



## Haunted by Deadly Ghosts

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The main theme of this article is death, and in particular how we manage the end-of-life process, grief, and the subsequent importance of remembrance. It draws on the notion that people aren't really dead until the memories of them are gone. It is noted that, no matter how prepared people think they are for the death of those close to them, it always comes as a shock. In this context, the article touches also on the grieving process, and how grief has no statute of limitations. Furthermore, the article also addresses how we deal with people who are dying and explores why this concluding of a life cycle elicits questions as to how far an individual may have embraced life as a journey well lived as opposed to one colored by regrets and missed opportunities.

In addition, the article points out that the development of the frontal lobes (the last part of the human brain to develop) that has enabled Homo sapiens to imagine the future, also comes with a keen awareness of the inevitability of death. Burdened by this cognitive/emotive awareness, human beings may suffer from serious pangs of death anxiety, technically described as "thanatophobia". It is noted how psychologically difficult it may be to confront the disintegration and decay of the body, and the equally difficult idea of disappearing into a void.

The article goes on to dissect the suggested causes of thanatophobia, noting that it may be reduced by the presence of the hedonic treadmill—the human characteristic that allows an individual to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness (or sadness) despite experiencing major positive or negative events or life changes such as death.

The final section of the article observes how much of human existence stems from people who have attempted to find ways to transcend death. Typically, this may take the form of various "immortality projects" (e.g., legacy, achievements) to cope with the fear of death. Here, it is also suggested that the meaning of life is not confined to some hidden, mysterious realm only discovered after death, but, on the contrary, can be found by living life to the fullest in the present. It concludes with the suggestion that people can find purpose and meaning in striving to live well.

*Key Words:* Death; Remembrance; Grief; Life Cycle; Death Anxiety; Thanatophobia; Hedonic Treadmill; Immortality Projects; Meaning.

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*What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.*

—*Thucydides*

*The comfort of having a friend may be taken away but not that of having had one.*

—*Seneca*

*The song is ended but the melody lingers on.*

—*Irving Berlin*

### **The power of remembrance**

Recently, a close friend of mine died. We used to see each other regularly, talk on the phone and exchange ideas over WhatsApp. During our many discussions, we would share experiences and memories. But now that this friend is gone, an empty space is left in my life. It made me realize that when a person close to me dies, something of myself dies too. The death of my friend has made me much more aware of the fact that our lives are steeped in memories. Therefore, with my friend gone, with whom will I be able to talk about our shared memories? With whom can I laugh when recounting our mutual foibles?

Clearly, memories have always helped me to hold on to the things I love. They have motivated me to retain certain images and moments I would never want to lose, contributing to the person I am and reaffirming my existence. In short, memories have helped me to feel alive. The death of this particular friend has reminded me that remembering is, in itself, a form of resurrection. It has become a very special way of

continuing our relationship. Thus, even though my friend is gone, he continues to live on in my memories, occupying many of my thoughts. With new clarity, I have felt how people aren't really dead until the memories of them are gone.

Although we must accept death, I am asking myself whether it can be overcome by the act of remembrance. It has even been said that all of us may experience three deaths. The first comes when the body ceases to function, the second when the body is consigned to the grave and the third at that moment—sometime in the future—when a person's name will be spoken for the last time. Perhaps, as I am trying to explore, we die only when we're no longer present in the hearts and minds of the people who have been close to us. In this respect, it is possible for the dead to speak through the mouths of the people they have left and the signs they have left scattered behind them. Thus, even though my memory may be imperfect, many of the people who have gone, are still living through these memories. They're only truly dead when the way they have affected me and other people who have known them has dissipated.

What I'm also realizing is that when a person who has been close to me has died, repressed memories that have been hiding in the corners of my mind are coming to the surface. I'm now recalling past disappointments, remembering lost opportunities. Various heartbreaks come to mind and sorrows that I thought I had dealt with and forgotten, now mingle with the still-fresh wounds from the loss of my friend. I also find myself thinking that, if I had known that my friend was at death's door, I would have paid even more attention to him and spent more time with him. The simple truth is that I would have liked to create new memories.

Presently, many of the people who I have known are passing on. Often, without warning, people seem to be disappearing from my life. What is clear—and what I have to accept—is the fact that the longer I stay alive, the more familiar I will become with death. With so many people whom I know and have known reaching the end of their lives, I wonder whether parts of me are also dying. In other words, I am asking myself what will all these deaths do to me. How will I be processing all these deaths? How will I be able to deal with the sorrow of the passing of these people? Furthermore, given the way my mind operates, will these deaths affect my memory? What I am also asking myself is whether my defense mechanism—given the difficulties I have in accepting these deaths—are working overtime. Hence, given my defensive reactions, it also makes me wonder whether I will be able to hold on to the memories that I have had of these people.

What I find is that it isn't always easy to refresh the stories I know about the people who have passed on by recounting them to those who never knew them. Clearly, exchanging memories—like I would do until recently with my friend—has been a way of keeping mutual memories alive. But now that he is gone, I find myself trying to reconstruct some of the memories that refer to him and others, and I am troubled to admit and accept that many of these memories are no longer as vivid as they used to be. They are, in fact, gradually fading away like fleeting dreams, as parts of my consciousness drop into nothingness.

I realize therefore how important these shared memories have been. Clearly, they have enabled me to make sense of my life, helping me understand and define myself. They have been a crucial means of ensuring a sense of continuity in my life between

the past, the present, and the future. In fact, a large part of who I am has been built on these narratives, stories constructed from the memories that are stored in my inner world.

While reflecting on my inner world, I come to see that the connections we make over the course of our lives could be what life is fundamentally about. They form the foundations of the stories that we tell ourselves and the nature of the memories we internalize. Through the creation of these connected memories, I have learnt important life lessons that have allowed me to grow and develop into the person I am today.

Reflecting on the experiences that I have shared with my recently departed friend, I continue trying to glue together the broken shards of our shared memories into a larger picture that, while imperfect, will make me feel more whole, as the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde said, “Memory... is the diary that we all carry about with us.” Despite these memories, the absence of the departed one has created a deep feeling of emptiness—a reminder that death is Homo sapiens’ constant companion. It is the kind of companion that seems to be always hovering, like a visitor that never leaves.

### **Reaching the end station**

Entry and exit are the two great gateways of a life. From the time of our birth, we are all on the road to our end station. The thought of this reality gives death an awful finality; it is very difficult to accept a state of not being. We meet people, grow to appreciate them, only for them to suddenly disappear from our lives. Once more, I am increasingly prescient that, as the people whom I feel close to are reaching their end station, I should make an even greater effort to try to retain the memories I have of

them, imperfect as they may be. It is a means of sustaining our connection even after these people have passed away.

Clearly, every parting is a reminder of death. Thus, I better realize that death can come at any time to anyone. There are no exceptions. In this respect, death is a great equalizer. Realizing its definitiveness causes us to question whether we will still be alive tomorrow, given the regularity with which we are exposed to risks, and whilst disaster may be just around the corner. What it also reminds me of is that life doesn't always deal us the best hand of cards. But how are we to play a poor hand of cards well, if that's what we have been dealt? And when will it be that we are dealt the losing cards? Thinking about this game of chance that is our life, I realize that nobody will be excluded.

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, said, "Mostly it is loss which teaches us about the worth of things." It is loss that motivates major existential questions such as 'Why am I here?' and 'What do I plan to do with the time that remains?' As is evident from the subject of this article, those people who are gradually leaving my sphere make such questions more preoccupying than ever, and a reminder that I need to make the most of the time that's still left. In this respect, the recent loss of my close friend has taught me a significant lesson about the value of life.

Along with these existential matters, there is also the question of my emotional response to this recent loss. It has caused me to ask what grieving is all about. How can we better understand the emotional suffering when something or someone we love is taken away? In this respect, what my friend's death (and that of losing others

close to me) is teaching me, is that grief can be compared to a slow burning fire. This fire is always present, it is always smoldering inside me, however there are specific triggers that cause this fire to flare up. Again, it makes me realize that, consciously or unconsciously, I have internalized the grief of losing people that were important to me. Fortunately, my defensive reactions have been working overtime to make life manageable and, most often, these feelings lie dormant. There are certain situations, however, that agitate these feelings, at which point the sense of loss opens up like a big grating sore.

Clearly, this recent and particularly acute loss has provoked yet another explosion of grief, and, given his importance to me, I have found the deep sadness of his passing very hard to deal with. As has been the case at other times of loss, it's like the world has become much emptier, and life less meaningful. Sadly enough, no matter how much I try to prepare for these losses, they always come as a shock, forming into deep hurts that keep on haunting me.

To me, grief is really a draconian initiation into the mysteries of human life. In fact, grief has taken me to places I wouldn't otherwise have gone. But draconian as these experiences might be, the feelings they elicit seem to be an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity—the price that we all have to pay for having been close to other people. Even so, they are a very bitter medicine to take.

I have discovered that the taste of grief isn't something that easily goes away. Experience has taught me that healing, in as far as it can happen, will take a very long time. Grief doesn't seem to have a statute of limitations, nor, to the best of my

knowledge, any miracle cure. The only real way to manage grief seems to be having the time and space to grieve. At its most acute, I wonder whether these feelings of sorrow will ever end. Nevertheless, I know that the only thing I can do is to move forward and evolve from such strong emotions. I need to accept that I will continue to miss the people I have lost and, at the same time, be grateful to have known them.

Grieving may be painful, but it cannot simply be disregarded or bottled up. Repression is not a solution, but merely a delay or defensive mechanism that provides no resolution. On the contrary, I need to give myself permission to grieve. I need to allow myself to feel whatever I am feeling. At the same time, I accept that it can be helpful to go through the grieving process with the support of other people. Here, in particular, I am referring to family and friends, even if the very personal nature of grief creates feelings that are difficult to share with others. Although I may feel quite alone while grieving, I know that I have company and empathy; grief is a visitor that leaves nobody untouched.

Still, when people die who are quite close to me, I find it hard to imagine that I will ever feel better. It has become all the more preoccupying as I have aged, and these appointments with death have become increasingly common. In fact, the death announcements of people I have known are coming at me in what seems like an avalanche. This includes both the death of those who have been close to me, and others of the cohort with whom I grew up. People whose names I have been familiar with for much of my life, and that made up the cultural landscape of my life.



When I was much younger, I never bothered with obituaries. Now my outlook has become very different. Like a magnetic force, I seem to be compelled to read them. And what's more, when I read these obituaries, I always note the age of the deceased. Immediately and automatically, I relate this figure to my own age and find, worryingly, that many of the people who appear tend to be younger than me.

In fact, I have begun to feel like a spectator of a never-ending vanishing act. And as the people who are close to me (as well as the ones who were part of my developmental history) are appearing in these obituaries, it becomes more and more difficult for me to believe that my own end station still remains far away. When I am truly honest with myself, I do know that I am getting there. The Bible says that a person's allotted life span is "three score years and ten." And if this is true, I have clearly passed my expiration date. The death of my old friend has forced me to face this fact once more.

There are other reminders of the long goodbye. The two places I call my home are full of photographs of people who have been important to me. Many of these pictures portray family gatherings, and as is the case in so many such photographs, everyone looking at the camera appears to be smiling. Many of these images, however, have an inherently depressive quality, because I am reminded that a considerable number of those smiling faces are no longer with us. Once more, these photographs point out the tragic transience of things, and the question as to who is going to be next in line. It is hard to accept but it is also inevitable. I know that we all are going to be dead one day, all it takes is time.

Another reminder of my death foretold is the decline of my body. Every day when I look in the mirror, it seems as if death is smiling back at me. Sometimes, I have this out-of-body experience and fail to recognize myself. What has happened to my previous self? The body I once had seems to be deserting me. The warning signs are certain physical activities that I am no longer able to do, as if my body is also preparing me for the inevitable—that death is just around the corner. Observing those people who are close to me, I wonder whether they have the same feelings. Are they also trying to accept the fact that the end station is approaching? Is it something they talk about? If this is the case, I don't seem to be included in the conversation. Instead, I am faced with an ominous silence.

No matter how prepared I think that I am for the death of the people I love, it always seems to come as a shock. Although I may be consciously aware of the fact of death, I am always surprised anew when faced with it. It also comes with significant pain, from the death of my grandmother to the particularly significant loss of my parents, I find death hard to accept. Still, I know logically that every person I have ever met, every person I meet every day, will die. Equally logical is that the longer we live, the more we will suffer from the loss of friends and family members. In fact, we are all going to lose everything we ever loved in this world. Of course, some of us will have our appointment with death earlier than others; the thing that we all have in common is its inevitability.

In addition to the sadness for those people that have disappeared from my orbit, there is also the news of people who find themselves in a holding pattern where death is imminent. They know from their physical condition that they are living on borrowed

time, waiting in some metaphorical anteroom for the summons to arrive. I am referring to people for whom terminal illness has become the unwelcome visitor.

In spite of the heroic efforts made by medical professionals to keep this visitor at bay, we all know it to be an impossible mission. When I look at what is happening to these people, I wonder once more when it is going to be my turn to be chosen in this deadly lottery. These thoughts also make me fear the many preliminaries of death: the loneliness, the decrepitude, the pain, the debilitation, the depression, and possibly, even the senility. When will my number be drawn?

With the likelihood of this time drawing ever closer, I find myself wondering whether I would like to know the date when this will happen. I am not so sure, but the question itself makes me consider how I might feel if I was told that I have only so much time left—something I know that has happened to a number of people quite close to me. How would I use the remaining time? And of course, there is also the question of how my death would affect the people close to me. How would they handle it? Hopefully, the fantasy of their difficulties in being able to do so may just be exactly that: a fantasy!

When I visit people who are waiting at death's door, my heart goes out to them. At the same time, I feel helpless. I recall how they were before—their previous vivaciousness, their past appearance and *joy de vivre*. But it is all gone. How do they reconcile the poor hand of cards they've been dealt?

Evidently these encounters create in me a great sense of discomfort, as, knowing of their imminent demise, what can I really tell them? What meaningful words can I say

to diminish their suffering and give comfort? They are yet another strong reminder of the fragility of life, of the deadly march of time.

Reflecting on this march of time I tend to see birthdays as a macabre celebration of death growing closer, a reminder that I live on borrowed time. In fact, I increasingly realize that the candles now cost more than the cake, and I wonder whether birthdays warrant celebrations. To be honest with myself, I don't think so.

As much as birthdays remind me that I live on borrowed time, I make the same observation about falling asleep. Could it be that every time I fall asleep, I'm engaging in a practice session for dying? I say this because the boundaries between life and death when asleep seem to be less clear. In fact, I could look at each morning when I wake up as my "birthday," while every night could be considered my "death-day." Sometimes, I even ask myself when I go to bed whether I will still be alive the next morning. At the same time, having this outlook vis-à-vis sleep implies that every morning I seem to be reborn.

Of course, this notion of rebirth is merely a fantasy, the recent death of my friend again a morbid reminder. In the past, death was more likely to come as a surprise—it was something that was only supposed to happen to other people. Clearly, young people are the only ones living with a sense of immortality. When we are getting older, however, our perspective changes. Far from the immortality of youth when death appears to be nothing more than a distant rumor, I am now at the stage of "time-left-to-live", having reached the end stage of life.

## **Life stages**

An old teacher of mine, the developmental psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, referred to the polarity of integrity versus despair in his attempt to structure the various stages of the life of humankind. In regard to the final stage of life, he described this polarity as a retrospective accounting of our life to date. This accounting focuses on how much we reflect on our life as a journey that has been well lived as opposed to regrets for its missed opportunities. A summary of the human life cycle by the Canadian columnist Richard Needham is more flippantly witty: “spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, and wills.” In the light of all my recent reminders of death, it appears I may have reached the latter ages of ills, pills, and wills. With my body no longer what it used to be, I am also reminded of the American actress Bette Davis famous line, “Getting older is not for sissies.”

## **Death anxiety**

Clearly, it is time for me to accept the terrible existential burden that all humans must bear. In this respect, the evolutionary way our brain has developed makes us quite different from any other creatures in the animal kingdom. In fact, it is our frontal lobes (the last part of the human brain to develop) that are responsible for this, by enabling the human animal to imagine the future. As a result of our capacity to look forward, we appear to be the only species on the planet who are aware of their own mortality. However, as all of us have come to realize, this “gift” has a very high price attached. The realization that there are endings makes life more complex. In fact, it raises the question as to whether having a more advanced brain is such a good thing. It can even be argued that other living creatures are more fortunate—being ignorant of death may be the only way to feel immortal.

What this evolutionary “gift” implies is that death anxiety may be an exclusively human phenomenon, with the knowledge that death will always be lurking beneath the surface of our consciousness. It affects everything we do, such that it has become a stealth motivator.<sup>1</sup> In fact, our knowledge that all earthly matters will eventually die is both a blessing and a curse. We seem to be the chosen ones that must reflect on the fact of death on a daily basis.

Although this may be a rather pessimistic outlook, it is also worth acknowledging that nature doesn’t really know extinction, only transformation. For example, we see flowers wilt; we see leaves fall. We notice the change of seasons. But at the same time, we also recognize that all matter on earth recycles, which suggests that in nature, nothing really dies. Thus, in the cosmic sense of things, we can look at death not purely as an end but also as a transitional stage. In nature, all the forms of decay are but masks of regeneration.

Even though this fact should cheer us up, human beings remain apprehensive about endings. Burdened by the cognitive/emotive capacity of knowing about our own inevitable demise, we may become fearful of what may lie ahead. We would rather ignore what death is all about, as we may find its uncertainty troublesome. As noted, for many of us, shying away from the uncertainties of illness and death puts our armory of defenses on high alert. Hence, we try to negate the inevitable. However, it is a defensive reaction that isn’t very robust. In fact, as I have experienced myself, these

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<sup>1</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2014). Death and the executive encounters with the stealth motivator, *Organizational Dynamics*, 247–256.

defenses easily crumble due to the deaths of people close to us. It is very hard to ignore the plain fact of death; that we all will face the end station. Still, again referring to myself, although cognitively I do realize what's coming, still from an emotional point of view, I find it very hard to accept its inevitability. To imagine my own demise, seems to be somewhat unimaginable.

I also know that am not alone in this attitude regarding death. In fact, most people are extremely talented at dispelling these thoughts, most commonly by repression. Although at a rational level we know that death is part of the cycle of life, at an irrational level, we may find it hard to believe that it will actually happen to us. In fact, we go to great lengths to avoid thinking about the inevitably transitory nature of our existence. Instead we bury our anxieties deep in our unconscious and busy ourselves with our lives in the apparent expectation that we will carry on doing whatever we're doing indefinitely. Death, however, creeps up stealthily, shows its face in many guises like an ever-present stealth motivator.

Despite the omnipresence of death imagery, I sometimes wonder whether there is a conspiracy of silence as we get older. Again, it could be those same defense mechanisms that make death a far from popular topic of conversation. Most often the credo appears to be "out of sight, out of mind." But this is a state of ignorance that's hard to maintain in our world. Wherever we look, we find death symbolism embedded in architecture, paintings, music, or film.

A good example of this effort to break the conspiracy of silence concerning death is the work of the most iconic of Swedish filmmakers, Ingmar Bergman. In his case, the

subject of death seemed to preoccupy him greatly. One illustration comes at the end of his famous film “The Seventh Seal”, set in Sweden during the time of the Black Death in which the figure of Death forces people to engage in a morbid dance. The film portrays the journey of a medieval knight and a game of chess he must play against the personified figure of Death who has come to take him. The knight believes that he can survive as long as he continues to play the game.

The final scene in the film is a depiction of the *Danse Macabre*, an artistic genre of allegory from the Late Middle Ages on the universality of death. In this allegory about death, representatives from all walks of life are summoned to dance along to the grave. Clearly, this dance of death was often produced as some kind of *memento mori* intended to remind people of the fragility of their lives and how vain are the glories of earthly existence.

With this *Danse Macabre* in mind, the “manic” restless activities with which people distract themselves can be interpreted as a rather futile attempt to push the idea of their own mortality out of consciousness. To sing, dance, and make merry are a means of suppressing dark thoughts as opposed to confronting the disintegration and decay of our bodies. It is an understandably difficult prospect to work through. In its symbolic capacity, death might be seen as the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate narcissistic injury.

Clearly, it is easy to imagine that many people interpret their pending annihilation as a devastating blow to their sense of self. The anticipation of a state of nothingness, in which the self has ceased to exist, seems unacceptable. Even with harsh reminders



such as the *Danse Macabre*, many people continue to act as though death will occur to everyone but themselves. Many of us try to hide from ourselves the certainty that we will die, but whatever we do, we can no longer distract ourselves from our own sense of finite time, which like a dark cloud, will always be present.

Clearly, there are disadvantages attached to being too much of a rationalist and certain benefits to being religious. Without religion, death anxiety is even more of a reality. As the American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom said, "Death anxiety is the mother of all religions, which, in one way or another, attempt to temper the anguish of our finitude." What this again highlights is how far the fear of death affects everything we do and its inevitability that gives death such poignancy. It makes me wonder whether the people who reflect on death without fear are just pretending. In one way or another, I imagine that all of us are afraid of dying. Perhaps, this fear can be looked at as an evolutionary axiom. From an evolutionary point of view, we should stay alive. If not, taking this axiom seriously, the human species would become extinct.

### *Thanatophobia*

Over the years I have met a number of people who suffer from a serious form of death anxiety, better known as thanatophobia. The symptoms are obsessional worries or dread about the prospect of their own death, the death of loved ones, or the general idea of mortality itself. In their preoccupation with death, they seem to behave in a way similar to that of a child who fears the dark. Resembling a phobic reaction, their fears can range from a state of mild discomfort to severe anxiety and even a state of constant immobilizing panic. For these people nothing seems more dreadful than the possibility that death may only greet them with a profound and eternal nothingness.

The causes of thanatophobia vary. Obviously, a major one is the fear of the unknown. Since we don't know what happens after death, some people become very anxious about what to expect and cannot cope with this uncertainty. Another contributing factor seems to be the loss of control. Clearly, death is one of the few things in life that can't be controlled, and this can lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Furthermore, the prospect of death also raises serious existential concerns—questions about the meaning of life, the significance of human existence, and what happens after death, become the cause of great anxiety.

In dissecting death anxiety it becomes apparent that cultural and religious beliefs may also become contributing factors. Naturally, different societies and religions have diverse beliefs about death, which can either alleviate or intensify emerging death anxiety. Others may have had traumatic experiences pertaining to death. For example, in a statement from the Norwegian painter Edward Munch, "Sickness and madness and death were the black angels that stood by my cradle." Thus, experiencing traumatic death events can trigger or exacerbate fears of dying. Naturally, age can also play a role. Getting older and dealing with the inevitable ravages of the body can bring anxiety to the fore every time we look in the mirror.

### *The hedonic treadmill*

Given the prevalence of death anxiety and the general knowledge that an end station is waiting for us, human beings can get depressed and even become suicidal. Luckily, we have one evolutionary mediator in the form of the hedonic treadmill. The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is the characteristic of human beings that

enables them to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness (or sadness) despite major positive or negative events or life changes. It suggests that, though an individual's level of happiness may rise and fall in response to life events, ultimately it tends to move back toward where it was prior to those experiences. Consequently, hedonic adaptation can be looked at as a mechanism that reduces the affective impact of emotional events. And, given the effects of evolution, we can assume that the baseline level of well-being, or "set point," tends to be positive. Without this, depression in human beings would be even more widespread and problematic.

### **The preciousness of life**

All these reflections remind me that life is short but death last forever; although death seems so terribly final, life is full of possibilities. But it also allows me to understand that I can't live a meaningful life without an acceptance of death. It could even be said that death is what gives true meaning to peoples' lives. As the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov said, "Death is terrifying, but it would be even more terrifying to find out that you are going to live forever and never die." The knowledge of my upcoming demise makes my life more precious, and I realize that the way I live is what really matters. Or as the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung advised, "Shrinking away from death is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose. Do not fear death so much but rather the inadequate life."

Still, those who are prone to death anxiety may tiptoe through life overly carefully, seemingly wanting to arrive safely at death. They appear to be so afraid of dying that they never have the motivation to really live. The tragedy of these peoples' lives is what has died inside of them while they are still alive: the death of genuine feelings. In

living too little, they fail to see that death is not the opposite of life, but part of it. When they are so burdened by thoughts of their own deaths, they forget the real purpose of their lives. Hence, they are destined to lead a meaningless life and would not understand the truth of Socrates' admonition when he said that "The unexplored life is not worth living." Time and energy spent worrying about dying takes the pleasure out of living.

I really don't want to live in this way. In fact, what the death of my close friend has made me realize is that death is not the ending nor even the greatest loss in life. A worse thing would be to lose my reason for living and waste the short time that I've been given. With the clock ticking, I should make the most of my temporary existence and pursue meaningful activities. Consequently, if I accept death as an essential part of my life, I will be even more daring in the art of living. After all, what have I to lose if death is inevitable?

In this way, death itself is motivating me to make the best of my life. Or to quote the Roman emperor, the philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius, "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." Yet it seems that so many human endeavors are actually motivated by people attempting to transcend death in one way or another. Their efforts to create various immortality projects (e.g., legacy, achievements) are just another way of coping with death anxiety.

The knowledge of my death foretold should also affect how I deal with other people. Recognizing the fragility of life, I remind myself to treat others in a way that will leave no regrets. I should also make an effort to not hold grudges or behave spitefully. I

should practice gratitude for the good things that are given to me. Also, I should always ask myself questions about the meaningfulness of my actions: What's worth making a stand for? What's really important? In this context, particularly when referring to interpersonal relationships, it emphasizes the importance of being able to forgive and leads me to reflect with gratitude on all that I have.

I also realize that there are so many loose ends with the people close to me. I am thinking of all the things I have not said, and all the feelings I have not expressed. It begs the question of why I have not been more active in working on these matters. What was been holding me back? What have I been afraid off? In many instances, there could have been much better endings. But why in these instances, had I not been wiser?

Nowadays, I realize more and more that the most painful goodbyes are the ones that leave things unsaid, and the ones that are never explained. I am reminded of the infamous question: if I knew that I was going to die tomorrow and I had only one phone call to make, who would I call and what would I say? Furthermore, what is holding me back? Why am I waiting? Why haven't I made that phone call and said those things? It is like the statement 'Don't send me flowers when I am dead, send them while I am still alive.'

As my ending grows closer, I realize that the meaning of life is not to be discovered only after death in some hidden, mysterious realm; on the contrary, it can be found by living life to the fullest in the present. All of us need to remind ourselves that we have only one life. With this fact instilled in all we do, we would do well to learn to accept

ourselves in the painful experiment of living. In doing so, we are more equipped to make the most of our time until we die.

In this way I see that the acceptance of death gives me a greater stake in the here-and-now, a lesson in how to live for the moment. The more I concentrate on the present moment, the more the fear of death should diminish. In fact, the fear of death is based on the fear of life. And it is the fear of life that closes off opportunities. If instead, I accept death, I will be freer to live and to express myself fully. After all, the real death is the one of a life lived without risk. I cannot choose how or when I will die, but I can choose how I will live.

In concluding, we should not presume that the meaning of life will only be found in some mysterious domain after death. Death should not be looked upon with dread, and death anxiety is not so much of death itself, but of a death without meaning. And the importance of meaning tells me not to waste time. All of us should make an all-out effort to live with meaning.<sup>2</sup> Each individual should find things they are willing to die for. I am also quite aware of the fact that my death is not the end if we can live on in our children and the younger generation. If we live a life with meaning, they can continue carrying this torch.

Therefore, it is time to embrace the great adventure that comes in moving through the many stages between birth and death. I will not fear death if I live well. I need to accept that if I fear death, I lose out on the joys of life. What I should fear is living an

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<sup>2</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2021), *Quo Vadis ? The Existential Challenges of Leaders*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.

inadequate life, the end of which is an inner deadness. People who live their lives intensely are those who don't fear death.

Consequently, all of us should find something to die for. Often, this means reaching out to others and doing something for them. It is a form of transcendence to overcome our personal concerns and gain a higher perspective. It implies rising above the self and relating to that which is greater than it. In simpler terms, it is the realization that we are one small part of a greater whole and act accordingly.

Although our death is uncontrollable, we can live a life that we can be proud of. Or to quote the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "A useless life is an early death." The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. Thus, death should not be feared if we live wisely. If we accept death, we are free to live.