

“Keep on keeping on... until you don't”

Hey, this is Wallace Darwin, and today I want to talk about survival and why some living things don't survive.

I'm here on my block, where I grew up — right over there — where I still live. And as you can see, I live right near the cemetery. A lot of people think that living just a stone's throw away from a cemetery is creepy, but I really wouldn't know any different. I never really found Washington Cemetery, which practically surrounds my house, to be all that creepy or scary. When I was younger I was the one haunting this place, and as a result I know pretty much every corner. Back in social studies class we used to be able to like look out the window over the cemetery in high school and we could see all the headstones while we're sitting there talking about all these dead guys. And even today, I catch the bus right over there. The bus stop is right next to the cemetery. So the one thing about living so close to a cemetery is that you just never really forget that death exists, but for whatever reason that doesn't weird me out the way it might weird other people out.

The one thing that all these headstones have always reminded me is that death is unavoidable. It is not a question of whether you die, but when you die. And the way I look at it, what matters most is not so much how long you live, but what happens during that lifetime. Life is a lot about surviving, and how well you can survive influences not just how long you live but the quality of that life. So what determines which living things survive, and for how long?

I guess when we think about survival, the first thing we think about is meeting our basic needs. For animals that means finding enough food, and for us humans it's no different. Although I have to say that us humans don't seem to be hurting too much for food these days, but wild animals still need to hustle for their food. I gotta figure that some animals are just better than others at that hustle than others, and that means that some wild animals aren't going to find enough food and they aren't going to survive. And then obviously we all need water to survive — plants, animals, everybody — and if you don't have enough water to survive you're going to die. Plants are interesting because they also need light and if you think about plants, they're almost like fighting each other for light. If you have a couple trees growing next to each other, it's almost like they are fighting each other for the sun. So you have to imagine that you're a tree and you get placed next to another tree, and there's not enough light for you to survive because that other tree can grow taller than you, then you might not survive. So just meeting your basic needs is a big part of surviving.

Survival is not just about keeping your body — or whatever you are made of — alive... you also need to make sure nothing disastrous happens to you. I tend to get to work before the start of my shift, and me and a bunch of the other early birds like to take our breakfast here

at Calvert Vaux park because it's just down the road from the garage. So one day me and my buddy Sloan Williams are sitting in his truck right over there, eating our breakfast, and all of the sudden this big hawk swoops out of the sky and plucks a squirrel right out of that tree right there and then flies over there to that baseball backstop and pretty much eats that squirrel right in front of us. Now I guess you could say that that particular squirrel was not very good at avoiding being eaten by hawks — not watching out for hawks — but you gotta figure that some squirrels are because otherwise there would be no squirrels. And it is not like hawks are the only thing that you need to watch out for if you are a squirrel living in Brooklyn. A lot of roads are pretty treacherous, and we have all seen the little guys squashed, particularly in high-traffic areas. So a big part of the challenge if you are a squirrel really depends on where you end up living. You could stay here at Calvert Vaux and only have to watch out for hawks, but if you avoid traffic you also might miss out on all the good eating across the Belt at the park with more people and more food.

Meeting your basic needs and avoiding predictable disasters is a good formula for survival, but what about disasters you can't control? We had a guy die on the job a few years back, really nice guy and he was always careful and safe. He was up on a ladder lashed to a strand and he'd followed all the protocols — he had cones out, he was well-stabilized — and just as he's about to get to the top of the ladder and clip his belt in, this moron backs his car over the cones and into the ladder, and this guy falls and breaks his neck and dies. Freaky accident, but freaky accidents can kill you. Meanwhile we have some real dopes that work out of my garage and they're always doing things the fast way rather than the safe way and they still manage to survive in spite being so sloppy. So when you see that a plant or an animal has managed to survive, maybe it's doing all the right things to survive where it lives, or maybe it's just lucky.

I mean, even where you are born is a matter of luck. Maybe I am born here. Or maybe I am born here. Or maybe I am born here. Or maybe I am born and die and end up here before I even have a chance to grow and survive. Living things can't control where they are born, and if you are born in the wrong place at the wrong time, it might not matter how good at surviving you are.

The thing about luck is it makes no sense. So if which living things made it and which ones didn't was based on luck alone, I don't think that the living world would be so orderly and logical. So luck's got a role to play, but it can't be the whole story.

I think that most people wish that they could live forever, or at least they think they would like to live forever. Me, I'm not so sure because if you knew that you could live forever you'd probably never get going on anything because you'd always know that there's tomorrow to get things done. Knowing that you are going to die is like a kick in the butt to get going on something productive or valuable, whatever that means for you.

But why can't we live in this world forever? I don't think that we die simply so we can know to make the most of our lives, because most living things don't even know they're alive: they just live until they don't anymore.

Some folks see death as part of some grand plan. My mom, I know what she would say... Lynn's take would be *God will take you when he sees your work is done on this Earth, it's all part of God's grand plan*. But if there is some plan behind who lives and who dies, I sure can't figure that plan out. I guess you could say that if we all lived forever there would be no space in the world for future generations, but the way I figure it, if we all lived forever why would we even bother having babies in the first place? So I don't see any big plans behind all the death in the world.

I guess you might say that bodies break down over time and that's why we die, and that's definitely to some degree true. You that with people. If you think about people, what they can do when they are sixty is a lot different than what they can do when they are twenty, especially when it comes to things that involve pushing their bodies to the limit. So you might figure that breaking down, your body breaking down is inevitable, but I am not totally sure about that either. I mean, back in elementary school I used to have these pet mice for awhile and even though I was totally on point with watering and feeding those guys, those little suckers they would die after like a year or so. I mean, they more than made up for it by making a ton of babies, though. But it seems to me if mice break down more quickly than people do, maybe breaking down is not inevitable. And if people can break down more slowly than mice can, why can't some living things just nothing break down at all? And I kind of almost think that some living things *can* live forever. If you look here at Friends Field, some of these trees, some of them look like they are hundreds of years old, and I am not so sure that trees die of old age. It seems like a tree could live forever if a storm didn't come along or if somebody didn't come after it with a chainsaw.

So why life has limits is still a big mystery, to me and probably to a whole lot of other folks.