

When I was 23 years old, and living on my own in Washington DC, my mother called me one day, from home in Memphis, and said that my father had had a heart attack and that she was at the hospital with him. Half an hour later, she called back, saying that he had died. My father, who was only 56 years old, was gone. My father, whom I adored, was gone. My father, who only 3 months before had had an annual physical and been told that he was in good health, was gone. When I was 23 years old, I learned in a painful and inescapable way that there are no guarantees in life. I learned that in one instant, everything can be completely different than it was before.

In the responsive reading a few minutes ago, we read Psalm 103; verses 15 and 16 read: “As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” Likewise, the New Testament writer James addresses this issue, in chapter 4, verses 13-15: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’” We all know that James is right: we simply do not know what tomorrow holds. But we all, to some degree or another, try to pretend like we don’t know this: it’s just too scary. We don’t like to be reminded that you, or I, or someone we love, could be dead by the time we gather for worship again next Sunday. So we go about our lives, choosing to some degree or another, not to deal with it.

A man named Stephen Levine has worked professionally in the field of death and dying for 20 years. He says it has become painfully clear to him how often death catches people unaware; even those who had months or even years of illness to prepare themselves often lament how completely unprepared they are for their own death.

Yet he also noticed that other people, on being told by a doctor that they have six months to live, experience, oddly enough, positive changes in their lives, even what could be described as a “new aliveness”. So, Mr. Levine decides to try an experiment, to pretend that a doctor has just told him he has a year to live. He finds that his experiment is not some depressing exercise, but one which is ironically life-giving.

He wrote a book about this experiment, called A Year to Live, in which he tells of experiencing a change in perspective on his own life, and on life in general, that brings him a new aliveness and an appreciation for the simple joys and gifts of life. Part of the experiment for him is doing what he calls a “life review,” thinking back over his life. First, he addresses the theme of forgiveness: he thinks of the people he needs to forgive, then he thinks of those people that he wants to ask to forgive him, and somehow in the process he learns to forgive himself, and he’s able to “let go” of a lot of “baggage”. Secondly, he addresses the theme of gratitude: he thinks back over his life to notice all those people for whom he feels grateful – family, teachers, neighbors, friends, even acquaintances who’ve touched his life in some way or another. His reflection on gratitude then expands from individual people to include special days, moments of insight, experiences of healing and feelings of deep contentment. This two-pronged “life review”, focused on forgiveness and gratitude, helps him deal with the past in positive ways that set the stage for living more fully in the present.

If your doctor were to tell you tomorrow that you have one year to live, what would you do? Would you seek sobriety with a sense of urgency? Would you spend more time with your family, whether your blood family or your chosen family? Would you spend more time in

nature? Would you buy that set of paints or learn to play the flute? Would you change jobs or cut back on your hours? Or might you throw yourself into some passion or cause to leave the world a better place?

So I have a challenge for you: The next time you have a common cold, or have an injury, or have surgery, imagine dying from it and see what comes to mind.

- Do you have unfinished business or unresolved issues with a family member or a friend? Is there forgiveness that you need to give or ask for? On your next good day, tend to this unfinished business.
- Or, do you experience a change in perspective on your priorities in life, how you spend your time, how you spend your energy, and on how you spend your money? On your next good day, ponder what steps you can take to have your life, your daily life, reflect your true priorities.
- Or, do you find yourself wondering, “Why didn’t I realize how good my life really was, before this? Why did I take so many wonderful gifts of life for granted? Why did I focus on the petty and the insignificant, when so much was so good?” On your next good day, see what a difference this change in perspective can make.
- Or, do you realize that you need to talk to someone about the practical issues surrounding death? On your next good day, make the opportunity to talk with at least one person about things such as whether you’d prefer to be buried or cremated, or have your organs donated. Talk about what favorite scripture passages and hymns you’d like to have as part of your funeral. Decide who you would like to give your special items to, your significant mementos of a lifetime. The more you talk about all this now, the more a gift it is for your family and friends; and it sure is a lot easier to talk about all this before there’s some terminal illness or debilitating accident. Use this opportunity to draft those important end-of-life documents, such as a will, a living will, a durable power of attorney, and a health care power of attorney. Everybody needs a will, even if you don’t have much money, because without a will, there’s a big legal mess when you die. And everybody needs a health care power of attorney, to designate who you would like to have make decisions on your behalf if you are medically unable to make those decisions. Every Wednesday, attorneys come to Triune, and they can draft these documents with you, at little or no cost; Triune staff members even have the health care power of attorney forms. So take care of this important business while you can.

In his book [A Year to Live](#), Stephen Levine says, “Preparing for death is one of the most profoundly healing acts of a lifetime.” Why wait for a terminal illness to begin this healing process? Why run the risk of not having the time at all for this important spiritual journey? My friends, as James so bluntly tells us, we do not know what tomorrow holds. There are no guarantees about your life, or my life, or the lives of those we love. But instead of dwelling on our fears, and allowing our fears to immobilize us, we can face our fears head-on, and allow them to propel us back in to life, embracing life to the fullest.

So, celebrate each birthday as if it’s the last one, whether it’s your own birthday or the birthday of someone you love. Say those things you need to say, whether it is, “I love you” or “thank you” or “I’m really sorry”, or even “I really need to talk about something that’s been bothering me.” Realizing that we don’t know what tomorrow holds does not need to be a morbid, depressing realization, but can be the impetus for us to live our lives fully and gratefully.

By facing head-on our own mortality and the mortality of those we love, in some sense, what we are doing is “embracing” death, and as we do that, we are really embracing life, because we

see how precious each moment is. Each moment is precious, to give and receive love. Each moment is precious, to enjoy the simple pleasures, the everyday joys and gifts of life. Each moment is precious, even for working through difficulties in a relationship to be able to come to some sense of resolution. Each moment is precious, even for accepting that it may be best not to be with certain people who are harmful to us. Each moment is precious, for delighting in the gifts that God gives, even in the midst of hardship.

Thanks be to God, for the amazing and precious gift of life itself. Thanks be to God for the gift of love. Thanks be to God for the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation, healing and gratitude. Amen.