

The Last Great Drag

For some people, a cigarette is synonymous with death.

Cigarettes will kill you. *Dead.* I knew that before I ever started smoking; I knew it when I was doing a pack and a half a day; and although I recently started again, I knew it when I quit four or five months ago. I am, of course, more aware of the risk to my health today than ever before.

My vices are few, but the dread tobacco habit is prominent among them, for reasons that I myself do not completely understand. Not only will they kill you, cigarettes, but they'll discolor your teeth, shorten your

breath, burn away your spending money and get you discriminated against in public. So why, you ask, do I smoke them?

I'm not ashamed (but certainly not proud) to admit the one reason that I do understand: addiction. Let's not kid ourselves, folks, nicotine is a drug like any other, and more powerful than most. Cigarettes, and tobacco in general, are more addictive than heroin. No kidding. Believe me, I wish they weren't.

At least our society, if it doesn't exactly condone and en-

courage the use of the rank and hideous leaf, tolerates it to the extent of letting those of us who do use it the chance to go to hell in our own way. And a good thing, too. If our chosen leaders were to attempt, in some rabid, health-conscious frenzy to illegalize the use of tobacco in this country, the government would be savagely obliterated within the week. Can't you see it? Hundreds of thousands of smokers of all sexes, ages and colors unmindful of any law of God or man, their sanity long since evaporated in the white-hot fires of withdrawal, storming D.C. and chain-smoking the entire membership of both houses of Congress like human cigars. The White House in flames in the background—it's too horrible for any sane citizen to contemplate.

So nicotine is, and is likely to remain, a relatively innocuous vice. It's cheap, readily available to the public, and only mildly intoxicating. The only catch is that the habit will eventually kill you. *Dead.*

On the other hand, who really wants to live forever? The health research scientists and other wizards of our age treat any self-inflicted abuse of our bodies as an ultimately reprehensible crime. But what, I would ask them, is so overwhelmingly fascinating in human existence that we should all want to drag it out over a span of years in which, in all probability, we will have lost along with our teeth, our fertility and our youth, the enthusiasm for life?

Not that life is generally a valley of tears, but it can't remain a bowl of cherries for more than six or seven decades. Death is for most the last great mystery and adventure of life, despite the bad press it gets from insurance companies and Woody Allen.



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

Anyway, it's inevitable, so why fight it?

Not that death is in and of itself a good thing. Far from it. My cousin David, with whom I was very close, died two or three weeks after his seventeenth birthday and nobody in his or her right mind would say that the change did him any good. He was a smoker, but that wasn't what did him in. He was killed in a handgun accident a month or so after I had quit smoking. One of those coincidental ironies that would seem much funnier if death were not so humorless.

We traveled back to his hometown of Boise, Idaho for the funeral, where I witnessed a brief discussion of smoking that I will not soon forget.

After the ceremony we started down the road toward the cemetery gates and a female relative of mine named Daney produced a pack of cigarettes

and offered them around. To refuse took an almost superhuman act of will on my part, but I managed somehow not to take one. The only people in the car who weren't smoking were myself, my younger brother and the mortician, who was driving.

Daney, remembering her manners turned to the mortician and asked, "Oh, you don't mind if we smoke, do you?"

He solemnly turned to her, his eyes twinkling with mirth, and solemnly replied "No, not at all — you should know that I'd never object to anything that brings me more business."

We spent the rest of the ride home in thoughtful silence.

Cigarettes will kill you, but so what? We've all got to go some time. God bless Sir Walter Raleigh. Got a light?

— JOHN F. PIPER

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Spectrum

A publication of the Oregon Daily Emerald

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Cover Photo by Maria Corvallis

The editors will not be responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Submissions must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Writer's guidelines may be picked up at the Oregon Daily Emerald office, Rm. 300, Erb Memorial Union. Mailing address for Spectrum magazine is P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, Oregon 97403.