

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Earning one's death! Really?

By Terry Howard
Contributing
Writer

Seconds after I started my car and flipped on NPR, the news of Bishop Desmond Tutu's passing grabbed my attention. The interesting thing is that during my 35-minute drive from Charlottesville, Virginia over to my hometown, Staunton, I learned more about Bishop Tutu than I ever have.

As we know, it's standard practice this time of the year for the media to list the names of well-known people who died that year. For 2021, the names of Colin Powell, Bob Dole, Cicely Tyson, Hank Aaron and others dominate the lists. Add three more names as I write this; Senator Harry Reid, football's John Madden and the beloved actress, Betty White.

The USA Today's David Colton in his year in review, *PASSAGES*, described the high-profile ones as "social influencers." "Regardless of whether they lived beyond 100 or died young, their example will endure," wrote Colton.

Now until I read a recent head-scratching piece by author Tim Wise, "Ways to Stay Strong When Society is Breaking," the thought of these social influencers "earning" their deaths never crossed my mind.

"We must embrace our mortality because when we run from it or try and deny it — a common human tendency — we fail to live lives of purpose," wrote Wise. "Because

we're too busy trying not to die."

Wow, too busy trying not to die! Let that sink in for a minute.

Continued Wise, "Life is beautiful, but it's first and foremost tragic, precisely because that beauty will not last for any of us, and because we often squander it when here. James Baldwin explained this far better than I could in *The Fire Next Time*, so I'll just let him do it."

Life is tragic simply because the Earth turns, and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time.

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.

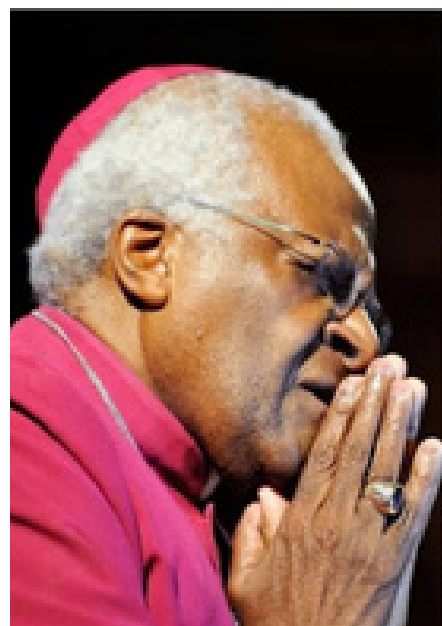
It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death — ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.

"Did you get that last bit? Re-read it, seriously," asked Wise. "One ought to rejoice in the fact of death? To decide to earn one's death by way of the life we lead?"

"I cry every time I read that line because it answers for me that question we all ask at some point about the meaning of life. Life is about justifying the space we took up, the resources we used, the oxygen we thieved from others who might have used it more productively."

Humm, "earning" one's death? Stop right there please.

I had a tough time wrapping my head around that notion. I mean, did those who sacrificed their lives



in the struggle for human rights — Bishop Tutu, Viola Luzzio and Dr. King among them — "earn" their deaths? Did the thousands who lost their lives to COVID-19 "earn" their death certificates? Did the hundreds of thousands of Haitians who perished from devastating hurricanes "earn" their deaths?

C'mon now Mr. Baldwin, is "earn" the appropriate word here?

Look, Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "earn" as receiving something in return for effort and especially for work done or services rendered. So, taken that definition literally, is death the reward for "services rendered?" Well, that's a bit of a stretch for me.

Switching now to thinking about one's mortality, let alone writing about it, I'm here to tell you that's no easy task. The thought can cause discomfort. But if we accept mortality — of course we have no other choice but to accept it — as an opportunity to reflect on the beauty and sacrifices of one's life and unique accomplishments, then "earning" becomes a bit more palatable. My hunch is that's the real meaning of the Baldwin quote.

So rather than quibble over semantics — "earned" versus something better — like I admit to doing,

let's direct our attention to the impressive biographies and stellar accomplishments of those who are no longer with us, including those far less known.

Now as we enter into a new year, let's soldier on — you, me, all of us — through a lagging global pandemic, political, economic and social upheaval and painful personal losses.

So rest in peace Betty White, Colin Powell, John Madden, Desmond Tutu, Harry Reid, Cicely Tyson, and all the rest.

Now one last personal quibble — If any of you insist on sticking with the word "earned," I'll insist on tagging it with the word "accolades."

Farewell to those we lost and Happy New Year to those who remain!

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller; a contributing writer with the *Chattanooga News Chronicle*, *The Douglas County Sentinel*, *The BlackMarket.com*, co-founder of the "26 Tiny Paint Brushes" writers' guild, and recipient of the *Dr. Martin Luther King Leadership Award*.

THIS WEEK IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY



DR. MARIE M. DALY (1921-2003)

Dr. Marie M. Daly was an American biochemist. She was raised in an education-oriented family, and Daly quickly received her B.S. and M.S. in chemistry at Queens College and New York University, respectively. After completing her Ph.D. at Columbia University — and becoming the first African American woman to obtain a Ph.D. in chemistry in the United States — Daly taught and conducted research. Daly's groundbreaking work helped clarify how the human body works. She died in New York City on October 28, 2003.

Daly was born on April 16, 1921, in Queens, New York. Daly came from a family that believed strongly in the power of education. Her father, Ivan C. Daly, had emigrated from the West Indies as a young man and enrolled at Cornell University to study chemistry. A lack of money blocked his path, however, and he was forced to quit college, instead returning to New York City where he found work as a postal clerk.

Daly's mother, Helen, grew up in Washington, D.C., and came from a family of readers. She spent long hours reading to her daughter and fostered Daly's love of books — in particular, those that centered on science and scientists.

After graduating from Hunter College High School, an all-girls institution in New York City, Daly attended Queens College in Flushing, New York, choosing to live at home in order to save money.

Daly graduated with honors in 1942, and to get around the fact that she didn't have much money for graduate school,

landed work as a lab assistant at her old college as well as a hard-earned fellowship. Both were instrumental in helping her to cover the costs of getting a graduate degree in chemistry from New York University.

Daly didn't waste time in completing her studies. She finished her master's degree in just a year and then, in 1944, enrolled at Columbia University as a doctoral student. Aided by her own ambition and intelligence, Daly was further helped by timing.

World War II was at its peak, and employers were looking for women to fill the jobs left by the scores of men who'd been sent overseas to fight. In addition, Columbia's chemistry program was being led by Dr. Mary L. Caldwell, a renowned scientist who helped blaze new trails for women in chemistry throughout her career.

At Columbia, Daly took to the lab, studying how the body's chemicals help digest food. She finished her doctorate — unknowingly making history as the first female African American to receive a Ph.D. in chemistry in the United States — in 1947.

Fascinated by the human body's complicated inner workings, Daly landed a grant in 1948 from the American Cancer Society. This was the start of a seven-year research program at the Rockefeller Institute of Medicine, where Daly examined how proteins are constructed in the body.

In 1955, Daly returned to Columbia, working closely with Dr. Quentin B. Deming on the causes of heart attacks. Their groundbreaking work, which was later relocated to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University in New York, disclosed the relationship between high cholesterol and clogged arteries. That work opened up a new understanding of how foods and diet can affect the health of



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the heart and the circulatory system.

In addition to her research work at Einstein, Daly also taught biochemistry courses. Recognizing the importance of her own career path, Daly championed efforts to get students of color enrolled in medical schools and graduate science programs. In 1988, she started a scholarship, in honor of her father, for minority students who want to study science at Queens College.

Daly retired from Albert Einstein College in 1986. Her many honors included induction into Phi Beta Kappa as well as being tapped as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Daly, who married Vincent Clark in 1961 and whose full married name was Marie Maynard Daly Clark, died in New York City on October 28, 2003.