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Approx. 900 words

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## BEFORE I DIE...

by Terry Black

I'm tormented by a chalkboard.

But not just any chalkboard, it's the one at St. George's Episcopal Church in Lake Forest – a venerable house of worship, with a vaulted ceiling and beautiful stained glass windows. Outside there's a promenade, with a greeters table, a memorial garden, and – my personal fixation – a chalkboard.

With a very special feature: there's a prompting message, repeated twelve times, in two columns of six apiece. And that message is BEFORE I DIE, I WANT TO <blank space goes here>. You have twelve chances to say what you'd like to do, before that Great Dirt Nap begins.

Just one problem: There's no chalk.

It seems like no big deal. Others shrug and move on, going “Huh” and leaving their thoughts unspecified. But to me, that blank board is like an itch unscratched, taunting us with possibilities. Why provide space but no writing utensils? Why ask the question with no means to answer it?

Finally, I can bear it no longer. One Sunday I go to Office Depot and buy a box of chalk, for a dollar and twenty-nine cents, that's my entire purchase. And I go back at Saint George's and deposit them in the little holder-rack under the chalkboard. I wonder if I can be accused of malicious chalk providing, or perhaps defacing a public surface with self-revelatory insights.

But what to write? Sadly, my first ideas aren't as lofty as one might hope:

*Before I die, I would like to sneeze, belch and fart at the same time.*

*Before I die, I would like be named People Magazine's Sexiest Man Alive, beating out Brad Pitt and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who come in second and third.*

Neither of these seems church-appropriate, so they're nixed from the chalkboard. Instead I try something more thoughtful: *Before I die, I would like to stop worrying about when I will.* Because no matter how convinced you are of a lemon-scented afterlife, up there in the cirrocumulus, we're all dreading that final sendoff, aren't we? The fear of that (I believe) is what drives people to church in the first place, one of the biggest issues we all grapple with. It belongs up on that chalkboard.

Of course, that leaves eleven spaces unfilled, and I'm curious to see what the other congregants chime in with. (Full disclosure: I'm not really an Episcopalian. I belong to the Tapestry Unitarian Church, but we're renovating and St. George's has graciously allowed us to share their facility.) But the question remains: What do they want to do here on Earth, before whatever comes next?

I hope to find out, and I'm not disappointed. The following Sunday, I find lots of ambitions laid bare.

*Before I die, they write, I want to make a difference/ be a good person/ learn to live/ see my son become a doctor.* Others want to own a Corgi, skydive, or visit Russia. I can't tell which

are Episcopal and which are Tapestry, because the groups have more in common that you'd think (as our minister, Kent Doss, keeps reminding us). But it's a rare privilege, seeing these wishes revealed in a public forum.

Two entries are memorable: *Before I die, I want to be forgiven* and *Before I die, I want to eat an entire pie in one sitting*. Someone else has written in the margin, either the word "by" or "with," followed by "Jesus." But you can't tell which entry it applies to. All we know is that someone either wants to be forgiven by Jesus, or to eat a whole pie with him.

It's fun and fascinating, seeing all this played out on a church chalkboard, but it can't last forever. Over the next few weeks, little doodles start appearing on the board, like soccer balls, smiley faces, even one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. *Kids can use chalk too*, I realize, and while it's totally wholesome by graffiti standards, it doesn't exactly set a tone of reverence and decorum.

Apparently, we've crossed some sort of appropriate-for-church threshold, because one Sunday we show up to find the board wiped clean, the chalk confiscated, the doodles gone to doodle heaven. I consider replacing the chalk, but decide I've already bothered God enough. From this point on, future yearnings must go unexpressed.

So what have we learned from this adventure, Dorothy?

Well, first is that these wishes are not whimsical (except, perhaps, for the pie). They involve family, travel, adventure, and forgiveness, all basic themes, like a Rorschach test for what you care about most. Ask yourself what *you'd* be doing, if you had only a few days to live, with no time to waste on banalities. If you were at St. George's right now, holding that chalk in your hand, what would you write?

And would you actually do it?

I suggest yes. Don't wait, do it now, today. Seriously, I don't want to hear anyone complaining how they didn't do it and now they're dead. Go out right now, while you've still got a pulse, and buy a Corgi, go to Russia, skydive, belch, sneeze and/or fart, however the spirit moves you.

As for me, well, most of all, I'd like to write a thoughtful, persuasive article that doesn't rely on snarky humor and stupid dead jokes.

But not today.