

MEMENTO MORI

There is a long and nearly lost tradition of remembering death in order to live more fully, which is fortunately re-emerging. Though death has been a taboo subject for polite conversation in the consumer culture, with its cult of youthfulness, young people are interested in death and can be even obsessively anxious about it. Interest in death and dying among aging baby-boomers now motivates attendance at “Death Cafes.” The Internet offers a host of online counselling services for bereavement and preparation for dying. In some ways, however, death is still compartmentalized as a topic separate from everyday living, a special concern for those touched directly by it. Especially for medical science, death remains a problem to solve rather than a natural phase of life. The broader significance of mortality as the mainspring of un-ease remains eclipsed by the view of death as a disease to cure.

The idea of *memento mori* is traditionally religious. Remembering the inevitability of death served to keep one’s eyes directed heavenward, not to become too caught up in the vanities of this world. It was a question of priorities. For those who are not religious or do not believe in an afterlife, the concept is still useful for similar reasons: to put things in perspective, to reserve a part of oneself for contemplation, to enrich one’s finite time alive, to remain awake to each moment. Especially when someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, we are shockingly reminded that death can happen any time, even to us, even in the very next moment.

It is no good, of course, thinking about death if that does no more than make one anxious. Contemplating death must get to the bottom of anxiety itself, which involves a gut fear of not existing. Uncertainty and the unknown make us anxious, for we are obliged to think and act based on insufficient information. The problem that gives rise to anxiety in the first place is that there is nothing at all that we can know with utter certainty, including what happens after death and what is “really” going on here in life. These are the issues that must be confronted to have a peace of mind about mortality that is not pinned to a fixed system of beliefs. After all, embracing any belief, however convincing, is itself a decision based on limited information, which could well inspire anxiety if it one had to make it consciously.

A further benefit of remembering mortality is the chance to actually *enjoy* experiences that might otherwise make one anxious. That state of mind is *appreciation*, which is private enjoyment of experience itself, and of the world itself, for its own sake and apart from the habitual judgments and activities that normally dominate daily life. But you don’t have to be a monk who sits in graveyards at night to confront your anxieties and to appreciate your consciousness for as long as you are blessed with it. Every waking moment offers that opportunity.

—Dan Bruiger