

Preparation for Death

Death happens. After life's ups and downs, its smells, and sounds, and colors . . . it ends. And we know that it will. We know that we will die; that is part of our journey. And like any journey, we have the choice of planning for it or not. Rejoicing in it or not. Fearing it or not.

After the wondrous surprise of having been born, we are often surprised again when it comes time to die. Though family and friends, mentors, and even spiritual guides may have died before us, none have been able to tell us of their experiences, of what to expect. Though we may be surrounded by loved ones when it comes time, this journey is ours alone.

Shirley Coe

According to the wisdom of Buddha, we can actually use our lives to prepare for death. We do not have to wait for the painful death of someone close to us or the shock of terminal illness to force us into looking at our lives. Nor are we condemned to go out empty-handed at death to meet the unknown. We can begin, here and now, to find meaning in our lives. We can make of every moment an opportunity to change and to prepare—wholeheartedly, precisely, and with peace of mind—for death and eternity. In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected. *Sogyal Rinpoche*

I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow.

Scarlett O'Hara, Gone With the Wind

We are conscious of our own selves, our own tasks, and also we know we're going to die. Man is the only creature—men, women, and children sometimes even, are the only creatures who can be aware of their death, and out of that comes normal anxiety. When I let myself feel that, then I apply myself to new ideas, I write books, I communicate with my fellows. In other words, the creative interchange of human personality rests upon the fact that we know we're going to die. Of that the animals and the grass and so on know nothing. But our knowledge of our death is what gives us a normal anxiety that says to us, "Make the most of these years you are alive."

Rollo May

I stand on the terrible threshold, and I see
The end and the beginning in each other's arms.

Stanley Kunitz

I want to enter death/ with my eyes open/ my ears open/ no fears knowing/ and not knowing/
serenely facing/ other voices/ other airs/ other paths/ forgetting my memories/
detaching myself/ being reborn/ intact.

Claribel Alegría

Death is not life's goal, only life's terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.

Forrest Church

The way we prepare for the day when we must say goodbye to a loved one, regardless of which side of the divide we find ourselves, is to live each day as if it were the only day—which it actually is. Every time you part, from this day forward, tell them you love them, even if you are in and out all day long. Appreciate the little things—the common, everyday things—because they will become almost unbearably precious when death comes knocking at the door.

Rev. Georgette Wonders

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Mary Oliver

Questions to Ponder

1. How does your religious belief or worldview influence your view of death? This question will be shared at the meeting.
2. Write a sentence or two about yourself that might go on your tombstone (even if you are planning on cremation). Be generous and loving to yourself. For instance, you might write, “She was so caring and giving to others. She loved her family with a passion.”
3. Think about a time in your childhood when you experienced the death of someone. What memories do you have from that time?
4. If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?
5. What words/phrases/euphemisms do you use for the word death?
6. Consider your own death. Write down or think about your funeral/memorial service. Who will be there, what will be said about you? What songs, flowers, readings? Write your obituary.
7. What plans have you made to deal with your own death? For example, do you have a will or trust? An advance directive? Life insurance or a burial policy?

Some questions adapted from Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: an ABC Theologized.