

Yehuda Yudkowsky, 1985-2004

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Spanish Translation Available.

Original: <http://yudkowsky.net/yehuda.html>

The next page is best
viewed pressing
Ctrl + 2 (Fit to Width)
and then scrolling through
the text.

My little brother is dead.
Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky

He died November 1st.
His body was found without identification.
The family found out on November 4th.

I spent a week and a half with my family in Chicago,
and am now back in Atlanta.

I've been putting off telling my friends
because it's such a hard thing to say.

I used to say:
"I have four living grandparents
and I intend to have four living grandparents
when the last star in the Milky Way burns out."

I still have four living grandparents
but I don't think I'll be saying that any more.

Even if we make it to and through the Singularity
it will be too late.
One of the people I love won't be there.

The universe has a surprising ability to stab you through the heart from somewhere you weren't looking.

Of all the people I had to protect
I never thought that Yehuda might be one of them.

Yehuda was born July 11, 1985.

He was nineteen years old when he died.

The Jewish religion prescribes a number of rituals and condolences for the occasion of a death.
Yehuda has passed to a better place
God's ways are mysterious but benign
etc.

Does such talk really comfort people?
I watched my parents
and I don't think it did.

The blessing that is spoken at Jewish funerals is
"Blessed is God, the true judge."

Do they really believe that?
Why do they cry at funerals, if they believe that?
Does it help someone, to tell them that their religion requires them to believe that?

I think I coped better than my parents and my little sister Channah.
I was just dealing with pain
not confusion.

When I heard on the phone that Yehuda had died
there was never a moment of disbelief.

I knew what kind of universe I lived in.

How is my religious family to comprehend it
working from the assumption that Yehuda was murdered by a benevolent God?
as they must

The same loving God who arranges for millions of children to grow up illiterate and starving
I presume

the same kindly tribal father-figure who arranged the Holocaust
and the Inquisition's torture of witches.

I would not hesitate to call it evil
if any sentient mind had committed such an act
permitted such a thing.

But I have weighed the evidence as best I can
and I do not believe the universe to be evil
a reply which in these days is called atheism.

Maybe it helps to believe in an immortal soul.

I know that I would feel a lot better if Yehuda had gone away on a trip somewhere
even if he was never coming back.

But Yehuda did not "pass on".
Yehuda is not "resting in peace".
Yehuda is not coming back.
Yehuda doesn't exist any more.
Yehuda was absolutely annihilated at the age of nineteen.

Yes
that makes me angry.
I can't put into words how angry.
It would be rage to rend the gates of Heaven and burn down God on His throne
if any God existed.
But there is no God
so my anger burns to tear apart the way-things-are
remake the pattern of a world that permits this.

I wonder at the strength of non-transhumanist atheists
to accept so terrible a darkness without any hope of changing it.

But then most atheists also succumb to comforting lies
and make excuses for death even less defensible than the outright lies of religion.

They flinch away
refuse to confront the horror of a hundred and fifty thousand sentient beings annihilated every day.

One point eight lives per second
fifty-five million lives per year.

Convert the units
time to life
life to time.

The World Trade Center killed half an hour.

As of today
all cryonics organizations together have suspended one minute.
This essay took twenty thousand lives to write.

I wonder if there was ever an atheist who accepted the full horror
making no excuses
offering no consolations
who did not also hope for some future dawn.

What must it be like to live in this world
seeing it just the way it is
and think that it will never change
never get any better?

Yehuda's death is the first time I ever lost someone close enough for it to hurt.

So now I've seen the face of the enemy.

Now I understand the price of half a second.
a little better

I don't understand it well
because the human brain has a pattern built into it.

We do not grieve forever
but move on.

We mourn for a few days and then continue with our lives.

Such underreaction poorly equips us to comprehend Yehuda's death

Nineteen years of life and memory annihilated.
7053 days

A thousand years
or a million millennia
or a forever
of future life lost.

The sun should have dimmed when Yehuda died
and a chill wind blown in every place that sentient beings gather
to tell us that our number was diminished by one.

But the sun did not dim
because we do not live in that sensible a universe.

Even if the sun did dim whenever someone died
it wouldn't be noticeable except as a continuous flickering.

Soon everyone would get used to it
and they would no longer notice the flickering of the sun.

My little brother collected corks from wine bottles.

Someone brought home a pair of corks they had collected for Yehuda
and never had a chance to give him.

And my grandmother said
"Give them to Channah
and someday she'll tell her children about how her brother Yehuda collected corks."

My grandmother's words shocked me
stretched across more time than it had ever occurred to me to imagine
to when my fourteen-year-old sister had grown up and had married
and was telling her children about the brother she'd lost.

How could my grandmother skip across all those years so easily when I was struggling to get through the day?

I heard my grandmother's words and thought:
she has been through this before.

This isn't the first loved one my grandmother has lost
the way Yehuda was the first loved one I'd lost.

My grandmother is old enough to have a pattern for dealing with the death of loved ones
she knows how to handle this because she's done it before.

And I thought:
how can she accept this?
If she knows
why isn't she fighting with everything she has to change it?

What would it be like to be a rational atheist in the fifteenth century
and know beyond all hope of rescue that everyone you loved would be annihilated
one after another as you watched
unless you yourself died first?

That is still the fate of humans today
the ongoing horror has not changed
for all that we have hope.

Death is not a distant dream
not a terrible tragedy that happens to someone else like the stories you read in newspapers.

One day you'll get a phone call
and the possibility that seemed distant will become reality.
like I got a phone call

You will mourn
and finish mourning
and go on with your life
and then one day you'll get another phone call.

That is the fate this world has in store for you
unless you make a convulsive effort to change it.

Since Yehuda's body was not identified for three days after he died
there was no possible way he could have been cryonically suspended.

Others may be luckier.

If you've been putting off that talk with your loved ones
do it.

Maybe they won't understand
but at least you won't spend forever wondering why you didn't even try.

There is one Jewish custom associated with death that makes sense to me
which is contributing to charity on behalf of the departed.

I am donating eighteen hundred dollars to the general fund of the Singularity Institute
because this has gone on long enough.

If you object to the Singularity Institute then consider Dr. Aubrey de Grey's Methuselah Foundation
which hopes to defeat aging through biomedical engineering.

I think that is a sensible coping strategy for transhumanist atheists
to donate to an anti-death charity after a loved one dies.

Death hurt us
so we will unmake Death

Let that be the outlet for our anger
which is terrible and just.

I watched Yehuda's coffin lowered into the ground and cried
and then I sat through the eulogy and heard rabbis tell comforting lies.

If I had spoken Yehuda's eulogy I would not have comforted the mourners in their loss.

I would have told the mourners that Yehuda had been absolutely annihilated
that there was nothing left of him.

I would have told them they were right to be angry
that they had been robbed
that something precious and irreplaceable was taken from them
for no reason at all
taken from them and shattered
and they are never getting it back.

No sentient being deserves such a thing.

Let that be my brother's true eulogy
free of comforting lies.

When Michael Wilson heard the news
he said:
"We shall have to work faster."

Any similar condolences are welcome.
Other condolences are not.

Goodbye Yehuda.
There isn't much point in saying it
since there's no one to hear.

Goodbye Yehuda
you don't exist any more.

Nothing left of you after your death
like there was nothing before your birth.

You died
and your family sat down at the Sabbath table
Mom and Dad and Channah and I just like our family had always been composed of only four people
like there had never been a Yehuda.

Goodbye Yehuda Yudkowsky
never to return
never to be forgotten.

Love,
Eliezer.