaking the very actions that might fight against it. Inevitability nurtures apathy; apathy makes the ending inevitable. The circle feeds on itself.

In my own fields of literature and history, these understandings of inevitability have led scholars into new forms of writing and thinking that resist the sense of a foreordained ending. Early Americanists, for example, want to jar readers loose from the notion that the colonial occupation of America just *had* to happen in the way it did, or that it led inevitably to the United States of America, or that any national narrative out of colonial roots was ever inevitable. In short, no event was required. The happening of one event never necessitated the next.

That becomes especially important when it comes to studying Native Americans and their ongoing presence in America. In history, we call "inevitability" by two names: "teleological narratives" and "terminal narratives." Teleology works backward from an ending (a *telos*). It starts with one event in time (say, the American Revolution), and then it asks how that event came about. Such an approach can be useful if done well, but often it entails selecting certain events from the past, erasing others, and then writing a story that ends where the scholar began. We prove what we assume. We know what happened, and so we write history as though it *had* to happen. Terminal narratives are teleological narratives, but with a twist. They assume (and then prove) the preordained death, destruction, and disappearance of Native Americans.

Perhaps the most famous terminal narratives come from the romanticized wilderness tales of James Fenimore Cooper, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (note the title). Countless scholars have shown how Cooper wrote about the “last” of the Mohicans in a setting where Native Americans had far from disappeared.³ He projected their disappearance by putting that disappearance in the past. Romantically valorizing Native Americans as a noble race, he simultaneously encouraged their removal. *The Last of the Mohicans* appeared in 1826. The Trail of Tears started in 1831. Indian removal remained a live issue, even as Cooper’s popular novels imagined a world in which they had already passed away. Inevitability *creates* a future, rather than just narrating one.



Narratives of inevitability

For that reason, as all the writers in this issue note, we must engage in the work of imagination. Inevitability festers in its absence. Scholars of my period note as much. Embracing contingency rather than teleology, they ask what the context and period might have allowed. What were the options at the time? Searching for the paths *not* chosen requires a great deal of imaginative labor with the evidence that remains. Scholars like Saidiya Hartman have forged “critical fabulation” as a way to engage the silence of archives and highlight the voices of the missing, trying to illuminate “what could have been.”⁴ Across multiple fields and disciplines, in response to immediate crises in the present day, scholars call us all to nurture a richer imagination.

How do we nourish the imagination? Discovering “what could have been” does not happen without encountering stories upon stories. Contingency is a function of plurality, and as we come to see the many twists and turns of individual stories, the more we will be able to consider the ways things might have gone—or “what could have been.” The work of the imagination, in other words, is indeed *work*. The imagination expands and contracts like a muscle. Encountering stories engages, exercises, and builds our capacities on both an individual and a collective scale. If we want to expand the imagination, we need to put ourselves in the way of stories—more

beginnings, more middles, *more endings*. As Tann writes, “This imagination has everything to do with the stories we inhabit and the choices we see in front of us.”⁵


Tann’s point—echoed in the other essays of this forum—resonates with a passage I love from Salman Rushdie’s novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. At a moment when Haroun feels low, when in fact he feels *hopeless*, another character introduces him to the sea of stories:

So Iff the Water Genie told Haroun about the Ocean of the Streams of Story, and even though he was full of a sense of hopelessness and failure the magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. . . . And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Stream of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive.⁶

Rushdie reminds us that stories blend and morph and mix and build and begin again. Swimming in a sea of stories allows the imagination to follow new currents, to find other endings, to multiply the range of choices possible within the world—including the choice of how to live.

The Good Life

Many colleges and universities have recognized the hunger for such imaginative work, and numerous classes on “the good life” have correspondingly boomed across campuses—at Yale, Notre Dame, Stanford, WashU, and many other places. Invested in philosophy, ethics, history, and other fields, such classes often assume that life takes the shape of a tale. And they often start their tale at the end: after a long life, imagining ourselves on the cusp of our life’s closing, how do we want to look back? What kind of life do we want to have lived?

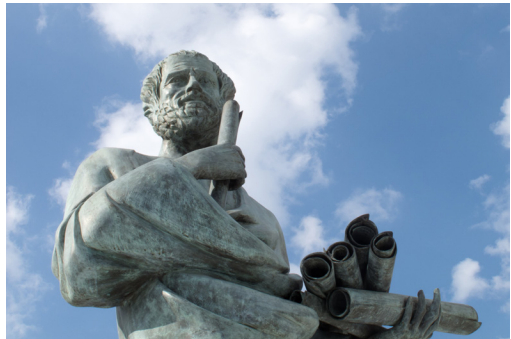


*What kind of life
do we want to
have lived?*

In this approach, *telos* takes an entirely different valence. Where teleological narratives prove what they assume, good life courses ask students to imagine a *telos* toward which they want to live. Here the sense of an ending enlivens choice and agency. Starting from the end, asking students to imagine their lives as a whole, courses in the good life often invite a range of paths forward into the years ahead.

Aristotle seems to stand behind this approach. Long ago he counseled his pupils to judge the shape of life as a whole, not any short span within it: “for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy.”⁷ For this reason,

Aristotle taught, no one’s life can be called a “good life” until it has ended. Conclusions reflect and give shape to the whole. And getting students to think of multiple possible endings—none of them inevitable—allows them to imagine their way to a “good life” before they have hardly entered it. As countless colleges have found, students flock to such courses.



Aristotle's lasting teachings

At Washington University in St. Louis (where I work), we engage such approaches in a set of classes called “Beyond Boundaries.” Each course employs professors from different disciplines to ask questions that no single field can answer. One such course, directly related to Katie E. Boyer’s piece, is called “When I’m 64.” It is massively popular. Students desperately want to imagine the contingencies that lead to multiple endings. Before they begin to work, they want to know what it means to retire, to *end* well.

My own “Beyond Boundaries” course, called “Morality and Markets,” combines literature and social sciences to ask students what counts as “success.” We cover a range of topics, but each of them circles around what it means to live “a rich life,” and what role money does or does not play in such a life. We ask, for example, how much money they *need* to make, how much they *want* to make, how much would be *enough*, and how they would ever know? What limits, if any, guide their labors? How should they invest their time? And what do the data say about the relation between happiness

and wealth? To get them to think through these questions, we place before them story after story—novels, plays, and scenarios from real-life CEOs.

Such teaching never gets old. And our class has attracted followers beyond our standard first-year students. When we taught it during the pandemic, parents would join and listen. Presentations followed for alumni. Now we have a growing Substack column called *A Rich Life* devoted to stories that examine the meaning of work in relation to the whole of life.⁸

Asking the big questions (as the essays in this issue do)—questions like how do we age well, what can we do about climate change, how do we mourn well and pay attention to the grieving, how do we approach our own mortality—these questions and others will always have an audience. As the authors here all indicate, we need to ask them, study them, and answer them in the context of story and imagination.

The liberal arts offer an exploration of worldviews that opens contingency and pushes back against inevitability.

The expanding audience for such material reveals the undying desire and need for the liberal arts—the rich garden of imagination. The liberal arts offer an exploration of worldviews that opens contingency and pushes back against inevitability. As

Cecilia Gaposchkin recently wrote, “The point of a liberal arts education is to train the brain to look for new ideas, new ways of thinking about problems, new solutions. And to do so using knowledge framed with ethical values rooted in core principles of common humanity.”⁹ The liberal arts are a well-known, long-practiced, deeply rooted, ongoing answer to inevitability.

We Are Stories

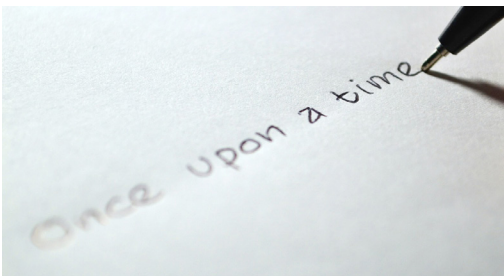
As we encounter a thousand stories opening new ideas and alternative futures, we discover what the authors in this issue all declare: that *we* are stories. We tell our lives as a tale. And the way we narrate our lives often affects not just how we view the past, but also how we move into the future. As Dale H. Easley reminds us, “Altering [our stories] means changing who we see ourselves as being.”¹⁰

Such reflections become especially apparent in Boyer’s essay on aging. The first necessity, it seems, is to accept one’s finitude. The average life has 4,000 weeks, give or take, as Oliver Burkeman points out in his brilliant book.

Burkeman does a marvelous job of showing how living well and aging well begins by accepting that we cannot do it all. Finitude defines us. “In practical terms,” Burkeman writes, “a limit-embracing attitude to time means organizing your days with the understanding that you definitely won’t have time for everything you want to do, or that other people want you to do—and so, at the very least, you can stop beating yourself up for failing.”¹¹

Character arises from these constraints of finitude. Given limited time, what will we say no to? What will we eliminate from our days? What purpose will drive us forward? And what meaning will we find in our daily actions, our career, all that exists both in and beyond the labors of our work?

Recently, my colleague Peter Boumgarden wrote about the strange emotional experience some have when they achieve success. Entrepreneurs who sell their company often dip into depression. Similarly, academics who achieve tenure often fall into a funk.¹² That kind of experience can seem odd. After all, these moments of success should bring newfound happiness, right? Well, they can. But as Boumgarden shows, a great deal resides on how much purpose and identity have been invested in the work. If work has defined one’s identity, then actually achieving the moment toward which we’ve been striving can leave us with a letdown. What do we do now? As Boyer reflects, retirement will be much harder for those whose entire identity has been defined by their career.



Changing our own story

Boyer and Boumgarden both agree that a balanced “portfolio of purpose” can lead to a much healthier life. But how does a person change their story, shift the balances in their portfolio of purpose, define themselves by more parts of life? It may be true, as Easley argues, that we need to tell a different story

about ourselves. But how do we get there? Engaging stories upon stories helps, of course, but changing *our own* story—telling a different tale about who we are—can be extremely difficult.

Stories, it turns out, do not stand alone. They take shape in light of habits and practices—guiding our habits, but also taking form through our habits. The relationship is reciprocal. Consider, for example, the work of tenure in an academic life. At many universities, faculty go up for tenure in their sixth

year. External reviewers comment on the quality of the work and whether it achieves whatever standards the university has set. It may seem like a test, a bar to leap over in the sixth year. But tenure is not a test. It is a discipleship. Tenure has been training a young scholar to become the kind of scholar a university desires. And the judgment of tenure is when a university decides whether it has formed a young scholar and teacher into the kind scholar and teacher it values. Tenure is a process of formation.

As a result, if a young professor is not careful, the story they will tell about themselves will be the story given to them in the process of tenure. To tell a different story will require more than a decision or a new script on the spot. It will require practices, habits, other rituals and experiences. Shaping and changing the story we tell about ourselves involves daily formations that take place on a regular basis over the long haul. If a pre-tenure person wants to be more than their work at the point of tenure, they will need to invest time and energy in something *other than work* on their way to tenure.

Character and Telos

The important link between habits and stories comes from a long philosophical tradition that emphasizes the sense of an ending. We live toward a *telos*. For what are we made? Toward what are we striving? The *telos*—the goal or end—decides the habits that transform our character. Are we aiming at power, fame, money, glory? If so, that will affect the choices we make. Are we aiming at an other-centered life of service? The idea of character relates to the imagination of our *telos*.

Importantly, no *telos* is predetermined, and no end is inevitable. A person might believe that the goal of life is personal happiness, might try to live into that goal, and might never achieve it. In that sense, *telos* (understood as a




No promise that we will get there

goal) functions in almost the opposite way of a teleological narrative. A teleological narrative embraces inevitability by starting at the end and asking how we got there, showing how it never could have been any other way. A *telos* looks toward an ending and asks how will we get there—with no promise that we will.

The Aristotelian idea of telos and character filters down to the modern day in multiple ways. In *After You Believe*, for example, the theologian N.T. Wright explains that “Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand that goal, the better we shall understand the path toward it.”¹³ The path itself, Wright goes on to argue, involves the development of virtues. And virtues are nothing less than the habits we have practiced, those daily choices that come to seem natural. As Wright explains, virtue

is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn’t ‘come naturally’—and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what’s required ‘automatically,’ as we say.¹⁴

The lesson applies to character whether one is a practicing Christian or not. As all of the writers in this forum remark, aging well, mourning well, responding to the climate crisis well, facing one’s own mortality well—they all take daily, smaller practices *now*. As Wright puts it later in the book: “Character is a slowly forming thing.”¹⁵ The time to begin is now.



Aging well, mourning well, responding to the climate crisis well, facing one's own mortality well—they all take daily smaller practices now.

And perhaps the habit to begin with—the virtue most needed today and always—is attentiveness. Daniel P. Fleming dwells at length on this trait, though he is not the only one. “Learning to look and listen,” as Fleming puts it, is a practice of attentiveness that “can start today.”¹⁶ From attentiveness, we become more attuned to our own practices and how they relate (or not) to the idea of the good life that guides us. Just as importantly, we can learn to pay careful attention to all the liturgies of daily life (like social media) that warp us and bend us away from the life we hope to live.

Thinking of habits and practices through the idea of liturgy helps us realize how much we need to do beyond just thinking or talking differently. The importance of the body echoes as a theme through all the essays of this issue. Stories matter, yes; and how we narrate them shapes a great deal, absolutely. But it’s the habitual daily practices of an embodied person

that matters most. Inevitability might be an idea, but our response to it involves—and *should* involve—mind, body, and spirit.

The philosopher James K. A. Smith speaks well and often on this point. As he writes in *Desiring the Kingdom*, “liturgies—whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world.” We are what we love; and as Smith emphasizes, “Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies.”¹⁷ Attentiveness—practiced, nourished, and carefully cultivated—can help us see what kinds of liturgies the world throws at us, what kinds we engage (whether knowingly or not), and what kinds we need to develop in order to aim our loves at different ends.

Inevitability and Others

What stands out most from all these essays, however, is the ongoing importance of community. Aging well, dying well, mourning well, responding well to climate change—each of these topics invites the authors to ruminate on the importance of relationships. Positive relationships are essential to human well-being, as Boyer points out repeatedly. Every study of human happiness and well-being confirms it—perhaps most strikingly in Harvard’s 80-year study.

Yet the importance of relationships strikes at the heart of all the rest, for relationships take time. They force decisions. They take us away from other goals. The needs of others seldom line up with our work schedules, our deadlines, our career advancement. Relationships live according to a different clock, one that has almost nothing to do with productivity. They are, quite frankly, inconvenient.¹⁸




Fundamental need for community

Oliver Burkeman, in his great book, writes well about this strange inconvenience. In the context of a time management book, he urges readers to guard their time a little *less*. The goal of most management books, he argues, is some kind of increased efficiency. “But smoothness, it turns out, is a dubious virtue,” Burkeman writes, “since it’s often

the unsmoothed textures of life that make it livable, helping nurture the relationships that are crucial for mental and physical health, and for the resilience of our communities.” Or as he puts it slightly later: “Convenience, in other words, makes things easy, but without regard to whether easiness is truly what’s most valuable in any given context.”¹⁹

The inconvenience of relationships is not lost on most. And yet, for how little they might aid our productivity, they remain essential—not for advancement, but for fullness. C.S. Lewis puts this well: while our lives would be much poorer without friendship, friendship is not strictly required for survival. “Friendship is unnecessary,” he writes, “like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.”²⁰

Moreover, all the talk of story that threads through the essays in this collection comes back to that fundamental need for others—for community, for relationship. If we are to encounter stories upon stories, the best way to do so is in the lives of others gathered around us. As Lewis writes, “In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets.”²¹ The only way to encounter those stories, to draw out those lights, is to make time for others.



We need liturgies lived with others that shape our character in mind, body, and spirit by directing our loves toward life-giving ends.

Inevitability is an enormous topic. It speaks of endings. It tells a story—often one that it also creates through a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some things, like death, are indeed inevitable. Other things, like total climate collapse, are not. But either way, living into old age and death, mourning with

others and for others, or resisting the creep of the climate crisis, requires actions now, habits now, practices that begin today. We need liturgies lived with others that shape our character in mind, body, and spirit by directing our loves toward life-giving ends. We need telos without teleology.

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and literature, concentrating on the place of Pilgrims and Puritans in the American cultural imaginary. His book *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (Yale UP 2020) won two national book prizes, and his work has been supported by several national fellowships.

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Notes

1. Larkin, “Aubade.”
2. Brown, “Quitters Never Win.” This phenomenon is now known more generally as the “Superstar Effect.”
3. See especially the chapter called “Vanishing Americans” in Romero, *Home Fronts*.
4. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.
5. Tann, “Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate,” 15.
6. Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 71-72.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a18.
8. See *A Rich Life* on Substack: <https://arichlife.substack.com/>.
9. Cecilia Gaposchkin, “What is a Liberal Arts Education?” This piece was written for Dartmouth admissions internally, but is a rich piece well worth reading.
10. Easley, “The Inevitability of Dying,” 52.
11. Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 32.
12. See Boumgarden, “Wisdom from the Humbled Confederacy,” *A Rich Life* (Substack): <https://arichlife.substack.com/p/wisdom-from-the-humbled-confederacy>.
13. Wright, *After You Believe*, xi.
14. Wright, 20-21.
15. Wright, 35
16. Fleming, “Attention and Digital Mourning,” 68.
17. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.
18. I wrote about this more largely for *A Rich Life*. See “Inconveniences” here: <https://arichlife.substack.com/p/inconveniences>.
19. Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 52.

20. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 71.

21. Lewis, 61.

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