



# THE ART OF DYING

Many people in Western culture are unwilling to talk about death. We have a tendency to almost pretend that it won't happen – but those individuals who accept and embrace death as part of life inevitably have something to teach us.

WORDS BY CHERIE GILMOUR

“**T**o die will be an awfully big adventure,” Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie’s creation

of a boy who refused to grow up, said. Few of us would think of death as an adventure. In the 21st century, the conversation around death is filled with scientific and medical concerns, often around issues like euthanasia or quality of life.

It can appear as a shadowy fear lurking in your mind on sunny days while you’re watching the kids play or be right up in your face as you make funeral arrangements for a parent who suddenly passed away.

It haunts kids’ minds when driving past a cemetery and holding their breath (the superstition of not wanting to make ghosts jealous or breathe in a spirit).

We share birth stories – the unique way a child first entered the world – but we don’t dwell on death stories, and perhaps this is to our detriment. The Stoics encouraged daily contemplation of death.

## TEA, CAKE & MORTALITY

The aim of ‘death cafés’ is to increase awareness of death to help people make the most of their (finite) lives. The idea began in 2004, when sociologist Bernard Crettaz began hosting pop-up ‘cafés mortels’ in Switzerland where people could chat openly about dying and remove or reduce people’s fears. They gained popularity and quickly spread to France, Belgium, the UK, and across the globe, including Australia and New Zealand. For more information or to find a death café, visit [deathcafe.com](http://deathcafe.com)

“I cannot escape death, but at least I can escape the fear of it,” the Greek philosopher Epictetus said.

“Fear of death does more harm than death itself because it turns us into cowards, whereas Death merely returns us to Nature,” Donald Roberston wrote in his book, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*. “To learn how to die, according to the Stoics, is to unlearn how to be a slave.”

## LIVING YOUR LAST DAYS MEANINGFULLY

We can vicariously live through the process of death through the words of others. On learning that his death was imminent, neurologist and science writer Oliver Sacks wrote in *The New York Times*: “It is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can.” He said, “Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts.”



Author Amy Krouse Rosenthal, who was terminally ill, also wrote for *The New York Times* in an essay titled 'You May Want To Marry My Husband' in which she lists his attributes (good-looking, can cook, likes music). "This is when we entered what I came to think of as Plan 'Be', existing only in the present," she wrote of her sudden diagnosis.

Paul Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon who died at 37 from lung cancer, wrote: "The future, instead of the ladder toward the goals of life, flattens out into a perpetual present. Money, status, all the vanities the preacher of Ecclesiastes described hold so little interest: a chasing after wind, indeed."

## "ONE WOMAN'S FAMILY WRAPPED HER CAREFULLY IN BEAUTIFUL SCARVES THEY'D GIVEN HER OVER THE YEARS."

He directs the last line to his baby daughter: "When you come to one of the many moments in life when you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing."

### BEHIND THE MYSTERY OF TERMINAL LUCIDITY

Although research has limitations, it can illuminate the stranger phenomena around death, such as terminal lucidity. *Threshold: Terminal Lucidity and the Border Between Life and Death* by cognitive scientist Alexander Batthyány frames his research on cognition, dementia, death and dying with stories and philosophies. He defines terminal lucidity as "the technical term for the unexpected return of cognitive clarity, self-awareness, memory and lucid functioning of patients who were assumed to have permanently lost their mental faculties."

He argues that in Western medicine, we do not have a way of measuring what some might call 'paranormal' pre-death experiences and that sharing stories is more effective. Along with his research into terminal lucidity, he shares stories of families as unique as those experiencing them. Their stories were "often profoundly moving and beautiful, but scientifically puzzling", he writes. One person reported that their father looked 10 to 15 years younger when close to death, "and his eyes that had been milky for the last few years were crystal blue once again and twinkling as he looked at me."

Another reported that her mother had lost all speech faculties and could only communicate in jumbled phrases. Suddenly, one day, she asked her daughter to colour her hair and put her lipstick on before the rest of the family came in. "She ate. She sang with them. She exchanged stories. She asked about their lives" before she passed moments later.

Batthyány's research showed that there is "no single cause behind the re-emergence of the 'old self' before death." Sometimes, the trigger might have been the arrival of family and friends or a change in medication, but these were inconclusive. Batthyány says he finds consolation in the field when trying to understand "the relationship between our personhood and what goes on in our brains". He talks of his endless fascination with an area that draws together our understanding of the body, mind, and soul, and admits that it "raises a number of questions – and in fact more than it answers."

Hospice nurse Julie has various social media platforms, including 1.3 million followers on TikTok, that chronicle her work in palliative care. She's passionate about death education and believes it will help prepare us and decrease our fear of end of life. In the past, when most people have heard her talk about her work, they're scared or turned off, but her social media channels have gained huge followings.

"People seem ready to talk about death and dying and learn about it to decrease fear. I see in my day-to-day life, the ones that are willing to talk about their death and plan for it and learn about what to expect seem to live better and die better," she says. Sometimes, she gets messages from people who have had an extreme fear of death, and watching her channel has reduced their anxiety.

### AROUND THE WORLD

Different cultures and religions have vastly different ways of dealing with death. Hinduism envisions a circular pattern of life and death, whereby a person is thought to be reborn with a new identity. Families in Korea keep cremation beads made from the ashes of loved ones in their homes as a way to honour the deceased. In Ireland, wake services are often held in pubs or other gathering places, and they feature music, dance, food and the sharing of stories about the deceased. In Mexico, where death is accepted as another part of life, the annual Day of the Dead honours deceased family members and pan de muerto (bread of the dead) and special sweets are made.

She recounts some of her own experiences working as a hospice nurse, including the phenomenon of 'visioning', when someone who is about to die sees a pre-deceased relative or loved one, and terminal lucidity, which she sees in about 30% of her patients. While commentators on her videos have pointed out that certain phenomena are due to sudden decreases or changes in brain activity, she argues, like Battyány, that it's never been formally proven.

### CARING FOR THOSE WHO ARE LEFT BEHIND

Barbara Ferguson became a death doula after working in the birth space and calls herself a 'circle of life' doula. She's passionate about raising awareness about the death process and providing families and individuals with more options both pre- and post-death.

She has supported many people through their deaths, however her focus is mostly on the families who are left grieving. She believes that, even if the death was traumatic, she can support them to reframe their experience through good after-death care. This can include shrouding ceremonies, like the woman whose family wrapped her carefully in beautiful scarves they'd given her over the years, or even spending time with their loved one's bodies in the home for a few days before they continue their journey to a funeral home.

She advocates for a kind of de-medicalising of the death process, which, in the Western world, so often takes place in hospitals.

Perhaps our hunger for scientific advancement has come at the expense of the spiritual dimensions of life and death – the mysteries experienced by so many people give us some comfort that maybe there is more to death than meets the eye. The stories of those who work closely with death and study it can destigmatise what most of us fear and teach us to prepare for death in the way that philosophers have long been telling us: by living well. ●

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