

**Here Today and Gone Tomorrow**  
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Several weeks ago I watched a Mel Brooks movie called *The Twelve Chairs*; it's very funny. It takes place in Soviet Russia in the 1920s, so there is a lot of dark humor. The plot revolves around a formerly aristocratic family that lost everything during the Bolshevik Revolution and as the movie begins, the family's mother is dying. She tells the village priest, Dom DeLuise, and then her son, Ron Moody, that all of the cherished family jewels were sown into one of twelve dining room chairs, later confiscated by the government in the early years of the regime. Throw in a young itinerant con artist, Frank Langella, and the hunt and chase begins.

The movie opens with a delightfully catchy tune that is reminiscent of a Russian folksong (although it is actually based on a *Hungarian Dance* by Johannes Brahms):

*Hope for the Best; Expect the Worst.*

The lyrics are amusing, yet painfully frank:

*Hope for the best, expect the worst  
Some drink champagne, some die of thirst  
No way of knowing which way it's going  
Hope for the best, expect the worst!*

*Hope for the best, expect the worst  
The world's a stage, we're unrehearsed  
Some reach the top, friends, while others drop, friends  
Hope for the best, expect the worst!*

*I knew a man who saved a fortune that was splendid  
Then he died the day he'd planned to go and spend it  
Shouting "Live while you're alive! No one will survive!"  
Life is sorrow—here today and gone tomorrow...*

The words to this song came back to me over the weekend when I received a phone call from the eldest son of one of my close friends and a former colleague. He was sobbing as he told me that his father had died in a car crash the evening before on his way home from work.

The exact circumstances of the one-vehicle crash are not certain, but it seems there was a snow squall on a busy road between Augusta (Maine) and where he lived near Bath. The vehicle he was driving went off the road on a slight hill (it might have been mechanical...the vehicle had just come back from the shop for front-end repairs). Was he reaching for something? Did the vehicle begin to slide and he overcorrected? More than once it flipped over and went into a small pond and sank through the ice. He was seat belted, but the vehicle, a Jeep Cherokee, was upside down when it went under, the passenger compartment fully submerged in ten feet of water. Those who stopped to help were unable to do anything. In fact, it took rescuers close to two hours to get the vehicle stabilized enough to remove it from the pond.

It appears from news reports that the road was then sanded after the crash.

State Police on the scene stated that speed did not appear to be a factor.

Was there a medical problem? An inconclusive autopsy was performed but, thankfully, there wasn't any water in his lungs. He had had neck and back surgery; could the rollover have caused the fatal injury? Perhaps we'll never know.

He was looking forward to retiring from his position as a safety manager (for more than 30 years!) in two weeks. He was 67 years old. Left behind are his wife, three grown children, and five grandchildren.

For many years this department has been reminding our association's members that life is short...it is fragile...*here today, gone tomorrow*. The song continues: *Live while you're alive, no one will survive - there's no guarantee*.

When a close friend or a relative dies, a piece of you vanishes as well. It's that hollow empty feeling you get inside; some important part of you is now missing. Often, there is no chance to say good-bye. You want to say something to that person, but it's too late. In my case, it is to tell him how much he added to my life's experiences, and how grateful I am for having shared three decades as his friend. As safety "people" and colleagues who worked together on behalf of other entities, he and I often remarked on the bizarre situations others got themselves into in order to be injured; we shared laughs; laughed at our own shortcomings and mistakes (and there were plenty), and as time went on, the ground we covered and the things we learned in the process and the good things we accomplished (and there was a lot).

Professionally, we changed jobs but always kept in touch by phone or by e-mail, and got together for lunch at least once or twice a year.

But, life and death situations occur even to safety people, as did his crash. As professionals we are not exempt from situations like this, and neither is anyone else.

What lesson do we derive from this tragic situation? For one, we have to always be mindful of the limits of our mortality. We have to never take our lives or that of others for granted. “I’ll see you tonight” implies that nothing dangerous or life-threatening will happen to preclude that prediction. We naturally assume that we’ll return home for dinner, and all will be well. We put a bookmark in the book we’re reading, fully expecting to pick up where we left off. We expect the same of our loved ones.

We hear so often about *Safety First!* We live in a changing world, one that is seemingly more implausible, dysfunctional, and violent. To prevent from injuring ourselves, companies keep creating safety devices that are designed to take the thought out of safety and in the process we become reliant on these devices to keep us free from harm. This process facilitates the inevitable slide into complacency.

Machines and some tools come equipped with protective guards to lessen the potential of an injury...and users remove them for their convenience, risking injury. Technology is a good thing, but it must be used wisely. GPS units are marvelous tools so long as you don’t strictly rely on all the information they impart; back up alarms and cameras that assist in backing maneuvers must be used with mirrors; cell phones and other communicative devices are being built-into vehicles, but they still distract a driver from his or her principal task...driving...and the goal of arriving safely at a destination.

Safety comes first in everything we do...it permeates everything...but safety still depends on a decision maker.

As a driver we are a *decision maker*, making all sorts of major and minor decisions about what we driving and how we're driving. Driving is the most dangerous activity we engage in on a daily basis, yet we just take driving for granted. Don't.

Only a few make a choice in how they die; to most it comes through age, illness, or accident. Vehicle collisions are rarely among the choices. They occur with the briefest of warnings and most often the outcome is determined by the sudden reflexive actions of the alert driver, or failure thereof.

My friend was looking forward to getting home and having dinner with his wife. He was looking forward to the weekend, and his goal of retiring was fully within his grasp.

I wish I knew what caused him to go off the road...I wish I had told him how much fun and comforting it was being his friend...I wish I had another chance to tell him.