

Introduction

We begin to die from the moment we are born. But how we choose to live during our brief sojourn on earth determines the quality of our time while here.

Life begins as an adventure of exploring and learning. We come in with a sense of energy and enthusiasm. But as we learn the ways of the world our feeling of excitement begins to fade. We are told by our parents and others what to do and what to believe. As we get into a pattern of school – then relationships and work – most of us gradually assume an identity that limits our imagination and creativity.

We are dying – and being renewed – every moment of what we call life. New cells replace old cells – and new views replace old views – but this happens more slowly over time as we and our bodies become more stable and set in our ways. Some of us move quickly and recklessly toward our ultimate destination, while others are better at imparting a spirit of grace into our everyday experience.

The quality of our lives depends much more on what we bring to them than on what they bring to us. If we see our circumstances as overwhelming it will diminish our experience. If we maintain an openness to learning about others and the world, it will bring us a continually renewed sense of adventure.

Those who enjoy their lives the most maintain a sense of purpose. And what is that purpose? We began unafraid to take on challenges and risks. Then we learn to proceed with caution, which begins to get in the way of a full life experience. Throughout our lives we seek to reconnect with the life force with which we came in and bring that into our daily interactions.

We once sought to expand our horizons, then our world began to shrink. We first were open to learning about others and the world, then began to believe we knew about them and forced them into the categories we forged. We paid less attention and stopped really seeing who and what was in front of us. Our vision became more limited to enable our participation in everyday functioning rather than expanding to accommodate the real world.

If we choose we can reaffirm our sense of purpose and again experience life more fully. As we do this our fear of death diminishes because we have a renewed sense of fulfillment. We can train ourselves to no longer dwell on our limitations and that of our world, and rather to focus once more on what is possible.

Since death – and fear of death – is a dominant theme in the lives of most of us, we will devote much of the space in this book addressing that issue. But replacing that emphasis with a renewed interest in life is what this really is about.

People – and many animals – spend much of their lives doing all they can to avoid death. But only people are able to contemplate life's end. Our fear of our ultimate destination dominates much of our time on earth. Some believe that an essential part of us goes on after we die, and

some think that the death of the body is the end of the line. But there is no way to be certain about what death brings. No one really knows if there is a part of us that continues after the demise of the body.

Even though there is some consistency about reports from those who have been declared clinically dead that they see relatives and a “light at the end of the tunnel,” those individuals actually went through near-death experiences and not death itself. There are those who report “out of body” experiences, but leaving the body may be an illusion, and even if real, doesn’t necessarily tell us whether the part that left the body continues after its demise.

Death rituals and mourning have been part of human society as long as there have been people on earth, and according to recent findings it also was a factor for some species that preceded us. Yet when fear of death – and fear in general – dominate our lives we already are partially dead.

Much of our inhibition to leading full lives is based on concern about what others think. We largely form our ideas of what is right and wrong – and act based on them – from the established values of our culture. But we also are individuals with a capacity for experiencing and expressing our unique perspectives in a joyful manner that we have, for most of us, forgotten.

When we allow our natural ability to enjoy life to be experienced and expressed, we no longer are dependent on others or the world for happiness. Death no longer hovers over us when we have a profound appreciation for all that life brings.

At age five I was watching a television show with my family that dealt with death. The idea that life has an end struck me for the first time. I blurted out: "I don't want to die," and remained inconsolable for a long time despite the efforts of my mother to comfort me. She did her best to explain that we all die some day, and in my case that inevitable moment was a long way off.

It has taken me many years to understand that in our inescapable journey that begins at birth our only real choice is how we lead our lives. After a lifetime of soul-searching – and a search for the existence of a soul – it has become clear to me that a major part of living at its fullest includes a willingness to embrace all it brings, including its end, and that this view enhances our experience for its duration.

Some of us live in denial and some embrace all – or most of – what comes our way. The time on earth for each of us is brief. We share an identical destiny, but some choose to make their time here a living hell – even while aware of what awaits them – while others experience a great deal more fulfillment in their everyday encounters.

Each moment yields to yet another, and for most of it we have little control. We usually can't predict whether our daily encounters will bring fulfillment or regret. All of us experience times of pain and disappointment, as well as moments of joy and elation. All we really can do is witness what appears on our plate as the years advance. But it is what we do with what occurs in the course of our daily encounters that makes the difference, not only in the end, but in every ongoing moment.

For some of us the number of days is more limited than for others. But it seems to me that a short life enjoyed is preferable to a long one filled with fear and resentment. No matter how hard we pursue our goals it is not worldly success or disappointment that brings satisfaction, but our ability and willingness to fully experience what we encounter.

With each passing moment we make choices. When I project disappointment upon what I experience – and thus on my mind – I already am defeated; when I choose to engage openly with what I encounter – rather than simply reacting – I live a life of dialogue in which I experience respect for the world, for those around me, and for myself all at the same time. This little book is a meditation on how, despite life's daily surprises, what we bring to our experience, more than the experience itself, determines the quality of our brief time on Earth.

In the pages that follow we discuss how our lives have become less dynamic and meaningful with what we call “maturity,” and how we can restore the sense of wonder we left behind. But mere words cannot force people to take on a view that renews their joy in life. It is only when we identify and restore the enthusiasm we once knew that a dynamic involvement in life once again comes into play. While fully engaged with others and the world, and focusing on the enjoyment of each moment rather than our demise, we overcome the fear of death in our daily lives.