Character and . . .

Inevitability

Volume 10 / 2024

Annalee R. Ward — *Character and Inevitability*

Articles

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Katie E. Boyer — *Aging Well*

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Response

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Inevitability

Annalee R. Ward

Dread. Deep down fear. Imagine enjoying an idyllic vacation in Thailand, watching something strange happening to the ocean, and then seeing a wall of water. Tom and Arlette Stuip dropped their breakfast, turned and ran as that crashing, roiling water chased them. The water inevitably rushed past the shoreline, inundating the community. A 9.1 magnitude earthquake near Indonesia caused massive tsunamis, ultimately killing over 230,000 people and destroying infrastructure for years to come.[1]

Habits of good character and habits of thinking about alternatives move us forward in the face of the seemingly inevitable.

Inevitability raises questions of fatalism or determinism. It calls forth that feeling we get when we know we have to face something distasteful or unpleasant. The water rushes in and it cannot be stopped. This journal issue challenges determinism by weaving moral character into conversation with inevitability. In doing so, it highlights the ways habits of good character and habits of thinking about alternatives move us forward in the face of the seemingly inevitable.

With the assumption that each human being embodies dignity and worth as image-bearers of God, the authors called one another into their stories of inevitability. In reading together, we framed our work in reminders about the need for a life of character from Christian Miller's *The Character Gap*. We learned from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* that it is possible to live through awful things with a vision that finds purpose and meaning despite the circumstances. It may call for therapeutic processing, but the possibility to find the way forward with hope exists. Our discussions on the inevitabilities of aging and death continued with *Aging,* by priests and educators Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney. They name the dark side of aging but counter it with the light, noting the gifts of aging. Nevertheless, we

are human and need to face the realities of our natures, as Atul Gawande, author of *Being Mortal*, gently and elegantly reminds us.

As the authors wrestled with their writing, the relationships between them deepened into relationships of trust. From there they challenged each other to change the stories of inevitability to stories of empowerment, seeing possibilities. This semester-long process formed the authors into a team—reading together, talking, arguing, writing, and editing.

Inevitability seems like a very strange topic to write about, especially in connection with character. If it's inevitable then why bother thinking about it? We are powerless to affect it. I must admit that I, too, wondered if we could extend our understanding of character as we thought about inevitability. But as these authors worked together, the recognition of personal agency in how we face what may seem to be determined projected a vision of hope. It reminded us of our own power to act through the work of telling and writing different stories.

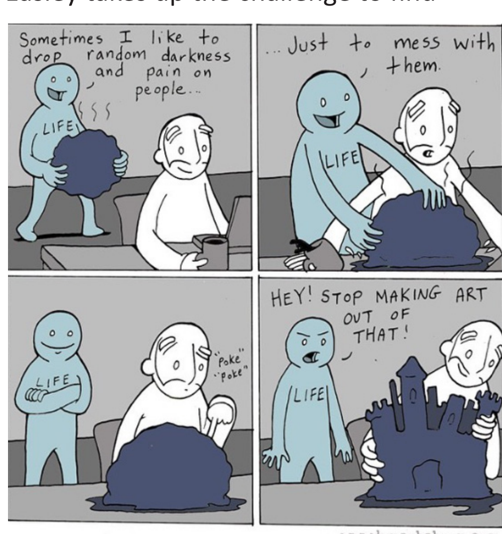
Changing the story

Donovan Tann's "Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate" encapsulates the authors' overall response to the topic of inevitability. Using the example of climate change, he acknowledges the angst that so many people find themselves experiencing. "Anxiety and apathy in the face of climate inevitability become more understandable when doing the right thing becomes ever more muddled and unclear."[2] Rather than accepting the common narratives of doom and only calling for sustainable personal change in habits (although he affirms that action too), Tann calls for adapting by imagining new stories, new visions of the possible not only as individuals, but as communities. Echoing Charles Taylor's push for "horizons of significance" to shape

our identity as people of good character, Tann recognizes we have a responsibility to act with vision and hope.[3]

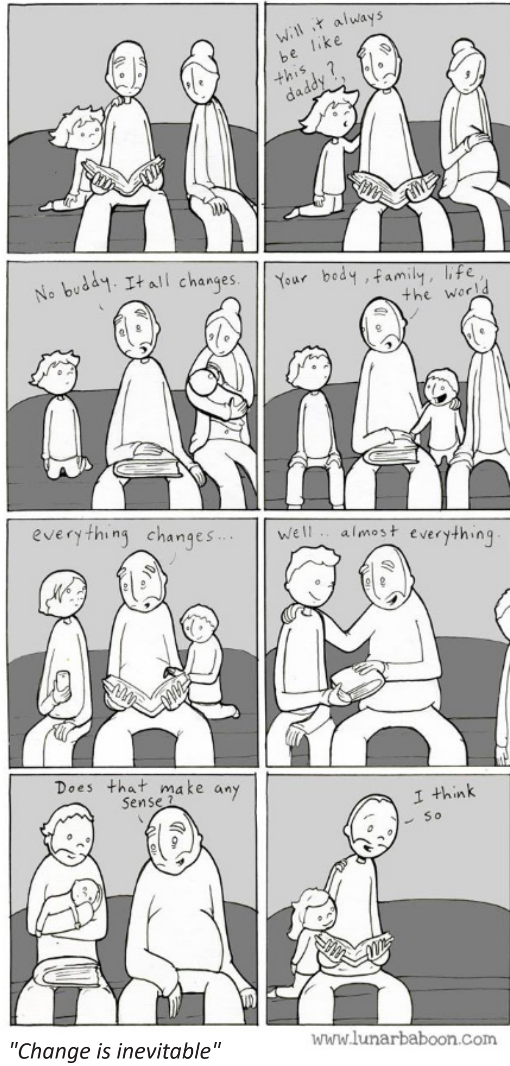
One fact of inevitability common to humanity lies in our vary natures—we are designed as creatures who age. How do we do that in ways that express good character? Katie Boyer asserts in "Aging Well" that how we handle the changes of aging expresses our character. Mindset matters. Choosing to narrate the inevitable changes with positivity and relational connection affects quality of life. Building healthy habits to sustain one's intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, environmental, *and* physical health becomes an outcome of good character practices—practices that rely on virtues such as perseverance, steadfastness, and discernment—all contributors to a life of integrity.

Highlighting the need for other character virtues such as courage, compassion, and tenderness, Dale Easley considers how they apply to the ultimate inevitability—death. Death challenges our sense of meaning. In "The Inevitability of Dying," Easley wrestles with his experiences of the death of a student and loved ones. Using Viktor Frankl's work and practices from cognitive behavioral therapy, Easley takes up the challenge to find meaning. Pushing through depression and despair, he works to change the stories. He presents the storytelling options he faces when he chooses to tell of the haunting negative experiences or instead to focus on the positive memories in order to change his thinking. He finds in his memory's stories what Rabbi Steve Leder calls "the beauty of what remains."[4] Surviving the death of friends and family is no easy task. Storytelling contributes to the way forward. It takes the pain and "makes art" out of it.



Making art out of pain

Dan Fleming's article, "Attention and Digital Mourning," extends the conversation on the inevitability of death and mourning to the need for better habits of attentiveness, especially as the online experiences of mourning increase. Character-informed attentiveness means "offering a



"Change is inevitable"

gift to the person before me," showing up with the whole, integrated self and a willingness to focus on the other.[5] What that looks like in virtual worlds may differ from that of actual presence. The divide between life online and offline, nevertheless, diminishes every day. It only makes sense that mourning would find expression in this integrated virtual world. As we struggle with our grief, we may turn to support groups online, to virtual tributes and memorials, or even stumble across that loved one's digital footprints. Mourning with the kind of character that makes a positive difference in the world calls for deep attention, something the nature of the digital medium fights against. Deep attention leads to good mourning both on and offline.

Our respondent, Abram Van Engen, elegantly pushes us to think deeply about the narratives we construct and the telos or ends toward which they are directed. Telling different stories about ourselves is possible in the context of developing habits and practices that move us in better directions. Positive habits shape better character, grow virtue. All of this, note Van Engen and the authors, is best accomplished in the context of community, of relationship.

"Change is inevitable," purports Taoist philosophy.[6] Change comes in many forms. This issue is meant to begin conversations on how we live and die with the inevitabilities of being human. We can wring our hands with despair or explore ways to act with the hope that action brings. From the

exigencies of global climate change to the realities of aging, to the pain of death, and finally to the attention we give to mourning, we must responsibly embrace our humanity with the grace of integrity and the just expression of compassion. Narrative and relationships operate as key tools for this work. May we exercise the character to persevere with wisdom.

As of fall 2024, Annalee R. Ward has transitioned from her role as the Director of the Wendt Center for Character Education to Director Emerita at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Through programming and curriculum, the Wendt Character Initiative seeks to shape character for lives of purpose. Ward researches and writes on communication, ethics, and popular culture.

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Notes

1. *BBC News*, “Tsunami Stories.”
2. Tann, “Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate,” 11.
3. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.
4. Leder, *The Beauty of What Remains*, 6.
5. Fleming, “Attention and Digital Mourning,” 64.
6. The Enlightenment Journey, “Taoist Teachings.”

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Beyond Inevitability

Telling Another Story about Climate

Donovan E. Tann

Abstract

Seeking to embody good character by making good choices about climate can be particularly challenging when people face contradictory or even misleading information, and this situation can lead many into either apathy or despair. By drawing on examples from climate scientists and the storytelling power of literature, I argue that telling a story beyond that of inevitable failure or doom is necessary for us to take collective action. I also contend that cultivating the imagination to see beyond simple stories of inevitability is necessary for our larger communities to discover new avenues for meaningful change.

Plastic pollution

Carry a reusable bag around or the earth is doomed. Remember, you have to use it 131 times just to break even with the equivalent plastic bag's carbon footprint. There's a giant island of plastic in the Pacific. There's a surprising amount of microplastics already inside of your body. Buy these organic bamboo shirts by clicking on our Instagram profile for a truly sustainable choice. You'll never believe how much laundry soap is left behind on your clothes. Is it fair trade? Have you heard how much water organic cotton uses? When it comes to making ethical choices about climate, it is hard not to feel like it is impossible to figure out the right one.[1]

At the same time, many of us have also developed a sneaking suspicion that none of these choices ultimately even matter. In just four years, *Washington Post* polling shows the number of Americans who believe that their actions can make a difference for climate change dropped from 66% to 52%.[2] Between the anxiety of choice fatigue and a growing sense that whatever happens is out of our hands, we can understand why many people have a growing sense that climate change is inevitable, whether or not we make the right choices.

These unspoken narratives often tell stories of inevitable failure—a sense that making good choices is impossible or not worthwhile. As a literature professor, I'm often paying attention to the stories influencing our outlook on the world. Inevitability is one such story, but when it comes to climate, it is not the only story. When we face an immense challenge like global climate change, good character requires us to cultivate the imagination necessary to think beyond inevitability. As we do so, we must confront the stories that produce our climate anxiety (or apathy) and discern together what it means to act wisely in this crucial moment.

We must confront the stories that produce our climate anxiety (or apathy) and discern together what it means to act wisely.

Challenging Inevitability

Inevitability is one of many stories that we use to make sense of our lives. Broadcasters regularly describe the influence of big-name athletes by referring to them as "inevitable." Elsewhere, our sense of mortality can lend structure to our lives. Surgeon and public health scientist Atul Gawande talks in *Being Mortal* about how researchers on aging found that we make different choices that reflect our outlook on the future, "[depending] on how much time we perceive ourselves to have."[3] Our decisions reflect the ending we anticipate—whether in the ebbs and flows of a game awaiting the referee's final whistle or in the broader story of a life.

For many college students, inevitability rolls around at the end of each semester. I regularly see students become frozen with catastrophic thinking about the future—what Buddhist blogger Toni Bernhard describes as "mocking up worst-case scenarios instead of just taking care of the business at hand."[4] Final projects balloon into impossible obstacles and small failures

threaten to crush weeks of progress. Students have to call upon tools like imagination to challenge inevitability's hold over them instead of diligently battling their own windmills. In these moments, students need a change of perspective as much as they need courage and resilience.

Telling stories about inevitability interacts with character because it places us in the messy territory of choosing for the future with only today's knowledge at hand. We exercise good or bad character—the alignment of our actions with our ultimate purposes or values—as we make choices, but also as we *discern what choices we have*.

Of course, doing so isn't easy.

Navigating Climate Confusion

Climate change itself remains a polarizing and controversial issue—one deeply connected to social and political identities. The Pew Research Center, for example, notes that political party affiliation is the biggest predictor of an individual's view on climate change.[5] Beliefs about climate—like many other issues relating to the common good—sometimes serve as a badge of community identity. Climate is controversial, we hear. Everyone is either going to be fine or doomed, and besides, there isn't much we can do about it.

These, too, are stories we've inherited. Science journalist Eugene Linden explains part of why discussing climate can feel like a hot-button issue, even in the face of overwhelming scientific consensus. Linden traces the origins of two radically different stories in present-day American culture—one in which future change is "likely to be moderate and incremental, a problem for future generations, and with the qualification that the best minds disagree about whether it's a threat at all"—and the other a growing scientific agreement that significant change is already underway and that climate feedback effects might equally be "violent and extreme."[6]

Anxiety and apathy in the face of climate inevitability become more understandable when doing the right thing becomes ever more muddled and unclear.

What Linden calls the "public story" of climate change arrives in a ready-made narrative that "begins with a peg—a collapsing ice shelf, a heat wave, retreating glaciers" before briefly turning to a scientist for comment, emphasizing the uncertain nature of climate science, highlighting disagreement,

and eventually pointing out how difficult or expensive solutions might be.[7] He argues that this is the narrative woven through the persistence of well-funded lobbying groups like the Global Climate Coalition. These groups have framed climate as an unresolved debate about a distant future and hounded journalists with "hired guns" to ensure naysayers were included in climate reporting—while internal documents at the companies bankrolling these organizations reveal broad agreement with the scientific consensus since the 1970s.[8] The success of this effort to sow confusion is visible in the 13% of all U.S. adults who report being "not sure" whether human activities were responsible for climate change.[9] The issue of climate, then, is a site of uncertainty for many: those who wish to act but don't know how and those who aren't certain whether alarms about climate are even justified.

Confusion abounds when it comes to environmental issues, even for those who want to make careful and conscious choices. Kenny Torrella recently wrote about "'climate-friendly' beef" marketing that leaves consumers with a vague impression of positive environmental effects but obscures the outsized environmental effects of meat and dairy production.[10] The power of this classic example of greenwashing—environmental claims rooted more in advertising than reality—is apparent in polling showing that most Americans couldn't successfully identify meat and dairy production's significant environmental impact and incorrectly selected plastic packaging as a greater issue for global temperatures.[11] Anxiety and apathy in the face of climate inevitability become more understandable when doing the right thing becomes ever more muddled and unclear.

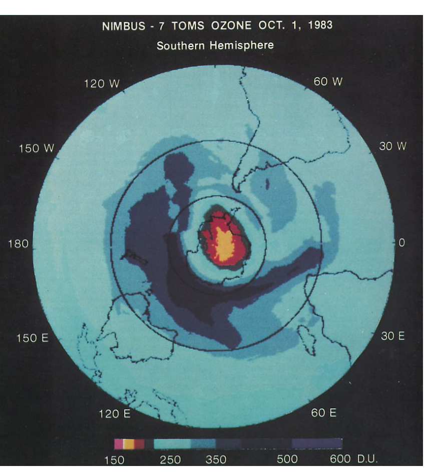
Protestors against greenwashing

Why We're Anxious

We can think about climate anxiety and apathy as two sides of a single coin in response to narratives of climate inevitability. On one hand, the sense that we need sudden and radical action can create choice fatigue with misinformation and pitfalls at every turn. On the other hand, even among those convinced of the scientific basis for alarm, a sense that we're already doomed could understandably produce apathy or cynicism. Something that

seems inevitable has a powerful persuasive force. It promises a resigned reassurance: whatever happens, at least we know what's coming.

Speaking frankly about climate anxiety means facing difficult truths head-on. Pope Francis recently issued a second statement on climate change describing rising sea levels, increased extreme weather events, and melting glaciers—all visible within a single generation.[12] Organizations from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to NASA and even ExxonMobil have all reached the same conclusion: increasing global temperatures represent a global crisis with serious impacts yet to come.[13] Since the 1970s' first calls to action, we have a clearer picture of the earth's complex ecosystem and what it means to stand on the precipice. By sampling air trapped in ice, for example, climate scientists can compare today's atmosphere with the past, which reveals a sharp rise in the gases that trap solar energy.[14]



Ozone hole over Antarctica, 1983

One challenge for predictions is that climate's damaging effects aren't immediately visible. In her explanation of climate predictions, Elizabeth Kolbert describes how scientists use complex calculations to model the impact of greenhouse gases. Kolbert notes that delays between emission and impact can be a double-edged sword: on one hand, we can anticipate the future, but on the other, a delay is "clearly disastrous" if we are lulled into a false sense of security while effects accumulate down the line.[15] Like a victim of radiation poisoning, we may feel fine today even if the damage is already done.

In *The Uninhabitable Earth,* David Wallace-Wells takes a hard look at projections for human life in a world experiencing climate's cascading effects, ranging from the optimistic targets of the Kyoto and Paris climate agreements to a disastrous "business as usual scenario." I will highlight just a few less-familiar impacts we can already see. Wallace-Wells reports on our threatened biodiversity:

> In just the last forty years, according to the World Wildlife Fund, more than half of the world's vertebrate animals have died; in just the last twenty-five, one study of German nature preserves found, the flying insect population declined by three-quarters.[16]

He later cites research connecting the destabilizing effects of strained fresh water supplies with large-scale conflicts, including "[t]he five-year Syrian drought that stretched from 2006-2011, producing crop failures that created political instability and helped usher in the civil war that produced a global refugee crisis."[17] This account demonstrates how cascading effects can quickly disrupt a seemingly permanent order: it is not the flood so much as the aftermath.[18]

Speaking in these terms feels impolite—as if we are better off not mentioning something we cannot change, better off not upsetting people who might get angry, and better off not interrupting the banquet to read the writing on the wall. In a sense, we're still driving the car with the "check engine" light on with a creeping sense of concern about what the mechanic might say. Those of us in the wealthier Global North can also be apathetic if we see climate as a problem that only affects poorer places, where we can be tempted to believe that suffering and disaster are just a matter of course.[19] Wallace-Wells reminds us, "as disproportionately as it will fall on the world's least, the devastation of global warming cannot be easily quarantined in the developing world . . . Climate disaster is too indiscriminate for that."[20] Here, both climate anxiety and apathy—both echoing the story we're told about the inevitability of climate change—keep us from taking determined and meaningful action. Handling this kind of uncertainty requires an imagination capable of telling a new kind of story.

Handling this kind of uncertainty requires an imagination capable of telling a new kind of story.

Need for new stories

Reimagining the story of climate inevitability allows us to face our climate anxiety more directly. Theologian Paul Tillich argues that while fears can be as clear and specific as a fire or a wild animal on the loose, the kind of generalized anxieties that sit in the pit of our stomach affect us so deeply because they threaten our sense of self with the threat of death, meaninglessness, or guilt.[21] For many of us, the climate crisis easily taps into

all three with a sense of inevitable doom, the potential meaninglessness of action, and the sense that we are personally responsible for a society-level problem.

However understandable its origins, this form of climate anxiety represents a serious problem for our ecological systems and even disrupts our best intentions. One popular solution that plays upon individuals' anxiety is the "easy" version of sustainability. Green, "clean," and "non-toxic" alternatives to everyday products make impassioned sales pitches in our supermarket aisles and social media ads.

Social critic Curtis White provocatively rejects this approach. White argues that "[w]hat no one is allowed to consider is the distressing possibility that no amount of tinkering and changing and greening and teaching the kindergartners to plant trees and recycle Dad's beer cans will ever really matter if our assumptions about what it means to be prosperous [and] what it means to be 'developed'" still embody what White calls "the Barbaric Heart: self-love and power. Profit and violence."[22] Ordinary sustainability, White suggests, falsely promises that our status quo can continue—harms safely tucked away—without addressing the deeper, more fundamental changes required. We need new stories rather than new products.

Overwhelming loads of plastic waste

The problem with the story in run-of-the-mill, consumer-focused sustainability is not only its exclusive focus on individual choices ("buy this and not that!") but also that it can prevent us from imagining alternatives. BP's 2004 public relations campaign, for example, popularized the idea of an individual's "carbon footprint," which largely succeeded in nudging public discourse towards individual consumer choices rather than industrial-scale producers.[23] Acting with character in the face of climate change requires more than just individual choices: it must also include improving our community's character by striving to imagine a new story beyond inevitability.

From Anxiety to Imagination

We need to cultivate an imagination, both individually and at a societal level, that can help us seek out new choices and new ways of working to address the challenges ahead. This type of thinking—which I describe here as imagination—is essential for us to respond to the climate crisis with good character. More than just critical thinking or creativity alone, I see "imagination" as the deeply human magic of breathing something wholly new into being. Imagination calls to mind the kind of storytelling, joy, or even inspiration sometimes forbidden in the application of serious, scientific work. While we still need to make wise and informed decisions, we urgently need to cultivate a vision big and ambitious enough that our wider community can see that meaningful change is possible.

Stories help us to imagine new ways of living together.

This imagination has everything to do with the stories we inhabit and the choices we see in front of us. As someone who loves literature, I argue that stories help us to imagine new ways of living together. When I think about stories that have challenged my own limited imagination, one of the best examples is speculative fiction writer N.K. Jemisin's short story, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight."[24] Jemisin dramatizes an exuberant, scandalously utopian world full of color and joy before directly challenging us to confront our imagination's limitations.

Jemisin describes the world of Um-Helat as "a city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another." In this city, people from all backgrounds and ability levels live in harmony, work together for the good, and each person receives care and shelter. Like many utopian writers before her, Jemisin contrasts our world's barbarism with this one, a world "[w]ealthy with no poor, advanced with no war, a beautiful place where all souls know themselves beautiful," and we subtly, almost imperceptibly find the narrator sizing up our reactions as we read.[25]

After profiling the city and its festivals, Jemisin's narrator confronts readers' growing discomfort with Um-Helat by speaking our fears directly: "It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal. It's a fairy tale, a thought exercise. Crabs in a barrel, dog-eat-dog, oppression Olympics—it would not last, you insist. It could never be in the first place." When I first read the story, I remember being surprised by the way that Jemisin's narrator named my instinctual objections, which felt almost unconscious or visceral. She folds

our objections into the story of their ongoing battle against the creeping infection from our own world: "*It's possible.* Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself . . . because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so."[26]

The story finally ends as Jemisin folds us, as readers, into the story as characters facing the simple choice of walking away or staying to uproot the infection of greed by doing "what must be done to make the world better." In the end, Jemisin tasks us with building the world we want to see.[27] When I first read the story, I found it so striking because it so perceptively challenged my own limited imagination. It expertly anticipated my gut reactions to argue that another world was possible if I would participate in the struggle to make that vision possible.

Challenging stories of climate inevitability means continuing to tell stories of our past successes. When widespread industrial pollutants produced acid rain in North America (which threatened forests, lakes, and, yes, melted paint off of cars), scientists and concerned citizens fought for years to overcome misinformation and denials—a process requiring three decades and international cooperation.[28] Persistent work in educating and messaging eventually led to the passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act. Since then, North America has experienced significant reductions of acid rain and at least partial recovery of marine ecosystems, though the same problem is now emerging in other parts of the world. This story can be a blueprint for today's challenges: building broad support and challenging polarization can produce real change.

Pollution in Dubuque, Iowa, in the 1940s

Likewise, in the mid-1980s, scientists discovered that CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons)—used in everything from refrigerators to packing materials—disrupted the fragile ozone layer protecting the earth from UV radiation: "How do you raise crops for the few billion people on the planet if you've got so much . . . sterilizing UV radiation pouring in on the earth?"[29] I remember hearing all kinds of pessimistic stories—*our efforts won't make a difference, we'll never have good A/C units again*—but the reality was very different. Alarmed scientists and governments around the

world worked together to sign the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which has been a model for every climate agreement since. We met challenges like these through cooperation and by cultivating alternatives. These examples are the kinds of stories we need to tell if we are to respond to today's challenges in a way that opens the door for good character—not just for ourselves as individuals, but for the communities we live in.

Climate and Exercising Good Character

We need to cultivate this kind of imagination to respond to the challenge of climate change with good character. Over and over again, journalists and climate scientists alike return to the language of ethics and imagination when they talk about what our next steps must be. Scientist E. O. Wilson argues that our "success or failure [in addressing climate] will come down to an ethical decision, one on which those now living will be defined and judged for all generations to come."[30] If our choices reflect the options we are capable of seeing, then the task of making the right ethical decisions is inseparable from nurturing the imagination we need to discover those choices.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter reminds us that the very idea of character comes out of storytelling, and he describes "the horizons of the moral imagination" as "the expanse of the good that can be envisioned."[31] This idea that imagination is crucial for decision-making is both good and difficult news—good in the sense that we are continuing to learn, and difficult in the sense that learning more increases our responsibility.

The good and bad news is that making choices with limited future knowledge is as true for climate as it is of every other choice. If we want to exercise good character, the challenge is the same as ever—to try to see the path ahead as clearly as possible and to choose as wisely as we can. Well-intentioned efforts can't always live up to lofty goals—as demonstrated by failing urban trees planted at the wrong time of year and the ever-growing surplus of reusable grocery bags in our entryway.[32] We have to act swiftly, but we also have to continue learning and expanding our imagination as we go.

Action and Imagination Are Inseparable

Here's the good news, though: every positive action we take on climate is more meaningful (and necessary) than ever. Telling a story beyond inevitability means coming to recognize that we all can intervene in the

potential harms that we—and all our global neighbors—will face. Action and imagination are inseparable.

One positive spin on a pervasive, global crisis is that every action we take is part of the solution—and imagining new solutions is crucial to that work. Even within one of the most sobering books I've read on climate, Wallace-Wells reminds us:

> climate change is not an ancient crime we are tasked with solving now; we are destroying our planet every day, often with one hand as we conspire to restore it with the other . . . we can also stop destroying it, in the same style—collectively, haphazardly, in all the most quotidian ways in addition to the spectacular-seeming ones.[33]

One half of a degree Celsius marks the difference between a "straining global food supply" and "a global food deficit," while even small changes to air pollution levels have direct effects on respiratory health.[34]

I first suggest that we have to balance taking informed action while we still continue to learn and expand our imagination. Take the example of environmental scientists Stephen Pacala and Robert Socolow, who introduce the idea of "climate stabilization wedges" and describe fifteen individual and highly specific ways our global community can reduce our carbon emissions—from more efficient vehicles to reduced deforestation and better tillage in fields.[35] Some involve changes of behavior—like reducing driving—and others involve efficiency improvements or considering imperfect solutions, like nuclear power. Each wedge, "already implemented at an industrial scale," represents a roughly equal carbon benefit over the next 50 years.

Socolow emphasizes in a later interview, "These things can all be done" if our society decides they are worth doing.[36] The flat nature of their list—each has as much impact as the others—implies that each is equally urgent. Taking the first step means finding somewhere to contribute and diving in. In his retrospective on this influential research, biologist Anthony Barnosky explains how this demonstrates "that we're not helpless; if we want to, we can start fixing things today."[37] This change in attitude and perspective is as much a part of the solution as the actions we take.

This change in attitude and perspective is as much a part of the solution as the actions we take.

In my own experience, I agonized about the ethics of my own individual climate choices: is it better to insulate our older home here in Iowa or to install solar panels? Should we buy an electric car? One strategy that helped me reason through my choices was to resist the idea that we could wait around for one single, perfect choice. When I researched options for our home, I studied charts showing the environmental impact of individual choices with surprising results: if I was focused on saving money alone, I might have better return on investment using a bowl to conserve dishwater.[38] On the other hand, the same chart showed that residential solar had a larger carbon impact in spite of its cost—which has since continued to improve.

Rooftop solar panel installation

I could only make sense of my options by continuing to learn and expand my imagination to include overlooked and less-glamorous solutions—like adding home insulation or using less water—while we also took on some of the bigger projects.[39] Trying to exercise good character for us has meant recognizing that we have to act with imperfect knowledge, but that we still have to continue learning and imagining new possibilities.

Imagining as a Community

Thankfully, we do not have to reimagine climate inevitability on our own. Even some of the most prominent climate scientists emphasize that we have to cultivate the imagination of our broader community. Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, authors of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, argue that each of us has a role to play in shaping our society's imagination: "Much of what we imagine to be permanent is more ephemeral than we realize. Sometimes imagination can seem naïve, but don't belittle thinking big. Time and again societies have turned seeming fantasies into realities when circumstances require something new."[40]

Imagining new possibilities at a community level can help us to challenge the story of climate inevitability. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac reject the narrative that disaster is already our "inevitable fate . . . the full story has not yet been written. We still hold the pen. In fact, we hold it more firmly now

than ever before."[41] Their manifesto concludes with ten specific actions we can take to improve the quality of human life in the future. The list includes practical recommendations (fossil fuel transition, targeted investment, and responsible technology use), but many of their suggestions are directed towards our society's shared imagination. Transitioning to clean energy and thinking carefully about machine learning or cryptocurrency's energy use is—of course—important to reducing our collective carbon output. They maintain, however, that addressing consumerism, gender inequality, and our attachment to the way we have done things in the past are "top ten" list items: in fact, their last and final recommendation is getting involved in the political process. These steps are ways we can help to guide and shape the possibilities our communities envision, and they are no less important than more technical fixes.

Imagining as a broader community means considering new or even unusual ideas. One so-called fringe idea is the idea of degrowth, or the "need to shrink global economic activity" and the idea that "policymakers serious about climate change should try to build a livable world without economic growth fueling it." A *Vox* profile objects that degrowth is too radical because it calls for deeper, more fundamental change and—simultaneously—not radical enough because implementing it would be difficult without fundamental change.[42] Is this concept truly beyond imagination? A 2001 *Nature Communications* article argues that "degrowth pathways exhibit the lowest relative risks for feasibility and sustainability" compared to pinning our hopes on future technological fixes. Rethinking growth and prosperity points directly to the unpredictable but "softer" barriers of "deeply embedded cultures, values, mind-sets, and power structures."[43] Cooperation very well may be less risky or unrealistic than conventional ideas about climate solutions that often rely on yet-to-be-developed technologies.

Imagining new possibilities at a community level can help us to challenge the story of climate inevitability.

Imagining together means recognizing that individuals *can* produce significant and meaningful change by shaping what our communities see as possible. Harvard political scientist Erica Chenoweth's research on nonviolent social moments suggests that "it takes around 3.5% of the population actively participating in the protests to ensure serious political change."[44] This number is both larger and smaller than we might think. David Robson notes that this is roughly the population of New York City.[45] At the

same time, it is roughly a third of the over 30 million people who reportedly tried to buy tickets for Taylor Swift's "Eras" concert tour.[46] Individuals and small groups have a collective power—one too easily lost in the story of inevitability.

Our task is simple although it isn't easy: imagining new stories that reveal our collective power. Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakete, for example, discusses a time when she was "feeling frustrated about how we continued to strike every Friday, and leaders continued not to do anything, and the climate disasters continued to happen, and people continued to suffer." She describes how speaking with a fellow activist helped her to see the big picture and look beyond her own piece of the puzzle. She counsels listeners to "know that you are not doing activism just by yourself, but you're speaking up and mobilizing and organizing with millions of people from different parts of the world."[47]

By expanding our imagination, we can tell a new story that empowers us.

Telling a new story and exploring what it means to act ethically—as much as it still matters to develop new technologies, to study climate's effects, and to take individual action—are essential if we want our global community to forge a new path. In the end, imagining together means seeking out new—and old—stories that help us to see beyond our anxiety and apathy. Our society's character reflects the kinds of choices we believe are possible. By expanding our imagination, we can tell a new story that empowers us to get involved and work towards change.

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Notes

1. See for instance Thompson, Claire, "Paper, Plastic or Reusable."
2. Selig and Guskin, "You're Doing It Wrong."
3. Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 97.
4. Bernhard, "How to Put a Stop to Catastrophic Thinking."
5. Lipka and Nortey, "Younger Evangelicals in the U.S."
6. Linden, *The Winds of Change*, 219-29.
7. Linden, 222, 222-223.
8. Hall, "Exxon Knew."
9. Lipka and Nortey, "Younger Evangelicals in the U.S."
10. Torrella, "'Climate-Friendly' Beef."
11. This point illustrates some of the challenges of setting priorities in the face of climate: plastics pollution and microplastics are important issues, but scale of impact for global temperatures may not reflect public discourse on issues such as reusable straws.
12. Fialka, "American Catholics Call for Climate Action."
13. On ExxonMobil Corp's scientific modeling of climate change, see Supran, Rahmstorf, and Oreskes. "Assessing ExxonMobil's Global Warming Projections."
14. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 67-68. For a slightly simplified experiment demonstrating the effect of different atmospheric compositions, see EarthLabs, "Climate and Earth's Energy Balance."
15. Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, 2015. 106, 107.
16. Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 25-26.
17. Wallace-Wells, 92-93, 93.
18. Bill McKibben makes this point exactly twenty years earlier in his landmark work, *The End of Nature*. See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature.*
19. See, for instance Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70-71.
20. Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 24.
21. Tillich, *The Courage to Be,* 40.
22. White, *The Barbaric Heart,* 74, 75.
23. Schendler, "Worrying About Your Carbon Footprint."
24. N.K. Jemisin's short story responds to Usula Le Guin's famous story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," which explores a very different set of moral

questions beyond this essay's scope.

25. Jemisin, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight."
26. Jemisin.
27. Jemisin.
28. Ogden, "The Bittersweet Story."
29. McQuilkin and Chakrabarti, "How the World Came Together."
30. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 189.
31. Hunter, "Leading Children Beyond Good and Evil."
32. Gatten, "Trees Planted by Councils Die."
33. Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 32.
34. Wallace-Wells, 55, 103.
35. Pacala and Socolow, "Stabilization Wedges."
36. Pacala and Socolow, 971; Kolbert, *Field Notes,* 143.
37. Barnosky, *Dodging Extinction*, 65.
38. Clarke, Grant, and Thornton, "Quantifying the Energy and Carbon Effects," 59
39. On the divide between perception and reality about the impact of climate choices, see Selig and Guskin. "You're Doing It Wrong."
40. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac, *The Future We Choose*, 99.
41. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac, 5-6.
42. Piper, "Can We Save the Planet?"
43. Keyßer and Lenzen, "1.5 °C Degrowth Scenarios Suggest the Need for New Mitigation Pathways," 9.
44. Robson, "The '3.5% Rule'".
45. Robson.
46. Gupta, "Didn't Get a Taylor Swift Ticket?"
47. Nakete and Goodman, "'A Bigger Picture.'"

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Aging Well

Katie E. Boyer

Abstract

Aging is inevitable. Embracing the ages and stages through our whole *lives with our* whole *selves can be rewarding with flexible mindsets, active/ committed connections, and driven purpose. This article takes a look at the dimensions of wellness with a focus on healthy relationships as the central connecting piece. Here are research-based strategies for using those connections to help foster healthy choices and resilience against unhealthy actions, thoughts, and habits though all stages of life.*

Embracing Age

My daughter was so excited to be tall enough to ride the carnival rides at the fair. The first few years that she went, she was only tall enough for a handful of rides. Then, as she got older, she could ride all of the kid rides and was only left out of the adult rides, which she was terrified to ride, anyway. This summer, she was so excited to go on the rides with her younger cousins, only to find out that the first ride they went to, the speed boats, she was now too tall to ride. Aging is inevitable, and so are changes that come along with the progression of time—changes in the body, in the mind, and within the soul.

Rites of passage

Different ages, different stages

At first, getting older is encouraging; as a baby there is the new freedom of starting to walk and the advancement to being a toddler. Then preschool starts, riding bikes, graduating from toddlerhood to being a kid. When puberty begins, as awkward as it is, there is growing and that means more privileges,

looking forward to being a preteen. High school brings the opportunity to drive, giving freedom to and from parents, and now being a teenager. Then aging becomes more personal as graduation awaits, with thoughts about what is next. No longer is it necessarily caregivers who encourage success, but oneself individually and uniquely looking to reach the next goal. High school graduation. What's next—college, tech school, gap year, work?

Societally, we age straight from a teen to being an adult. According to Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, almost all states legally consider 18-year-olds to be adults,[1] as this is when we are said to have control over our own actions, affairs, and we are responsible for our decisions. Though most of us could probably not wait to grow up, the thought of being an adult was at the same time terrifying. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the retirement age on average is 63 for women and 65 for men.[2] So we spend midlife working for approximately 40 years, taking care of our duties as an adult and aging all the while. Think about what our purpose is in those 40 years. Is it merely to get to retirement so we can finally enjoy less than 10 youthful years?

"Life must be understood backwards. But . . . it must be lived forwards."

—Søren Kierkegaard[3]

Louise Aronson, a geriatrician and professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, says, "We've added a couple of decades, essentially an entire generation, onto our lives, and we haven't kind of socio-culturally figured out how to handle that." Figuring out how to handle that, says Aronson, might just mean embracing the realities of getting older while realizing the end of working doesn't have to mean the end of a meaningful life.[4] Viktor Frankl, award-winning author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, believes the primary human drive is the search for meaning.[5] We as humans survive with the tenacity and grit that get us through the challenges of life. Resilience and reactions to life stages and changes can have an impact on how we age.

How do we age well? Each stage of life—childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood, and eldership—brings on changes we may not be ready to accept. There is no magic potion, secret recipe, or ancient playbook with the key to living well. Some of us have heredity to blame or genetics to thank, but we have all made a variety of good and poor decisions. Yet despite the many paths aging may take, there are habits, routines, and choices we can consider to help make aging

easier on the mind, body, and soul. First, looking at changes, setbacks, and accomplishments as opportunities for growth will encourage a healthy state of mind and add meaning in our lives. Second, cultivating quality relationships and connections throughout the stages of life is the most important factor in nurturing mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.

Aspects of Aging to Consider

Every body ages in its own way. We may not be able to stop the hands of time on gray hair—we will all have some by age 50—but as we age we don't need to do less. We may just need to do things differently. In her bestselling book, *Elderhood*, Aronson writes about redefining old age. "I honestly think anybody who's lived past their 40s knows age matters," she said. "Your body changes, your brain changes. What I would like to see is a conversation where we actually discuss the things that matter."[6] Author Atul Gawande, in his *New York Times* best seller, *Being Mortal*, describes the story of aging as the "story of our parts," stating that each part of our body has its own aging process at different stages of our lifespan. Gawande goes on to say that our bodies fail the way all complex systems fail: randomly and gradually.[7] How we handle changes and choose to respond can determine our quality of life.

> *"If you don't take time for your wellness, you will be forced to take time for your illness."*
>
> *—Joyce Sunada*[8]

I have spoken to multiple individuals in my own search for meaning for this essay. A mentor of mine, the woman who introduced me to the term "SuperAger" and whom I consider a "SuperAger," talked about the importance of human connections in life as well as developing the skills to be flexible when life hands us pieces that do not fit neatly into our plans.[9]

Starting in elementary school, health curriculums take up the topic of relationships with family and friends. We are taught at a young age about respect (for ourselves and others), communication, and authenticity in relationships with others. I will be using the term *relationships* to specify human connections with family and friends. In Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development, he stresses intimacy and making connections. Through the ages between 18 and 40, we explore personal relationships and start to form intimate connections. Between 40 and 65, we need to give to others and to feel needed by others.[10]

Developing habits now in preparation for progressive changes in life will help us to practice wellbeing in the six dimensions of wellness outlined in the next section.[11] Creating habits take time, whether it is the three weeks to form a habit or the three months to make it a lifestyle change.[12] One way to look at forming habits and keeping with routines is behavioral sustainability; we "need to know how to make the consistent decisions that underlie your lofty objective."[13] Jim Romagna, EdD, a mentor of mine, director of MERGE Performance Institute, Certified Personal Trainer and Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, states that it is better to do something than nothing at all. "Fitness is more of a behavior issue than it is a knowledge issue."[14] While this advice was intended for a fitness goal, we can apply it to everything we do. Taking care of ourselves and investing in healthy habits isn't just for young people or the elderly. As John Ratey, Clinical Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School, observes in his book, *Spark*, "Age happens. There's nothing you can do about the why, but you can definitely do something about the how and the when."[15]

Habit formation through consistent decisions

Don't get overwhelmed with the complexity of it all. Finding a work/life balance with proper symmetry for the stage of life one is in is important for a healthy lifestyle, stress management, and being able to manage emotions at all ages. Gawande states,

> . . . bolstering our resilience in old age, requires attention to the body and its alternatives. Requires vigilance over nutrition, medications, and living situations. Requires each of us to contemplate the unfixables in our lives, decline we will unavoidably face, in order to make small changes to reshape it. We need to accept that we are not ageless.[16]

Accepting that we are changing mentally, physically, and emotionally will help us adjust.

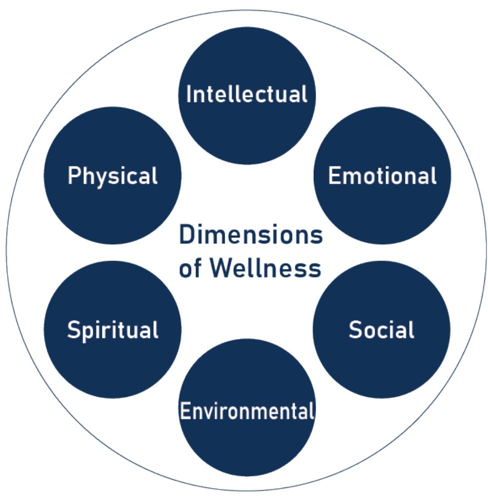
Each dimension of wellness plays an important role in the aging process. Let's look at how to care for each of the dimensions, highlighting the function of relationships and connections within them.

Dimensions of Wellness

The dimensions of wellness include intellectual, emotional, social, environmental, spiritual, and physical. Included within the dimensions, we can also examine our occupational, financial, and cultural wellness.[17]

Intellectual/Creative Health governs the ability to interpret, analyze, and act on information. It also includes a person's ability to reason (with oneself and others). "Start at the top," says Dan Johnston, former lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army who also co-founded BrainSpan, a company and laboratory that develops products and programs to help people measure, track, and improve brain function. Johnston aims to shift the way we think about health. "Many of us immediately turn to things like weight, cholesterol levels, risk for cancer, blood sugar levels, and heart health, we forget about the brain." Focus on your brain and everything else will follow. "Without a healthy brain you cannot make healthy decisions." He explains that some of the most influential and modifiable factors related to cognitive decline are linked to lifestyle: physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, smoking, social isolation, poor sleep, lack of mentally stimulating activities, and misuse of alcohol.[18]

Taking precautions now will help ward off diseases and dysfunction. Literally exercising your brain by keeping it active will slow cognitive decline. In his book *Keep Sharp*, neurosurgeon and CNN correspondent Sanjay Gupta describes 5 pillars for preserving brain health: movement, discovery, relaxation, nourishment, and connection.[19] When we have a reason for being, it will encourage us to make those lasting relationships and do what is necessary to be mentally present.



Six dimensions of wellness

Emotional Health involves one's feelings and their expression. School districts around the country have been implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) into the classroom. The SEL curriculum helps students identify feelings and emotions and includes strategies to manage those emotions.

Developing the relationship one has with oneself is of primary importance. We can't take care of the other dimensions until we take care of our emotional health. The need to take care of ourselves before we can help another is like the oxygen masks on an airplane. We need to put on our mask first to have the mental and physical fuel, and then we can give love to others and nurture strong relationships. Research by Dan Buettner, who traveled to the Blue Zones (areas of the world found to have the highest percentage of people living long and meaningful lives), found strong social networks and community bonds have proved vital for people's mental and emotional well-being. [20]

Social Health/Cultural Health controls the ability to relate and connect with others in the world. The sense of belonging and acceptance carries us through the best and worst of times. Throughout our life we will have both personal and professional relationships. It is up to us to nourish them and determine which ones are worth investing the time. According to psychologist Helene Moore, "Time spent cultivating positive relationships throughout the lifespan—both in and out of the home—is time well spent, for relationships are *one of the most important sources of meaning, life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being*."[21]

"Relationships are one of the most important sources of meaning, life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being*."*

—Helene Moore

In an 80-year study on human happiness, Harvard researchers established a strong correlation between deep relationships and overall well-being. The trick, according to Robert Waldinger and Marc Schultz, who wrote *The Good Life* about the Harvard study, is that those relationships must be nurtured. The trouble with this sentiment is that we don't always put our relationships first. Any given day brings many things to get done and we often take for granted that those who love us most will always be there or that unconditional love will prevail. But working on those relationships takes both parties involved. "*Positive* relationships are essential to human well-being."[22]

As a physical education professor, I particularly love the authors' statement that having healthy, fulfilling relationships is its own kind of fitness. Social fitness, like physical fitness, takes work to maintain. They state that social fitness should be taught to children and be a central consideration in public policy right alongside exercise, diets, and other health recommendations.[23]

It takes being honest with ourselves about where we are devoting our time and whether we are tending to the connections that help us thrive. Finding time can be hard and we may feel we are being selfish, but taking care of our social health can have mental, emotional, and physical benefits.

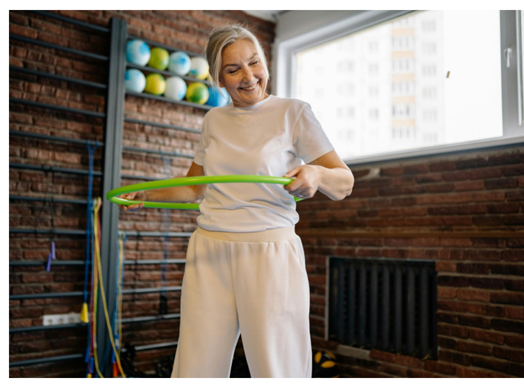
Spiritual Health determines the ability to deal with everyday life in a manner that leads to realizing one's full potential, finding the meaning and purpose of life, and experiencing happiness from within. It is not confined to sacred terms and practices. In one of the most influential books written on meaning and purpose in life, Viktor Frankl says, ". . . the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. [sic] What matters . . . is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."[24] The center of that meaning is purpose, and that purpose is intrinsic motivation to keep going for someone or something. Whether that someone is ourself, a partner, or multiple someones, such as family, friends, children, co-workers, neighbors, or individuals in your community, the relationships with those external groups help us to find meaning and have purpose.

Vocational/Occupational/Environmental Health prevents and controls disease or injuries related to the interactions between people and their environment. We need to understand our relationship with factors outside of our control. In her presentation for the Health and Longevity Summit, Christine Vatovec, professor at the University of Vermont, emphasizes our connection to the planet. Healthy planetary systems support our health: Clean air and water, stable climate, resilient ecosystems, biodiversity. All interconnect with our physical health, social health, cultural health, and spiritual health.[25] Aronson points out that "We need ways of letting people work when they still can, and of helping them to stop working when that's in their interest the interest of the common good."[26] Lifestyle tools for health promotion and disease prevention includes nutrition, movement/physical activity, sleep, stress management, and our connection to/with nature and those we encounter as we go through our daily lives.

"For people living in the Blue Zones, their longevity is a product of their environment."

—Dan Buettner[27]

Physical Health refers to the well-being of the physical body. It is the ability to maintain a healthy quality of life that allows one to get through daily activities without extra fatigue or physical stress. Ratey shows evidence in



Physical exercise

Spark that exercise actually grows new brain cells and that physical activity is truly the best defense against everything from mood disorders to ADHD, to addiction, to menopause, to Alzheimer's. "Physical exercise may offer the greatest return on investment in yourself, and it's an antidote to many things that pay into your risk for decline," says Gupta.[28] Physical health is shaped by our diets, sleep patterns, as well as fitness routines. Our physical health impacts all of those we interact with on a daily basis. For example, the rising cost of health care affects us all. Three key factors driving U.S. health care costs are prescription drugs (various conditions), chronic diseases (arthritis, obesity, cancer, and heart disease), and lifestyle choices (smoking, alcohol, dangerous activities).[29]

If we don't start thinking about wellness early on and working on ways to fit it into a daily routine, we will be forced later in life to try to correct what we could have prevented. By improving in each dimension of wellness we can diminish our impact on the rising costs of healthcare, environmental hazards, emotional distress, social isolation, and accidents.

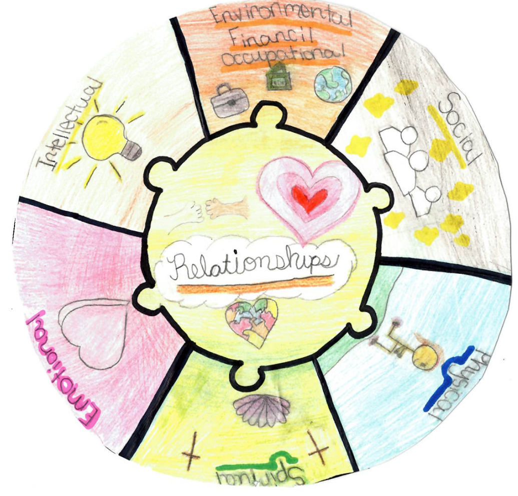
Overall Well-being

Wellness encompasses so much more than working out and eating right (although they are very important). Most studies or advice for aging well include some way of talking about finding balance and working on all areas of wellness. For example, a HelpGuide.org article on aging well suggests that the keys to healthy aging are learning to cope with change, finding meaning and joy, staying connected, getting active and boosting vitality, and keeping your mind sharp.[30] It is not just knowing the dimensions but the relationships you have within and the connections you have to each one. It takes commitment to exercise each dimension for your overall wellbeing.

The documentary *Live to 100* explores the main take-aways from those who live to 100: those featured emphasize moving naturally, having a positive outlook and real sense of purpose, and eating wisely. All have a sense of

connection. “Our lifespans are contingent on our health spans—not the other way around. . . . Obesity and loneliness will likely kill us faster than advances in medicine will help us. We shouldn’t seek to just live longer; we should strive to live healthier—longevity will follow from there.”[31] Look at wellbeing as multiple pieces of a puzzle fitting together, connecting the larger whole.[32]

My children have puzzles that challenge them to match words around a single related word in the middle. What if we looked at the dimensions of wellness as the matching words with “relationships” at the center of our wellbeing? As we age, we develop in each dimension. The stronger the connections within those dimensions may nurture our longevity and sense of belonging, connecting to the larger puzzle.



Dimensions of wellness, depicted as a matching puzzle with relationships in the middle, by Veronika Boyer

It Takes Some Effort

My teaching and coaching philosophies revolve around being a role model. My teaching profession involves promoting the wellness of our youth and teaching our youth lifelong skills to be well into older ages. I only get to teach students until their graduation, but if I get lucky, my passion for wellness will inspire others to keep well into adulthood. When the curriculum ends, I challenge students to continue to educate themselves and practice wellness in all dimensions. I often have had former students contact me to ask for advice and below is some of what I tell them. I also continue to seek advice from my role models and mentors like Romagna and my SuperAger friend.

Find what works for you. I stated earlier that there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to aging. Find what you enjoy and make it work with your schedule. When the number one suggestion for enhancing intelligence is Sudoku or crossword puzzles and you don’t like doing them, read a book, paint a picture, or take a class. New knowledge in any form helps, says Gupta. He even suggests speed games like video games instead of pills.[33]

Emotional health is in the hot spot with brain health issues on the rise (or just recognized). To foster your mental health, it is acceptable to see a mental health counselor even if you are not diagnosed with a specific disorder. If that is out of your comfort zone or filling out your gratitude journal causes more stress with finding the time or remembering to do so, taking just minutes to meditate or just two minutes to breathe can have a lasting impact.

If your spiritual health is confusing or lacking, pausing to be thankful for all you do have and recognize all that is good in your life also counts as nurturing your spiritual health.

Goals March '24

Social
- Pool
- Once a month family over

Emotional
- Less caffeine
- more date nights

Environmental
- Start composting

Intellectual
- Sign Language
- Keep reading

Occupational
- Promotion

Spiritual
- Practice Gratitude w/ kiddos

Financial
- Fitness Workbook

Physical
- Start running regularly
Diet: Cut back on caffeine

My personal wellness goals

You do not have to be on the neighborhood association committee to work on your social health. Simply taking a walk around the block or attending a local farmers market can help you feel a part of something. Another piece of advice from my friend, the SuperAger, is to spend time with the older and wiser. You just might learn something.

Don't let your carbon footprint hinder you or overwhelm your mindset about your environmental health. Starting small by shutting off the sink while brushing your teeth can foster healthy habits.

Physical health encompasses nutrition and diet, sleep, and physical activity. Find what you like to do, and do it. Fit it into the little spaces of time you have. Extreme solutions (such as fad diets, over exercising, and use of substances) hurt our well-being.[34] Choice matters—find something you enjoy. The result may be less exercise at any given time, but framing exercise as an integral part of your life will keep you on track and active.

How intensely you focus on each dimension of wellness may vary. As long as we are conscious of the role each plays in our overall well-being, we are working on them.

Your wellness matters to others. My dad just turned 68. Honestly the age doesn't sound that old to me but to others that is "getting up there." He has now outlived his own father by 8 years. My Grandpa Ron, Ronnie, died of a cardiac arrest in his work boots at age 60. When I was a kid, my dad didn't seem unhealthy, besides his sports-related injuries (torn Achilles, hernia surgeries). In his early 40's he started experiencing a racing heart. I remember seeing his heart beating out of his chest after a city rec basketball game while relaxing in his recliner. He had his first and second ablation surgeries at age 47. We have come to learn his condition is hereditary, as three of his sisters have since been diagnosed, so my dad started paying attention to his wellness instead of assuming he was healthy. The healthy habits he has invested his time in will keep him around for my mom, my brother and me, and our children, his grandchildren. His wellness matters to us.

Be proactive instead of reactive. I worked in a shoe store for 15 years through high school, college, and adulthood. We fit and sold functional training shoes and we worked with local podiatrists in town. The shoes were pricey, and we would often get asked about the high costs. My response was proactive health care. Pay for quality shoes now that will help with stability, cushion, and balance, or be ready to pay a chiropractor, physical therapist, or orthopedic surgeon for ailments that could have been prevented by knowledge and proper care early on in life. "Prevention is the most powerful antidote to illness."[35] If you do the work today, it will make tomorrow easier.

"The future depends on what you do today."

—Mahatma Gandhi

See the meaning in the small events. It doesn't have to be life altering events that define who you are or motivate you to do better. Gawande notes,

> If we shift as we age toward appreciating everyday pleasures and relationships rather than toward achieving, having and getting, and if we find this more fulfilling, then why do we wait so long to do it? Why do we wait until we are old? The common view is that these lessons are hard to learn. Living is a kind of skill. The calm and wisdom of old age are achieved over time.[36]

I love a story I read about a woman who, at her 70th birthday party, said, "That was the best day of my life." She concluded she wanted her to have more best days.[37] Our society puts so much pressure on weddings, birthdays, and graduations, but why not strive every day to feel the best in the little

things? Finding purpose in everyday events and activities will cultivate a purpose and self-worth.

Nurture meaningful relationships. Everyone needs to work at their relationships, keeping in mind that they are two-sided. You have to give as much as you receive. Not all days may be the same—some days you have more to give, and some days you need more grace. Positive attitudes are vital in maintaining relationships. My SuperAger friend noted that sharing humor with others helps her in the aging process. She told me a delightful story about an elderly couple; the wife had fallen in the kitchen, she could not get herself up and her husband did not hear her cries for help. Likewise, she was not responding to his calls for her in the next room. Once he realized he should go find her since she was not answering him he found her on the floor and rushed to her side. Once he realized she was ok and just stuck, he noticed he himself could not get up. They both started laughing hysterically and once they regained sanity he scooted to a chair, hoisted himself up, then scooted the chair to her from his knees and she managed to get herself up as well. Being able to laugh at yourself and with others will make the aging process a little less intimidating and maybe even fun.

Work on resilience. We will all make poor decisions when it comes to personal wellbeing. We all know that wearing sunscreen is important, smoking is bad, and fast food is not real food, yet there are individuals who choose to make less productive choices when it comes to their health. "Getting older is unavoidable, but falling apart is not."[38] There are reasons we do things. Some things just need to be done and there will be no monetary prize or trophy.

Resilience

To age well, find the purpose inside yourself. Your reward will be the satisfaction of knowing you did everything well up to the current moment. But when you make a poor choice, learn from it and do better. Waldinger and Schultz make a good point in *The Good Life* about being flexible when it comes to mistakes or setbacks. ". . . coping strategies though our lives . . . can become set in stone. This kind of 'strength' can actually make us more fragile. In an earthquake, the sturdiest, most rigid structures are not the ones that survive. In fact, they might be the first to crumble." They go on to say that, "being able to flex with changing circumstance . . . might be the difference between getting through and falling apart."[39] In *The Joy Choice,* Michelle Segar introduces a

method called POP, an acronym for Pause, open up your Options, then play and Pick the joy choice.[40] There are those who naturally do this when plans change, while there are some who may need to practice resilience when plans are popped.

Viktor Frankl, stressing the freedom of will, argues humans have the freedom to choose their responses to any situation, regardless of external circumstances.[41] Ultimately, this inner freedom allows individuals to find purpose and meaning in their lives. Situations may happen that you did not choose or cannot control. If you can start training yourself to handle tough times, they will only be tough for a shorter amount of time. Flexible thinking will help if something does not go as planned. In *Option B*, a book that focuses on facing adversity, building resilience, and finding joy, the authors state that we need to have resilience in the ways we process negative events. "We all deal with loss: jobs lost, loves lost, lives lost. The question is not whether these things will happen. They will and we will have to face them."[42] It is important to recognize that we all go through the ages and stages in life. "People who can adapt to changing life circumstances and experiences may more quickly resume close-to-normal feelings and states of mental well-being," says Gupta. [43] Do things today that your future self will thank you for.

> *"When you tolerate an error, you rob yourself of learning. When you ruminate on an error, you rob yourself of happiness. Notice it, improve it, and move on from it."*
>
> *—James Clear*[44]

Final Thoughts

While my daughter has grown too tall to ride some rides at the fair, she is now tall enough to ride roller coasters and "older" rides with Mom! She embraced the change with the excitement for what's next to come and built a new connection with those close to her.

Paying attention to all dimensions of wellness and working on the connections between and within those dimensions will empower us through life to keep aging with grace. We can overcome the stressors that may

lead to toxic stress, depression, and other health issues, and instead find meaning and purpose to guide us toward a better future.

The good news is that "despite feelings of loss that often occur as people age, getting older does not necessarily mean people become less happy. On average, most people report greater mental well-being as they age past their mid-fifties into the later stages of life."[45] In one of her most influential studies, Laura Christensen, Stanford psychologist, found that people reported more positive emotions as they age, contrary to beliefs that people grow unhappier as they age.

"When we are young and healthy, we believe we will live forever, we widen networks of friends and connections . . . but as our time becomes finite and uncertain we shift to the here and now, to everyday pleasures and the people closest to us."[46] Her findings raise the question: if, as we age, we appreciate everyday pleasures and relationships rather than focus on achieving, having, and getting, why do we take so long to get there? Why wait until we are old? These lessons are hard to learn. Living is a skill, and the calm and wisdom of old age are achieved over time. But what if it has nothing to do with age, but merely perspective and a personal sense of how finite your time in the world is?[47]

"The time is now. Do the work."

—Brian Knight[48]

Find motivation to pay attention to aging being inevitable and accept the changes. That motivation can only come from within. It is important to think about the effects of aging at all stages of life, not just when the culture labels us as old or when medical benchmarks require us to start our colonoscopies and mammograms. According to the text I use for a Coaching Decisions and Ethics course, *Coaching Successfully,* the best way to motivate is to challenge but not overwhelm.[49] While the thought of aging can be overwhelming, if we are aware of the changes happening with the inevitability of aging, we can accept the challenges and look forward to the new experiences. We can change our mindset from uncomfortable to content, accepting, and grateful.

Katie E. Boyer, EdD, is assistant professor for education at the University of Dubuque—specifically, physical education and coaching. She is also a fitness instructor and CPR instructor. Katie and her husband are in the stage of life raising two elementary-aged children.

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p. 30: Photo of apple and donut by Andres Ayrton via pexels.com

p. 34: Photo of woman with hula hoop by Yan Krukau via pexels.com

p. 35: Dimensions of Wellness as a puzzle by Veronika Boyer

p. 36: Goals plan by Katie Boyer

p. 38: Photo of yellow flower by Anastasiia Traskovska via pexels.com

Notes

1. Cornell Law School, "Legal Age."
2. Center for Retirement Research, "Average Retirement Age."
3. Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, 161.
4. LaPook, "Redefining Old Age."
5. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.
6. Aronson, *Elderhood*; LaPook, "Redefining Old Age."
7. Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 29.
8. Marketplace espeakers, "Joyce Sunada."
9. Niewijk, "The University of Chicago Welcomes Dr. Emily Rogalski." Emily Rogalski PhD, leading neuroscientist at University of Chicago Healthy Aging and Alzheimer's Research Care (HAARC) Center, coined the term "SuperAgers" 15 years ago to describe people older than 80 whose memory is as good as those 20 to 30 years younger (or as well as that of someone in their 50s or 60s). What researchers are learning from SuperAgers could allow us to discover new protective factors in lifestyle, genetics, and resilience for common changes that arise with aging. Becoming a SuperAger is partly dependent on the genetic lottery, but our lifestyle choices – food, exercise, social connections and taking on new challenges—make a difference.
10. Lewis, "Erikson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development."
11. Evans and Sims, *Health and Physical Education*.
12. Clear, *Atomic Habits*.
13. Segar, *The Joy Choice*, 19.
14. Jim Romagna, personal communication.
15. Ratey, *Spark*, 224.
16. Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 46.
17. Evans and Sims, *Health and Physical Education*.
18. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 75.
19. Gupta.
20. Firpo-Cappiello, "'Blue Zones' Author Dan Buettner." After collecting data on diet, exercise, social interactions, and other factors, Buettner and his team discovered patterns: The people in these areas (Blue Zones) mostly eat a whole-food, plant-based diet; they have strong social connections; and they participate in regular physical activity.
21. Moore, "Bridging the Gap between Our Minds and Bodies."

22. Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life*, 29 (emphasis added).
23. Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life*.
24. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 108.
25. Vatovec, "Healthy Aging."
26. LaPook, "Redefining Old Age."
27. Buettner, *Live to 100*.
28. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 101.
29. Blue Cross Blue Shield, "Why Does Healthcare Cost so Much?"
30. Smith, Segal, and White, "Aging Well."
31. Finkelstein, "'Blue Zones' Have Captivated Health and Longevity Experts."
32. It took me years to find my symmetry in the wellness dimensions and I am still working on it as it is ever-changing. It has evolved with my ages and stages in life. After college, in my 20s, I was very selfish, but not in the negative way everyone perceives selfishness. I took care of me. I had to. I took courses in wellness and physical education, I had a strong social group playing rugby, relationships with my co-workers, and I have a very close family. My spirit was uplifted by the many gifts and talents I had and knowing I was never alone. I was single until I met my husband at age 30 and my priorities changed. I have not always been keen on changing my hobbies, but realized the change is for a good reason, and I have found my joy in new and different routines. Now, in my 40s, married with two children, the balance revolves around 3 other people in my life. While I still find time for me, I chose to be a mother and my family is an extension of myself. I write goals on my birthday each year. I don't do New Year's resolutions on January 1, I make them on MY New Year's. I started the habit of writing a goal for each of the dimensions of wellness and I don't get discouraged if I don't meet them all in the year. I simply put them on next year's list and continue to work on at least a small percentage of each dimension in my everyday life.
33. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 124-125.
34. Segar, *The Joy Choice*.
35. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 95.
36. Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 95.
37. Mannarino, "Embracing Your Age," 186.
38. Ratey, *Spark*, 221.
39. Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life*, 147.
40. Segar, *The Joy Choice*, 151–62; chap. 12.
41. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.
42. Sandberg and Grant, *Option B*, 29.
43. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 155.
44. Clear, "3-2-1".
45. Gupta, *Keep Sharp*, 155.
46. Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 97.
47. Gawande, 95–97.
48. Knight, "What Could This Cost Me?"
49. Martens, *Successful Coaching*.

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The Inevitability of Dying

Dale H. Easley

Abstract

Though death is inevitable, our response to it is up to us. Rather than allowing our suffering to lead us to self-deception and despair, we must find our way through grief with honesty, integrity, and compassion. Using stories from my own life and framing events in different lights, I demonstrate how to focus on hope and positivity, rather than the negative. Though no easy task, making the choice to change the inner narrative helps us find peace as we embrace both death and the lives that precede it.

Three weeks after our class returned from studying sustainable development in Haiti, one of my students, Jennifer, became partially paralyzed and was transported by ambulance to Charity Hospital in New Orleans. By the time she arrived, Jennifer was feeling better and was put on a bench to wait for five hours. She had no insurance. Rising to go to the bathroom, she passed out, went into a coma, then died. She was 25. The coroner told a nurse who told her mother that Jennifer had died from meningitis that she caught from a mosquito bite she had received in Haiti. It seemed that going on my trip had killed her.

For many of us, the inevitable dealing with a loved one's death is our most extreme experience, the time at which we are most miserable. Whether sudden, as with suicide, or lingering, as with cancer, we inevitably confront mortality and must face how we deal with death in our life. And we suffer. As we search for some meaning in that suffering, our character is laid bare—do we think only of ourselves or do we think of others? Do we behave nobly, whine, or, worse yet, inflict suffering on others? Do we demonstrate courage, compassion, and tenderness—good character—or will we slide into self-delusion, self-centeredness, and isolation? Viktor Frankl says that we get to choose.

In *Man's Search for Meaning,*[1] considered one of the greatest books of the 20th century, Viktor Frankl tells of his experiences surviving imprisonment in a German concentration camp during World War II. He observes how his fellow prisoners responded to the torture and humiliation of their conditions, observes who maintained hope, generosity, and compassion—and who despaired or, worse, contributed to the suffering of others. He uses those experiences to develop the central theses of logotherapy, his approach to healing through finding meaning in our suffering. He says that "this striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man."[2]

Frankl says,

> And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.[3]

Once again, Frankl says that we get to choose.

Though Frankl's writings about his experiences are widely read still, logotherapy is not widely embraced among today's mental health practitioners.[4] Telling someone that they need to find meaning can be far apart from actually helping them find it. In some ways, logotherapy is the work of a lifetime, a change in worldview driven by introspection and reflecting on our actions and interactions.

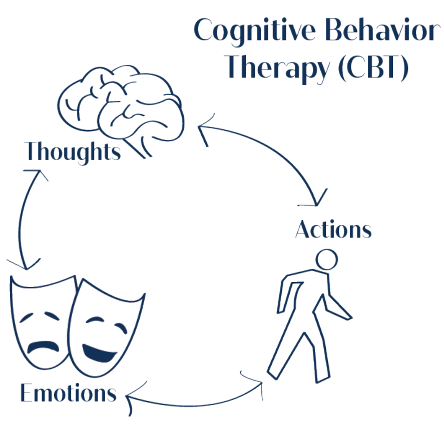
Sometimes things just happen—as Jayson Greene says after his two-year-old daughter was killed by a brick that fell off a building, "It represents everything that is meaningless, malevolent and terrifying about the universe."[5] Is there really meaning in his suffering? A more immediate relief is often called for.

Telling someone that they need to find meaning can be far apart from actually helping them find it.

Unfortunately, much therapy is not evaluated in terms of its effectiveness. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "There is no formal approval process for psychotherapies like there is for medications by the U.S.

Food and Drug Administration."[6] However, evidence-based approaches[7] such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) are the preferred approaches, often in conjunction with medication, especially as the duration of treatment is often limited by cost and insurance.

Where Frankl argues that the need is to find meaning in the suffering so as to endure it, CBT sees suffering as the result of maladaptive thinking patterns that need to be altered to alleviate distress. Evidence suggests that CBT is effective. Frankl's approach is excellent for the philosophically or religiously oriented who can afford the time required, but CBT provides specific actions that can be taken quickly to reduce distress. In either case, we are pushed to choose different ways of thinking about our suffering. We need to change our story.



Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)

The term for stepping back and thinking about our ways of thinking is *metacognition*[8]—thinking about thinking, the sort of reflection that is part of any good education. We learn to observe our thoughts and how they influence emotions and behavior. Only as we step back and recognize those thought patterns can we begin to change them. Otherwise, we tend to ruminate, get anxious or depressed, follow our addictions, and act out.

That said, I'm not a therapist, though I have experienced therapy in multiple forms (and my daughter is a mental health counselor). If distress is extreme or debilitating, seek the help of a professional. Medication may be needed. Both logotherapy and CBT may offer help, as may a myriad of other therapies.

But not everyone needs professional help. In part, this paper is a response to the overmedicalization[9] of the grieving process. Social work researcher and scholar Joanne Clarke says,

> Grief and loss are universal experiences of the human condition, and as such have long been the subject of reflection and research across many and varied disciplines. Despite the multiplicity of grieving experiences, the Western tradition has predominantly applied rational approaches

> to understanding and working with grief and loss. This has resulted in the pathologizing of grief responses that do not fit within medicalized normal ranges.[10]

She goes on to say that there is a "need for a narrative approach as an alternative to the medical/psychological model in our response to grief and loss."[11]

Our distress plus Frankl's writing can motivate us to change. To achieve that change, CBT and storytelling can provide specific methods. For those who seek to learn from their grief and live with it through personal effort, this paper will provide an approach that relies on narrative construction and modification, drawing from therapy approaches.

The Story of Grief

In this article, narrative and storytelling are often used interchangeably. This is an oversimplification—narrative is a broader concept than storytelling and includes most communication structured to make a specific point. Storytelling, particularly in its common understanding, is structured to have a beginning, middle, and end.[12] In some cases later in this article, stories presented are more like snippets of stories, thus falling instead into the category of narrative. Regardless, the focus in either case is reworking those things we say to ourselves and others during the time centered around the death of a loved one.

David Brooks says,

> What's necessary for understanding people is narrative thinking. Stories capture a person's character and how it changes over time. Stories capture how a thousand little influences come together to shape a life, how people struggle and thrive, get knocked about by lucky and unlucky breaks. People also just speak more freely when you get them to tell stories about themselves.[13]

Not only does that narrative thinking help us understand others, it helps us understand ourselves.

As we turn our thoughts into a story, we can examine them better and then, if we choose, modify them. Below, written in the first person, are example stories followed by alternative stories that demonstrate how the shift in emphasis or selection of content can lead to alternative expressions and descriptions of times of grief.

Narratives 1A and 1B: My Father's Death

1A: *My story as an adult begins when I was 19 and a sophomore in college. Just after I was home for Thanksgiving, my father was diagnosed with leukemia. He spent the next six and a half weeks in the hospital before dying in the intensive-care unit. Our family had agreed that we didn't want to die hooked up to machines in a hospital, but that's exactly what happened with my father. It wasn't the death we envisioned or what he desired.*

This is a story of failure and regret. The focus is on the downward trajectory of illness, the poor decisions made, and the sense of disempowerment. The effect is to add a burden to surviving loved ones—a haunting question of "What should I have done?"

1B: *During Christmas, Dad was going through chemotherapy for the second unsuccessful time. Despite his troubles, he thought of Mom's wish for a wooden trunk in which to store some of her work—quilts, baskets, needlepoint, sewing. With the help of a friend, he arranged to refurbish an old wooden trunk. My future brother-in-law and I snuck it into the house on Christmas Eve while Mom was in the bath. The next morning, after we had finished unwrapping all the presents, we gave Mom that trunk.*

Mom and Dad soon after they were married in 1948

This is a story of love. It demonstrates the power of good character, and it inspires others. By choosing to focus upon the second story, mood is uplifted, distress is decreased, and the likelihood of future positive action is increased. For me, it was an embrace of so many good things that I valued about my father's life and the character he showed as he died.

Narratives 2A and 2B: My Mother's Death

2A: *When my mother began to develop dementia, I convinced her to move to a memory-care facility that had locking doors to prevent her from leaving. In her perception, I went from being her Golden Boy to being her jailer. Though I was trying to keep her safe while also taking care of all the logistics, I soon*

had to try to appease her anger at being in an institution. Family members were of little help. Ultimately, she, like Dad, died in an institution, hooked up to an I.V.

Like in 1A, this is a story of distress and failure. Though intentions may have been good, once again the outcome was not. There's isolation, disappointment, and medicalization.

2B: *As Mom's dementia progressed, she was endangering herself and others by driving. Later, at the memory care unit, she wandered the halls at night, going into others' rooms. If it weren't for the locked door, I don't doubt that she would have wandered out and down the road. I was still being a good son by trying to keep her safe. When she died, I, my sister, and my niece were with her. We'd worked with Hospice to ensure that Mom felt little pain—thus, the morphine drip. Though Mom didn't die at home, she died in the bed where she'd slept for months, surrounded by her family.*

Mom at 83 while visiting Carolina Beach, NC

This story shows a son doing his best to take care of his mother as her mental faculties decline. It emphasizes the validity of decisions and the successes, painful though the time was. Once again, like in 1B, it is a story of love, of thinking of another despite ongoing distress, of respectable character.

Changing the Narrative

How to change the story isn't obvious, but contemporary therapy gives us some tools. CBT starts from the belief that thoughts influence feelings that in turn influence behavior.[14] Change the thoughts and a change in feelings and behavior follow. And we begin to feel relief.

Many of our thoughts are derived from prior experiences—"I'm not good enough" may be a thought that arose from criticism by parents or teachers. "The world is dangerous" may come from hurts we experiences as a child.

And we may come to believe, "I'll never be good at anything because everyone hates me."[15]

These thoughts become our identity[16]—the unchallenged story we tell ourselves about "how things are." We take those stories into new situations far from their origin, perhaps at the time of death of a loved one. We find ourselves feeling badly and acting poorly. Those thoughts are maladaptive and what CBT calls cognitive distortions. We need to change them in order to find relief from our distress.

It is no trivial task to alter the stories we tell ourselves. Altering them means changing who we see ourselves as being, both personally and in relationship to others. We have to break through our self-imposed limitations, our self-delusion, and our narcissism—and open ourselves to alternatives. And that requires a level of vulnerability that is often painful.

Most of us have had the experience of sharing a part of ourselves, something we hold dear, and then having it rejected or even made fun of by others. After those experiences, few of us are willing to open up again. We shut in the pain, internalize it, even blame ourselves for being vulnerable.

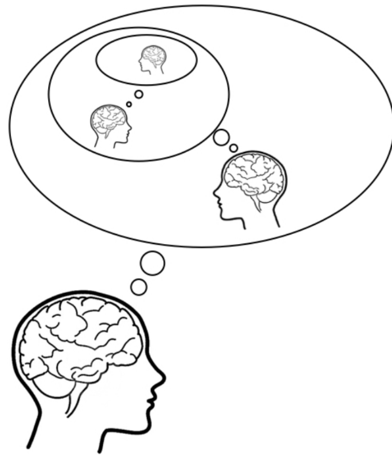
Brené Brown has written and spoken about the power of vulnerability, of opening ourselves up to the possibility of being hurt.[17] She says, "Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage."[18]

And courage is one of the most important aspects of good character. It takes courage to turn the other cheek. It does little good to be honest about a bad situation without the courage to try to change it. And it takes courage to show compassion to others while feeling pain or anger personally. Courage allows us to put good character into action.

Courage is one of the most important aspects of good character.

Methods of Change

Even with high levels of courage and vulnerability, we still need guidance on specific techniques to use to accomplish the transformation of our stories. We have to develop skills at managing our thoughts. Some common approaches are the following:



Metacognition

1. Observe thoughts and emotions. Many faith traditions have some sort of meditation, such as mindfulness and centering prayer, that calls for us to watch without judgement the thoughts and emotions we are experiencing. As Arthur Brooks says, "Observe more, judge less."[19] This is an important aspect of metacognition and is required for beginning to rewrite out stories. He also says, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic,

    > People are experiencing more than just everyday bad feelings right now. Many have lost jobs and loved ones and are feeling the devastation of this once-in-a-lifetime tragedy. Even for those of us who haven't, however, the pandemic is a particularly rough patch in our lives. But we have an opportunity here to assess the benefits of negative emotions and experiences—and how we can use them for personal improvement instead of trying to push them away.[20]

2. Learn the ABCs. When we feel distress, CBT teaches that we should pause and ask ourselves, "What was the **A**ctivating event?" Something *triggered* our emotional response. Then we look to see what **B**eliefs we hold about that event and try to reevaluate them. Finally, we ask ourselves, "What were the **C**onsequences?" That is, how did we respond?[21] In the case of a dying loved one, the triggering event is sometimes easy to identify, at least superficially. But it takes more effort to identify the underlying beliefs that we hold about how things ought to be and how we ought to behave. The behaviors we actually perform, often in stressful conditions, can give us insight into the thoughts that are driving them.

3. Continue to reflect on the events. Much of our best thinking occurs when we force ourselves to create sentences on paper or screen,[22] getting the poorly structured ideas out of our heads to a place where we can look at them[23] and begin to reshape them. Write.[24] Start a journal.[25] Publish a blog.[26] Throw up in the morning, clean up at noon, as Ray Bradbury advised.[27] Being vulnerable starts with being honest with ourselves, digging into the hurts and history that helped shape us.

4. Tell the story publicly. Getting up in front of others, maybe crying, is scary. But in the right venue with a set of supportive listeners, it can be liberating. Try speaking at a Moth[28] event, PechaKucha,[29] church, or support group. Go watch others first. See their courage[30] and it will help us find our own.
5. Change expectations. Boethius, who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* as he awaited execution, said, "So true is it that nothing is wretched, but thinking makes it so, and conversely every lot is happy if borne with equanimity."[31] Perhaps as important is the recognition that every culture has expectations for dealing with death, most of which are unspoken but assumed. Make them explicit. For those who don't understand those expectations, additional distress is generated when the unexpressed expectations are unmet.
6. Practice gratitude. It's hard to be grateful during the dying and death of a loved one. But after, it will help to appreciate why we loved the deceased person and how others supported us.

In these techniques, the emphasis is on what is currently occurring, not childhood events and family history, though those may help us understand the thoughts and beliefs driving our behavior. That said, if there is a history of trauma, such exploration is best done in the accompaniment of a trained professional.

Example Application

What follows is an example of walking through the grieving process. It describes my own experiences as my father died, described in **1A** above.

The fall before my father died, two of my classes had a student newly back at college after a year off. Both were small courses, and soon Jim and I were laughing together. But after my father was diagnosed with leukemia, I learned more about Jim's grief. Jim had been waterfront director at a church camp on Lake Michigan that he first attended as a young boy. The summer before his year off, a camper drowned. Jim couldn't understand how a loving God had let the drowning happen. That's why Jim had taken a year off college.

The next school year, Jim and I were co-editors of the college newspaper. It was a weekly in the time before word processors and computer typesetting, so we'd stay up late on Sunday and Monday nights, first choosing the articles to include, writing our weekly editorial, and then the next night doing the

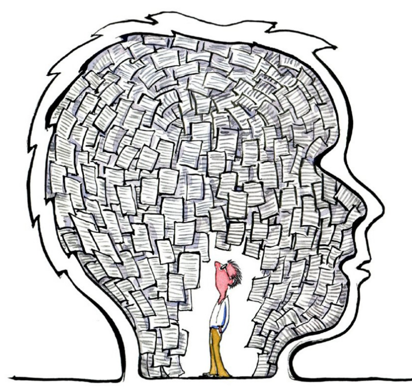
layout of the print. Afterward, instead of going to sleep or to study, we'd head out for omelets at an all-night diner, to a doughnut shop, or to one of our apartments where cold beer awaited. Our conversations seldom dwelled on our grief, but it was always in the near background.

Somewhere during our college days, Jim went on an Outward Bound[32] *trip. Near the end, one of the counselors gave Jim a quote that starts by stating that its author is a searcher, not being satisfied with society's easy answers. He asserts that there are many of us. Jim shared the quote with me after Dad died, knowing I was searching for some way to understand what had happened. It ends with this:*

> Our sadness is as much a part of our lives as is our laughter.
> To share our sadness with one we love
> is perhaps as great a joy as we can know—
> unless it be to share our laughter.[33]

Several decades later, I can still call Jim and within a few minutes be laughing. But the depth of our friendship comes not just from laughter but from shared grief. I still can't make sense of Dad's death. But I can now understand how the grief Jim and I were going through was the foundation for our lasting friendship.

If ever there is a cure for loneliness and isolation, it's a friend like Jim. But that level of friendship isn't reached without some vulnerability. Grief ripped open a level of vulnerability that allowed us to heal and to bond for life.



Stories we carry wtih us

In this story, the decrease in distress over my father's death is driven by finding my community—primarily Jim but others, too,[34]—and speaking with them of my experience. My editorials were tinged with it, my understanding of music deepened, and I began to recognize the deeper friendships that grief had led to. Though I never found meaning in my father's death itself, my life became richer because of the relationships it led to.

And though it may seem minor, the shifting in identity from searching to being a searcher is significant. A searcher values the search itself, not a potential endpoint. To see oneself as a searcher is to embrace the search

instead of thinking, “There must be some explanation out there that I haven’t yet discovered.”

After I graduated college, I headed to Africa to teach high-school mathematics, no longer just searching, now a searcher.

Beginning to Make Peace with Death

Many of our experiences of death have an emotional distance despite the upset we feel at the time—we read the news, perhaps follow a celebrity who becomes ill and dies, maybe know of classmates who die in car accidents. But, usually, our first serious encounter with dying and death is with a loved one. It’s harder to maintain that distance when the dying person is close to home—we’re distressed and we suffer.

We can be better prepared for those inevitable times and for living a full life if we also contemplate our own death. The Stoic philosophers often use the phrase, *Memento Mori, remember that you will die,* to remind themselves that life is fleeting and unpredictable. Their intention is not to be morbid or timid but to live well. They and others follow a long tradition—Socrates said that the proper practice of philosophy is “about nothing else but dying and being dead.”[35]

"Remember that you will die"

When the dying is close to our hearts, we receive a test of our character. Ryan Holiday, author and contemporary popularizer of Stoic Philosophy, says,

> The great psychologist Viktor Frankl, survivor of three concentration camps, found presumptuousness in the age-old question: “What is the meaning of life?” As though it is someone else’s responsibility to tell you. Instead, he said, the world is asking you that question. And it’s your job to answer with your actions.[36]

Our actions are the physical manifestation of our character, which is the focus of the Wendt Character Initiative at the University of Dubuque. It “aims to help students, faculty and staff at the University of Dubuque

become people of integrity, justice and compassion." We seek to be "people of character leading lives of purpose."[37]

Holiday continues, "If you see any of this as a burden, you're looking at it the wrong way. Because all we need to do is those three little duties—to try hard, to be honest, and to help others and ourselves. That's all that's been asked of us. No more and no less."[38]

Holiday's statement brings us back to Frankl, to revising our stories ("you're looking at it the wrong way"), and to character ("to try hard, to be honest, and to help others and ourselves"). Frankl would approve.

As Holiday says, "It doesn't need to be depressing. Because it's invigorating. And since this is true, we ought to make use of it. Instead of denying—or worse, fearing—our mortality, we can embrace it."[39]

Ultimately, I learned that the pain I felt at my father's death was proportionate to the love I gave and received from him. I would not trade a lesser father for less pain. I embrace the story of the man he was.

And in the case of Jennifer, my student, I learned that she did not die from meningitis but from a brain aneurysm. If she had been treated quickly, she might still be alive. Learning the different story of her death not only took the load of regret off my shoulders but also led to a better future for others—a student whose mother was a nurse at the Charity Hospital Emergency Room told me that the policies and procedures there were altered in light of Jennifer's death. As they should have been.

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p. 56: “Memento Mori (1916)” by Julie de Graag via openclipart.org

Notes

1. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.
2. Frankl, 99, loc. 1235.
3. Frankl, 66, loc. 872.
4. Nelson, “What are Some Common Types of Therapy?”
5. Greene, “What Does Daddy Cry About?”
6. National Institute of Mental Health, “Psychotherapies.”
7. Heinssen, Goldstein, and Azrin, “Evidence-Based Treatments.”
8. Brooks, A., *Build the Life You Want*.
9. Gawande, *Being Mortal*.
10. Clarke, “The Irrationality of Grieving,” 12.
11. Clarke, 12.
12. The Moth, “The Art and Craft of Storytelling.”
13. Brooks, D., “A Humanist Manifesto.”
14. Vogel, “The 3 Basic Principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.”
15. Fenn and Byrne, “The Key Principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.”
16. Den Elzen and Lengelle, “A Tale of Two Widows.”
17. Brown, *Daring Greatly*; Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability”
18. Brown, *Rising Strong*, 4.
19. Brooks, A. “The Art and Science of Happiness.”
20. Brooks, A. “The Art and Science of Happiness.”
21. Healthline, “ABC Model of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.”
22. Howard and Barton, *Thinking on Paper*.
23. Bertrand, “These Roots That Bind Us.”
24. Małecka and Bottomley, “Grief Memoirs.”
25. Den Elzen and Lengelle, “A Tale of Two Widows.”
26. Karkar and Burke, “It’s Your Loss.”
27. Bradbury. *Death Is a Lonely Business*.
28. The Moth, “The Art and Craft of Storytelling.”
29. Howard and Barton. *Thinking on Paper*.
30. Braestrup, “The House of Mourning.”
31. Reynolds, “The Consolation of Philosophy (II/III).”
32. Outward Bound, “Outdoor Education Adventures & Wilderness Programs.”
33. Easley, “Searcher.”
34. Easley, “The Courage to Be Tender.”
35. Daily Stoic, “‘Memento Mori’.”
36. Holiday, *The Obstacle Is the Way*.
37. Wendt Character Initiative, “What Is Character?”
38. Holiday, *The Obstacle Is the Way*.
39. Holiday.

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Attention and Digital Mourning

Daniel P. Fleming

Abstract

Mourning is the human response to inevitable loss that, if done well, reintegrates the bereaved's life into a new way of being that acknowledges the continuation of life while not minimizing or ignoring the pain of loss. The virtue of intentional attentiveness is essential for the mourner as well as those who accompany them in order to mourn well. The internet has given rise to new opportunities for mourning that have been beneficial for many, especially those who are isolated or cannot mourn in person. At the same time, the driving motivations—to sell attention—behind much of the internet interferes with healing and effective mourning. However, with intentional efforts to infuse attention into our use of the internet, we can practice good mourning even in the digital space.

I woke up Monday, December 6, 2021, to a text message from Dad: my sister's boyfriend, Steven, had not made it home from a weekend with her. Internet sleuthing found a fatal single-car accident with the right type of car at approximately the time he would have been passing the spot. The county coroner said it was not Steven. Three hours later we found out it was him. His car had swerved off the road, hit a tree, and burned.

Mom and Dad flew to Columbia, South Carolina, to be with Christina, my sister, the same day. The rest of us mourned with Christina at a distance, through the wonder of the internet. We were able to text, talk, video-chat, and watch the funeral from a distance. The internet helped a family scattered across Dubuque, Seattle, and Frankfurt to be attentive to Christina's mourning in Columbia.

The internet brought my family together in ways that were impossible in previous generations. Nearly 66 years earlier, on January 8, 1956, another unexpected death occurred. Pete Fleming, Grandpa's brother, was speared

to death on a remote river-sandbar in the Ecuadorian jungle with four other men. He was 27. Olive, his wife, along with the other wives, waited a few miles away for a planned radio contact at 4:30 that never came. A military expedition finally found their bodies a week later.

At the time, my grandpa was living halfway around the world in South Africa. It took several days for a five-word telegram to arrive: “Pete missing. Letter to follow” (This is according to Aunt Lois, who saw it as a child. The original has been lost.). Grandpa had no phone calls, texts, or video-chats, and could not participate in the funeral. The only people he had to mourn with were Grandma, his children, and Grandma's sister, who happened to be visiting.

nes 6. AMUSEMENT PROGRAMS SPORTS NEWS 21

Parents Pray for Lost Missionary

Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth L. Fleming, whose son is among five American missionaries feared captured by savage Amazon jungle Indians, prayed today for their son's safety—and the success of his work.

The Flemings, who live at 1403 Tenth Av. W., have been notified that their son, Peter, 27, is missing in the jungles of Ecuador. He and four other missionaries flew in a light plane to work with the primitive Auca tribe.

"We feel that Peter is safe," said Mrs. Fleming. "We have faith that God will take care of him."

Radio Message Stops Short

The missionaries had radioed they had preliminary friendly meetings with the tribe. The last message said: "Here come a group of Aucas we have not known before." Then the radio transmission broke off.

"We knew that Peter was on a dangerous trip," said Fleming, an insurance-firm executive. "In his last letter, he asked us to pray for a project coming up. We didn't know what it was."

Bodies Seen Near Plane

Other missionaries' planes and Army and Air Force planes, which joined the search today, reported the group's plane was stripped. One body was lying near the plane. Another body was spotted some distance away. However, searchers did not determine whether the bodies were those of Indians or white men.

The National Geographic Society in Washington, D. C., today described the Auca tribe as "the world's most bloodthirsty killers," the United Press reported.

Indians Always on Warpath

"The Aucas are always on the warpath," said the society. "They hate everybody. Occasionally they prey on each other like maddened beasts."

One report said a signal fire had been spotted in the area. Searchers hoped it might have been kindled by the Americans.

Fleming represented the nondenominational group, Christian Missions in Many Lands. He was born in Seattle and was graduated from Queen Anne High School and from the University of Washington in 1950. He attended the university for two postgraduate years and went to Ecuador in 1952.

Fleming returned in 1954 and married Olive J. Ainslie of Seattle. Mrs. Fleming, 23, is safe at the missionaries' base in Ecuador.

The other missing missionaries are James Elliot, Portland, Ore.; Roger Youderian, Billings, Mont.; Nat Saint, Philadelphia, and Edward McCully, Milwaukee, Wis. All are married. Their families are in South America.

The elder Flemings have another missionary son, Kenneth C. Fleming, 28, in Durban, South Africa.

AWAITING NEWS: Kenneth L. Fleming, 1403 Tenth Av. W., talked with a friend on the telephone as he and his wife awaited news of their son, Peter, 27, feared captured by savage Indians in Ecuador. The younger Fleming is one of five American missionaries missing in the jungle.

—A. P. photos
PETER FLEMING JAMES ELLIOT

Water Shutoff

Water will be shut off from 8 o'clock until noon tomorrow in 12th Avenue Northwest between West 92nd and West 100th Streets and in West 96th and West 97th Streets between Ninth and 12th Avenues Northwest.

Newspaper article about the loss of my Uncle Pete

From 1956 to 2021, the inevitability of mourning has not changed. However, mourning, encompassing the actions that express and deal with inevitable loss, and the expectations we have around mourning have radically changed. An entirely new digital world has been created and has invaded all aspects of life: work, personal, social, and financial. But humans have not changed so quickly. A person is still a person, and a person in mourning still requires the same character traits from those around them: appropriate attentiveness.

Mourning requires attentiveness because of the confluence of emotion and cultural expectations in mourning. Attentiveness is the character trait of paying attention—probably what parents tell their children most, aside from “sit down and be quiet!” Attentiveness calls for more than being present physically; it includes emotions, mind, will, consciousness—in short, being

present as a whole person. Though it sounds like mindfulness, attentiveness is always other-focused, whereas mindfulness is self-focused. Attentiveness is offering a gift to the person before me.[1]

Mourning with Christina, online at first and in person later when she visited for Christmas, showed me the importance of attentiveness during mourning for everyone involved. Christina attended to her memories, feelings, and dashed hopes of a future with Steven. Her mourning changed from moment to moment, which meant that my family and I needed to be attentive to what she needed and what was appropriate at that time. Being attentive is the key character trait needed to mourn well, while the internet—a particularly inattentive place—encroaches ever more onto mourning.

Attentive to Mourning

Mourning is a universal and inevitable human experience because loss is inevitable. Everybody dies. The internet may have changed the places and expressions of mourning, but everyone has or will mourn a loss at some point in their lives. They may not mourn well—mourning is complex and difficult—but everyone will mourn.

Mourning is a universal and inevitable human experience.

Mourning is multidimensional, having emotional, social, behavioral, and physical aspects.[2] Emotions stemming from loss such as grief, shock, pain, anxiety, anger, guilt, and others ground mourning. However, mourning is also expressed through intentional actions such as memorializing, remembering, crying, and sharing. Not all of grief's physical effects are intentional—they may leak out as mental fog, loneliness, being overwhelmed, exhausted, agitated, not eating, not sleeping, and the like. A good mourning process is grounded in its embodied effects to provide help to the mourner so they can accept the reality of the loss, work through the anguish, readjust to a new environment, and reinvest in their life while maintaining a connection to the deceased.[3]

Anguish and Acceptance

Anguish over loss—or sometimes over socially unacceptable reactions to loss—and the need to accept loss is where all mourning begins. Death causes multiple losses: the loss of a future, the loss of memory, and the loss of part of the bereaved's sense of self. Death blows in like a hurricane,

shredding all lives in its path, and requires attentive rebuilding. Enabling the bereaved to attend to their pain and move through it to accept these losses is mourning's first goal. In this sense, mourning is natural. It is part of the cycle of life and death experienced by every living thing.[4]

Thoughtless action is insufficient for processing loss and grief—the mourner needs to be attentive to themselves and their loss. Like driving on autopilot, inattentive mourning may not lead to the intended destination. Paying attention to the actions of mourning is backed up by research as a helpful activity. As Alexander Burrell and Lucy Selman argue in their article on funeral impacts on grievers, "the benefit of after-death rituals including funerals depends on the ability of the bereaved to shape those rituals and say goodbye in a way which is meaningful for them."[5] Shaping rituals means paying attention to them and to the mourner's emotional and physical well-being in order to bring the mental and physical worlds into alignment.

Perhaps the deepest loss experienced in death is a loss of the bereaved's sense of self. Humans are highly relational beings and losing a part of our relationship network disrupts our sense of who we are. Good mourning begins to heal the rip in our social and personal fabric left by a loss. Journaling about the sudden mountain-climbing death of his 25-year-old son, philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "We have to live around the gap. Pull one [person] out, and everything changes."[6]

Teens are particularly susceptible to the disruption grief introduces to their self-image because they are in a fragile stage of development.[7] Everyone got a taste of the kind of isolation home-bound people—like the elderly—experience through the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole world was collectively isolated online—except for the dying who were hospitalized alone. For teens, however, the combination of isolation, grief, and harm to their self-image led to a "grief pandemic" following the COVID-19 medical pandemic.[8] Being forced to attend to who they are and rebuild their self-image around a bleeding wound at

Isolation in the inattentive world online

such a young age is a large ask for teens who are most comfortable in the inattentive world of the internet.

Mourners should be attentive to their inner and outer worlds. But those around them, mourning with the bereaved, also need to pay attention as they cross the distance to be with the bereaved, whose world has just had a jagged gap ripped in it. It is impossible to know what is going on inside others' heads, which adds to the challenge faced by those gathering lovingly around the bereaved.

Coming alongside the bereaved

Isolation is one of the chief threats to a mourner's wellbeing. Grief on its own is severely isolating as it takes over every aspect of the bereaved's life. When the bereaved is physically isolated, like everyone was in the pandemic or the bedridden are, mourning can be stunted by a lack of interpersonal interaction. Responsibility to avoid isolation, in this case, falls on those mourning with the bereaved. Understanding cries of a broken heart from a distance through printed words is difficult. Grief, which gives rise to moments of mourning, can come from unexpected directions that surprise the mourner, not to mention those who are trying to faithfully attend to their mourning loved ones. As Julie Lythcott-Haims, reflecting on the path she took after her dad's death, observes in her essay on grief:

> I picture grief as a vat full of tears hidden behind an opaque wall. All we can see on our side of the wall is the spigot. Circumstances loosen the spigot and our tears flow, then we tighten it again to get on with our lives as custom and bosses demand. But things remind us of our loved one—a song, a milestone, a photo, an expanse of sky—and we loosen and tighten, loosen and tighten, over months, years, even decades. None of us know how big the vat is. How vast the grief.[9]

Surprises and unexpected moments of mourning make attentiveness much more difficult. Paying attention to the multi-faceted anguish of loss leads to a deeper view of mourning than the popular five-stages model. Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross introduced the five stages of mourning—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—in her 1970 book, *On Death and Dying.* Her work is a powerful exploration of the psychological

aspects of death and mourning.[10] However, popular views of the five stages have reduced all mourning to one "essentialist"[11] recipe or path that every bereaved person limps down, missing the social impact, trauma-recovery, and relationship rebuilding we have to do when we have lost a loved one.

Readjustment and Reinvestment

While mourning involves processing natural emotions borne out of the anguish of loss, mourning is also relational and social.[12] The bereaved must adjust to a new reality—a reality with a gaping hole in it. Society, culture, and religion all define what is "normal" and, from that definition, they shape the categories, acceptable practices, and taboos of mourning. Lythcott-Haim's quotation above highlighted how "custom and bosses" are often at odds with working out grief.[13] Wolterstorff expands on the gap his son left in his life: "We don't just each have a gap inside us, but together a gap among us. We have to live differently with each other."[14] Not only are we learning to live in new ways around the gap, but we are doing that in context of a society that puts its expectations on us. Learning to navigate a particular society's demands and limitations on mourning[15] while still mourning and moving towards readjustment and reinvestment is an act of attentiveness by the mourner. Mourning means being in a particular place in the world. It means paying attention to the world around us that extends the mourner's attention to anguish and acceptance.

Reality for the bereaved has forever changed, requiring adjustment and reinvention of themselves as their social circle rebuilds around the loss. Mourning in both private and public worlds is part of the healing process and must be attended to. One study has shown that expressing mourning by posting online reduces the anxiety of the bereaved.[16] There is also evidence that shows that private grieving, out of the public eye and even alone, is essential for the mourner's emotional wellbeing.[17] The evidence for public and private mourning is not contradictory but complementary, as there is a time for mourning with others and a time for mourning alone.

There is a time for mourning with others and a time for mourning alone.

There is a time and place for mourning together, but attentiveness to the mourner should reveal when they need to mourn privately—when they are not able to engage in relationship or when those mourning with them are thinking more of themselves than of the mourner they are supposedly

attending to. Wolterstorff summed up the benefits and dangers those mourning with the bereaved provide:

> Some people are gifted with words of wisdom. . . . Some blurted out strange, inept things. That's OK too. . . . And if you can't think of anything at all to say . . . just embrace. . . . Some say nothing because they find the topic too painful . . . So they put on a brave face and lid their feelings . . . that adds new pain to the sorrow of their suffering friends.[18]

Mourning in an attentive community is healing even when imperfect. Yet mourning without attention to self and the other person wounds deeply.

Hope remains. Attentiveness can be learned in everyday life and applied to mourning. Practiced attentiveness becomes a habit, even a virtue, as ingrained in people as throwing the football in a spiral is to an NFL quarterback. In other words: attentiveness practice can start today. At its simplest, attentiveness as a virtue means to "look and listen,"[19] to be present as a whole person, not just a physical lump of meat. Learning to look and listen with all our senses is simple but difficult—simple because the instructions are minimal; difficult because it is a fight against nature, desire, and the momentum of the internet, as well as the nature of humans.

Digital Mourning

Mourning and culture are dance partners, weaving meaning into each other and giving form and beauty to our vision of the world. Facing death and finding meaning in response shapes our self-perception. Yet that same self-understanding forms the categories that shape our understanding of good and acceptable mourning practices. Some grieving men withdraw from society because their model for manhood is ever stoic and reserved. Teens in mourning drift to social media in mourning because they are comfortable there. Thus, transitioning online for mourning makes sense. Mourning has always happened partially at a distance—flowers, cards, and letters used to be mailed.[20] Now, when most people are already comfortable communicating and socializing online, the internet

Mourning at a distance

is a natural place to turn for mourning, especially at a distance,[21] though in its present form it has a complex relationship with mourning because it demolishes our attentiveness.

Current Trends

The internet has always been about communication that shrinks space and time. The internet has repeatedly transformed the speed, power, and reach of communication. And our digital lives are not done changing. Developments in artificial intelligence have enabled communication with bots that can simulate deceased relatives, so called "grief bots," or programs that become AI girlfriends, with the attendant mourning when a particular digital-girlfriend-service goes offline—or dies.[22] Each of these communication revolutions has appeared as if by magic, with little attention paid to the effects on users until much later.

The internet's entrance into mourning has been a grass-roots transformation more than a systematic hostile takeover—no Illuminati-funded plan here. The transition has been broad, affecting end-of-life technology, expanding options for memorialization and tributes, supporting complex responses for mourning in different subgroups, and necessitating new strategies for record-keeping and dealing with digital assets. New opportunities to practice mourning online have arisen with blogging, videos, photos, visualization, poetry, grafting, film-making, dialoging with the deceased, and personal reflection, as we connect with others, pass the time, and transition through various stages of grief.[23]

The internet takes the human propensity for inattentive mourning and escalates the problem by selling attention to the highest bidder. When attention is the business model, users must be prevented from spending attention other places—including mourning. Social media companies strategically show posts and comments about mourning to keep a user engaged, not to help them mourn well. Their goal is to move the user along at a pace that maximizes the amount of money the company can make by showing advertisements without the user leaving. Taking attentiveness and shaping it solely for someone else's profit is not beneficial to mourning.

The internet takes the human propensity for inattentive mourning and escalates the problem by selling attention to the highest bidder.

Social media sites are the most visible places of digital mourning because of their ubiquity, but they are also sites that encourage the most inattentive mourning. The algorithms driving social media arrange posts on a user’s feed at varying times, including reminders of a lost loved one that are auto-generated—“Say happy birthday to Joe!”—as well as those created by other mourners.[24] The algorithm will sandwich heartfelt posts mourning loss between the basest self-promotion, political rants, and memes, making no distinction. The algorithm’s goal is to take as much of its users’ attention as possible so it can sell more advertisements. Even so, these reminders of loss may be opportunities to mourn, to remember a friend, to process, or they might be uncomfortable and creepy—bringing up unwanted memories—or simply out of place. Tech reporter Brett Williams observes that ``Grief is an emotion that feels out of place on social media, where most people painstakingly curate the most appealing versions of themselves.’’[25] Social media’s inward focus crowds out the attention that mourners need to give to their grief and receive from those accompanying them.

In fact, the more emotionally and relationally distant a person is from the loss, the more inattentive they are to online mourning. A study in Spain showed that those most closely related to the deceased found comfort in online mourning, while those who were more distant viewed the same activities as superficial and disturbing.[26] People closest to the loss tend to be the most focused on the loss and mourn the most deeply. Their own mourning enables them to see the depth of others’ expressions online and enables them to be more attentive and mourn with their friends or family.

Social media may be the most visible venue of mourning, but other venues may be more conducive to digital mourning. Private messages through iMessage, Signal, or old-school text-messaging are used to express and listen to mourners. Zoom, Facebook Live, YouTube and other streaming services let people participate in funeral services who could not otherwise make it. Using a streaming service became extremely popular with the public[27] during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a majority of funeral homes offering streamed services.[28] My uncle and sister attended Grandpa’s funeral online in 2021 because of travel and life restrictions. They didn’t just hear us but were even able to participate by sharing their

Streaming funerals

own memories and eulogies. The internet enabled them to express their mourning and hear ours, joining a family separated by almost a dozen time zones into one shared experience!

Clearly, the mixing of a wide variety of content on social media is not exclusively bad news for mourning. First, it extends the range of possible mourning actions and interactions. As Neil Postman has stated, each new medium, including social media, which was unimaginable in his day, opens "a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility."[29] The internet, including social media, has opened up vast new horizons of creativity and self-expression in part because it is different than speech, writing, radio, television, or any other media. For example, Instagram's photo-orientation may lead to using humor to mourn by remembering your grandma's photographic quirks or other aspects that would be taboo during a funeral. Or X/Twitter's original 140-character limit brought out the creativity of brevity, which can be seen in the tributes to the death of Robin Williams.[30]

Remembering a grandma's humor on social media

Second, some sites are recognizing and making space for mourning-specific activities. Facebook and Instagram allow turning accounts into memorials. These memorials freeze the contents of a deceased person's profile while still allowing others to visit, tag, and talk to the memorial publicly. The deceased's thoughts, opinions, photos, and other artifacts are preserved—a double-edged sword. Preservation allows mourners to return to an unchanging version of the deceased, which may help them remember and mourn the person as they saw themselves.

On the flip side, those posts do not age and change with the mourner, which may be harmful to their continued mourning. They do not reinterpret themselves as the bereaved grow and change, which is essential for mourning.[31] While previous generations have dealt with journals, letters, and other artifacts, they are not present to the mourner in the way social media is. Those artifacts must be intentionally brought out and reviewed.

On the internet, the social media companies' algorithms decide when to show the mourner old memories. Agency is taken away from the mourner. Unfortunately there is no clear-cut plan for mourning; what helps some people mourn well can be damaging to others.

There are also specifically built tools focused on mourning. Sites for mourners to share their stories while they go through grief and reflect on their journey as they grow and change, like Option B, Here to Help, Grief Stories, and Caring Bridge, are out of the public eye but fill an important role in our mourning by providing a carefully managed community of support. Some researchers are concerned that such sites may turn into grief ghettos, where mourners feed on each others' negative emotions without growth and change, but overall the effects seem more positive.[32] Caring Bridge is built specifically to help people walking through a major medical event to tell their story. Those stories do not always end with recovery and families can turn the page into a memorial space for digital gathering, mourning, and remembering.

Far-Reaching Impacts

Having moved many mourning practices online, modern culture is creating the aforementioned ``digital artifacts'' of mourning—an entirely new category of "stuff" the bereaved are left to clean up. Mourning has always created artifacts, the bits of ourselves left behind in words and objects such as tombstones, letters, monuments, stories of grieving, and the like. In the digital realm, each interaction creates a digital artifact. A future archaeologist may comb back through digital artifacts of mourning—if they survive—to learn about the current moment, just as archaeologists today study the artifacts of mourning from societies long dead to gain insight into their lives. What they will find is a mess of social media, digital tools, and specifically built sites, all generating intertwined and overlapping artifacts.

> *Modern culture is creating "digital artifacts" of mourning—an entirely new category of "stuff" the bereaved are left to clean up.*

Dealing with all the artifacts the deceased left behind is an often hidden and private aspect of mourning. Cleaning out a house, handling finances, and dealing with a will are now supplemented by cleaning up the online debris of life. This includes the visible elements of a dead person's social

media profiles as well as their information on government websites, email, online banking, and all the other aspects of the life they carried out online, not to mention the often-memed "clear my browser history, bro!" Online clutter impacts mourning in two major ways. First, the decisions require shifting attention, which can interrupt mourning. How long to hang on to the bereaved's artifacts and when to let go is a deeply charged question made ever more difficult by the public nature of the internet.[33] Second, sorting through the more private side of digital life can be seen as an invasion of privacy[34] and may be affected by corporate policy, law, and regulation.[35]

Dealing with a loved one's digital artifacts

On the other hand, when loss is public, as in the death of an individual like Kobe Bryant all the way up to a society-wide event like war, mourning is also public, which means that emotions can become contagious, spreading quickly through society and generating the potential to deeply change social and cultural expectations and taboos. When those emotions can be poured out in a widely read, open-access forum like the internet today, major social norms can be drastically altered. Steffen Steinert has cataloged how times of mourning, like after 9/11, the downing of flight MH307 (a flight that disappeared in 2014 with no trace), and the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks was expressed online as deep anger and sadness, while Hurricane Sandy in 2012 saw an online epidemic of fear.[36]

Attending to these society-wide crisis moments and their earth-shaking acts of corporate mourning raises unique challenges for the mourners and those mourning with them. Emotionally charged groups, especially once a critical mass is reached to make the reaction self-sustaining, often respond with mockery and disregard for those who try to raise concerns. Being attentive requires recognizing the powerful force that a mob becomes, whether for good or ill.

When George Floyd's murder was shared on social media, it kicked off nation-wide mourning that resulted in a summer of protest whose effects are still felt today. True grass-roots public online mourning can be cathartic if it is done properly. But many times powerful agents like social

Attending to society-wide moments of crisis

media companies, mediators of digital mourning, capture mourning and twist it into capitalistic productivity, nationalism, advertisement sales, or some other agenda, which negates the healing effects of the mourning.[37] Attending to these society-wide crisis moments as they unfold in all of their internet-boosted speed and their earth-shaking acts of corporate mourning means attending to a crowd of individuals, with their unique mourning responses, who are behaving as a single mob directing mourning in a particular emotional and behavioral direction.

Infusing Attention

Removing distractions is only the first step on the path to attentive online mourning. We also need to develop attentiveness as mourners and accompaniers. In Japanese, the word *kizukai*, meaning "reading others' needs," captures the essence of attentiveness.[38] Such reading, hearing, and understanding of others' needs affirms the validity and importance of the beneficiary. In mourning, attentiveness affirms the reality of mourning and opens space for engaging grief head-on in safe community.

Consider the depth of attentiveness demonstrated on the page dedicated to Emily Johanna Hoffman.[39] She was in a car accident on February 9, 2023, which left her on life support for eight days, going through multiple surgeries, until she died on February 17. Her sister continues to maintain the blog as a place to mourn significant dates like Emily's birthday or several different anniversaries associated with her death. The comments, pictures, posts, and tributes are moving as Emily's friends deal with trauma, death, and the continuing march of life without their loved one.

Good mourning, dealing with the emotions of grief and reality of loss, like Emily's family has done on Caring Bridge, has not been the norm. Even before the internet, with its penchant for inattentiveness, invaded mourning, people did not like to be attentive to grief. The funeral industry equated good mourning with big purchases: "the fancy coffin is what they would have wanted." People would show up to mourn not to accompany the bereaved in their loss but—consciously or unconsciously—to satisfy

themselves, put on a good show, or be the center of attention. The internet may have revolutionized mourning, but human mourners are still the same: fighting to attend to what is important during the most emotionally charged time of life.

Attending to others' mourning online means missing out on many non-verbal cues or altering behavior because of the discomfort people experience talking to a screen.[40] Combining the lack of cues with emotional distance and the inattentiveness of the internet results in a very big obstacle in the way of mourning. That obstacle is not insurmountable if we focus our attention on mourning with the bereaved.

At best, the internet is a mixed bag when it comes to mourning. Many interactions are helpful and healing in the wide variety of places they happen. Even in the face of social media's monetization of attention, people are fighting back and giving their attention to mourning. Some are carefully and thoughtfully posting and commenting despite the attention-selling banality of social media. Others are carving out separate sites like Caring Bridge. These efforts show the power of attending to mourning so as to mourn well, whether in person or digitally.

The internet may have revolutionized mourning, but human mourners are still the same: fighting to attend to what is important during the most emotionally charged time of life.

Conclusion

Mourning attentively is difficult. As our world spins through a digital space that breeds inattention, developing attentiveness is key to unlocking the healing and reintegrating effects of mourning. Mourners need to attend to their anguished emotional state caused by the gaping wound ripped in their lives by death while also reinvesting and readjusting to that new reality. Those who come alongside and accompany them need to know how to attend to the mourner, as well as pay attention to their own more distant anguish, loss, and reinvestment as they, too, grieve.

Making a conscious choice to recapture attention, to become attentive, to be the sort of person who gives the gift of attention to others is possible. Attentiveness is learnable. A person trained to be attentive in the day-to-day will fall back on that habit—that virtue—in mourning as readily as teens fall

back on the forums they are comfortable with. A world populated by the attentive will be a place where mourning and accompanying mourners bring healing from anguish and readjustment into a new reality for the bereaved.

Daniel Fleming is an Assistant Professor of Computer Studies specializing in Cybersecurity. He is also a trained theologian (Ph.D.) and bioethicist (M.A.). Daniel loves studying and teaching about the interaction of people and computers. He works towards helping society and especially the church recognize the benefits and dangers of modern technology.

Image Credits

p.63: clipping from *The Seattle Post Intelligencer*, January 11, 1956, https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/exhibits/Ecuador1956/04.2%20Secular%20Press%2001.htm

p.65: Image of girl on phone by Anestiev via Pixabay.com

p. 66: "Man and Woman Encouraging Male Patient" by freepik via Freepik.com

p. 68: Image of card by Gerd Altmann via Pixabay.com

p. 70: Image of video call by Tina Koehler via Pixabay.com

p. 71: Instagram post from Williams, "After a Death in My Family, I Now Understand."

p. 73: Image of man working with laptop by Nataliya Vaitkevich via Pexels.com

p. 74: "Protests against Police Violence in Minneapolis, Minnesota" by Fibonacci Blue via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0, lightened and cropped

Notes

1. For more on attention and character, see Adam Smith's essay, "Discomfort, Attention, and Character," in volume 5 of this journal.
2. Beaunoyer et al., "Grieving in the Digital Era."
3. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*.
4. Bennett, "How Animals Grieve."
5. Burrell and Selman, "How Do Funeral Practices Impact Bereaved Relatives"
6. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 99.
7. Weinstock et al., "It's Complicated."
8. Weinstock et al.
9. Lythcott-Haims, "I Picture Grief as a Vat Full of Tears."
10. Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*.
11. Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies, "Mourning and Meaning."
12. Walter, *Death in the Modern World*.

13. Lythcott-Haims, "I Picture Grief as a Vat Full of Tears."
14. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 99.
15. For example, in Italy, digital announcements of death and condolence responses are accepted, but other online expressions of grief are still taboo. Regardless, a variety of mourning-related actions have appeared online as people organically communicate their bereavement. See Pasquali, Bartoletti, and Giannini, "'You're Just Playing the Victim.'"
16. Blower and Sharman, "To Grieve or Not to Grieve (Online)?"
17. She et al., "Living Memory Home."
18. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 34.
19. Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, 40, 195.
20. Morehouse and Crandall, "Virtual Grief."
21. Weinstock et al., "It's Complicated."
22. Dawson, "What Happens When Your AI Girlfriend Dies?"
23. Ellis Gray, *The Diversity of Mourning Practices*.
24. Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish, "Beyond the Grave."
25. Williams, "After a Death in My Family, I Now Understand."
26. Kuznetsova and Ronzhyn, "Exploring Attitudes to Online Grieving."
27. Norris and Sofka, "Death, the Internet and COVID-19."
28. Downs, "Funeral Webcasting."
29. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 10.
30. I particularly liked the Academy's "Genie, you're free." See other examples in Wilson, "Robin Williams: Online Tribues" and Polowy, "Robin Williams Tributes."
31. Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish, "Beyond the Grave."
32. Christensen et al., "Bereaved Parents' Online Grief Communities."
33. Sas et al., "Futures of Digital Death."
34. Kasket, "Access to the Digital Self."
35. Norris and Sofka, "Death, the Internet and COVID-19."
36. Steinert, "Corona and Value Change."
37. Granek, "Mourning Sickness."
38. Fukushima, "A Cross-Generational and Cross-Cultural Study," 550.
39. Hoffman, "Emily's Site."
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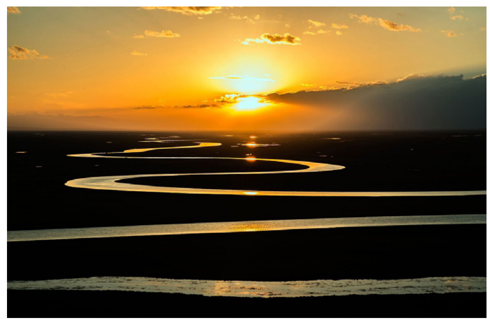
The Sense of an Ending

Abram Van Engen

Inevitability speaks of endings. No matter what choices we make or what resistance we offer, we head toward the same destination. A series of paths might lie before us, as though we had options, but agency is an illusion. In the end, all paths meet in the same place. No choice could have changed it. That's inevitability.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the essays in this issue dwell a good deal on death, for death can never be outwitted or outrun. In the remarkable poem "Aubade" by the poet Philip Larkin, he awakens before dawn to the realization that each day draws him closer to "unresting death." Nothing he does can change its approach. Courage or conviction make no difference: "Death is no different whined at than withstood."[1] Choices will not, seemingly, matter. In the end, he will die.



Dawning sense of the inevitable

This sense of an inevitable ending places us in a world of time, a chronological progression. In doing so, inevitability casts itself as a *story*. When we focus on inevitability, we tell a certain kind of tale. Inevitability starts from the finale and works its way backward in the form of a story where the ending is known.

Yet in narrating our way to a certain end, inevitability also quite often produces that end. It propels us toward the end it predicts. Inevitability stories become self-fulfilling. If I believe that an ending cannot be avoided no matter what I do, then I'll be far less likely to do anything that might avoid it.

"Tiger Woods Effect"

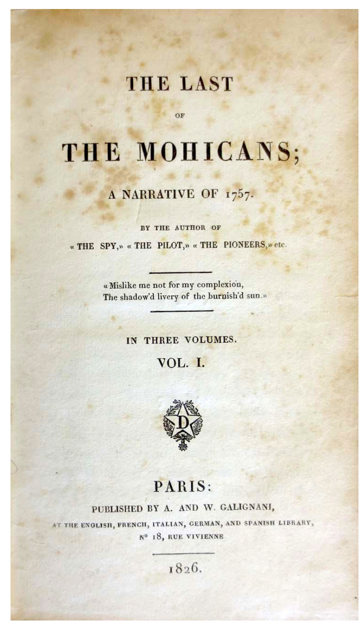
In sports, such a self-fulfilling inevitability-function happens all the time. Consider the well-known and psychologically intriguing "Tiger Woods Effect": at his height, Tiger Woods was considered unbeatable. As a result, whenever he joined a tournament, all the other good players actually *played worse* than normal. They gave up trying to win. Lo and behold, they lost.[2]

Inevitability has a shaping influence not just on the stories we tell, therefore, but on how we live into those stories from day to day. Donovan E. Tann makes that point well, arguing that when climate change becomes an apocalyptic tale of inevitability, we quit undertaking the very actions that might fight against it. Inevitability nurtures apathy; apathy makes the ending inevitable. The circle feeds on itself.

In my own fields of literature and history, these understandings of inevitability have led scholars into new forms of writing and thinking that resist the sense of a foreordained ending. Early Americanists, for example, want to jar readers loose from the notion that the colonial occupation of America just *had* to happen in the way it did, or that it led inevitably to the United States of America, or that any national narrative out of colonial roots was ever inevitable. In short, no event was required. The happening of one event never necessitated the next.

That becomes especially important when it comes to studying Native Americans and their ongoing presence in America. In history, we call "inevitability" by two names: "teleological narratives" and "terminal narratives." Teleology works backward from an ending (a *telos*). It starts with one event in time (say, the American Revolution), and then it asks how that event came about. Such an approach can be useful if done well, but often it entails selecting certain events from the past, erasing others, and then writing a story that ends where the scholar began. We prove what we assume. We know what happened, and so we write history as though it *had* to happen. Terminal narratives are teleological narratives, but with a twist. They assume (and then prove) the preordained death, destruction, and disappearance of Native Americans.

Perhaps the most famous terminal narratives come from the romanticized wilderness tales of James Fenimore Cooper, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (note the title). Countless scholars have shown how Cooper wrote about the "last" of the Mohicans in a setting where Native Americans had far from disappeared.[3] He projected their disappearance by putting that disappearance in the past. Romantically valorizing Native Americans as a noble race, he simultaneously encouraged their removal. *The Last of the Mohicans* appeared in 1826. The Trail of Tears started in 1831. Indian removal remained a live issue, even as Cooper's popular novels imagined a world in which they had already passed away. Inevitability *creates* a future, rather than just narrating one.



THE LAST
OF
THE MOHICANS;
A NARRATIVE OF 1757.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
« THE SPY, » « THE PILOT, » « THE PIONEERS, » etc.

« Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun. »

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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1826.

Narratives of inevitability

For that reason, as all the writers in this issue note, we must engage in the work of imagination. Inevitability festers in its absence. Scholars of my period note as much. Embracing contingency rather than teleology, they ask what the context and period might have allowed. What were the options at the time? Searching for the paths *not* chosen requires a great deal of imaginative labor with the evidence that remains. Scholars like Saidiya Hartman have forged "critical fabulation" as a way to engage the silence of archives and highlight the voices of the missing, trying to illuminate "what could have been."[4] Across multiple fields and disciplines, in response to immediate crises in the present day, scholars call us all to nurture a richer imagination.

How do we nourish the imagination? Discovering "what could have been" does not happen without encountering stories upon stories. Contingency is a function of plurality, and as we come to see the many twists and turns of individual stories, the more we will be able to consider the ways things might have gone—or "what could have been." The work of the imagination, in other words, is indeed *work*. The imagination expands and contracts like a muscle. Encountering stories engages, exercises, and builds our capacities on both an individual and a collective scale. If we want to expand the imagination, we need to put ourselves in the way of stories—more

beginnings, more middles, *more endings*. As Tann writes, "This imagination has everything to do with the stories we inhabit and the choices we see in front of us."[5]

Tann's point—echoed in the other essays of this forum—resonates with a passage I love from Salman Rushdie's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. At a moment when Haroun feels low, when in fact he feels *hopeless*, another character introduces him to the sea of stories:

> So Iff the Water Genie told Haroun about the Ocean of the Streams of Story, and even though he was full of a sense of hopelessness and failure the magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. . . . And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Stream of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive.[6]

Rushdie reminds us that stories blend and morph and mix and build and begin again. Swimming in a sea of stories allows the imagination to follow new currents, to find other endings, to multiply the range of choices possible within the world—including the choice of how to live.

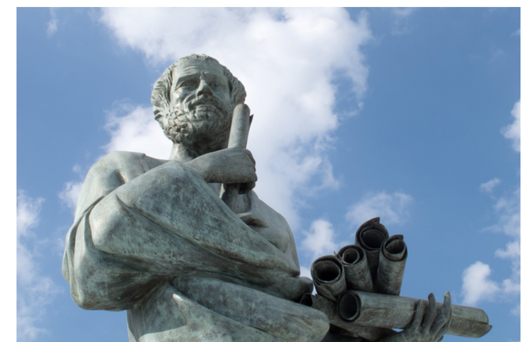
The Good Life

What kind of life do we want to have lived?

Many colleges and universities have recognized the hunger for such imaginative work, and numerous classes on "the good life" have correspondingly boomed across campuses—at Yale, Notre Dame, Stanford, WashU, and many other places. Invested in philosophy, ethics, history, and other fields, such classes often assume that life takes the shape of a tale. And they often start their tale at the end: after a long life, imagining ourselves on the cusp of our life's closing, how do we want to look back? What kind of life do we want to have lived?

In this approach, *telos* takes an entirely different valence. Where teleological narratives prove what they assume, good life courses ask students to imagine a *telos* toward which they want to live. Here the sense of an ending enlivens choice and agency. Starting from the end, asking students to imagine their lives as a whole, courses in the good life often invite a range of paths forward into the years ahead.

Aristotle seems to stand behind this approach. Long ago he counseled his pupils to judge the shape of life as a whole, not any short span within it: "for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy."[7] For this reason, Aristotle taught, no one's life can be called a "good life" until it has ended. Conclusions reflect and give shape to the whole. And getting students to think of multiple possible endings—none of them inevitable—allows them to imagine their way to a "good life" before they have hardly entered it. As countless colleges have found, students flock to such courses.



Aristotle's lasting teachings

At Washington University in St. Louis (where I work), we engage such approaches in a set of classes called "Beyond Boundaries." Each course employs professors from different disciplines to ask questions that no single field can answer. One such course, directly related to Katie E. Boyer's piece, is called "When I'm 64." It is massively popular. Students desperately want to imagine the contingencies that lead to multiple endings. Before they begin to work, they want to know what it means to retire, to *end* well.

My own "Beyond Boundaries" course, called "Morality and Markets," combines literature and social sciences to ask students what counts as "success." We cover a range of topics, but each of them circles around what it means to live "a rich life," and what role money does or does not play in such a life. We ask, for example, how much money they *need* to make, how much they *want* to make, how much would be *enough*, and how they would ever know? What limits, if any, guide their labors? How should they invest their time? And what do the data say about the relation between happiness

and wealth? To get them to think through these questions, we place before them story after story—novels, plays, and scenarios from real-life CEOs.

Such teaching never gets old. And our class has attracted followers beyond our standard first-year students. When we taught it during the pandemic, parents would join and listen. Presentations followed for alumni. Now we have a growing Substack column called *A Rich Life* devoted to stories that examine the meaning of work in relation to the whole of life.[8]

Asking the big questions (as the essays in this issue do)—questions like how do we age well, what can we do about climate change, how do we mourn well and pay attention to the grieving, how do we approach our own mortality—these questions and others will always have an audience. As the authors here all indicate, we need to ask them, study them, and answer them in the context of story and imagination.

The liberal arts offer an exploration of worldviews that opens contingency and pushes back against inevitability.

The expanding audience for such material reveals the undying desire and need for the liberal arts—the rich garden of imagination. The liberal arts offer an exploration of worldviews that opens contingency and pushes back against inevitability. As Cecilia Gaposchkin recently wrote, “The point of a liberal arts education is to train the brain to look for new ideas, new ways of thinking about problems, new solutions. And to do so using knowledge framed with ethical values rooted in core principles of common humanity.”[9] The liberal arts are a well-known, long-practiced, deeply rooted, ongoing answer to inevitability.

We Are Stories

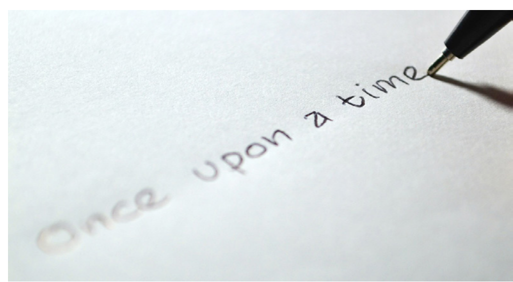
As we encounter a thousand stories opening new ideas and alternative futures, we discover what the authors in this issue all declare: that *we* are stories. We tell our lives as a tale. And the way we narrate our lives often affects not just how we view the past, but also how we move into the future. As Dale H. Easley reminds us, “Altering [our stories] means changing who we see ourselves as being.”[10]

Such reflections become especially apparent in Boyer’s essay on aging. The first necessity, it seems, is to accept one’s finitude. The average life has 4,000 weeks, give or take, as Oliver Burkeman points out in his brilliant book.

Burkeman does a marvelous job of showing how living well and aging well begins by accepting that we cannot do it all. Finitude defines us. "In practical terms," Burkeman writes, "a limit-embracing attitude to time means organizing your days with the understanding that you definitely won't have time for everything you want to do, or that other people want you to do—and so, at the very least, you can stop beating yourself up for failing."[11]

Character arises from these constraints of finitude. Given limited time, what will we say no to? What will we eliminate from our days? What purpose will drive us forward? And what meaning will we find in our daily actions, our career, all that exists both in and beyond the labors of our work?

Recently, my colleague Peter Boumgarden wrote about the strange emotional experience some have when they achieve success. Entrepreneurs who sell their company often dip into depression. Similarly, academics who achieve tenure often fall into a funk.[12] That kind of experience can seem odd. After all, these moments of success should bring newfound happiness, right? Well, they can. But as Boumgarden shows, a great deal resides on how much purpose and identity have been invested in the work. If work has defined one's identity, then actually achieving the moment toward which we've been striving can leave us with a letdown. What do we do now? As Boyer reflects, retirement will be much harder for those whose entire identity has been defined by their career.



Changing our own story

Boyer and Boumgarden both agree that a balanced "portfolio of purpose" can lead to a much healthier life. But how does a person change their story, shift the balances in their portfolio of purpose, define themselves by more parts of life? It may be true, as Easley argues, that we need to tell a different story about ourselves. But how do we get there? Engaging stories upon stories helps, of course, but changing *our own* story—telling a different tale about who we are—can be extremely difficult.

Stories, it turns out, do not stand alone. They take shape in light of habits and practices—guiding our habits, but also taking form through our habits. The relationship is reciprocal. Consider, for example, the work of tenure in an academic life. At many universities, faculty go up for tenure in their sixth

year. External reviewers comment on the quality of the work and whether it achieves whatever standards the university has set. It may seem like a test, a bar to leap over in the sixth year. But tenure is not a test. It is a discipleship. Tenure has been training a young scholar to become the kind of scholar a university desires. And the judgment of tenure is when a university decides whether it has formed a young scholar and teacher into the kind scholar and teacher it values. Tenure is a process of formation.

As a result, if a young professor is not careful, the story they will tell about themselves will be the story given to them in the process of tenure. To tell a different story will require more than a decision or a new script on the spot. It will require practices, habits, other rituals and experiences. Shaping and changing the story we tell about ourselves involves daily formations that take place on a regular basis over the long haul. If a pre-tenure person wants to be more than their work at the point of tenure, they will need to invest time and energy in something *other than work* on their way to tenure.

Character and Telos

The important link between habits and stories comes from a long philosophical tradition that emphasizes the sense of an ending. We live toward a *telos*. For what are we made? Toward what are we striving? The *telos*—the goal or end—decides the habits that transform our character. Are we aiming at power, fame, money, glory? If so, that will affect the choices we make. Are we aiming at an other-centered life of service? The idea of character relates to the imagination of our *telos*.

Importantly, no *telos* is predetermined, and no end is inevitable. A person might believe that the goal of life is personal happiness, might try to live into that goal, and might never achieve it. In that sense, *telos* (understood as a goal) functions in almost the opposite way of a teleological narrative. A teleological narrative embraces inevitability by starting at the end and asking how we got there, showing how it never could have been any other way. A telos looks toward an ending and asks how will we get there—with no promise that we will.

No promise that we will get there

The Aristotelian idea of telos and character filters down to the modern day in multiple ways. In *After You Believe*, for example, the theologian N.T. Wright explains that "Christian life in the present, with its responsibilities and particular callings, is to be understood and shaped in relation to the final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand that goal, the better we shall understand the path toward it."[13] The path itself, Wright goes on to argue, involves the development of virtues. And virtues are nothing less than the habits we have practiced, those daily choices that come to seem natural. As Wright explains, virtue

> is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn't 'come naturally'—and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required 'automatically,' as we say.[14]

Aging well, mourning well, responding to the climate crisis well, facing one's own mortality well—they all take daily smaller practices now.

The lesson applies to character whether one is a practicing Christian or not. As all of the writers in this forum remark, aging well, mourning well, responding to the climate crisis well, facing one's own mortality well—they all take daily, smaller practices *now*. As Wright puts it later in the book: "Character is a slowly forming thing."[15] The time to begin is now.

And perhaps the habit to begin with—the virtue most needed today and always—is attentiveness. Daniel P. Fleming dwells at length on this trait, though he is not the only one. "Learning to look and listen," as Fleming puts it, is a practice of attentiveness that "can start today."[16] From attentiveness, we become more attuned to our own practices and how they relate (or not) to the idea of the good life that guides us. Just as importantly, we can learn to pay careful attention to all the liturgies of daily life (like social media) that warp us and bend us away from the life we hope to live.

Thinking of habits and practices through the idea of liturgy helps us realize how much we need to do beyond just thinking or talking differently. The importance of the body echoes as a theme through all the essays of this issue. Stories matter, yes; and how we narrate them shapes a great deal, absolutely. But it's the habitual daily practices of an embodied person

that matters most. Inevitability might be an idea, but our response to it involves—and *should* involve—mind, body, and spirit.

The philosopher James K. A. Smith speaks well and often on this point. As he writes in *Desiring the Kingdom*, "liturgies—whether 'sacred' or 'secular'—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world." We are what we love; and as Smith emphasizes, "Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies."[17] Attentiveness—practiced, nourished, and carefully cultivated—can help us see what kinds of liturgies the world throws at us, what kinds we engage (whether knowingly or not), and what kinds we need to develop in order to aim our loves at different ends.

Inevitability and Others

What stands out most from all these essays, however, is the ongoing importance of community. Aging well, dying well, mourning well, responding well to climate change—each of these topics invites the authors to ruminate on the importance of relationships. Positive relationships are essential to human well-being, as Boyer points out repeatedly. Every study of human happiness and well-being confirms it—perhaps most strikingly in Harvard's 80-year study.

Yet the importance of relationships strikes at the heart of all the rest, for relationships take time. They force decisions. They take us away from other goals. The needs of others seldom line up with our work schedules, our deadlines, our career advancement. Relationships live according to a different clock, one that has almost nothing to do with productivity. They are, quite frankly, inconvenient.[18]

Fundamental need for community

Oliver Burkeman, in his great book, writes well about this strange inconvenience. In the context of a time management book, he urges readers to guard their time a little *less*. The goal of most management books, he argues, is some kind of increased efficiency. "But smoothness, it turns out, is a dubious virtue," Burkeman writes, "since it's often

the unsmoothed textures of life that make it livable, helping nurture the relationships that are crucial for mental and physical health, and for the resilience of our communities." Or as he puts it slightly later: "Convenience, in other words, makes things easy, but without regard to whether easiness is truly what's most valuable in any given context."[19]

The inconvenience of relationships is not lost on most. And yet, for how little they might aid our productivity, they remain essential—not for advancement, but for fullness. C.S. Lewis puts this well: while our lives would be much poorer without friendship, friendship is not strictly required for survival. "Friendship is unnecessary," he writes, "like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival."[20]

Moreover, all the talk of story that threads through the essays in this collection comes back to that fundamental need for others—for community, for relationship. If we are to encounter stories upon stories, the best way to do so is in the lives of others gathered around us. As Lewis writes, "In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets."[21] The only way to encounter those stories, to draw out those lights, is to make time for others.

We need liturgies lived with others that shape our character in mind, body, and spirit by directing our loves toward life-giving ends.

Inevitability is an enormous topic. It speaks of endings. It tells a story—often one that it also creates through a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some things, like death, are indeed inevitable. Other things, like total climate collapse, are not. But either way, living into old age and death, mourning with others and for others, or resisting the creep of the climate crisis, requires actions now, habits now, practices that begin today. We need liturgies lived with others that shape our character in mind, body, and spirit by directing our loves toward life-giving ends. We need telos without teleology.

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Notes

1. Larkin, "Aubade."
2. Brown, "Quitters Never Win." This phenomenon is now known more generally as the "Superstar Effect."
3. See especially the chapter called "Vanishing Americans" in Romero, *Home Fronts*.
4. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.
5. Tann, "Beyond Inevitability: Telling Another Story about Climate," 15.
6. Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 71-72.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a18.
8. See *A Rich Life* on Substack: https://arichlife.substack.com/.
9. Cecilia Gaposchkin, "What is a Liberal Arts Education?" This piece was written for Dartmouth admissions internally, but is a rich piece well worth reading.
10. Easley, "The Inevitability of Dying," 52.
11. Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 32.
12. See Boumgarden, "Wisdom from the Humbled Confederacy," *A Rich Life* (Substack): https://arichlife.substack.com/p/wisdom-from-the-humbled-confederacy.
13. Wright, *After You Believe*, xi.
14. Wright, 20-21.
15. Wright, 35
16. Fleming, "Attention and Digital Mourning," 68.
17. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.
18. I wrote about this more largely for *A Rich Life*. See "Inconveniences" here: https://arichlife.substack.com/p/inconveniences.
19. Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 52.

20. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 71.
21. Lewis, 61.

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