



Reflections on a Meaningful Life

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MEMENTO MORI

Practicing Mindfulness through *Memento Mori* Journaling

The Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (121 AD-180 AD) wrote in his journal: “Give yourself a gift - the present moment.” Marcus is known as the last of the “Five Good Emperors.” Unfortunately, for a man who grew up during a time of relative peace, his reign as Emperor was characterized by continuous wars, devastating plagues, and political unrest. Marcus found peace and perspective—his moment—through journaling. His journal, *Meditations*, somehow survived his death and has been passed down through the centuries as an example of practicing mindfulness.

Memento Mori

The most prominent theme in the *Meditations* is Marcus’s contemplation about his own mortality. In the Roman tradition, a slave would stand behind a victorious general during a triumphal parade, whispering in his ear, “*Respice post te. Hominem te esse memento! Memento mori!*” The repetition of this phrase brought perspective: “Look behind you. Remember you are mortal! Remember you must die!” As Marcus wrote to himself, “In a little while you will have forgotten everything; in a little while, everything will have forgotten you.”

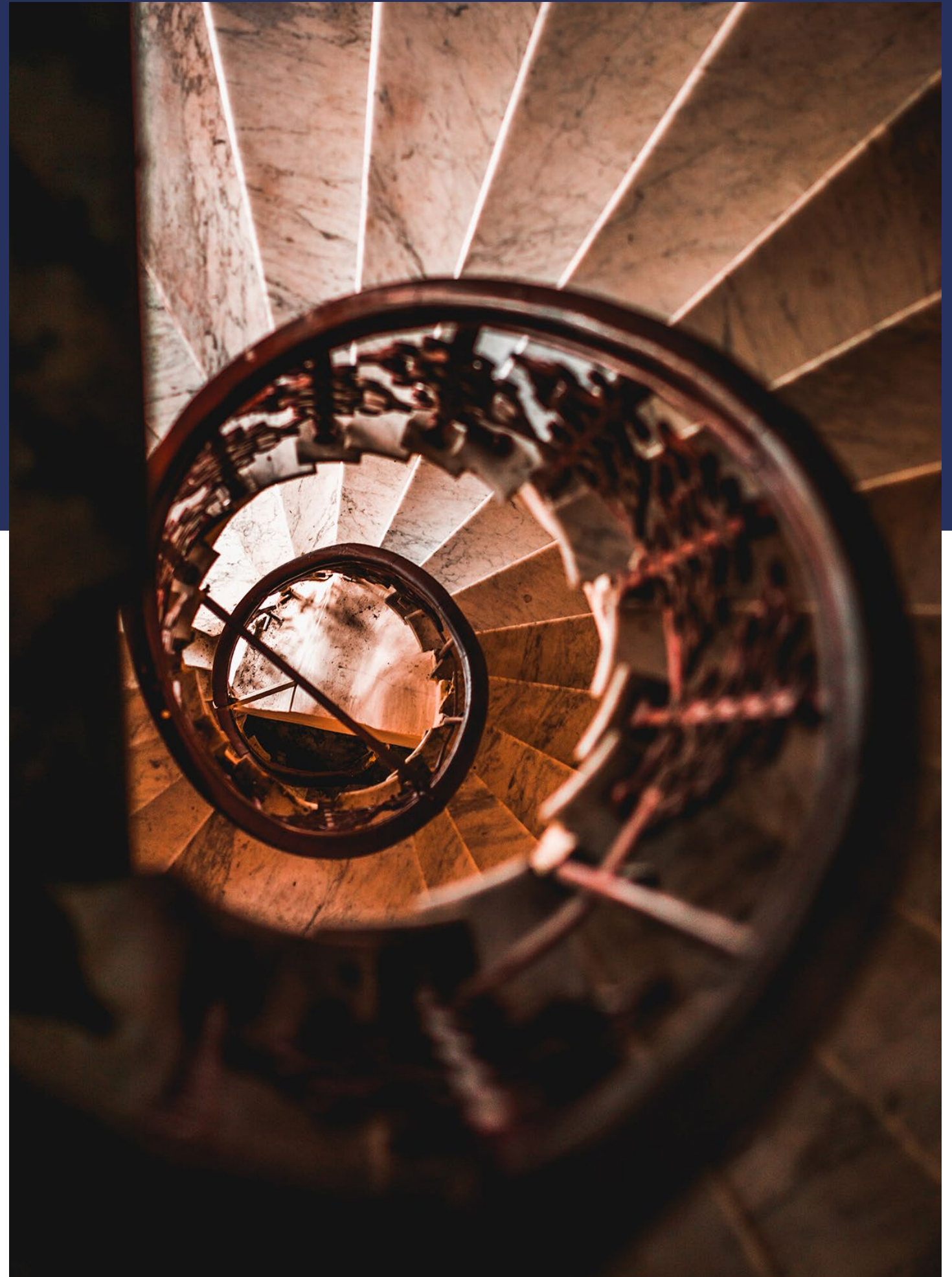
Born in antiquity, *Memento mori* has inspired philosophy, literature, and art. Today, the phrase is often used as a philosophical or spiritual reminder to live in the present moment and not take life for granted. It is a call to action to prioritize what is truly important and meaningful in life.

Memento Mori Journaling

Journaling is a mindfulness practice. It is a means of bringing the past and the present together in the current moment, being here, now. This guide is dedicated to a particular type of journaling, journaling that uses meditations on our mortality to help us gain perspective on what is important and meaningful in life. Below are seven practices along with resources for *memento mori* journaling.

Debts and Lessons

We do not know when Marcus wrote Book I of his *Meditations*. He probably wrote this journal entry near the end of his life and over a period of time. In his 2002 translation, Gregory Hays entitles Book I, “Debts and Lessons.” For this journaling practice, reading Book I is a worthwhile exercise to set a context and mood for writing.



Beginning with his grandfather, father, and mother and ending with Antoninus Pius—the emperor who adopted Marcus when his father died—and the gods, Marcus makes 17 entries about those who have influenced him. To these, Marcus owes a debt, they have taught him how to live. In several cases, Marcus mentions former teachers. In all cases, the lessons were taught by example, that is, Marcus reflects on the virtues these people (and the gods) exhibited and what he has learned from observing and relating to others. These moral paradigms taught Marcus how he should—and in some cases, should *not*—live.

Following Marcus's example, the Debts and Lessons practice is about naming those who have had an impact on your life. Beyond naming, it includes a description of their characters and specifically how they have shaped your life, what you have learned from them. Debts and Lessons is a practice in gratitude, a journaling exercise that helps you appreciate how fortunate or blessed you are to have encountered these people in your lifetime. "Looking behind you," the practice of Debts and Lessons helps you remember your unique journey, for your life alone is molded by this combination of characters.

The Joy in Small Things

What are the small things that bring you joy? "Small" means they are not expensive, they are readily accessed, and engaging in them is itself a mindfulness practice. Hobbies are an example, and so is enjoying a cup of coffee or taking a walk.

To practice the "Joy in Small Things," reflect on a small pleasure that you experienced today or recently. First and foremost, write about why this experience brought you joy and how it made you feel. Consider how you can cultivate more moments of joy in your daily life. Often, we would derive more from the experience if we packed less into it. For example, if exercise is one of the small things, try exercising without the television, podcast, music, or other distractions that pull you away from being in the moment. How can you be more mindful and present in these moments?

You might also reflect on the people, places, and things that bring you the most joy. Who are the people in your life that make you feel happy and fulfilled? How do they do that? What lessons can you learn from their example? What are the places and activities that you enjoy the most? You might use a prompt for journaling, a picture, a souvenir, or some tangible object to help you reflect on a person or place. How can you make more time for these "joy-full" small things in your life?

Because healthy relationships are a part of a meaningful and happy life, journal about how you can share your joy in small things with others. Specifically, write about the ways you can show appreciation and gratitude for the people who bring you joy. This is your gift to them, a gift that will outlast your immediate physical presence.

Finding joy in the small things has a cumulative effect, adding up to a happy and meaningful life.

The Story Is Finished

The Story Is Finished is another *memento mori* journaling practice inspired by Marcus Aurelius. He wrote:

Consider all you've gone through, all that you've survived. And that the story of your life is done, your assignment complete. How many good things have you seen? How much pain and pleasure have you resisted? How many honors have you declined? How many unkind people have you been kind to? (*Meditations*, 5.31, trans. G. Hays)

This exercise is a retrospective, taken from the view of one's final days or hours. One way of going about this practice is literally to write down Marcus's questions and respond to each of them about yourself. Presumably, these were the critical questions by which Marcus assessed his life. They were prompts to help him appreciate his great fortune in life (*How many good things have you seen?* Marcus was the son of an emperor. He spent many of his early years in schools in Athens and in Rome. He surely saw many good things.) and to assess his character (*How much pain and pleasure have you resisted? How many honors have you declined? How many unkind people have you been kind to?*).

Another way of approaching this practice is to use only the first two sentences of Marcus's journal entry as a prompt. Consider all that you have gone through in your life. Write down some of the significant events or milestones that have shaped your life story, including both the positive and negative experiences. Imagine the story of your life is complete. What emotions come up as you think about this idea? Then, as the next set of prompts, rather than using Marcus's questions, write three to five questions by which you would measure your life.



Begin journaling in answer to each of your questions. Be honest with yourself. Bring to mind examples of when you hit the mark, when you answered the question in a meaningful and important way. Also consider when you missed the mark and what you learned from failure. Journal about the character strengths you showed. Did you show courage, humility, love, honesty or other virtues that sustained you and provided an example for others? Write about those things for which you are thankful, that you were blessed or fortunate to experience in life.

Lastly, appreciate all that you have accomplished, all the difficulties through which you have persevered, and all that you have contributed to the world. Reflect by writing a few affirmations about these to remind yourself of strengths, uniqueness, and resilience. Use the Story Is Finished practice to remind yourself that, for the immediate present, you are still writing and the story continues to unfold. What is your next sentence? Your next paragraph? Your next chapter?

Letters to Those I Love

Among the author's most cherished possessions are the letters he exchanged with his patents while in college and graduate school. Each one is a time capsule of people, places, and events. Even a routine day becomes interesting when read about decades later. Instead of fading away like an old photograph, these letters illustrate a narrative of intermingling plots with vivid images. Letters from loved ones, when read from distance in time and space, are occasions to pause and reflect on one's life story and those who contributed to it.

If letters from loved ones have this effect, letters written to loved ones can have a similar impact on both the recipient and on the writer. To mindfully craft a message to someone for a future, undetermined point in time is an exercise in *memento mori* journaling.

The other journaling practices discussed here are first and foremost your mindfulness exercises. While you may wish your journals to survive you, and you may even hope that others will read your words, those are secondary considerations for this practice. Letters to Those I Love is primarily about others and secondarily about you. As a practical point, if others are to read your words much later, you should use a format that is most likely to last well into the future. The default is not necessarily a digital format; some people think better with and prefer using pen and paper. The point is to make certain you can preserve and protect your letters, no matter what format you use.

After you determine your recipient, decide on your purpose and content. Write about autobiographical experiences, your hopes, and your disappointments. Think of your recipient becoming reacquainted with you in the future. Write about your relationship to the recipient, how you love them, your admiration of them, your present concerns about them, and your hopes for them. Include personal stories, words of encouragement, and the wisdom you have gained through the years. Let the recipient know how they have brought meaning and purpose to your life.

Write authentically, that is, be honest, transparent, and vulnerable. You want those you love to appreciate your humanity, both your virtues and vices and your strengths and weaknesses. The journaling practice of Letters to Those I Love is not only a way of reflecting on a meaningful life, but also your gift of wisdom and love to future generations.

Dialogue with the Greats

Meditating on a quotation about our mortality is an excellent way to turn our journaling into a dialogue with great thinkers across history. The French essayist, Michel de Montaigne, wrote, "All days travel toward death; the last one reaches it." In a few words, Montaigne expresses the common destiny of all humans—past, present, and future. With a familiar metaphor, he shows the reason that meaning and mortality is a ubiquitous theme in human history. The reality of our finitude raises an infinite number of questions about the nature of our humanity, God, and how we spend our limited time. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, statesman, orator, and tragedian, observed: "You ask what the finest life span would be? To live until you reach wisdom. The one who gets there has arrived, not at the farthest goal, but at the most important." Along the road we travel, *memento mori* journaling is an important way of arriving at wisdom, the most important goal.

There is no shortage of profound thoughts about meaning and morality. Many quotations about our humanity (e.g., love, happiness, or disappointment), our virtues (e.g., courage, justice, or faith), or our vices (e.g., pride, greed, anger) are nuanced with the limitations of human mortality. Identify a quotation that catches your attention, that resonates with you, that makes you pause and reread it several times. Begin your journaling exercise by writing down the statement or statements and paying attention to the thoughts and emotions evoked. Consider both *what* is said and *how* it is said. Then, move into a dialogue with this thinker. How do you interpret the words? What was the author thinking or feeling? How do this great thinker's ideas relate to your life and experience? What does the quotation mean *to* and *for* you?



Another approach to Dialogue with the Greats is to build on the quote. You can do this in many ways. For example, assume the role of the author and write the next sentence or paragraph to develop the ideas further. Look for other quotes from the same thinker, the same (or different) group or school of thinkers. Create collections of quotations and organize them by themes. Write an essay and intersperse quotations. The writings of Montaigne, perhaps the greatest essayist in history, are a superb example of using the thoughts of others to build new reflections.

You can have a conversation with great thinkers about any topic. In *memento mori* journaling, you are focused on a particular theme. Use this dialogue to elucidate how you are spending your time. Look for new perspectives and insights that challenge you to live your life to the fullest, to think and act in ways that imbue your life with meaning.

Eulogy Virtues

When looking for a “Great” with whom to have a dialogue, the contemporary journalist David Brooks is an excellent choice. In his book *The Road to Character* (Random House, 2015), Brooks makes the following observation:

We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life.... We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success [the ‘resume virtues’], but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character [the ‘eulogy virtues’].

Brooks explains that resume virtues are skills and qualities that help us achieve professional success and build impressive credentials. They include things like ambition, intelligence, competitiveness, and various skills to succeed. In contrast, eulogy virtues are the qualities people remember and praise us for when we die. These virtues include generosity, compassion, empathy, kindness, and honesty.

Universities, their professional schools, leadership programs, and corporate training teach resume virtues. Resume virtues are the yardstick by which we are assessed and promoted. Eulogy virtues are character traits that develop over time, often through struggle, failure, and confrontation with life’s harshest realities—severe illness, divorce, career setbacks, tragedies, and death. Eulogy virtues are character strengths, developed through the exercise of will, by making the choices that become admirable habits and, in turn, form exemplary human beings. Character explains *why* we do *what* we do.

Resume virtues ask: “What do I need to know?” Eulogy virtues ask: “What kind of person should I be?” *Memento mori* journaling about this second question provides insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our characters. How will people remember you when you are gone? By what you did? By the character you exhibited? These are not mutually exclusive, but if you are only remembered for your accomplishments, the memory is likely to fade quickly because others will soon surpass you.

As you engage in the journaling practice of Eulogy Virtues, write down the virtues for which you want to be remembered. If you have engaged in the Debts and Lessons journaling exercise, consider the virtues of those you admire, those who have had an impact on your life. Define each virtue based on how you ideally see yourself expressing it. Then, begin your inventory, virtue by virtue. What life experiences have helped you develop this virtue? How close are you to your ideal? Where have you failed to act virtuously, and what can you learn from this failure? Are you making progress?

Another approach to journaling about eulogy virtues is literally to write your eulogy or obituary. This should not be a gloomy exercise, but you may find it humbling. To quote Brooks again:

In the struggle against your own weakness, humility is the greatest virtue. Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness. Humility is an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.

View from Eternity

You serve a larger order. What is your place in the cosmos? To set some perspective, let us assume that the majority of astrophysicists are correct, and the age of the universe is 13.8 billion years old. The human species has existed for about 300,000 years, or .002% of that time. The average life expectancy of males and females combined in the United States is 77 years.



Assume you live to 77. You will not be surprised that your span on the cosmic timeline is small. You have actually occupied 0.000000558% of the total time the universe has existed. An individual's existence is so infinitesimal as to be—well, unnoticeable, in the scheme of the cosmos. One may cut the cards in other ways. We might consider an individual life since the time of the human species, since the emergence of *homo sapiens*, or during recorded history, and an individual's place on Earth is still less than a blink of an eye. Not even a twinkle in the eye. And yet, some people grow anxious over the number of “likes” on their social media post.

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” is the *leitmotif* of the book of Ecclesiastes. From the View from Eternity, the author reflects on human significance in the cycles of nature:

A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever...
There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.

The View from Eternity is not a call of despair, but rather a call for perspective. It is an exercise that imaginatively takes us above diurnal routines and concerns and helps us see the much bigger play of life. Our part in the play is small, but that does not matter. We have our lines, our parts to play, and we should contribute our best.

How does one journal from the View of Eternity? Consider this example from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*:

To see them from above: the thousands of animal herds, the rituals, the voyages on calm or stormy seas, the different ways we come into the world, share it with one another, and leave it. Consider the lives led once by others, long ago, the lives to be led by others after you, the lives led even now, in foreign lands. How many people don't even know your name. How many will soon have forgotten it. How many offer you praise now—and tomorrow, perhaps, contempt.

Before you write, take note of your surroundings. Then, close your eyes and imagine yourself looking down on the neighborhood in which you live. Take a bird's eye view. Think about your neighbors, those you know and those you do not. Imagine all the ideas, activities, relationships, the good things that will happen today, and the difficulties they will face. Then, fly higher, see the city and consider the same types of questions. Fly even higher until you are looking down on Earth. Consider all that is happening in your life and try multiplying these things roughly eight billion times. In the totality of human affairs, likes on social media (or pick your favorite unfounded anxiety) are insignificant.

Viewing from Eternity can make anything and everything you do seem insignificant. Or, it can encourage you to make the most of the moment you have on the cosmic clock. It can also help you to put problems into perspective. After your meditation, write about how you can better appreciate the time you have on Earth. It may be cosmically infinitesimal, but it is your time.

Here are a few prompts to consider: Reflect on your daily routines and your habits. Are you spending your time wisely? Do you need to make any changes? Consider your relationships. How can you deepen and grow them? Lastly, think about the challenges you face or setbacks. Take a problem that concerns you and project yourself into the future—a month, a year, five years, or more. You pick the timeframe.

Journaling with a View from Eternity can help us detach from the tyranny of the urgent and immediate concerns, making room to contemplate the larger purpose of our lives. Most of the matters over which we fret are forgotten in a few days or weeks by us and in even less time by others. Most of our anxieties are caused by worries that never materialize. Over time, we adjust to most every triumph and tragedy we experience in life.

A Two-Sided Coin

Memento mori is one half of a two-sided coin. The other side reads *carpe diem*. Popularized in the 1989 movie, *Dead Poets Society*, the phrase has a long history. The Roman poet Horace wrote in his poem “Odes”: “*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*,” which translates as “pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in the future.” The phrase has been used in poetry and literature throughout the centuries.

Both *memento mori* and *carpe diem* remind us of our limited time—our mortality—and emphasize the importance of experiencing meaning in the present moment. *Memento mori* journaling is a reminder to seize the day and to cultivate a sense of gratitude, purpose, and fulfillment leading to happy and meaningful lives.



Quotations on Meaning and Mortality

MEANING AND PURPOSE:

- » If I can, I shall keep my death from saying anything that my life has not already said. – Michel de Montaigne, "That Intention Is Judge of Our Actions," in *The Complete Works*
- » The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well. – Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Essays*
- » The meaning of life is to give life meaning. – Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
- » The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience. – Maya Angelou, *The Art of Fiction No. 119*

MORTALITY AND DEATH:

- » Death is a release from the impressions of the senses, and from desires that make us their puppets, and from the vagaries of the mind, and from the hard service of the flesh. – Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*
- » Our life is what our thoughts make it. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
- » It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live. – Marcus Aurelius, "That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die," in *Meditations*
- » The coming of death will teach me nothing. – Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*

GRATITUDE AND CONTENTMENT:

- » Curb your desire—don't set your heart on so many things and you will get what you need. – Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*
- » Thinking of departed friends is to me something sweet and mellow. – Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*
- » It is only in the last disquietude that contains the first actual quiet. The last and most fundamental question calls forth the first real answer. It is the last mortal terror that for the first time one can hear with certainty, Peace be unto you. – Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*
- » The most important thing is to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become. – Charles Dubois, *The American Spirit*
- » Our death is not an end if we can live on in our children and the younger generation. For they are us; our bodies are only wilted leaves on the tree of life. – Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*



RESILIENCE AND ENDURANCE:

- » The greater the difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it. – Epictetus, *The Discourses*
- » Never say about anything, "I have lost it," but say, "I have given it back." – Epictetus, *Enchiridion*
- » We suffer more often in imagination than in reality. – Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*
- » The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
- » Greater in combat than a person who conquers a thousand times a thousand people is the person who conquers himself. – Buddha, *Dhammapada*
- » Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but sometimes, playing a poor hand well. – Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

MINDFULNESS AND PERSPECTIVE:

- » All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak and act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. Speak or act with a peaceful mind, and happiness follows like a never-departing shadow. – Buddha, *Dhammapada*
- » Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: Some things are within our control, and some things are not. – Epictetus, *Enchiridion*
- » Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans. – John Lennon, *Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)*
- » Mindfulness is not a luxury to be bought but a basic human capacity that needs to be cultivated. – Christina Feldman, *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World*

LIVING A FULFILLED LIFE:

- » An ordinary journey will be incomplete if you come to stop in the middle of it, or anywhere short of your destination, but life is never incomplete if it is an honorable one. – Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*
- » To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all. – Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*
- » We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. – Winston Churchill, speech in Edinburgh, Scotland, on July 15, 1948
- » What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us. – Helen Keller, *The Open Door*
- » Life is not what you alone make it. Life is the input of everyone who touched your life and every experience that entered it. We are all part of one another. – Yuri Kochiyama, *Passing It On: A Memoir*
- » Life is a journey, and if you fall in love with the journey, you will be in love forever. – Peter Hagerty, *The Love Affair Continues*



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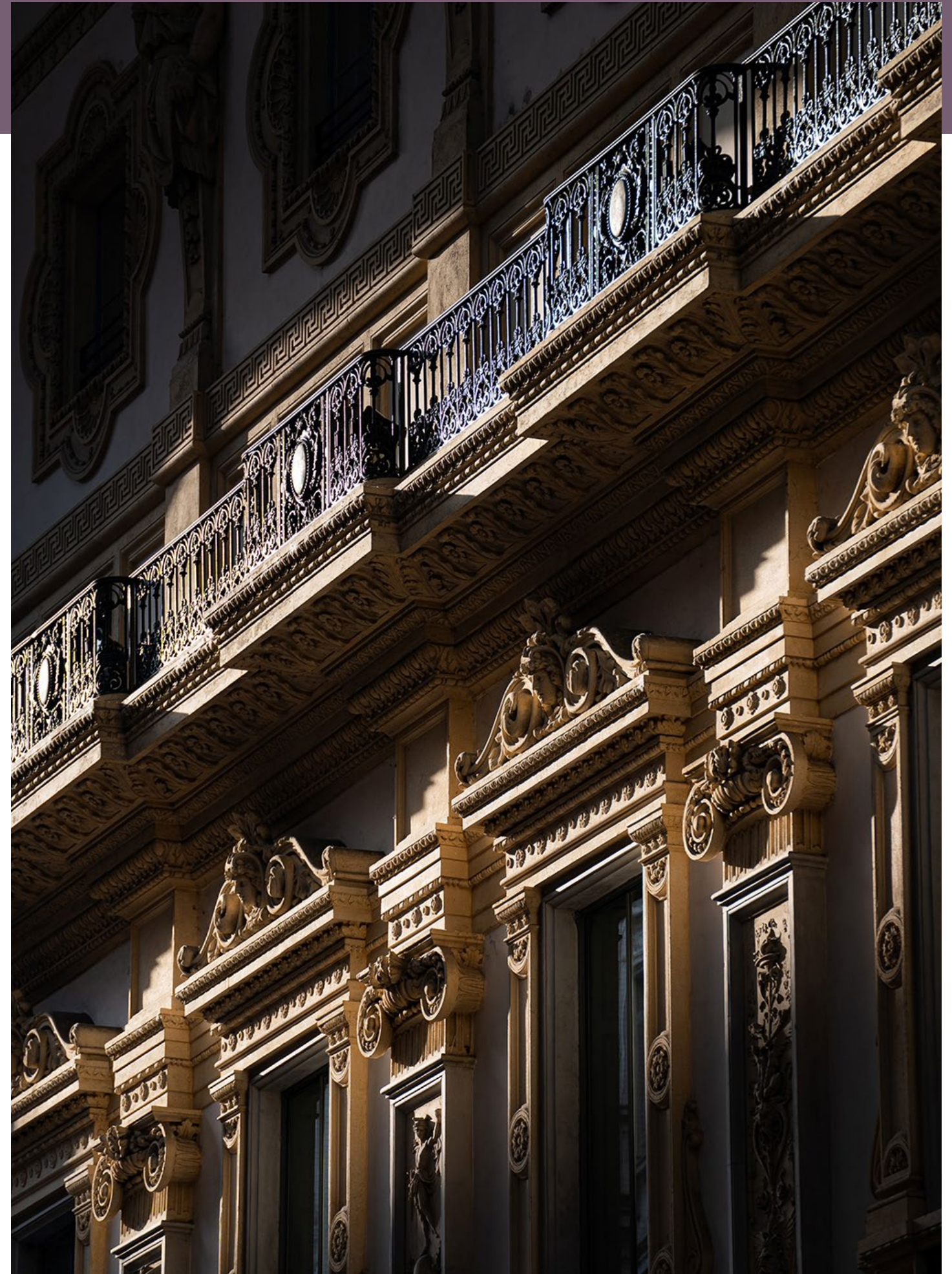
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