

Saturday, 30th January 2021

Life is short

When I was a kid, I used to often think about finishing my homework and going out to play. I often lamented that the day is so short, I need more time to play. Is life actually short, or are the adults just complaining about its finiteness? Would we complain if the average life span was 200 years instead of the now average of 70+ years in most developed countries?

Eventually, I stopped wondering about this and life moved on. Later, as I entered high school, I started learning about some of my favourite concepts of mathematics like elementary statistics, combinatorics and probability. We learnt about the average life expectancy, probability of events and measuring them using math. The idea that math could help you predict with reasonable certainty about some events stuck with me. Later that year, we celebrated my dad's 50th birthday. And that is when it gave me a way to answer the question, and the answer is that life is short.

Dad's 50th birthday gave me a way to convert a continuous quantity- time into small discrete quantities. The realization that there might be only 25-30 more Diwali celebrations with him or that you only get 25-30 new year eves with him hit me. As a teenager with no partner and responsibilities, obviously parents played a very important part of my life. I am not saying 25-30 years is short, but if you had a handful of your 10 cookies or you had a shelf of 10 books to choose from, the quantity would definitely seem limited, no matter what your lifespan was.

Ok, so now we know life is indeed short. What difference does it make by knowing that? For most people life goes on and it is pointless keeping up with this wishful thinking and not living in the present. But for me, this realization has led to a thinking of "Life is too short for bullshit in the long run". This generalized statement can mean different things for different people. Some things I can think of are-unnecessary meetings, pointless disputes, bureaucracy, posturing, signaling, having to dealing with other people's mistakes, traffic jams, addictive but unrewarding pastimes.

There are two ways bullshit gets in your way: its either forced on you or it tricks you into accepting it is the norm. Things that lure you into wasting your time have to be really good at tricking you. One byproduct of technological progress is that, the things we like tend to become more addictive (often designed that way to keep the product sticky). This means that as time passes, we will increasingly have to make a conscious effort to avoid addictions.

This gets me to the second part of this essay. How to avoid bullshit? One should actively seek out things that matter. But different things matter to different people, and most have to learn what matters to them. A few are lucky and realize early on that they love math or taking care of animals or writing, and then figure out a way to spend a lot of time doing it. But most people start out with a life that's a mix of things that matter and things that don't, and only gradually learn to distinguish between them. For the young, most of the confusion is induced by artificial situations created at school (and now social media). As soon as you hit high school, what other kids think of you seems to be the most important thing in the world. This leads to kids wanting to 'fit in'- which is a perfect recipe to getting dragged into doing things that don't matter to you.

One heuristic for distinguishing stuff that matters is to ask yourself whether you will care about it in future. The fake stuff that usually tricks us has a very short shelf life of mattering in the long run. The things that matter aren't necessarily the ones people would call "important". Having coffee with a friend

matters. You won't feel later like that was a waste of time. One great thing about having small children or pets is that they make you spend time on things that matter: them. Kids will grab you by the sleeve while you are staring at your phone and ask "will you play with me". Similarly, a pet will often cajole you with his/her innocent eyes wanting to play ball. This is indeed a bullshit minimizing option.

Like most people, even I have taken life's shortness for granted and then those things are gone. People have plans to write that book, climb that mountain, go on that trip or whatever and then you realize that the window has closed. Some of the saddest windows close when other people move away (for work or education or even death). After a few of my close friends moved abroad, I wished I had spent more time with them in college. Some windows are shut forever and that irreversibility should not be taken for granted. Perhaps a better solution is to look at the problem from the other end. Cultivate a habit of impatience about the things you most want to do. Don't wait before climbing that mountain or writing that book or visiting your mother or calling that friend. You don't need to be constantly reminding yourself why you shouldn't wait. Just don't wait.

P.S: This essay certainly doesn't advocate the teenage phenomenon of YOLO. To conclude, we should relentlessly prune bullshit and savour the time that we have. Things don't make you happy; creating memories with people you care about make you happy.