Remember Death

Jennifer Michael Hecht

Jennifer Michael Hecht is a poet, historian, and philosopher whose books include *Doubt: A History* (2003), which is a history of atheism, and *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies against It* (2013). She earned her Ph.D. in the history of science and European cultural history from Columbia University in 1995, and she continues to live and work in New York. Her contrarian book *The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think Is Right Is Wrong* (2007) argues that many popular beliefs about the sources of happiness — that, for example, money can buy happiness and that certain drugs, taken in moderation, may increase happiness — are mistaken. In this chapter from that book, she examines the modern habit of "death denial," arguing that paying more attention to death might actually make us happier.

All the great graceful-life philosophies and all the great religions counsel people to remember death. Today we tend to want to forget death: our supermarkets make it seem like meat grows on white Styrofoam, almost bloodless, always pink. Dying happens elsewhere. We catch and release fish, then go have hamburgers. Human dying occurs in hospices, alone at night. Most people have not seen someone die, whereas, in past centuries, even young children were brought to deathbeds to witness a period of sometimes agonized dying, and then the much respected moment of transformation. This moment was as sacred and revered as the modern-day birth. Men of a century ago saw no births, or recordings of births, but they saw many deaths and recordings of deaths. Deathbed scenes were commonplace in literature and theater, magazine essay, and Sunday sermon. The idea was to educate people to have a good death and to help other people have one. For instance, an etching might show how the departing man or woman might reach up to God, and how the many guests should respond—for instance, that it was okay for some to look away, some to gaze with fixed attention, and for very young children to play beneath the chairs. Verbal descriptions of death offered a variety of models for how to behave in one's suffering, how to make peace and find forgiveness, and how to commend oneself to God. We have childbirth classes where you see and hear about a splendid array of births; they had essays and sermons that described an endless parade of deaths. In the future, classes for dying might look very much the same as childbirth classes, showing some breathing methods to manage pain and fear, and showing the partner, or "death coach," different ways of soothing the dying one. But instruction on death is not part of mainstream culture today. Indeed, studying it

seems morbid, rebellious, adolescent. Valuing birth as a site for study and reverence and hiding death as a kind of profane, dark, secret, gross thing is, of course, a cultural trance. Cemeteries were often at the center of small towns and part of the life of the village; people picnicked there and daily visited their defunct friends and family. Even only a century ago, there were all sorts of customs around death that would seem bizarre and morbid today—for example, wearing a broach made out of elaborately twisted strands of your dead sister-in-law's hair. It is also true that until recently, much of history considered the execution of criminals to be an edifying and entertaining spectacle. Death denial may have reached its height at the middle of the twentieth century, a time when revelations about the Holocaust and memory of two world wars may have occasioned a general psychological shutdown on the issue. In a famous little essay of 1955 (it was two short pages!), "The Pornography of Death," sociologist Geoffrey Gorer pointed out that as the nineteenth century treated sex, so his time now treated death, and vice versa. Wrote Gorer,

I cannot recollect a novel or play of the last twenty years or so which has a "death-bed scene" in it, describing in any detail the death "from natural causes" of a major character; this topic was a set piece for most of the eminent Victorian and Edwardian writers, evoking their finest prose and their most elaborate technical effects to produce the greatest amount of pathos or edification.

One of the reasons, I imagine, for this plethora of death-bed scenes—apart from their intrinsic emotional and religious content—was that it was one of the relatively few experiences that an author could be fairly sure would have been shared by the vast majority of his readers. Questioning my old acquaintances, I cannot find one over the age of sixty who did not witness the agony of at least one near relative; I do not think I know a single person under the age of thirty who has had a similar experience.

Gorer's guess about why this transformation occurred was that "belief in the future life as taught in the Christian doctrine is very uncommon today even in the minority who make church-going or prayer a consistent part of their lives," and that without such a belief, death and decomposition "have become too horrible to contemplate or discuss." An interesting theory, but what counted most was the observation itself: we were avoiding the subject. There were other calls for attention to death. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 *On Death and Dying* generated a whole new vocabulary. Her five stages of grief gave us a way to talk about discreet parts of the experience of dying. She later explained that she did not intend her list—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—to be understood as a neat series of events, just as you could write up the

drama of falling in love as five stages but wouldn't expect a consistent one-to-one correlation when looking at real people's experiences. The fact that our culture has so mightily seized on her ideas, and for so long, tells us how desperate we are for some kind of script.

Gorer's comments about the deathbed scenes of theater bring to mind Margaret Edison's 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Wit,* in which a brilliant scholar of the poet John Donne° deals with her cancer and death open to the gaze of the audience. What makes that play work is decidedly not that the viewers had all seen this sort of thing in their real lives. The play is part of a change that took place in response to Gorer and Kübler-Ross, wherein the wise once again try to get us to stop averting our gaze. People seem to find this offer almost titillating. The HBO series *Six Feet Under* invited people to look at a corpse's journey from death to burial, and it was enthusiastically embraced by television audiences.

Even with the changes toward more direct conversation about death, the age-old advice to remember death, to keep it in the forefront of our minds for the sake of bettering the life we lead now, is still rather lost in our culture of youth, competition, and vigor. There is, however, one modern-day conviction about the life benefits of remembering death: the axiom that survivors of an almost-fatal experience are understood to be happier than other people.

The idea is that the cancer survivor lives every day in exquisite gratitude. 5
What happens seems so fundamental as to suggest that there is a biological component to it, a change in brain pathways, or chemistry, or something of the sort. Let's call it "posttraumatic bliss." There are feelings in this life—good and bad—that cannot be conquered by intellect or force of will. Some are potentially blissful, like romantic love. Most are rough: the sudden loss of a family member, a violent personal assault, a brutal accident—or maybe something you did to someone else—soldier's remorse, for instance. Trauma flashes back. I am suggesting that almost dying can realign you in a way that is the positive incarnation of trauma: posttraumatic bliss. Throughout history we have tried to induce posttraumatic bliss by reminding ourselves of death. By this downright physiological interpretation, some aspect of self-induced posttraumatic bliss has been thought possible throughout the ages. People have tried to give themselves a jolt of the positive incarnation of trauma by traumatizing themselves with thoughts of death. Of course, the injunction to remember death is also intellectual; it is supposed to help you come to understand death in a way that won't distress you. But the way they tell you to study a skull reveals

John Donne (1572–1631): foremost English metaphysical poet and a churchman famous for his spellbinding sermons.

that it is more about shocking yourself into a post-near-death good mood. Consider a few brief and insightful attestations.

The Buddha wrote: "Of all mindfulness meditations, that on death is supreme." Koheleth in Ecclesiastes° added this beautiful tangle of thoughts: "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." The great Epicurus held that the "true understanding of the fact that death is nothing to us renders enjoyable the mortality of existence, not by adding infinite time but by taking away the yearning for immortality." The crowning insight comes from Aurelius:° If, instead of fearing death, "you shall fear never to have begun to live according to nature—then you will be a man worthy of the universe that has produced you, and you will cease to be a stranger in your native land, and to wonder at things that happen daily as if they were something unexpected, and to be dependent on this or that." Pay attention to living fully and you won't worry about death.

When Christianity arose, the wisdom to remember death was very well established. St. Gregory (329–388) was forever quoting Plato's advice to practice regular "meditation upon death." Ash Wednesday is a holiday devoted to remembering death. Each year, on the day after Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, the priest takes ashes (from burning last year's Palm Sunday palms, and then mixing with a little olive oil to make them sticky) and rubs them on people's foreheads, in the shape of a cross. It used to be that clerics, who all wore what we think of as monk's tonsures (a shaved top of the head), would get their ashes in the tonsure. It must have been eerie to talk to a man, then see him turn to go and be confronted with this reminder that he was a man marked for death. Whether you get it coming or going, the minister of the rite marks you with ash and says, "Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Catholics fast that day and don't wash off the smudge until after nightfall.

Plato would have loved it. He warned against poetic fantasies, so we generally think he would have found the promise of a Christian afterlife a little silly, but he loved the idea of enacting one's philosophy in ritual. The ancient philosophers always said that remembering death took active meditations and gestures. Ash Wednesday leads up to Easter,

Koheleth in Ecclesiastes: Ecclesiastes is a book in the Christian Bible known in the Hebrew Bible by the name of its author "Koheleth," a word that means "teacher" or "gatherer."
Marcus Aurelius (121–180): a Roman emperor and the author of *Meditations,* an influential work of Stoic philosophy.

a holiday whose meaning is a fantasy of resurrection. But in and of itself, the holiday is philosophical and somber. Ash Wednesday arose from Christianity's two greatest sources: the Jewish influence came from the Jews' remembrance of death in a day of fasting on Yom Kippur. On this holiday Jews concentrate their minds on death, and rhythmically beat their fist against their heart. The Greek influence was in part as a supposed bad example: the holiday of Lent was set up as a specific refusal to join in the wild party of the Sacred Mysteries.

Christians also persisted in citing ancient calls to remember death. St. John Climacus, who wrote in the late 500s, advised people to "let the memory of death sleep and awake with you," and St. Benedict's guidebook for monasteries, known as his *Rule* (c. 530), advised monks to "see death before one daily." Eventually, Christianity formulated the idea of death as the time of reckoning, and of either torture or reward. Still, the fundamental message was that the contemplation of death was itself curative. Whatever you believe about your soul, your flesh is going to leave your bones. It is a potent notion. In medieval times, monks often had *memento mori* in their cells, objects kept because they remind one of death—usually, real human skulls or images of skeletons. The great Renaissance sculptor Bernini designed a memorial for Pope Urban VIII in bas-relief: a tremendous bronze and marble skeleton, with awesome wings, holding a banner upon which the pope's name is written. The skeleton is in the midst of ripping the banner in two. Bernini found a spot on the dim church wall that was occasionally hit by a beam of light from a high window, and had the monument placed there so that it would be nearly invisible until it was revealed in brilliant glory. The image was so striking that people had it copied for their own monuments, and these too became known as *memento mori*. Much of the history of remembering death is comprehensible as a kind of posttraumatic bliss. It is not easy to invoke, but it works. It can make you feel mellow and happy.

In other cases, the call to remember death is more an intellectual 10
argument than a technique for internal transformation, and its result is not mellow gratitude for the life you have but revved-up desire for more life. The thesis runs as follows: remember that you should fill your days with exotic action, because you could die at any time. In 1922 a French journal asked a range of noted people to answer a question—one of the main literary-magazine devices of the nineteenth century (another was the essay contest). This time the question was: "An American scientist announces that the world will end. . . . If this prediction were confirmed, what do you think would be its effects on people . . .?" I love the gratuitous note that the scientist is American; it borrows our scientific clout to help sell the scenario, but it also feels a little like a premonition that

American science itself may bring disaster. Anyway, here's how Marcel Proust° responded:

I think that life would suddenly seem wonderful to us if we were threatened to die, as you say. Just think of how many projects, travels, love affairs, studies, it—our life—hides from us, made invisible by our laziness which, certain of a future, delays them incessantly. But let all this threaten to become impossible forever, how beautiful it all becomes again. Ah! if only the cataclysm doesn't happen this time, we won't miss visiting the new galleries of the Louvre, throwing ourselves at the feet of Miss X, making a trip to India. The cataclysm doesn't happen, we don't do any of it, because we find ourselves back in the heart of normal life, where negligence deadens desire.

Proust then reminds himself and his reader that simple human mortality ought to be enough to get us in gear but, oddly, isn't. In his own life, Proust neither visited museums, nor threw himself at anyone's feet, nor even seemed vaguely interested in a trip to India. He liked to stay home in bed under heavy covers, eat stewed fruits, take tea and other drugs, and write his books. He did in fact die only a few months after he wrote this, not having gone much of anywhere. I do not agree with his own assumption that this was laziness. A lazy person could not even read the monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu,* let alone write it. The man made choices about how he wanted to fill his days. We know exactly what he would do if he had three months left to live: answer a magazine question, write his book, and generally take part in the great literary drama of humanity.

The idea that we need to remember death so that we will go to the Louvre almost sounds like there is a deathbed scorecard, or even an afterlife scorecard. There is not. There's a wonderfully silly country music song, "Not a Moment Too Soon," big in 2005, that claims that if we found out we were dying, we'd go skydiving, we'd go "Rocky Mountain climbing," we'd go "two-point-seven seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu." There is some truth to it. But remember, too, that we choose the things we do on a regular basis at least in part because we like doing them. Just because I'm dying I should suddenly feel like riding a mechanical bull? No. It is all metaphorical. We worry about death because we worry we aren't living. Living can be enhanced by doing exotic things, but that's not really so important. Noticing death may challenge you to do unordinary stuff. But noticing that you are especially wracked with fear of death—that should challenge you to think about what you wish were going on in your ordinary life.

Marcel Proust (1871–1922): French novelist and essayist.

Today *memento mori* are seen as a bit gruesome. If you are Catholic and you go to church or to your parents' house, you will see a statue of a dead or dying man. The rest of the time, like most everyone else, you live in a world that doesn't show you artistic images of a dead or dying person. The rituals of remembering death have largely disappeared, from communal chest beating to ash wearing. Yet despite the way natural death is concealed in the daily lives of Americans, images of death have snuck back into our lives and nearly taken over.

We live with constant images of death. The news photographs are not billed as *memento mori*, but with a little consideration of the idea, it becomes clear that they are. There have been inquiries into what we are doing when we photograph the affliction of others, and publish it, and purchase it, recycle the paper, and do it again. Susan Sontag's final book, *On the Suffering of Others*, is in part a recantation of her famous moral indictment of such photography of the early part of her career. She came to believe that looking at these pictures is more politically active than she had originally allowed. I am arguing that beyond politics, there is an old psychological need being filled. Given how often humanity has devised ways to look upon death in order to achieve happiness, and given how much we have sanitized our lives to free them of images of death, consider that the images of dead people that we see in the news, which is driven by our desires, are there to help us be happy. We shield children from news, but we still tell them to remember death. Think of classic fairy tales, and of Edward Gorey's doomed boys and girls. Think, too, of the dead parents of James of the Giant Peach, Lemony Snicket's Baudelaire children, and Harry Potter—all orphans. Children are going to think about death anyway, and it is much easier to think about death directly than it is to host the monsters that roam your head (and bedroom closet) when you try not to think about it.

Montaigne° knew that thoughts of death could bring insight and liberation, but could be depressing in the short run. "It is certain that to most people preparation for death has given more torment than the dying." He blames philosophy for making us think of death so much and then rushing in like a hero to save us from our fatalism: 15

Philosophy orders us to have death ever before our eyes, to foresee and consider it before the time comes, and afterward gives us the rules and precautions to provide against our being wounded by this foresight and this thought. That is what those doctors do who make us ill so that they may have something on which to employ their drugs and their art . . . They may boast about it all they

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–1592): French writer and politician who is widely considered the inventor of the modern essay.

please: "The whole life of a philosopher is a meditation on death" (Cicero). But it seems to me that death is indeed the end, but not therefore the goal, of life.

Remembering death seemed to be something that intellectuals fretted over, while the less schooled managed the issue in a more natural, more relaxed way:

I never saw one of my peasant neighbors cogitating over the countenance and assurance with which he would pass this last hour. Nature teaches him not to think about death except when he is dying. And then he has better grace about it than Aristotle, whom death oppresses doubly, by itself and by a long foreknowledge.

Only the educated think of death when they are healthy, "dine worse for it," and go looking for opportunities "to frown at the image of death." More-common people stand in need of no preparatory consolation and rather just take in the shock "when the blow comes."

Knowledge of death makes us human, and great knowledge of death can make us great humans. Still, I cannot help but agree with Montaigne that there is also the possibility of too much exposure to death, and too much acceptance of death. For some of us, it is hard enough to get our cleats into life. Remembering death is like switching to skates. The only historically defensible conclusion is this: Life does not seem like it is going to end. It is, though, and for your own happiness, you have to train yourself to accept it and keep it in mind. Only if you can cozy up to this peculiar fact can you be mature and happy, because otherwise you will be in worse trouble than normal if someone close to you dies; also because death lends life a gravitas and a sweetness; and finally, because the work of denying death will keep you as busy as a full-time job. But once you school yourself in the awareness and acceptance of death, you have to try to forget it again. Consciousness of death makes it too hard to invest effort in the present or the future. With knowledge of the sun's eventual expansion and absorption of the earth, the future is not what it once was. I am joking, as no one really needed science to get to nihilism. Over two thousand years ago, Koheleth said that everyone is forgotten. Want to know how forgotten we will be? I know you know all four of your grandparents' names, and that you may love them, and see them as your connection to your family's past. Good. Now list the names of your grandparents' mothers. I casually surveyed a bevy of Americans of greatly varied ages, and only a tiny minority could name even two or three of their four great-grandmothers. These are the mothers of people you have loved, spent days with, and possibly mourned. Koheleth was right. We are not going to be remembered.

"Make yourself face death and become familiar with it. Effect within yourself a transformation. Seek out a state of posttraumatic bliss."

Once we learn to remember death, how can we care about the future? The answer turns out to be romantic and moral; it is about our children most of all, but not only. Could I abide it if, after my death, someone burned the New York Public Library? I work my way back into existence from there. You want to be able to work your way back. Again, the way out of this happiness trap is to teach yourself to remember death, a long and laborious process, and then, though it will be almost as difficult, teach yourself to forget death again. As with controlling desire, remember that the Buddha said his method was a raft you use to get to the other side of the river; once you have gotten where you needed to go, you can stop doing the practice. Make yourself face death and become familiar with it. Effect within yourself a transformation. Seek out a state of posttraumatic bliss. But once you have done that, you have to firmly guide your attention back to life. Don't justify life and help it stand up to the paradoxes posed by eternity. Just walk your mind away from the dark edge of the beautiful springtime field and into its lovely center. Search a clover patch for a sprout with extra leaves, or roll over and look at the cloud-scattered sky.

Any time is all time. As he lay dying, the Buddha told his students not to grieve. He explained, "If I were to live in the world for a whole eon, my association with you would still come to an end, since a meeting with no parting is an impossibility." Also know that Seneca° tried to stop Nero from killing his rivals by telling him, "No matter how many you slay, you cannot kill your successor." Someone is coming, because, sooner or later, we are going.

Listen to our very motivated Shaw° again: "Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." Of course, he's arguing with Shakespeare, through Macbeth. Macbeth sighed that life was so short we almost might as well extinguish it now, that it hardly mattered. "Out, out brief candle." He knows how an abyss yawns on either side of this tiny life, and these abysses make our stretch of life so tiny that the difference of years or decades loses all meaning. That's not how Shaw wants it. Not a "brief candle," he protests, but a splendid torch! We'll leave them comparing

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE): known as Seneca the Younger; Roman philosopher, statesman, and playwright, as well as a tutor to the future emperor Nero (37–68).
George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950): Irish playwright and writer.

candles; it is a game even good men take to when they are scared of the dark. What's so bad about the threat of the dark, though? Neither Shaw nor Shakespeare must have ever been to high school or to a faculty meeting. They must never have tried to get home in the rain or had morning sickness. How could they have missed how slow life is?

To those dogged by a nagging fear of death, it is like you are at a carnival with four lousy rides and a three-gag funhouse, playing rigged midway games, occasionally winning something and henceforth having to carry it around—and meanwhile, you spend a lot of time staring at the exit sign and worrying over eventually having to go home. Jeez, closing time is the least of your troubles. 20

As I mentioned earlier, I wrote this section, and really this whole book, as a way to develop an answer to Montaigne's challenge to wisdom. What I have come to believe might best be explained by a porcine romp through history. We follow the pig. In 334 BCE, Pyrrho of Elis joined the court of Alexander the Great. (Aristotle had finished his eight years as Alexander's teacher about a year earlier.) Pyrrho traveled with Alexander to India, where he studied with philosophers and ascetics. While at Alexander's court Pyrrho also came in contact with various Greek philosophers. When he came back, he became the founder of a new and powerful school of thought, Skepticism. In his hands, the gist of it was that every argument has a counterargument and that our senses and our reason frequently lie to us. Others would make more epistemological arguments based on Pyrrho's idea, but for him the point was that we should find Eastern calm in the realization that truth cannot be known. Once, when Pyrrho was at sea, a terrible storm tossed his ship around, and the passengers panicked and screamed. Pointing to a pig that was munching away on deck and looking at the waves without fear, Pyrrho told his fellow humans that the pig had the right idea. They all survived, and so did the story.

Listen to Montaigne, almost two thousand years later:

But even if knowledge would actually do what they say, blunt and lessen the keenness of the misfortunes that pursue us, what does it do but what ignorance does much more purely and more evidently? The philosopher Pyrrho, incurring the peril of a great storm at sea, offered those who were with him nothing better to imitate than the assurance of a pig that was traveling with them, and that was looking at this tempest without fear. Philosophy, at the end of her precepts, sends us back to the examples of an athlete or a muleteer, in whom we ordinarily see much less feeling of death, pain, and other discomforts, and more firmness than knowledge ever supplied to any man who had not been born and prepared for it on his own by natural habit.

Knowledge might be forgiven this failing if it were easy to acquire, but it demands supreme effort, over long periods of time, all the while promising consolation even as we can see, with our own eyes, that philosophers sometimes jump out of high windows, just like everybody else. They have meaningless weeping jags. We have heard of those who are rude to waiters, toady up to horrific political leaders, shove a chattering but innocent neighbor down the stairs, cultivate personal wretchedness, starve themselves to death, and allow their children to suffer deprivation and death. Some mock the poor and the worker, some have been racist, some have kept slaves, and most have been so vicious about women's minds and abilities as to constitute a gross inner failure in themselves. Even the Buddha didn't give women full access to fairyland. With Montaigne, I have to say, "Wisdom, my friend, I am not impressed." Yet, the next thought must always be, "Ignorance, I am even less impressed; indeed, I am appalled." There is a big difference between those who try to be broadly humane and those who indulge and coddle their self-centered fantasies. Knowledge and wisdom are a lot better than ignorance and immaturity.

In 1861 John Stuart Mill° wrote: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides." Remember this the next time someone asks why we support fine arts that do not quite support themselves. This whole pig-versus-philosopher debate is pretty hilarious, yes? The upshot is that the wise can get wiser by watching the innocent. But that doesn't mean the wise want to switch places. What I have come to believe about all these paeans to wisdom flanked by all this despair about wisdom is this: everything has to be learned twice. In childhood we have ignorant happiness, and we must lose this happiness if we are ever to get beyond it. Repression is not the same as transcendence. Between these states of calm ignorance and calm knowing, there has to be some halfwise screaming. Some few people actually grow wise by acting wise, but most grow wise by acting foolish, by accruing a variety of experiences, by taking chances (and thus learning about chance, our constant companion), and by making errors. Voltaire's Candide said that we should cultivate our own gardens, but he concluded this only after he was no longer the naïf his name implies. By then, he had gone on many travels, seen a fine woman return from a voyage with but one buttock, seen the great philosopher of optimism lose one extremity after another until he was a mere nub of optimism, and seen kind men do as much terrible harm as cruel

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873): English political philosopher and economist.

ones. What if all these characters had instead stayed home, cultivating their gardens, and had kept their buttocks, limbs, and innocence? They would have remained children. Or, as so many adult children are, pigs. Spinoza° quoted Ecclesiastes' saying that whoever increases knowledge increases sorrow. But he was explicit in his opinion that, though both fools and wise people have happiness, they do not have the same happiness. As Spinoza put it, both a human and a horse have lust, but a horse lusts for a horse and a human for a human. Just so, Spinoza explained, the happiness of a drunkard is not the happiness of the wise. Knowledge and wisdom are worth it.

According to the great philosophers, your worst barrier against happiness is you, your own wrong thinking. Your four problems are these: You cannot see yourself or much about the world you live in. You are ruled by desire and emotion. You will not take your place or rise to your role. You are alternately oblivious to death and terrified of it. As such, your job is to master these four errors in yourself. If you do, you will be happy and more free to love, work, and play the way you wish you could. None of this comes easily; it has to be practiced a great deal, and it never works completely. However, there is no useful alternative to the effort. As Epicurus° reminds us, "We must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it."

The wisdom literature I have been discussing addressed itself to the 25
question of how to live, but it is worth noticing, in closing, that the core of our lives is love and work, and these wisdom instructions also apply in these more specific realms. If you want your love and your work to be successful, actively apply yourself to knowing yourself, controlling your desires, taking what is yours, and remembering that love and work can both end abruptly—remembering to the extent that you cherish them both—and learn to let them flow. Actively applying yourself means doing something different in the service of these goals and seeking out information about what it is you need to learn. We acknowledge only some parts of the great store of happiness advice, and the most important idea that we have lost is that happiness takes study. Secular happiness requires the same kind of meditative work that religion requires: the solace works only if you rehearse, daily, weekly, and on special days, reading over and over the phrases and arguments that seem most persuasive.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677): Dutch philosopher who rejected the mind/body dualism of Rene Descartes (1596–1650).
Epicurus (341–270 BCE): Greek philosopher, the founder of Epicureanism, which held the belief that pleasure is the greatest good and should be pursued with intelligence and self-discipline.

Understanding the Text

1. Hecht lists a number of ways that death is not mentioned or represented in our contemporary cultural climate. First list her examples. Then, beside each example, state whether you think she is correct. Can you think of counterexamples? If so, what would this suggest about her argument that death is to our society what sex was to the Victorians?
2. Toward the end of the essay, Hecht enumerates the kinds of "wrong thinking" that stand between us and true happiness, according to the great philosophers. List the examples she provides. What is the method to right each kind of wrong thinking? How does each relate to her key terms "love" and "work"?
3. What function does Geoffrey Gorer's "famous little essay" play in Hecht's argument? What does Gorer talk about and why does it matter?

Reflection and Response

4. Desire and death each play an important role in Hecht's argument about the obstacles and challenges of finding happiness. Hecht argues that we actively avoid death in order to pursue our own desires. And yet, podcasts that focus almost exclusively on death abound. Consider the popularity of murder podcasts, for example. (If you can, listen to one of these popular podcasts that focus on death in some way and provide a response to Hecht's argument.) Does the popularity of these podcasts challenge her theory? How?
5. What does Hecht mean by "posttraumatic bliss" (par. 5)? Once you have defined it, discuss its relationship to Hecht's ideas about happiness. Finally, is this an experience you identify as your own?

Making Connections

6. Look for a copy of Vincent van Gogh's painting *Sunflowers* online. In many ways, we might say that "Remember Death" argues a point opposite to what van Gogh represents in the painting. Do you agree? Why or why not? Summarize how each of these creative individuals represents ideas of "life" or "death," or both, in their work. Consider this an opportunity to explore the complexities of the crafts of writing and painting as well as the concepts you see embodied in their works.
7. Consider the popularity of a television show like *Breaking Bad* or *The Good Place* in relation to Hecht's arguments about death. Is confronting death more a part of our contemporary culture than Hecht might realize? Provide a counterargument in which you contend that our culture is actually obsessed with death. What are the consequences of seeing our world this way?

There's More to Life Than Being Happy

Emily Esfahani Smith

Emily Esfahani Smith is the author of *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* (2017), in which she offers methods for individuals to abandon the quest for an unattainable standard of happiness and pursue goals for a more realistic, long-term happiness. Smith's articles have appeared in the numerous publications, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *TIME*, and the *Atlantic*. Her writing on culture and psychology has reached millions of readers. Smith's famous TED Talk, which was based on her book, asks us to think differently about the stories we tell ourselves and helps us identify what makes life worth living. She is a former instructor of positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. The former managing editor for the *New Criterion*, she is a writer for the Aspen Institute's Weave: The Social Fabric Project, which seeks heal social fragmentation. Born in Zurich, Switzerland, Smith grew up in Montreal, Canada. In 2013, after graduating from Dartmouth College, Smith earned a master's degree in positive psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. The following essay appeared in the *Atlantic* in January 2013.

"It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness."

In September 1942, Viktor Frankl,° a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist in Vienna, was arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp with his wife and parents. Three years later, when his camp was liberated, most of his family, including his pregnant wife, had perished—but he, prisoner number 119104, had lived. In his bestselling 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he wrote in nine days about his experiences in the camps, Frankl concluded that the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: meaning, an insight he came to early in life. When he was a high school student, one of his science teachers declared to the class, "Life is nothing more than a combustion process, a process of oxidation." Frankl jumped out of his chair and responded, "Sir, if this is so, then what can be the meaning of life?"

As he saw in the camps, those who found meaning even in the most horrendous circumstances were far more resilient to suffering than those who did not. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing," Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "the last of the human freedoms—to

Viktor Emil Frankl (1905–1997): Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who survived four concentration camps, including Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) argues that his experiences as a concentration camp inmate led him to discover the importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most brutal ones.