Reflections on mortality can help you live well now

For me and many others, contemplating death has clarified what matters. These curiosity-based exercises will get you started

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When I was an adolescent, I developed a profound fear of flying. But I also *really* loved to travel. To overcome this impasse, I developed a sort of spontaneous ritual. As soon as I got myself situated on the plane – carry-on stowed, seat belt buckled – I would close my eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Then I would ask myself a question: ‘If I were to die today on this flight, what would I regret?’ Unwittingly, and knowing nothing of the tradition, I had developed my own *memento mori.*

For millennia, and all over the world, people have actively cultivated a relationship with death as an important part of a life well lived. One way they have done so is through the use of *memento mori* (Latin for ‘remember you must die’). These are practices, objects or artworks created expressly to remind people of their death as a means of encouraging them to live the life they

truly want before it's too late. By forging a relationship with death, many people have found that they were, paradoxically, able to live fuller and more meaningful lives.

Steve Jobs, the man behind Apple computers and the iPhone, made use of *memento mori* in the crafting of a unique and impactful life. In a 2005 commencement speech – soon after he was diagnosed with a rare form of pancreatic cancer – Jobs shared that, since his teens, he would look in the mirror every morning and ask himself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' If he found that the answer to that question was 'No' for too many days in a row, then he would make a change. He also told the young graduates:

> Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.

What our ancestors knew so well – and Jobs and I both accidentally discovered – is that contemplating death is a

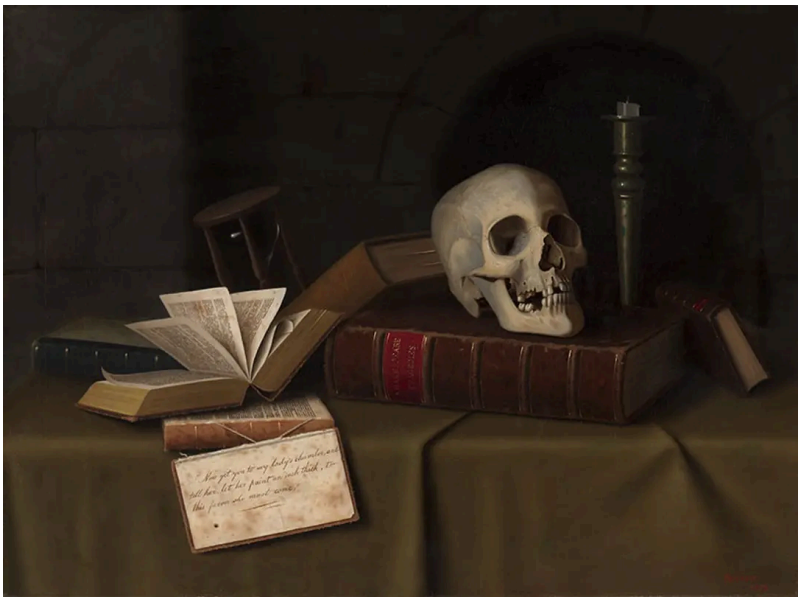
powerful tool that, regardless of your beliefs about God or an afterlife, can transform your life. Its formidable lineage stretches back at least to Socrates, who asserted that the core of philosophy itself was a *memento mori*-like contemplation of one's mortality. In ancient Rome, it was common to encounter a skeleton mosaic on a tavern floor as an exhortation to 'seize the day' (*carpe diem*); in other words, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you might be dead. Christians used *memento mori* as a reminder to resist earthly temptations and to be ready to meet (and be judged by) their maker. *Memento mori* were also used by some Buddhists, who would visit charnel grounds and meditate on decomposing corpses as a means of overcoming fear of death. Even today, one sometimes finds a human skeleton in a Buddhist meditation space.

Keeping reminders of mortality close at hand provides me with the clarity to see what truly matters

Carl Jung (1875-1961), the founder of analytical psychology and onetime protégé of Sigmund Freud, believed that,

even for nonreligious people, the contemplation of death is deeply important. He asserted that coming to terms with mortality is one of the most important tasks of life from middle age on, and that developing one's own personal understanding of it is essential to psychological wellbeing.

On a personal level, I have found that keeping reminders of mortality close at hand provides me with the clarity to see what truly matters to me, and the courage necessary to live a life aligned with my values. Because I have, for decades, been asking myself what I would regret if I were to die – *and because I made changes in accord with those answers* – I live a rich and fulfilling life that I appreciate every day. Contemplating death has not given me financial security or a generous retirement account, but it *has* allowed me to manifest a life – one filled with travel, learning, beauty, relationships and artistic expression – that will, I hope, leave me with few deathbed regrets and allow me to die with a sense of peace.



Memento Mori, 'To this Favour' (1879) by William Michael Harnett. Courtesy the Cleveland Museum of Art

In 2007, I started a project called Morbid Anatomy. Devoted to the places where art, death and culture intersect, it began as a blog and has since evolved to include exhibitions, films, books, a research library and various educational programmes. Morbid Anatomy is also a *community*, a place for people around the world who wish to talk about, or develop a positive relationship with, death and mortality. At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, I started to teach an online class for Morbid Anatomy called 'Make Your Own Memento Mori'. I wanted to use that particular historical moment – one in which death was demanding our

attention in a way it had not in decades – as an invitation to develop a relationship with our mortality. The class introduced students to a rich variety of ways in which other eras and cultures made sense of, imagined and even celebrated death. They also made their own *memento mori,* an object intended to remind them of death so as to make the best use of their time on earth.

My new book *Memento Mori: The Art of Contemplating Death to Live a Better Life* (2024) draws from and expands on my experience teaching this class. It also offers dozens of practical exercises designed to help any of us forge a personal relationship with death, reduce our fear of it and find clarity on what*, for us,* makes a life well lived.

Below I will share a few of these activities with you, along with their animating principles. Just grab a pen and paper – or speak into the notes app on your phone – and respond to the questions and prompts that follow.

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Reflect on your ideas about death

See if it is possible for you to get curious about different views on death, to feel a sense of wonder rather than fear

No one knows for sure what happens after we die. And, of course, it's natural to fear the unknown, especially when that unknown is as mysterious, inevitable and personally impactful as death. But another natural response to the unknown is *curiosity*. A provocative study by the behavioural scientist Coltan Scrivner and colleagues found that people who possess 'morbid curiosity' – those with an interest in topics such as death and the macabre – have greater positive

resilience, or the ability to have a positive experience even in threatening or frightening situations. Following individuals during the recent pandemic, they noted that the morbidly curious were able to find this fraught historical moment not only frightening, but also *interesting.*

So, see if it is possible for you to get curious about different views on death, to feel a sense of wonder rather than – or at least, in addition to – fear. An important first step towards opening your mind to other ways of thinking and allowing in a sense of curiosity is to uncover your present beliefs and their likely sources. Below are some prompts to get you started. Try to respond as quickly as possible, without overthinking!

- What did your parents think about death and what happens after you die?
- What is your first memory of death? Was it a pet, a grandparent, a friend? If it was a person, were you invited to the funeral? What was the experience like? How might it have impacted the way you think about death today? How did your family or other adults talk to you about it?
- What did your culture tell you about death and what happens after? Do

these ideas feel true to you? Have such ideas made the world a better place?

Explore less familiar ideas about death

After doing some reflection about your views on death, I encourage you to learn about some of the ways people living in other cultures or eras have understood it. Many of us today look to science to explain life, death and everything in between. For the vast majority of our ancestors, however, the truths of life and death were to be found in mythology and religion. With rich and fully realised cosmologies – and the near-ubiquitous belief that the death of the body does not mean the end of the person – these stories can offer us, if nothing else, different metaphors for understanding the human experience.

I grew up in a nonreligious Jewish family. No one told me what they believed (or disbelieved) about God or what happens after we die. As an adult, while researching the history of Jewish belief, I was surprised to learn that some Jews believed in an angel of death who would collect you at your allotted time. I also

discovered that some Jewish sects believe that, after death, your soul is given a view of its previous life from a newly acquired spiritual vantage point. The pain one experiences upon seeing one's own shortcomings acts like a temporary hellfire, purging the soul of its impurities and preparing it for its next destination.

In Mexico, families gather at the cemetery to clean and decorate the grave sites of their ancestors

Looking to the traditions of another culture can also reshape your view of death. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), the Nobel Prize-winning author Octavio Paz wrote:

> The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favourite toys and his most steadfast love.

And indeed, in Mexico, images of death are ubiquitous; one sees skulls and skeletons in the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, in the signages for bars and restaurants, and in the popular Lotería children's game.

Detail from the mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* (1947) by Diego Rivera. Courtesy Adam Jones/Flickr

During the Mexican holiday of Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) – understood as a special time when the souls of dead loved ones spend time with the living – families gather at the cemetery to clean and decorate the grave sites of their ancestors. In the home, many families also create *ofrendas*; these are altars covered with photographs of deceased family members, along with candles, copal incense, marigolds, sugar skulls and offerings of a loved one's favourite food, drink and indulgences. Such festivals of the dead are far from rare. In Japan, for instance, Obon, or Bon, is the festival that welcomes home the

returning souls of dead loved ones, and families clean familial graves and light lamps to guide the spirits of departed ancestors back home.

With these examples in mind, choose a culture – perhaps one that is part of your own familial heritage, or simply one that piques your curiosity – and do some research about its death traditions and beliefs. Ask questions like:

- How did they conceive of death (as an angel, a god or a goddess)?
- What did they believe happened after the death of the body (afterlife, reincarnation)?
- Did they have any methods for staying in communication with deceased ancestors?

You might then ask yourself:

- What appeals to me (or does *not* appeal to me) about these traditions?
- What advantages or disadvantages can I see?
- Is there something I can learn (or bring into my life) from these traditions?
- How might I feel if I had been brought up in this culture instead of my own? How might I live my life differently? How might I think about death differently?
- Is there a way I can see past traditions living on in my family even

today?

Write your own obituary

The brevity of her time on earth seems to intensify Charlotte's appreciation

Sometimes, an oblique entry point allows you to uncover information about yourself that might otherwise be unavailable. In this exercise, I ask you to view your life from the perspective of it having just ended. If you had lived *the life of your dreams*, how might your obituary read? Your obituary could be as brief as a paragraph, or several pages long. Write quickly, without overthinking, and allow yourself to be fanciful.

When you are done, reflect on what you wrote. Did this activity reveal any dreams or aspirations that were surprising to you? If so, what are they, and could you take a first step towards putting one of them into action? For example, if your obituary states that you were the author of six novels, but you have not taken your writing seriously since college, could you commit to taking a half hour each morning to write?

Cultivate gratitude for a finite life

One of the first important books in my early life was E B White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952). Of all the characters in the book, the spider Charlotte has by far the shortest lifespan; she is also the one with the most gratitude for life. In the classic 1973 Hanna-Barbera film based on the book, Charlotte sings a poignant song as she nears her death. In it, she expresses a joyous and profound gratitude for the privilege of having been, if for just a brief while, 'part of life's eternal rhyme'. Charlotte uses her final moments to reaffirm her love of – and gratitude for – life, and to assert that, *no matter how brief*, it is a precious gift. In fact, the brevity of her time on earth seems to intensify her appreciation.

Like Charlotte, I have found that taking the time to feel gratitude for the good things in my life – as it is, right here and now – helps me appreciate the gift of life, even in its finitude, and minimises my frustrations about the aspects of life that fall short of my dreams and desires. For years now, every night, I have been practising a sort of daily gratitude ritual. Once I am in bed, eyes closed and moving towards sleep, I take a few deep

breaths. Then, for one slow, full breath (in-breath and exhalation), I give thanks for something I appreciated that happened that day. I do this five times each night, paired with five breaths. The things I appreciate are sometimes quite simple, such as wonderful weather, but can also include more noteworthy milestones, such as turning in a manuscript. This gratitude exercise can also be done daily as a written exercise in your journal.

Consider how facing imminent death might change your life

It can be challenging to separate the wheat from the chaff when trying to figure out what you really value. How can we learn to distinguish the things that *really* matter from the more prosaic longings we encounter every day? One way is through the evocation of regret, which we might see as the flip side of gratitude. In her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing* (2011), the Australian nurse Bronnie Ware writes about what she learned over years of working with palliative care patients.

Their most common regrets included focusing too much on work, not having retained contact with their friends, and not having had the courage to live a life true to their own values. Kristina Golden, a Morbid Anatomy community member who is also a death doula – or person who helps individuals navigate the dying process – reports that the regret she hears the most is: 'I should have said "I love you" more.'

With this in mind, ask yourself some questions about your current life:

- If you died today, what would you regret having done or not done in your life?
- How would you change your life right now if you found out that you had five years to live? One year? One *day*?

Write down the answers that come up for you. Then, use them to make a change. If, for example, you found that you regret not having cultivated your adolescent talent for drawing, can you find or buy a sketchpad and spend a few moments each morning making art? If you find you regret having drifted from an old friend, can you send them an email, or reach out to make a coffee date?

Final notes

Building a better relationship with death is a lifelong process, and I encourage you to continue with the good work you begin here. You can do this by returning to these prompts over a series of months or even years.

To get the most out of this sort of work, I also recommend that you give yourself time and space to process the powerful and emotional material that comes up in a non-direct, non-rational way. This might take the form of yoga, meditation, walks, journal writing, drawing or something else entirely. Pay attention to any images or ideas that bubble up from the unconscious in your dreams or daydreams, and consider giving them form in some way, such as by making a painting or writing a poem. If you find that this sort of reflecting on death is feeling unhealthy or even dangerous for you, set it aside for the time being, or consider talking about it with a friend or a therapist.

Confronting the reality and unknowns of death can not only make us less afraid of death; it can help us learn to tolerate all

of that which we cannot control, to sit with the mystery at the heart of life and still appreciate, and with great joy, the life we have been given. I urge you, then, to allow yourself to be *curious* about mortality, to approach it with humility, treating it as the mystery that it has always been and continues to be, despite our impressive scientific advances. It is my hope that, in this way, you might find beauty and value in something that many of us have been told has no value whatsoever. I also hope it will empower you to uncover your own truths and values, and inspire you to live them out in the world.