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Facing the Fact of My Death



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Facing the Fact of My Death

As a child, confronting my mortality was terrifying. Now it is an opportunity.

George YancyCredit...Devin Yalkin for The New York Times
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This essay is an introduction to a series of monthly interviews to be conducted by the author with 12 religious scholars and practitioners on how individual religious traditions understand and respond to the inevitability of death.

As a young boy, I recall very clearly telling my mother with an innocent defiance that I wished that I had never been born because I will die someday. I can't recall her response, but I'm sure it worried her and left her feeling hurt. But I was frustrated, angry, afraid. While I knew that people died, it had suddenly dawned on me that I would be among them, that *I will die someday*. It was an epiphany — one I would rather have not had. I recall thinking, "I didn't sign up for this. Who is playing this terrible joke on me?"

Strange, I realize, but there I was — a child, elated to be alive, feeling the warmth of the sun on my brown skin, playing with friends in the streets, eating ice cream, celebrating birthdays, enjoying unconditional love shown to me by my mother and my older sister. Why did I have so much joy and shared love just to someday have it all taken away, gone forever? And I understood "gone forever" to mean *never ever existing again*. Done! Kaput! It made absolutely no sense to me.

I experienced the fact of my death as a cosmic slight. I could not get it out of my head. Even at that young age, I began to feel the heavy weight of my finitude. I couldn't put it down, even though I wanted to. Death was now too close.

It was dreadful. That sense of unthinking longevity, invulnerability, cavalier confidence — hell, just being a child — gave way to a deep and frightening reality that I could not control. The childlike omnipotence collapsed and left me facing an abyss. The abstract fact of death had become personal. I had come to realize that not a single moment is guaranteed, not another breath, another blink of an eye, another hug from my mother or clash with my sister.

As I grew older this feeling of existential dread stayed with me — of being thrown into existence without any clear sense of why we're here, of wondering whether or not God exists, whether or not the cosmos has any meaning beyond what we give it, whether or not we have immortal souls, whether there is anything to be discovered after death or whether death is the final absurd moment of our being. I was like the French-Algerian existentialist Albert Camus, who wrote of having "conscious certainty of a death without hope."

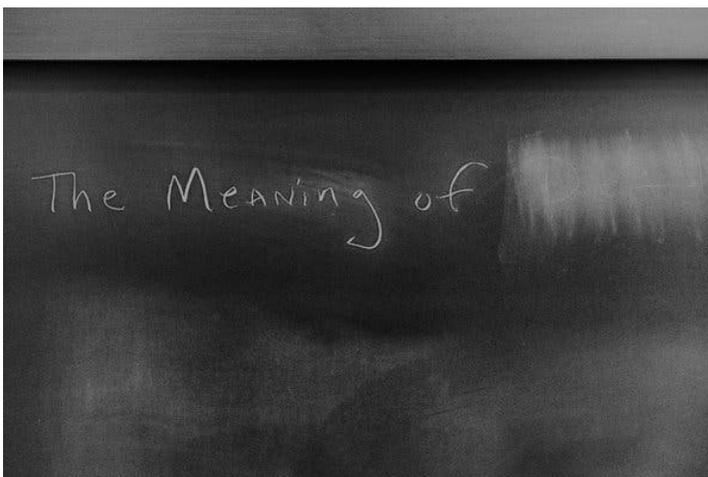


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As an adult, this uncanniness goes unabated; it has not stopped. There are times when, like the 17th-century thinker Blaise Pascal, I feel trapped between two infinities of meaninglessness. In his unfinished work, “Pensées,” Pascal writes, “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the small space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces alarms me. I wonder why I am here rather than there, now rather than then. Who set me here? By whose order and design have this place and time been destined for me?”

The fact of death is like a haunting. It frequents me, entangled in everything I do: It’s just beneath my pillow as I sleep, strolling next to me as I casually walk from one class to the next, inserting its presence between each heart beat in my chest, forcing its way into my consciousness when I say “I love you” to my children each night, assuring me that it can unravel the many promises that I continue to make, threatening the appointments that I need to keep. This sense of haunting is what the Harvard professor Cornel West calls the “death shudder.” Of this “shudder” in the face of death, he writes, “Yes, dread and terror were involved, but also perplexity. Exploration. Where does nonexistence take you? What does it mean to be stripped of your own consciousness? How do we live with the idea that we are always tantalizingly close to death? At any moment the bridge can collapse.”

I continue to shudder. Yet there is something about facing the fact of death that invites us to double back, to see our existence, our lives, differently. The scholar Mark Ralkowski, reflecting on Martin Heidegger’s notion of “being-toward-death,” writes: “In rare moments, we can be returned to ourselves by an experience of anxiety (*Angst*), which disrupts the tranquility of the everyday world by emptying it of its usual significance and meaning. In these moments, none of our projects or commitments makes sense to us anymore, and we see that we are committed to roles prescribed to us by *das Man*” — which means “the they” or “the crowd.”

I want my students to experience one of those “rare moments,” to consider the short duration of their lives. To get them to think differently about our time together, to value their lives differently, I make a resolute effort to remind my students that all of us, at some point, sooner or later, will become rotting corpses. That, I explain, is the great equalizer. No matter how smart, brilliant, wealthy, beautiful and fit you are, no matter how great your MCAT, LSAT or G.P.A. scores, no matter your religious or political orientation, we will all perish.

After hearing this, students will often become completely silent. There is a sudden recognition that something has been haunting our joy, our unquestioned and collective happiness, our sense of “permanence.” It is palpable. No matter how many times I’ve decided to remove the veil, the sting of our collective finitude continues to hit me, along with the reality of bodily decomposition and putrefaction. The unspoken reality of death, which is the haunting background of our lives, shakes my body; I mourn for me and my students, and humanity.

Yet a clarity emerges. My students and I see each other differently, perhaps for the very first time. We are no longer simply students and professor, but fragile creatures and mysterious beings who have been dying from the moment we were born in a universe with no self-evident ultimate meaning. Something as previously uneventful as sitting next to one’s fellow classmate

takes on unspeakable value. That shared understanding, vulnerability and mutual recognition of collective destiny makes our time together even more joyful, even more precious.

I'm not sure if the "death shudder" will ever abate while I'm alive. And I am no closer to understanding the fact that I exist or why I must die. I don't seem to be able to achieve the necessary adjustment, the solace of acceptance. In his "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists." Wittgenstein helps to give voice to something mysterious about our being: It is that we exist, and that we will die, which is so uncanny. It is that both life and death are inextricably braided together that elicits the shudder. And the shudder and the uncanniness point beyond mere facts. They function, at least for me, as gestures, as intimations of a beyond, that enthrall my soul.

So, sooner or later I will die. I'm assured that it will happen. I know that if you are reading this article 100 years from now, I will no longer exist. I will have paid the debt for the gift of being. Death is our collective fate. Yet so many of us fear to talk about it, fear to face it, terrified by the idea of nonbeing. But we must face our destiny, our rendezvous with death. Indeed, the concept of death is a deep and perennial theme in philosophical and theological-religious thought; it is one of the Big Questions. As the philosopher Todd May writes, "Of course, most religions don't claim that we don't die. But there is, for many religions, a particular sense in which we don't really die."

It is in this spirit of exploration that I will interview 12 deeply knowledgeable scholars, philosophers and teachers, one each month, about the meaning of death in their respective traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Jainism and others. I will be asking questions like: What is death? Why do we fear death? Is death final? Do we have immortal souls? What role does death play in how we ought to live our lives?

The objective is not to find definitive answers to these eternal questions, but to engage, as my students and I try to do in our classes, in a lively discussion about a fact that most of us would rather avoid, and move ourselves a little closer to the truth.

Next: An interview with the Tibetan Buddhist Dadul Namgyal.

George Yancy is professor of philosophy at Emory University. His latest book is "Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly About Racism in America."

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