



ANY FINAL THOUGHTS?

**AS HARD AS IT IS, THINKING ABOUT DEATH AND DYING NOW
AND THEN IS ACTUALLY QUITE A GOOD THING, JOURNALIST
CAROLINE BUIJS DISCOVERS. BECAUSE REALIZING THAT LIFE
ENDS AT A CERTAIN POINT CAN MAKE IT EASIER TO BE AWARE
OF HOW YOU WANT TO LIVE YOUR LIFE.**



Recently at breakfast, my husband asked our children, “Do you realize that grandpa and grandma will die some day?” Everything froze for a moment and then came their startled response: “No, it’s not true—grandpa and grandma will live forever. Or at the very least it will be far, far in the future when they die”. My husband cautiously followed through: “Perhaps it’s better to consider this future sometime though? Then you can prepare yourself a little bit. Because we all die in the end”. To be honest, I nearly choked on my yogurt and mused when he brought up the topic. I’m definitely someone who is inclined to want to talk about something nice. When it comes to death, I stick my head in the sand; when it comes to my parents’ death or my own death, I prefer not to think about it, and I talk about it as little as possible. It scares me. Death hasn’t played a big role in my life so far either, and I realize all too well how grateful I should be for that. But lately I’ve started waking up in the middle of the night with a heavy feeling. For a moment, I don’t even know what’s bothering me, but then I realize with a sigh: “Oh yeah, my parents are going to die some day, I’m going to die some day myself”. And so it slowly but surely dawns on me that it’s time to shake off the naivety and look death in the face.

HOLDING ON

Why is that so difficult? Because after reading a pile of books from the library on the subject, it’s very clear that I’m not the only one. Everyone prefers to ignore death; it’s a recurring theme. According to Sogyal Rinpoche, author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, one of the main reasons we struggle with death is that we don’t want to accept that we are mortal. We so desperately want everything to continue as it is that we have to believe that things will always stay the same. In our eyes, change always means loss and suffering; the Tibetan teacher writes, “And when loss presents itself, we do everything we can to avoid feeling it. Reflect on this: The realization of impermanence is

paradoxically the only thing we can hold onto, perhaps our only lasting possession. I can identify with this; I’m definitely a ‘holder-on’. I get a stomachache when things change. I don’t want my children to ever grow up and grow apart from me, for example, and I also don’t want my parents ever to die. Perhaps that also explains my sometimes slightly over-the-top habit of making a photo album out of every special occasion. Hold on to those beautiful memories! But that sentence about transience offering you something to hold on to is comforting. It gives me a sense of peace. In her book *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross writes that death—despite all technological advances—confronts us with our human vulnerability. We may be able to postpone death, but we can’t escape it, and it strikes without distinction. Good people die just as often as bad people. It’s probably this aspect of inevitability and unpredictability that makes death so frightening for so many people. What’s more, she writes, in Western society it’s difficult to accept death, because we’re simply not familiar with it. In spite of the fact that it occurs everywhere, all the time, we’re never confronted with it. Maybe she’s right. I remember how, during a trip to India, I noticed that death seemed to be much more common in daily life there. I saw people swimming in the river Ganges and doing their laundry, while a little bit further down the river the dead were being burned. Nobody but me thought this was strange.

MIND EXPERIMENT

And so one fine Saturday afternoon I show up at the De Nieuwe Ooster cemetery in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, for a class called ‘You only die once’ presented by The School of Life. Dutch philosopher Lammert Kamphuis will help us find ways to integrate our deaths into our lives in a more positive way, followed by a tour of the cemetery. As I walk over to the café where the class takes place, I see a funeral >

‘IF I WOULD NEVER DIE, WOULD I BE HAPPIER?’

procession passing by in the distance. My first impulse is to look the other way, but of course that's going to be hard in a cemetery. Death really is everywhere here. In older times, says Kamphuis, a graveyard would lie next to the church and the church would lie at the center of a village or town. Today, cemeteries and crematoriums are often located on the outskirts of a city or village and are therefore not really part of our daily lives anymore.

A question that we are asked to ponder during this gathering, and that I mull over in the following weeks, is whether paying attention to death might lead to a more authentic life. Because when you fully realize that life is finite, it can become easier to sense what you want and how you want to organize your life. A thought experiment such as 'imagine you have one more year to live' can be helpful. "I've noticed, in conversations with friends who are wrestling with something like, 'Am I doing the right work?', or 'Do I want to live my life with this person?' is that this thought experiment really helps them to make a decision," Kamphuis says. "Because then they often suddenly realize, 'No, in that case I wouldn't be doing this work. So why am I doing it now?'"

It triggers something in me, too. For example, I've been wondering for a long time if I should go to graphic design school. It will cost a lot of time and money, and I'm not even sure if I will ever do anything with it. On the other hand, I think that if I found out I only had a short time left to live, I would regret not ever having tried. So I consciously make a decision to fill out the registration forms and enroll when I get home. And I feel elated.

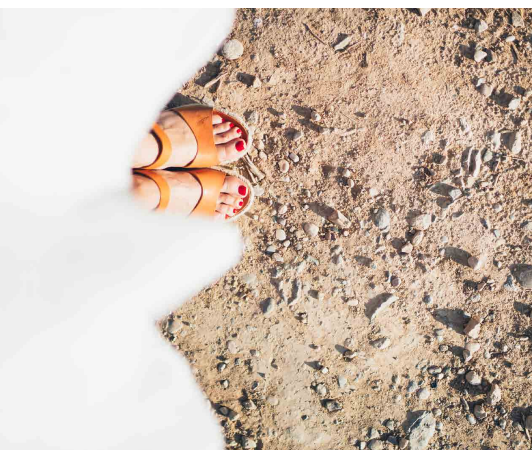
A confrontation with death also often makes you more keenly aware of what you do and don't want in your life. "Once, after this class, someone told me how, after the death of his mother, he suddenly knew for certain he wanted to ask his girlfriend to marry him," Kamphuis says. I myself also remember how when my father-in-law died seventeen years ago, my husband and I both had this sudden clarity that it was time to have children. Until then it had never seemed to have

any real urgency, we'd been thinking about children in terms of 'some time' and 'later'. But then everything had suddenly become clear.

HURRY UP AND LIVE

The Stoics would know what to say about my head-in-the-sand attitude toward thinking about death. They were advising people to think about difficult things 2,000 years ago, according to Kamphuis. Because if you do, you'll be mentally prepared when difficult things actually happen to you. The Roman writer and Stoic philosopher Seneca held death in his thoughts every day. This theme returns again and again in his letters, which read as if they were written yesterday—they're so beautiful and relevant. For example, this piece from his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*: "There is nothing more wretched than worry over the outcome of future events; as to the amount or the nature of that which remains, our troubled minds are set adrift with unaccountable fear. How, then, shall we avoid this vacillation? In one way only, if there be no reaching forward in our life, if it is withdrawn into itself. For he only is anxious about the future, to whom the present is unprofitable [...]. Therefore, my dear Lucilius, begin at once to live, and count each separate day as a separate life. He who has thus prepared himself, he whose daily life has been a rounded whole, is easy in his mind." That appeals to me immensely. If you treat every day as the whole of your life, then you will not regret things that you haven't done; the story of your life is actually complete every day. This way, you won't neglect things that are unresolved, or agonize over things you still wanted to do.

Another thought experiment that helps me is to reverse the situation and ask myself: If I would never die, would I be happier? Dutch philosopher Joop Doornen thinks not. He writes that death is the greatest gift to man, even, because its finality informs our existence. "If we were immortal, we could always redo



everything, reverse every wrong decision, undo all mistakes. But if we were immortal, we wouldn't ever have to start on anything. Because why start on anything when it can also be done tomorrow? Or the day after tomorrow? Death makes it impossible to take life for granted, he writes in his [Dutch-only] book about the modern art of living. "Our mortality is the one thing that makes a meaningful and successful life possible."

AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR

Kamphuis brings our afternoon class to a conclusion with the uplifting message that we are now two hours closer to our deaths, and then Johan Mulenders, who has been working at De Nieuwe Oester for more than 25 years, takes us on a tour of the cemetery. I must say it's very pleasant he given a tour of a graveyard by a down-to-earth Amsterdammer. Because of his pragmatic approach to death, it takes the weight off a little. When we walk past an empty, open grave, he removes the boards that are laying on top and lets us have a look into the prepared hole, if we want. "Look, in here there will be five people laying on top of each other." At first I'm afraid to look, but then I feel a kind of peaceful resignation. It may sound a bit dim, but only here do I start realizing that we really all die some time and that there is just no point in denying or ignoring it. And I'm genuinely amazed at how many different ways you >

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT: AN EXERCISE FROM THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

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Imagine you have only one more year to live. What would you do in that year? This exercise is about drawing up an agenda for the coming twelve months. You can imagine there are no physical limitations. Write down the twelve months of the year and for each month write down—as specifically as possible—one or two things that you would do (or not do) in that time period.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOU:

- * Get together with family members: Who, where and when?
- * Get together with friends: Who, where and when?
- * Do you want to write your life story or your own funeral speech? Are you going to celebrate events and organize parties and, if so, what kinds of parties?
- * Will you stop working and, if so, when? Be practical: You still have to be able to earn your living this year.
- * What things that you've always done would you stop doing this year?
- * Will you go traveling and, if so, where?
- * Are you going to do something you've always wanted to do, and how are you going to start?
- * Will you sell all your stuff; will you arrange care for your pets?
- * Will you look for a deeper meaning (for example in philosophy)?

The School of Life is devoted to developing emotional intelligence. They address issues such as how to find fulfilling work, how to master the art of relationships, how to understand one's past, how to achieve calm, and how better to understand the world. Visit theschooloflife.com for more information or to sign up for their newsletter.

A serene sunset scene over a calm body of water. In the foreground, the dark, metallic railing of a boat is visible on the left. A small, white boat with a dark hull is positioned in the middle ground, facing away from the viewer towards the horizon. The sun is a bright, glowing orb just above the horizon line, casting a long, shimmering reflection across the water's surface. The sky is a mix of soft orange, yellow, and pale blue, with a few wispy clouds. The far shore is a dark, silhouetted line of trees and land.

**'WHATEVER YOU WANT TO DO,
DO IT NOW. THERE ARE ONLY SO
MANY TOMORROWS'**

Michael Landon (1936-1991), American actor

**'CERTAIN MOMENTS ARE
TORN FROM US; SOME ARE
GENTLY REMOVED'**

can be cremated and buried. There's an option to grow a tree out of your ashes which appeals to me. It also triggers me to talk to my parents for the first time about what they really want to happen when they die—I didn't get my avoidance behavior from a stranger after all: they tend to shy away from any talk of death. But not this time, and I find that all three of us actually enjoy talking about it for a change.

MORE CLARITY

Nowadays, I no longer uneasily avoid the graveyard when I walk through the park. It's just like Kamphuis said during the class: At a cemetery, you can see what matters in life more clearly. "Reading the names on the gravestones and seeing how old people were when they died gives you pause. Involuntarily, you think: 'One day I too will be laying here. And what would I have wanted to have done with my life?'" His words remind me that I want to manage my time more consciously. And so, for example, I decide that I no longer want to dye my hair. I know, it's not an earth-shattering decision, but every month I've been spending an entire morning at the hairdresser, and now I suddenly find it a waste of time. Exactly as Seneca wrote so beautifully to his friend Lucilius: 'Gather and save your time, which till lately has been forced from you, or filched away, or has merely slipped from your hands. Make yourself believe the truth of my words—that certain moments are torn from us, that some are gently removed, and that others glide beyond our reach. The most disgraceful kind of loss, however, is that due to carelessness'. ●



WANT TO READ MORE?

- * 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying', by Sogyal Rinpoche
- * 'Death: The Final Stage of Growth', by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
- * 'How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life', by Seneca, translated by James S. Romm
- * 'Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays', by Michel de Montaigne. The French philosopher asked himself the question: 'What should my attitude be in this life with regards to death?' In order to live well, you must be able to handle death well, he writes.
- * 'Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir', by Roz Chast. The author and her parents had long been followers of the denial theory: If you do not think about death, it won't come.