

Memento Mori, Re: This Week in Google Alerts: conference, sketch

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 13 Jul 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6569>

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Gwern Branwen — 13 Jul 2014, 18:50

On Mon, Jun 30, 2014 at 12:47 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern at gwern.net> wrote:

- Via <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jenniferfitz/2014/06/should-you-be-writing-right-now-and-what-about-the-kids-and-what-about-a-conference-this-summer/>, <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/9005474225.html> "Prominent Catholic Writers to Speak at Catholic Writers Conference in Chicago Area":

By the way, I know how easy it is to let time slip by and never get around to doing something you always intended to do but never quite got around to. If you want to write fanmail, see Wolfe in the flesh, get an autograph for a book, perhaps buy an autographed special edition etc, you should do so soon. As soon as possible.

It will sound morbid to point this out, but the odds are not good for Wolfe surviving too many more years, and if you pass up opportunities you may well discover you passed up your last such opportunity. List members may not have much experience with how elderly people can abruptly decline and die, or how mortality exponential increases over time in the Gompertz curve, so here's some numerical calculations from SSA actuarial tables.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Wolfe tell us that Wolfe is now age 83. <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html> 83: instantaneous risk of death that year, 0.083230 or 8.3%; remaining life expectancy: 6.66 years.

Over the next 7 years, each year an American male's risk of death is:

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Risk increases dramatically each year, and since that's just the risk each year, the cumulative risk increases even more dramatically. This is why despite billions of people on earth, only one person (Jeanne Calment) has survived to 122 years (and the record age has actually fallen steadily ever since).

The probability of surviving to a particular age is the conjunction of each negated risk (since you have to not die in each previous year); so to survive to 84, one has to beat $1 * (1 - 0.083230) = 0.9168$, and to survive to 85, one has to beat $1 * (1 - 0.083230) * (1 - 0.091933) = 0.8325$, and so on. It's easy to automate the calculation up to age 93 in Haskell:

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Or, the probability an American male (like Gene Wolfe) will survive to a specified age, having survived to age 83, is:

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These figures are population-wide averages, which don't take into account individual circumstances. On the positive side, Wolfe is high-status and has received many honors and can look back on a sterling writing career with great satisfaction; on the negative, Wolfe has lost his wife recently, which is a well-known risk factor for men, is not in perfect health, and may be overweight. On net, I'd say these figures are underestimates.

So, this implies that if you pass up an opportunity this year in favor of next year, there's a >10% chance Wolfe will be permanently delayed; if you wait 2 years, ~20%, 3 years, 25%, and so on. These are not negligible risks.

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Marc Aramini — 13 Jul 2014, 23:22 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

The stressful and long decline of rosemary is concerning. This might be the most depressing analysis ever undertaken on urth list. I have felt myself to be very fortunate in my childhood heroes. I am so grateful that my time and Gene's just happened to overlap significantly.

There's a picture at the Fuller award I didn't know was taken at the time, where, for the many kindnesses he showed me, thinking we were mostly alone, I told him that I loved him, and he would always be my hero, thinking I would never see him again. Then the nebulas were in California the very next year, and Gene named grandmaster, so it proved to not be the last time.

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Antonin Scriabin — 13 Jul 2014, 23:26 · in reply to Marc Aramini

At first I was depressed, then I was interested in the math, then I was depressed again, then Marc's picture cheered me up. Here's to all the best for Gene.

On Jul 13, 2014 7:22 PM, "Marc Aramini" <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:
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Marc Aramini — 13 Jul 2014, 23:53 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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the beginning and mid 20th centuries as well as meet some of the new faces. I sat at dinner with Connie Willis, chatted with Joe Haldeman as he wrote, had Robert Silverberg ask to pet my dog, sat at a panel where the guy who wrote Logan's Run and other SF screenplays talked about the construction of so many of the classic movies and moments in SF ... SF fandom is truly special for that. (How many times have I, frustrated at elderly drivers or shoppers in Arizona, quipped about Logan's Run? And there sitting at the front of the room was the man who provided the punchline for my least humanitarian nastiness). When I was a child I got to meet Jack Williamson - he lived about 30 minutes away from me, and I curse the foolishness that did not lead me to seek out Roger Zelazny while he was living in Santa Fe, mere hours away, though I was a fan of his by the 4th grade. I feel like fans of truly popular entertainment are cheated of this closeness. When I saw my name in the SFWA directory, with my address and phone number next to the addresses and phone numbers of most of the authors I had grown up reading, it was an ethereal and impossible feeling. Most of the other famous personages throughout history are lost in antiquity, forever inaccessible to us, or others are so overwhelmed with inexplicable and mostly unwarranted fame (actors? golfers? really?) that they are unapproachable.

Marc Aramini — 13 Jul 2014, 23:59 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Marginally off topic, having said all that and been rather smug in my dismissal of "popular" entertainers, if you hang out in Las Vegas boxing gyms you will meet an amazing number of famous boxers coming through to train or with their proteges, most fairly friendly and accessible and happy to be recognized - the sport must now be something more of a niche thing than it used to be, much as SF probably is. I felt a little bad after I wrote that last sentence below.

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