

# Introduction

# The Good Story of Life



When death knocks at our door, how should we answer? A long time ago, I met Susan, a forty-year-old woman who did not look a day younger than sixty. She had a cancer that would not go away and, in spreading, had robbed her body of much of its weight. The treatments, and the fatigue that accompanied them, had left her drawn and breathless. She lay on her bed with tubes coming out from her abdomen and her nose, a picture of someone in serious trouble.

As we talked, she said to me, “I’m fighting this illness, you know. That’s right, isn’t it? I’m doing what I can, having whatever treatments I am offered. It’s so important to my family that I don’t give in.”

I worried that Susan felt that she was doing the “right thing” for the onlookers, especially her family, rather than for herself. Even days from her actual death she was reading books on vegan diets despite having long since given up eating solid food at all. It was not at all clear to me that “fighting” was the right choice for her. Neither of us was sure.

When you read the daily papers and listen to celebrities who have cancer, the impression you get is that “fighting” is what you are supposed to do when faced with an illness that might kill you. I saw an old movie star interviewed on TV recently who declared bravely that his intention was to “lick the cancer” that had recently returned to his body after a few years of remission. The television audience cheered madly. Clearly, he had said the right words for them. This was war.

Not long after my conversation with Susan, I met Thomas, an eighty-year-old man whose cancer was also very advanced. As we chatted, he told me that he had “made peace with his God.” “I have lived a good life, done the things I wanted to do. I have some regrets—who doesn’t?—but I have resigned myself to God’s will. Whatever he decides about how long I will live is okay with me.”

When he spoke, he appeared very calm. Here was a man with a serious cancer who had made some kind of peace deal with his fate.

But it was not clear to me then that “making peace” was the best thing for him or for his family. Although Thomas appeared to be at peace with himself, some of his family confided in me that they thought he might have “given up.” They needed some sign that he *wanted* to live. Making peace didn’t really fit the bill.

But do war and peace exhaust our repertoire of responses to something that threatens to kill us? Are fighting or surrendering the sum total of our choices? The Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan Kenobi, observed wisely in a scene from the film *Star Wars* that there are more ways to deal with trouble than fighting. And he is right.

In *The Arabian Nights*, a king who witnesses too much infidelity among women, including his own wife, decides to sleep with a new woman every night and kill her in the morning. As the virgin women in his kingdom die, all parents with

daughters become increasingly gripped by fear. In a bid to stop the killings, Shahrazad, the eldest daughter of the king's most senior public official, offers herself to him. With the king's consent, she arranges for her youngest sister Dinarzad to sleep under his bed so that when he has had his way with her she may bid her farewell before morning.

Unbeknown to the King however, Shahrazad has arranged for her sister to ask her to tell her a story to while away the hours.

The arrangements go as planned, and Shahrazad begins her tale but fails to complete it. So that he can hear the ending, the king gives Shahrazad a reprieve from death and arranges for her to come to his bed the next night to make love and to hear the end of the story.

This she does and, when it is over, she begins a new story to fill in the remaining time. This one is also interrupted by the dawn and so night after night—for a thousand and one nights—Shahrazad extends her own life and those of all the virgin women in the kingdom. Eventually she bears children for the king and he ends his serial revenge on womanhood.

Shahrazad lives not by fighting the king or resigning herself to her fate, but by engaging the heart and mind of that which might kill her. Eventually she lives for more than a thousand and one nights. She tells stories, each one designed for one night only, to allow her to live until the next day—not forever, not for eleven nights, or a hundred; not even for a thousand and one nights. Eventually, of course, Shahrazad dies, probably of old age, but it is not the king's wrath that kills her.

We see this all the time in people who seem to be very close to dying but don't die. Instead they live on to have an important role in the story of their last Christmas, or their daughter's birthday, or that special visit from an old friend. We see it in people who battle on with serious heart disease or a cancer that never seems to go away and, then, while working on other plans, eventually die of something else all together.

The stories we tell ourselves are central to our lives because they give them purpose and meaning. Although we must all do what is necessary to live, and sometimes this might mean being a fighter or a peacemaker, necessity does not make us *want* to live. All of us live through our own stories, and to go on living we must continue to tell them—the big ones: The best dad in history; The woman who made a difference to others; The boy who knew too much; The girl who loved cats; The family that planted trees; or The woman who told her illness who was in charge of her appointment diary. These are the stories worth living for, the stories that MAKE us live. They do not protect us from death or loss, because no story can do that but, as Shahrazad has taught us in *The Arabian Nights*, a story can make our day. And a day at a time is all we need.

The chapters in this book are forged from some of my own and other people's stories. Some are woven from some of the world's great folktales and legends. I have shared them with people living in the shadow of death. And I share them with you in the same spirit.

Some day we will all die. But in the meantime, you can offer Death this warning: as Shahrazad is my witness, good stories can take a long time to tell.