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How should a seventy-three year-old celebrate his birthday? Take a hike? Climb a mountain? Get drunk? Feel sorry for himself? See a movie? Take a medical exam? Write a book? Go hunting? Watch TV? Go to work?

I chose work . . . and feeling sorry for myself.

Work, because I am alone, on the outer fringes of a throbbing organization, and won't be bothered unless I choose to be. Feeling sorry, because the future, or what's left of it, seems grim and unreliable. It's not the fact of old age, it is the withering and drying up part of it that generate my feelings of gloom and foreboding.

I look at others who have gone before me: my mother, a relative, a neighbor, all lost touch with any reality. I see many others barely holding on, generally confused, drifting in and out of reality. Yes, there are other, and different, examples. My father who died in his prime, a life of good health without doctors, save his final six months, and another, a super-charged friend and mentor who seven years younger than I am today, fell asleep reading, and never awoke.

The end, of course, is never in question, it is the means that begin to haunt me. Of course there is nothing to be done, no decisions to be made, no other path to choose, it will happen as it unfolds. I am not in charge.

But cheers! The day itself started with a wake-up greeting from my spouse of 41 years, followed by a birthday e-card from my dentist - a frightful invasion of privacy, I thought. Not long after, a call from my six-year-old baseball grandson, and one from my youngest child - there will be many more calls and cards to come before the close of the day, I'm sure.

I have to admit: it IS nice to be remembered, even on a birthday when spirits sag, but none of this familial attention will dispel the gloom - feeling sorry for oneself is deeply rooted and requires perspective, gratitude, peaceful hope and long suffering. In the past, writing it down worked best of all, and may it again . . . soon.

P.S. The morning after: by the way, to help shake the gloom, it doesn't hurt to drink a 1er Cru Pommard (2004) with your homemade birthday dinner of veal piccata.