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Chapter 1

Death Awareness

IT MIGHT SEEM STRANGE to start a book about the pursuit of happiness with the subject of death. However, you cannot fully appreciate your life until you have seriously considered your death. Consider the privilege of existing. The fact you're reading this sentence means you are alive. Consider every dream or goal you have right now has to be accomplished within a time limit. So let's discuss that time limit. Let's contemplate your life and death.

Picture yourself alone in a waiting room. You have been diagnosed with terminal cancer and given a prognosis of six months to live. Suddenly you become aware of every smell and sound around you. Colors brighten as you become mindful of every detail near you. Precious relationships flood your mind. Your soul grips their essence so tight that you ache inside. You sit alone, feeling air move in and out of your body and you awaken to death awareness.

What incredible lives we would live if we could appreciate life from the perspective of the terminally ill. The awareness of our life sliding down through the hourglass of time would spark appreciation and zest for life. It would change our perspective and motivate us to realign our priorities. Insignificant things would be tossed aside and completion of goals and dreams would take on a sense of urgency.

The positive effect of death awareness is it stimulates vigor and passion for life. It provides courage and motivation to rise up to our highest potential. It reminds us, there isn't time for reckless mistakes because our life is going to end.

When we are mindful of death, self-consciousness is blunted and our need for peer approval is diminished. What do the opinions of others matter when we are knocking on heaven's door?

When we are ignorant or avoid death awareness we become apathetic. We waste away years under the illusion our life will never end. Without death awareness we can easily forget our existence on earth really comes down to a matter of months.

Death awareness gives us the ability to calibrate our frame of reference and change our perspective on life. It motivates us to realign our priorities and realize how precious life is. It stops us from taking ourselves too seriously, for in spite of what we accomplish, we will die.

For many, life is drudgery and doom—suicide through obesity, nicotine, reckless sex, alcohol, drugs, and countless addictions. It is self-murder and self-hate. It would appear that thinking about death would drive the terminally suicidal deeper into self-destruction. However, the opposite is true; it motivates the suicidal to seek life. Death awareness tends to promote spirituality and intimacy with God. Intimacy with God produces a rich, meaningful, grounded life that buffers loneliness. It invigorates courage to face that unknown dimension we are headed toward. Babies in the womb are familiar with their mother's heartbeat. When passing from the womb into the world everything is strange, but mother's heartbeat remains familiar. Likewise, in death we pass from this familiar earth into a strange new existence. But the presence of God will be familiar if we nurtured a spiritual relationship in this life.

The subject of death is easy to intellectualize and avoid. You can shrug it off like it is not a big deal if you don't personalize it. When you personalize it as something that's going to happen to "me," it gets real. Most of us won't do that because we fear our own death. Therefore, we refuse to awaken to the fact we are in the process of dying, and it doesn't matter if it is ten months or five hundred months, we all end up dead.

Sasha was a college student who interned at a funeral home as a grief counselor. Before her internship, she hadn't given her own death much thought. In the funeral business, death was all around her. She was attending funerals weekly and comforting grieving families. Part of Sasha's training involved helping dress and groom bodies in the embalming room. She was overwhelmed when she first stepped into the embalming room. There was a burley old man, a tiny grandma, a young girl, and a middle-aged man all stone dead lying on stretchers.

Sasha was aware of dead deer, raccoons, and opossums because their bodies were littered on the highways. But humans vanish so discreetly after death she was not aware of their dying until that day in the embalming room. Her first impulse was to escape and run from death, but she stayed and helped dress two bodies.

Throughout her internship she considered her body being in an embalming room someday. She contemplated cremation or burial for herself. Most people her age never had to consider the preference of a casket or where to be buried, but Sasha's internship responsibilities forced her to face her own mortality.

Sasha planned every detail of her funeral—flowers, music, and poem that would be read. She thought about her life and what the minister would tell the audience, and who would come to say farewell. Sasha seriously considered her death and lived a richer life.

How about you? Has there ever been an incident or time in your life that caused you to face your mortality? Maybe it was more of a process than a single incident. Have you truly understood and faced the fact you are going to die? When or how did you come to that realization?

The following poem may give you a sense of the emotional pain your loved ones may feel after your death. When we think about death we tend to imagine how we would feel if we lost a loved one. However, it is important to think about how your loved ones would feel if they lost you. Remember death feels like rejection, so plan your funeral in a way that comforts them. Your death is not just about you but also about your loved ones. Picture someone you love speaking the words of the following poem the day you die.

STORM

*The day you went away there was one of those storms
Where the surf pounds and the rock cracks
And the sailor pleads for life.*

*A hard charger came down in my soul
And a cold winter closed in
As I clung to a stone hurtling through space,
Screaming at the silence.*

*A dense fog settled in
And a dark vine gripped me in a stranglehold,
While the poison of your departure sank in.*

*That black spirit dog came my way
And bitter fear howled in my brain,
As lonely grief tore at my heart like talons.*

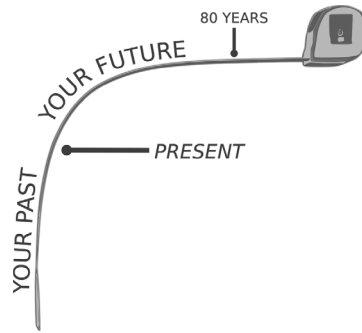
*I stood alone in the crowd that came to say goodbye
And all I heard was the surf pound and my heart crack,
The day you left me.*

Syrus Pakai

While none of us knows how many days we have left, we can hope we'll live an average lifespan. The following exercises are designed to help you grasp how much time you have left.

Tape Measure

Extend a tape measure to your present age, and grip it at that point. Continue to extend the tape measure to your life expectancy.



The years between your present age and your life expectancy is all you have left. The numbers from the beginning of the tape measure to your present age, indicate your past. Those years are gone. It is futile to try to retrieve them. Your past is your memory. Your future is your imagination. Take a moment to think about your remaining years; contemplate what you will do with them.

Picture Living Eighty Years

If a penny represented a month of your life, it would take 960 pennies to represent eighty years of your life.

Place 960 pennies beside an empty transparent jar.

How many months have you lived? (Present age) \times 12 = ____ (past).

Remove the pennies which represent your past from the 960 pennies.

Place the remaining pennies in the jar.

The pennies in the jar indicate how many months of life you hope are left. The pennies outside the jar represent the months you have used up. Every decision, mistake, and goal you want to accomplish has to take place in the months you have remaining. Each penny in the jar represents one month of your life. On the last day of every month, throw a penny from the jar to the wind and evaluate how you're living your life.



Forty-One More Springs

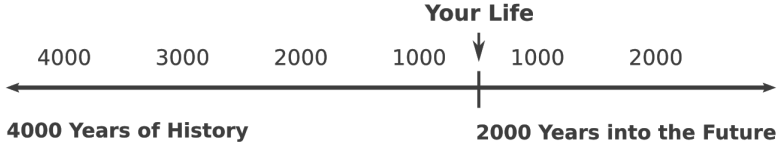
Each spring lavender colored flowers bloomed in a meadow by a woman's house. Every spring when the flowers bloomed she had good intentions of clicking a picture of the flowers. Year after year summer would creep up and the flowers would wilt away before she could click a picture. She would comfort herself by thinking next spring the flowers would bloom again. One winter as she gazed at the meadow she calculated if she lived to be eighty, she'd see the flowers bloom forty-one more times. Suddenly she appreciated the meadow in a different way. How many more springs will you see if you live to be eighty: $80 - (\text{your age}) = \text{remaining springs}$.

Permanence of the Moon

Compare your lifespan to the permanence of the moon. It is the same moon your ancestors saw thousands of years ago. It is the same moon Jesus, Plato, and Aristotle gazed upon. When the pyramids of Egypt were being constructed the workers saw the same moon you see. Your ancestors never fathomed thousands of years after their existence you would carry their genes under the same moon.

Timeline

The following timeline indicates four thousand years past and two thousand years into the future. Each segment on the timeline represents one thousand years. There's a speck between the four thousand years of the past and two thousand years of the future. That speck represents your lifespan. Live your life to its fullest potential. You matter.



Live Now

How many years will pass before no one on this planet remembers you were here; ten, twenty, or sixty years?

As you read the following poem realize it's what you do on this earth while you live that matters. In time, no one will remember your name. All that will remain are bones or ashes.

BONES

*It was by chance while walking
I stumbled on your bones,
Bleached white by wind and sun,
And I wondered as I stared;
Could it be amongst the living
Not one would know your name?*

*Like sticks or stones you know not love, nor hate,
Not even pain.
Your laughter and your weeping are as silent as the sand
And all your dreams and schemes have vanished
In the sunset of your life.*

*Tell me if you can, you pile of bones,
Can you see me from the vastness,
Or have you forgotten your old abode?*

Syrus Pakai

Stranger by Your Tombstone

Picture a stranger standing in front of your tombstone fifty years after your death. It is early autumn, leaves scattered about, and there he stands reading your tombstone. Do you think he cares whether or not you lived a life of misery or happiness? Do you

think he cares if you lived a prosperous life or eked out a living like a mouse? To the stranger you will mean as much as the rocks around him. Years will come and go and soon every human alive will be a stranger. Not one will remain who lived while you walked the earth. Keep your life in perspective and live to your fullest potential. Once your flame burns out it is over for this life. What will the stranger read fifty years after your death? Your entire existence will be summed up through the words or symbols on your tombstone.

Afterlife

Is there life after death?

VOICE BEYOND

*Not in life but in death have I found
Eternal peace in Paradise;
No more sorrow, no more pain,
I now comprehend forever.*

*In life I cherished moments of laughter,
Now laughter is all I know.
No more fear or toil in the cold;
I am basking in kindness, resting in warmth.
I now know perfect love,
For I have seen God's face.*

*Now faith and hope are obsolete;
Life's mysteries have been revealed.
I am home at last with my Creator;
There is nothing more I desire, or hope for.
So grieve me, then release me;
I'm waiting in Paradise.*

Syrus Pakai

Conclusion

After completing this chapter you might feel life is futile or meaningless. If our lives boil down to a matter of months then what's the point of our existence? The point of our existence is to live a meaningful, happy life.

Death Awareness Exercise

If I had six months to live the first thing I'd do is: _____

I'd spend the most time with: _____

I would be more forgiving, slower to anger: True__ False __

I would share my feelings more readily: True__ False __

One thing I would change: _____

The main thing I would try to accomplish: _____

I will: Be cremated __ Have a traditional burial__

I've allocated funds for my funeral: Yes__ No__

Four people I want to attend my funeral: _____

One song I want played at my funeral: _____

My greatest regret is: _____

My greatest accomplishment is: _____

I have life insurance: True__ False __

I have a Will: True__ False __

I have a funeral insurance policy: True__ False__

Where will I: Be buried__ Have my ashes scattered__ Other__

I'll likely be remembered as:

- Kind, gentle, slow to anger, honest, nurturing, loyal, brave, moral, polite, self-controlled, generous, industrious, dependable, faithful, encouraging, disciplined...
- Unkind, reckless, hateful, angry, envious, dishonest, mean, lazy, gossipy, controlling, rude, lustful, greedy, addicted, stingy, foulmouthed, hedonistic...

Who will remember me fifty years after my death: _____

I believe in an afterlife: True__ False __

Where will my spirit go after death: _____

Describe that place: _____

I believe in God: True__ False __ Describe God: _____

Months that remain if I live to be 80:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & 80 \text{ (years)} \\
 & - \text{ (my age)} \\
 & = \text{ (years left)} \\
 & \quad \times 12 \\
 & = \text{ (months left)} \\
 & - \text{ (months since B-day)} \\
 & = \text{ (months left if I live to be 80)}
 \end{aligned}$$

What insight did I gather from this chapter and how can I apply it to my life:
