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Life after Death as a Part of History

Wanting to live forever is not an uncommon fantasy, both in real life and in fiction. As a child, I frequently wished that I would never die, if only because lying in a hole in the ground with no one to talk to sounded incredibly lonely. Find any work of fiction about those cursed with long life – *The Lord of the Rings*, *Tuck Everlasting*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* – and it becomes immediately apparent that eternal life is not a good thing. However, it's not an undying body that intrigues me so much. What fascinates me is the idea of an immortal name: one that carries so much weight that people who live two thousand years from now will know it like they know the alphabet.

The concept first caught my attention when I was reading *The Iliad* a few years ago. Achilles was not necessarily concerned with living, but with leaving a legacy, so that he would be remembered long after he was gone. What really drove the story home for me, though, was that he succeeded; there I was, reading about him about three thousand years after the fact. At some point I realized how monumental it was to leave your name behind after death, because if you truly left your mark on the world, then people would remember you for it. And if you were recorded in history than ever, then almost nobody would have a stronger hold on the world than you.

The topic is not as relevant to me as one might think. I have no expectations of being immortalized. Of the approximately seven billion people who share the planet, only a scant few

will be important enough to be remembered beyond their grandchildren's grandchildren. Fewer still will make their mark in history. On the other hand, I am a writer, and the fact that this topic fascinates me so much makes me eager to explore it, both through research and in my writing. Though this paper mostly focuses on instances of this immortality, I would later like to learn more about the motivations behind it so that they would be reflected in the drive and ambition of my characters.

Unfortunately, sources found on the school databases did not cater to this topic. While many people aspire to be famous, it would seem that it is not nearly as common for them to consider "making history" in the same way that Achilles wanted. To gather research on immortality, I instead focused on individual cases. I wanted to examine the methods and ways in which renown manifested in those who remained well-known after death. The people I examined had all managed to leave their marks in some way so that they were remembered posthumously; though I have no way of knowing how well they'll be known a thousand years from now, they seem to be off to a good start.

Reading these sources on famous and renowned people helped me examine the path to immortality that many took. In doing so, it became apparent that while any of a long list of contributions could lead one toward recognition, most of them fell into one of two categories: those that positively affected humanity or the world, and those who had a negative impact. Those who had a positive impact are exemplified in any number of historical figures, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. How does any historical figure become so important to us that we celebrate his actions and take a day off every year for him? Out of the large number of people involved in the civil rights movement, King stood out because he did more than just fight for a cause. He propelled the movement with his actions and spread the use of nonviolent activism,

which continues to be an inspiration and an honorable means to an end (Raboteau). Those who are responsible for inventions and technological developments, as well as those known for their good deeds and generosity, also fall into this category of “constructive” contributors to humanity – as long as we make it a point of recognizing their accomplishments. Many great inventors, philanthropists, and other contributors go unnoticed, simply because they are content to contribute without fanfare.

On the other hand, there are some major differences when one takes a more harmful path to immortality. Being the cause of a tragedy, mass murder, or some other calamity can almost be considered the “easier” means of making history – not necessarily in terms of execution, but in terms of morality. There are fewer or no moral inhibitors where evil deeds are concerned. For this reason, it would seem that someone who is bent on renown, with little interest in how it is achieved, this is the road he or she would take. Why? People talk about death. Entire nations will mourn for a large-scale tragedy. Look at 9/11 and the Holocaust as examples: people remember those events, both to honor the dead and to try to keep such an event from ever happening again. Because of that, they will never go away. Interestingly, after the shootings at Columbine, the students there absolutely did not want this to happen. “They were repulsed by phrases...like ‘since Columbine’ or ‘prevent another Columbine’” (Cullen 250). They didn’t want their school to be the name of a tragedy. But it did, and for someone with immortality in mind, that alone is a victory, regardless of his or her own fate.

The above categories would suggest that most immortalized names come from either helpful or harmful deeds, as these are the ones that actually impact mankind or the world. However, there is something of a neutral ground for some people. This is where legends such as sports stars and people with polarizing viewpoints might find themselves. We recognize sports

stars for their successful careers, not for their impact on the world. While there are some athletes or stars that are known for more than their exploits in entertainment, the majority do not pursue other causes. People of polarizing views are in the opposite situation, one that politicians and other leaders might find themselves in: they might try to have a great impact, but people's opinions can vary so greatly that whether these impacts are positive or negative depend entirely on one's viewpoint.

Research also allowed me to identify the ways in which immortality can manifest. The most common and accessible – at least to students such as me – would be a history textbook. These are the people that students will learn about and (hopefully) memorize, because it is expected that we recognize them and their accomplishments. Our education is intended to keep us aware of these important people, even as we move beyond school and begin careers of our own. As time passes, those textbooks will grow longer, always there to provide information on the movers and shakers on the world in any era. However, these are not the only records where people's names are recognized. Others, usually athletes, performers, and entertainers, usually find their names immortalized in museums and halls of fame. For example, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was built to commemorate players such as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and Honus Wagner, opening in 1939 with a total of twenty-five members (Lipping). The difference between recognition in a hall of fame and recognition from a textbook is a large one, though. The names in the National Baseball Hall of Fame will naturally only be known to those interested in the sport. It's a far cry from unlimited recognition, but this might not be an important distinction to those who are involved, as it might be considered a success if a name endures at all.

A step beyond this is the success of having something named after you. The tradition of naming things after famous people has existed for long enough that anything from buildings to asteroids to parks to chemical elements can be stamped with someone's name: the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, Turner Field. The crater on Mars known as Asimov is an excellent example of such a marker; he was a prolific science fiction writer, making the crater as well as literary award named after him thematically appropriate ("Planetary Names").

Unfortunately, the practice and honor are cheapened by the ease with which people can name objects after themselves. Having a star named after you may seem like a lofty goal, until you find out that the process is outlined by a quick search on eHow.com (Jardin). Samuel Arbesman published an article to the Boston Globe detailing the "formula" for having any other concept or principle named after you – though whether or not it actually becomes significant is not a sure thing. This leads me to the conclusion that it is easy to mislead oneself with the illusion of immortality. Yes, the star that you paid to have named after you will exist after your death, but this is not true immortality. There is no recognition and no impact, so there is little purpose in the gesture other than to mislead oneself.

The reverse of this is also a great possibility. Oftentimes, someone will have a great impact on the world, yet his or her name will be lost, out of either negligence or lack of interest. Any number of cultural icons and technological developments can be created in this way. Even as a thing or idea becomes an integral part of our daily lives, we might forget about the people behind them. The creation of Superman is an example of this. Writers such as Larry Tye have been able to uncover the reasons behind Superman's status as a cultural icon; regardless of whether or not you consider him a compelling character eighty years after his creation, he has found his position as a role model, as a paragon of righteousness, as the protector of Truth,

Justice, and the American Way (“Superman”). Meanwhile, his creators, Joel Shuster and Jerry Siegel died in 1992 and 1996, respectively. One does not need to know about Siegel and Shuster to know about Superman, and for that reason it is possible that they will fade into obscurity, even as their creation endures.

As the chances of me walking the earth forever to observe how people become legendary are slim to none, my best option for learning about it is to focus on those who have appeared to attain immortality, as well as projections for the future. I chose most of the examples used in this essay by asking for my brother’s opinion on certain historical figures; I could expand this question to survey others about which historical figures they would consider to be the most prominent. I could also find out about possibilities for the future by asking others which figures they think would become legendary. Furthermore, I would like to ask who or what people would personally like to pass on to their children or others, as that is an example of how someone worth talking about becomes a recognized figure worth remembering.

As a writer, I have considered other questions that I would like to explore in the future. For one, is striving for immortality ‘worth it’? At first glance, it might seem like an incredibly lofty goal. But what’s the point of striving for something you can never observe? No matter how you live your life, it’s entirely possible that you’ll be forgotten a few generations after death. Conversely, you could live your life in obscurity, only to explode into fame posthumously. What most fascinates me about this dilemma is that you have absolutely no way of knowing; the best you can do is follow others’ examples and hope for the best. Another question that I would like to examine is this: what if we didn’t so strongly emphasize crimes and travesties? As mentioned earlier, if someone seeking immortality does so through violence, our innate need to recognize and pay homage to these deeds is the fastest way for such a person to

succeed. If, on the other hand, we refused to give the perpetrator the satisfaction, would he or she turn to other methods or be dissuaded? Or would they try to attempt something so big that it could not possibly be ignored?

There are quite a few options for what I can do with the information I have and will gather. Since most of the research I did was on a case-by-case basis, I could use this information to come up with a profile of the typical historical figure. What qualities do all or most of these great figures share? It's entirely possible that they have much in common besides their drive to change the world: similar backgrounds, personality traits, and so on and so forth. This "profile" would actually trivialize the idea of immortality for me, as it would take away some of the feeling of accomplishment involved. Nevertheless, I feel that this is the sort of information that might interest other people more than it would me. Someone would treat the information as a sort of checklist to eternal recognition, because it's our nature to look for the simplest way to do things. On the other hand, it seems that the people who go around saying they want to make history are generally thought of as slightly egotistical. And even though achieving immortality might be solid proof that one's time on Earth was worthwhile, it is not something that I would openly attempt. I would write about it, and I might continue to study it, but it is too abstract to be a personal goal.

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