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The Concealment Of Death

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Here's an exercise to try at home. You will need a working stop-watch, or another timepiece that measures seconds. Before you begin, seat yourself in a comfortable chair and loosen your clothing.

Watch the second hand as it passes around the face of the clock. Picture the moment of your death, perhaps many decades in the future, or perhaps only a few years or months (who can know?). Wait for the second hand to reach the starting point at the top of the clock face, and then watch as it records the passing of one minute of your life. Now imagine the clock counting down the minutes of your life to the moment of your death. Try this exercise picturing this moment a few decades in the future, then repeat it picturing the moment next year. Repeat it picturing the moment of your death next month. Next week. Tonight. After all, you never know.

Now observe the minute and hour hands on the clock. What were you doing at this time twenty four hours ago? Forty eight hours ago? One month ago? What will you be doing at this time in a week?

Imagine that the moment of your death is one month away. Consider—if you knew that this was true, what would you be doing right now? What would you be doing at this time tomorrow? Repeat this step, imagining your death to be one year away. Does this make very much difference in your thoughts about what you would do today and tomorrow if you knew the date of your death?

Compare your activities over the last twenty four hours to the activities you would have chosen if you had known that you would leave this world in one month or one year. Compare your activities over the last month, the last year, the last decade to those you would have chosen if you had known that on this day you would have only thirty days or twelve months left to live. How different would your life have been if you had known the date of your approaching death? Would you be ready to die in a month or a year, having lived the life that you have?

Chances are, at least as far as we all know, that most of the people who read this text and participate in this exercise will live for many more years or even decades afterwards. But still, look at the second hand of the stopwatch, and follow it as it records the passing minutes, counting down the minutes of your life that remain to you as they slip away. Are you living the life that you want to live? Are you living a life that, at any given moment, you could look back upon with satisfaction if you suddenly realized that it was about to end? Are you living the sort of life that you would wish upon a human being, a life that is exciting and full, a life that is well spent, every minute of it? If the answer is no, what can you do in the time that still remains to you—however long or short that may be—to make your life more like the life you would like to live? For we all do have only a limited amount of time granted to us in this world—and so we should use it with this in mind.

If you find, looking back upon your life, that you have spent years living without any consideration of your mortality, this is really not unusual. For our social/cultural environment does not encourage us to think much about the limits that nature places on our lives. Death and aging are denied and hidden away as if they were shameful and embarrassing. The older members of our society are hidden away in “retirement homes” like lepers in leper colonies. The billboards, magazine photos, and television commercials that meet our eyes at every turn show only images of healthy men and women in the prime of their life. Cemeteries, which once memorialized the dead and preserved a place for them in the thoughts of the living, are now forgotten in abandoned neighborhoods and overgrown with weeds. When a man dies, the rituals which once would have celebrated his life and brought the subject of human mortality to the thoughts of those who survived him are now often regarded as mere inconveniences. Death is impolite and embarrassing, it is considered bad etiquette, for there is no place for it in today’s busy world of corporate mergers and record-breaking conspicuous consumption. Our busy schedules and glossy mag-

azines neither make allowance for it nor offer any explanation of how it might be relevant to our value system or our lives.

And indeed if we were to stop and ponder the subject, perhaps we would find that when we seriously consider the limits of our time on this planet, keeping up with television comedies and having a good sum seem less important than they did before. Our cultural silence about human mortality allows us to forget how much weight the individual moments of our lives carry, adding up as they do to our lives themselves. Thus we may squander countless hours watching television or balancing checkbooks—hours that in retrospect we might have done better to have spent walking on the sea shore with our loved ones, cooking gourmet meals for our children or friends, writing fiction, or hitchhiking across South America. The reality of our future death is not easy for any of us to come to terms with, but it is surely better that we consider this now than regret not doing so later when it is too late.

Our modern denial of death has a deeper significance, beyond its functions as a reaction to our fear of mortality and a selective blindness that helps to preserve the status quo. It is a symptom of our ongoing struggle to escape from the cycles of change in nature and establish an unnatural permanence in the world. Our mortality is frightening evidence that we do not have control over everything, and as such we are quick to ignore it, if we cannot do away with it altogether—a feat towards which our medical researchers are slowly working. It is worth questioning whether this would even be desirable.

Since the dawn of Western civilization, men and women have hungered for domination not only of the world and each other, but also for domination of the seasons, of time itself. We speak of the eternal grandeur of our gods and empires, and we design our cities and corporations to exist into infinity. We build monuments, skyscrapers, which we intend to stand forever as testimony of our victory over the sands of time. But this victory can only come at a price, at this price: that though nothing passes away, nothing

comes to be, either—that the world we create is a static, standardized world that can hold no surprises for us any more. We would do well to be wary of fulfilling our own darkest dreams by creating such a dystopia, a frozen world in which no one must fear death any more, for everyone exists forever and no one lives for even an instant.