



"Fragment," David Popa

## Memento Mori

*One who puts the finishing touches on their life each day is never short of time.*  
Seneca

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT DURING THE Roman Empire, after the army won a great military triumph, it was customary for a slave to stand at the side of the victorious general at the elaborate victory celebration.

At the height of the festivities, as the fêted general was receiving tributes from the emperor and adulation from the cheering crowd, the slave would whisper repeatedly in his ear this simple phrase: "*Hominem te esse memento. Memento mori!*...Remember thou art mortal. Remember you must die!"

Now, one might think that this impertinent reminder would not be received graciously, and perhaps it was the poor slave himself who should be reminded of his mortality.

But in fact, this was not at all the case.

The custom of reminding an important leader—even one considered to be god-like—of his death at the very height of his glory was deliberate, and indeed, quite wise: By conferring a sense of humility to counter the sense of inflated self-worth that fame, riches and public adulation can often instill, it presumably made one a better leader.

Whether or not this tradition achieved its purpose or not is debatable—indeed, some historians doubt the story's veracity. (It is attributed to the rather unreliable Second century Christian apologist, Tertullian.) But it is known that even one of the greatest of Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius, would often meditate on 'Memento mori.'

Marcus Aurelius was a scholar of the Stoic philosophical tradition, which despite often being mistakenly associated today with resignation, developed many practical ways to overcome the problems of everyday life.

And surely there can be no greater ‘problem’ in life than the simple fact that for all of us, it must eventually come to an end. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius counseled “You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think.”

Reflecting on one’s death need not be a somber affair. Modern culture encourages us to avoid thinking about illness and death, hiding it inside the sterilized environment of the hospital, but ‘Memento mori’ art and ritual are pervasive throughout the world: In America’s southern neighbor, Mexicans celebrate *Dia de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, with festive singing, dancing, and costumes portraying skulls and skeletons.

The point of ‘Memento mori’ isn’t to be morbid or maudlin. On the contrary, it is meant to inspire us to embrace every day as a gift and to live our lives to the fullest.

Maintaining an awareness that life is precious and short can spur us to live our lives more intentionally and purposefully, thinking and acting more in accordance with our authentic core values and beliefs.

Like Stoics, Buddhists consider reflection on death as central to the path to wisdom. The meditative practice *maranasati*, or ‘death awareness,’ is a foundation of the Five Remembrances of Buddhist thought.

Unlike Western religions, however, Buddhist philosophy is grounded in the rational and practical. Rather than instilling the fear of annihilation or offering the false comfort of a heavenly afterlife, Buddhism focuses on the nature of existence itself.

From a Buddhist perspective, what we call the ‘self’ is inseparable from everything that gave rise to it and all that will follow, so it follows that *no one is really born, and no one can die*. The only ‘death’ is the death of the illusion of a separate and individual self.

Regardless of how we may try to escape it, psychologists remind us that the fear of death is with us all the time, manifesting, for example, as a pervasive, underlying anxiety that causes us to distract ourselves through the pursuit of wealth, status, and other perceived, temporary compensations.

Paradoxically, a fear of dying can even become a fear of living. A willingness to reflect on and embrace the truth of our existence through ‘Memento mori’ might be a key to living life to the fullest, putting our everyday problems into perspective and reminding us to be grateful for what we have and to cherish every moment of life.

If contemplating one’s demise seems too depressing, one might replace ‘Memento mori’ with the more familiar ‘Carpe diem’ (‘Seize the day’) or ‘Tempus fugit’ (‘Time flies’), which serve a similar purpose.

In fact, there is a less well known corollary in Latin to ‘Memento mori’ in the phrase ‘Memento vivere’ (‘Remember to live’). (Body art aficionados have been known to combine the two, with a tattoo of one phrase on their chest and the other on their back.)

‘Memento vivere’ is a much more recent saying than ‘Memento mori,’ first appearing alongside its older counterpart in a Victorian era poem by the English poet John Kenyon.

In “Memento Vivere,” the poet poignantly contrasts youth’s morbid fascination with death and mortality with the more nostalgic, balanced perspective of a much older person:

When life was young, in pensive guise  
I made it a fantastic glory,  
To pause and sentimentalize  
O’er every sad ‘Memento Mori!’  
Dear fourscore friend! in their dull place  
How gladlier now I turn to thee,  
With all thy cheery wit and grace,  
Thou bright ‘Memento Vivere!’ ■