

My Deathday Party

by Peter Ellway

First of all, I am not a story-teller, and certainly not an original one. But the above title - I do think that I originated this in my own head, even though a google search showed that, guess what, the genius who wrote Harry Potter books, someone called Rowling, had already had the idea, or at least used the phrase. But J. K.'s concept of a deathday party was one in which ghosts celebrated the the anniversary of the day they became such, and invited their fellow-ghosts to it! If you know and like the HP stories (and sauce), you may remember that this part of the epic adventure, that of the Deathdays, involved Hogwarts ghost Nearly Headless Nick (played brilliantly by John Cleese in the Potter films).

But I digress - my idea for a deathday party was different from this amusing fantasy, and it was different too from so-called "living funerals" where ailing folk invite their friends to a last celebration of their lives while they are still around. I am both still alive and also in reasonable health, and for "deathday party" in my world please simply read "funeral". But I thought - why should I not send invites to people I know whom I would like to attend my funeral, whenever this should happen. I took it for granted that the guests would outlive me, though of course there was no way of knowing whether they would or not. My objective in all this was, I suppose, to get some sort of reaction, and also to indicate in an eerily unusual way that I valued each of the recipients. I passed on the names of the invitation recipients to my next of kin, in order that they would be able to carry out my wishes "to the letter" (a little joke here, although of course I sent emails) rather than leaving it to them to have to decide who to inform about my sad demise and the ensuing funeral. I also thought that my intended "guests" would in a way appreciate the advance warning of my mortality and my apparent expectation that they would indeed survive me. Thus there seemed to be several good reasons to begin this enterprise, and so that is what I did.

I should now tell you what my invitation said. It went as follows:

Dear Friend,

I do sincerely count you as a valued friend, and I therefore wish to invite you to my funeral, whenever that sad day may occur. I know that this will seem odd to you and I am not aware that anyone else has taken this course of action, but I feel that, assuming you accept my invitation, this accord will deepen the bond between us while we both live. If you should accept my invitation but change your mind by the time that action is required, this will of course be quite acceptable, and you need only inform my next of kin to this effect. My nearest and dearest do of course know what I am doing and are happy with it.

Eternal felicitations, Vivian

I was interested, to say the least, to hear from my invitees, and some replies duly came. The first few complimented me on my sense of humour but sounded concerned that I might be trying to tell them that I was not long for this world; I assured them that this was not the case and that it did me good to think ahead in this way, eccentric as it might seem. Some of those friends who were not quite as close to me were non-committal about whether they would be able to attend, and of course, in the case of some

friends and acquaintances who were older than me, several people pointed out that realistically I would be more likely to be attending their own funerals than, in essence, hosting them at my own. Whatever the response was, I replied as seemed appropriate. Most of the recipients in fact were happy to accept my invitation, however.

How wrong, how tragically wrong was I to think that this was all there was to my venture in terms of consequence! I heard nothing more from my friends for some weeks, then, alas, news came of the death of the very first recipient of my letter invitation; he had gladly accepted in a light-hearted manner which was typical of him. Even more tragically, this person was a good deal younger than I was; naturally I contacted his family with my condolences, but they could tell me nothing very much about the circumstances of his death. I mentioned to them the irony that I had recently invited him to my own future funeral as a sort of joke, though, naturally, I put this in more appropriately tactful terms. And then, sadly but somewhat wryly, I crossed him off my list as a non-attendee and thought little more of it - except of course that I would now be committed to attending my poor friend's funeral.

Nothing more in terms of correspondence was received for a week or so, but then I received a very positive further reply from an older person who had already accepted my call. Curiously, she added that she was so pleased and honoured (and amused) to receive my letter of invitation, and was indeed enjoying a bit of a boost in spirits and even health since receiving it (she said "Vivian, you funny old thing, trust you to think up a stunt like this! Anyway, bless you, you are just so good for me"). She also of course confirmed her acceptance of the funeral invitation (and kindly assured me that the date would be well into the future), and that was that. Fortunately, she continues to flourish in body and mind.

The third person to accept my invite was younger than me, and I was relieved that he appeared, after a few weeks, to be fine in health. Yet I later received an email from him in which he told me that he had just suffered a minor car crash and a whiplash neck injury. This greatly perturbed me in view of the previous death of my other young friend.

After several more responses from my friends and future deathday party attendees, with messages both positive and negative, a pattern was starting to emerge, I realised. All my acquaintances whom I had contacted and who had accepted my invitation appeared to be subsequently affected by it in ways I had never imagined and could not comprehend. Those who were older than I was appeared to be actually helped in their everyday lives, while the younger ones were suffering serious setbacks in their lives, including several fatalities. What had I started? Dare I make further enquiries into the possible links between my friends' ages and their fortunes after accepting my innocent invitations? And if the links were confirmed, should I cast my net wider as far as older acquaintances were concerned, rigorously avoiding anyone younger than myself of course?

I know not. But anyway, so, my dear friend of more recent times, now we come to you. I have no real idea how old you are, and I have not told you my age. I did not invite you to my funeral at the time that I sent my original set of invitations, but I now regard you too as a friend. So in the light of what you just heard, how do you feel about attending my funeral, whenever that might be?

Would it help you to decide if I first told you how old I am and in turn you tell me your age? And do you trust me enough not to lie about my own age for the sake of vanity - or even as an experiment?