

**Your Year To Live**  
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It's a truism that everybody knows they're going to die, yet no one believes it. We act as though we were going to live forever. And why not? From the moment we're born, there's never been a moment when we were not in the center ring of the circus, spotlighted on the stage, the chief protagonist of the whole story. From our first breath, we're the ones sniffing the world, gazing around, bumping up against it, recording memories, hatching schemes and making plans. How could all this panorama exist without us? Other people's mortality we recognize readily enough. Sigmund Freud quipped of the man who said to his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would move to Paris." But our own expiration date always seems to retreat toward a distant and never-to-consummated someday. Indeed, Freud suggested that in our subconscious, time never passes. In our psychic self-image, we are eternally young and vigorous, always on the brink of the adventure and never near its finale. For the unconscious mind, there is no death. But emotional health and maturity requires bringing the primitive portions of the mind under the guide of what he called the Reality Principle. And in an essay written in 1918, at the end of the Great World War which had seen such mass slaughter on the battlefield, he suggested that men would perhaps not kill each other so quite casually if they truly believed in their own destructibility. If we acknowledged its brevity, its perishability, its ephemeral nature, we might value existence more highly. And so Freud concludes his "Reflections on War and Death" with this advice. "If you wish life, prepare for death."

If you want to live fully, prepare for the end.

Everyone knows they're going to die, yet few believe it. But suppose you did. Suppose you realized that you had this coming year of 2023, all 365 days, 8760 hours, 31,536,000 seconds remaining and then *finito* - all done. No more birthdays, no more brushing the teeth or putting on your socks, no more nothing. How would you use that time, and how might you change your life? Would you take a cruise or start playing the marimba? Would you go to

Paris or head to India and sit in an ashram? Would you spend all your money on fast cars and fine wine or lose all interest in buying and spending and accumulating things? Would you resolve to appreciate every passing moment and savor each minute to the max, or would you perhaps realize that denial, bargaining, anger and depression are part of the territory you need to cross before reaching a point of acceptance and finding peace with your own passing?

I don't think any of us really knows the answer. What would I change if I had just a year to live? It's hypothetical. If I had just one year, for example, I probably wouldn't have spent last summer caulking the windows and cleaning the culverts, I wouldn't bother with draining the hot water heater, and for sure wouldn't be getting that colonoscopy. But of course I probably will do those things and more because I might live to be a hundred (god forbid).

Still I think Freud was right, at least about this. Dealing honestly with death helps us deal more consciously and deliberately with life. We don't take it cheaply. We understand the stakes involved in just "killing time." While none of us knows the precise manner or moment of our exit, we do know that time is short.

In preparation for this New Year's Day, I've been reading and pondering Stephen Levine's book *A Year To Live*, where he undertakes an experiment to pass through the coming twelve month cycle as though it were his last. Before his own death in 2016, Stephen lived not far from here, along the high road to Taos, in Chamisal, New Mexico, where he and his wife ran a 24 hour hotline for individuals facing the end of life or coping with chronic grief and loss. And while he drew on the native wisdom of this region, along with Hinduism, his teachings were mostly rooted in Buddhism, which teaches that everything is impermanent, nothing and no one lasts, and that a kind of liberation of the heart and mind occurs when we accept that fact.

Different people might make different choices. Given a year to live, some might indeed take up the xylophone, but rather than starting a whole new life, Levine suggests the wisest course might be to just sit more deeply with the life we

already have: to spend less energy in denial, fewer hours dwelling in the land of make-believe or regret or wishful thinking, more time being present, listening and paying attention to the people around us, to each day's small satisfactions and the blessings so often hidden in plain sight.

So where do we start? One way to proceed could be with a life review. Call to mind all those important individuals who've blessed you or hurt you along the way and say farewell. In grief groups that I've led over the years, one of the tools I've used to help people move beyond bereavement is the creation of a memory box. Take a photo of your loved one, some personal mementos, letters, keepsakes that represent their unique traits and endearing habits and place them all in a holder, a container that can be put on a shelf where it can be accessed again but where those items are no longer a daily, intruding presence. For those mourning, it can be a way of gaining closure. And for the rest of us, those with just this one year to live, we might create some mental memory boxes, recalling old friends, lovers, rivals, mentors and all the difficult people who have crossed our path, spending a few minutes with each of them, offering thoughts of thanks or forgiveness as needed before gently letting each one go and placing them into a manageable folder, like taking a long string of emails out of the inbox and filing them away under the label "read," or maybe unsubscribing from an online feed: no more notifications needed from that particular sender.

I started writing my memoirs recently after my daughter asked me to record some Kowalski family history. That's been good practice, too. All of us have secrets we'd rather edit out of our biography, things we're not proud of, things we'd just as soon forget and you can do that with your own personal narrative, you have permission to be more gentle and compassionate with your own goofs and foul-ups. Putting your life in writing gives it shape and form, a beginning, middle and end and, if you bother to publish it, you can close the cover when it's done. The story achieves completion.

I rather suspect that all of us will be given some opportunity for a life review, like it or not and ready or not. Many years ago Dori and I were driving on the interstate when we hit a spot of black ice and our little car went spinning out of

control across three lanes of busy traffic. Dori had that classic experience where her life flashed before her eyes, like watching a movie reel. And I think that when we're close to the end of the line, our mind and body probably naturally know how to shut down, just as a newborn's tiny hand knows without instruction how to grasp onto a finger, just as the child knows to suckle at a mother's breast. So we'll get our retrospective glance, watch the movie unfold, all the highlights. Then we may finally meet Jesus, or Buddha or the goddess or Gandalf, and when we see the big tunnel and the light at the end we'll know exactly where to go. At least that's my hope.

But just in case, I'd like to be ready when the time comes. Stephen Levine suggests that you might want to choose a song, or a chant, or mantra that can help take you across the finish line. Many Buddhists rely on the phrase *Gate gate paragate parasamgate, bodhi svaha*, which comes from the Heart Sutra means something like "Gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore" with the words *bodhi* and *svaha* at the end, which in Sanskrit mean something like "wow, what an awakening." Christians, he notes, might prefer the Lord's Prayer, or the so-called Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." When Mohandas Gandhi was shot by an assassin in New Delhi in 1948, his final words were the simple exclamation "Ram," one of the names for the Hindu god Vishnu, as though he had been rehearsing beforehand for the last curtain call. He had the eternal already on his lips.

I think that I might cling to a passage from the Night Chant of the Navajo.

With beauty before me I will wander.  
With beauty behind me I will wander.  
With beauty below me I will wander.  
With beauty above me I will wander.  
In old age walking on the trail of beauty I will wander.  
It shall be finished in beauty.

The Night Chant is a nine day healing ritual still practiced to restore balance and equilibrium between the soul and and universe. The intent is not necessarily to make us better or cure disease, but to take us to the path's end with wonder and amazement all around. And the Night Chant is short enough and simple enough to hold onto even in extremity.

That's my mantra, but what's yours? What I'd suggest is that you all might consider a firm resolution for this coming year, not to lose weight or spend more time at the gym or start any other program of self-improvement, but to try more self-acceptance instead. Affirm your own imperfect lifetime. Acknowledge that you are good enough. It can be a healing practice, for as psychologist Carl Rogers noted, "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change." Self-acceptance means letting the past be past. It's over, its done, so lay it to rest. Self-acceptance means making friends with your own mortality and the short time remaining. The end comes for all of us. At peace with the past and future, your own birth and death dates, you can spend more time living the dash in between.

So Happy New Year, as well as Tearful New Year, Same Old New Year, New Year chock full of colonoscopies and other unavoidable unpleasantness. January First can bring a bag full of mixed feelings. It's a beginning and an end, just like everything else in this unrepeatable and impermanent universe. Another trip around the sun, another chance for a fresh start, another round of days that will never come again. But the year ahead is the only one we have. Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes. Don't let them fly by before you start living.