

This is
not a story
about death.

This is a story
about life.

And how contemplating the end
of it—every breath taken, every
day lived—can make the time
we're here longer, healthier, and
happier. Really, as alive as can be.

By Meirav Devash



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What makes life worth living? That question has consumed the minds of philosophers, scholars, and writers for centuries. Socrates felt it was striving to know and understand ourselves. Alice Walker said it lay in expressing our deepest feelings and emotions. Today's positive psychologists believe it is meaningful work, play, love, and service to others. We don't know which of them—if any—are right. But maybe, just maybe, the way to truly discover what gives a person's time on this earth meaning is to flip the question. Perhaps we should ask: What makes life worth dying?

That's the stance of the growing death-positivity movement, which posits that accepting that life will end—and exploring the feelings provoked by that knowledge—can make you more alive in the here and now. It's a 180-degree change from how most of us currently think about death—which is, we don't. Instead, we change the subject when it arises, put off end-of-life planning, and fumble over our words at funerals. But getting real about mortality has merit. Research shows thinking about death can reduce a smoker's urge to light up, boost workout motivation, and even nudge people to use more sunscreen. It also puts everyday struggles and annoyances (say, fighting with your spouse) into context, which can reduce anxiety, stress, and depression, says Kathy Kortess-Miller, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, who studies how to have healthy conversations about death and dying.

But what does thinking and talking about death actually look and feel like? How do you get from death as "terrifying abstract concept" to death as "reality check" that adds purpose to daily life? A surge of artistic endeavors is helping parse that out. Caitlin Doughty, a funeral director in Los Angeles who launched the death-positivity movement in 2011, has

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Writing on the Wall

In 2011, after struggling with grief over her mother's death, artist Candy Chang covered the side of an abandoned house in New Orleans with chalkboard paint and stenciled it with the statement, "Before I die I want to _____." Within 24 hours, passersby had picked up the provided chalk and filled the entire wall. Since then, more than 3,000 "Before I Die" walls (including the one in Atlanta, pictured above) have been created in over 70 countries. "Many people have shared how the wall helped them re-appreciate their current life," says Chang, who has degrees in urban planning, graphic design, and architecture. Most of the entries, she notes, revolve around a handful of themes: finding inner peace, love, helping others, traveling, and connecting with family. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these mirror the deathbed regrets commonly heard by hospice workers, which include not spending more time with loved ones, not staying true to who they felt they were, and living a touch too safely. The illustrations on the following pages capture some of the most poignant responses people have written, as seen through the eyes of female artists we commissioned to bring them to life.

seen a groundswell of get-togethers where people informally chat about death and dying. (Death Cafe, a nonprofit group, has hosted more than 5,500 events globally to date.) Books on death acceptance fill shelves (and online shopping carts). People are even downloading apps like WeCroak. Based on a folk saying from Bhutan that says to be a content person one must contemplate death five times daily, the app sends philosophical quotes about death at random intervals. The ironic thing is, these activities don't make people obsess about dying. Rather, they lead some to ultimately do the things they've been afraid to act on for years, like pursue a new career. For others, it's less dramatic; they might call a friend they don't talk to enough or finally get around to making a will. People may take such actions because, at

its heart, death acceptance is simply a reminder to get busy living. "I'm not anticipating dying tomorrow or in the near future, but I do consider what will be important to me at the end of my life," says Kortés-Miller. "Then I ask, 'Why is it not important today?'"

This guide is our way of asking ourselves that question, and encouraging you to do the same. It isn't about religion or the afterlife. Instead, it's packed with ways to process the last hurrah, starting with the images on these pages, a reimagining of "death art," a historically macabre genre. We asked artists to create paintings based on responses to Candy Chang's "Before I Die" public art project, which prompts people to share what they'd like to accomplish before they pass. How would you answer? Let's celebrate the here and now, together.

Death Becomes Her

When loved ones pass, women typically handle the arrangements, so it's only fitting that they're leading the death-positivity movement. (Fact: The number of female mortuary-science students has nearly doubled since 1995.) Meet five at the forefront.



The Dear Abby of Death

Caitlin Doughty, queen bee of modern death acceptance and founder of The Order of the Good Death, a collective made up of dozens of funeral directors, academics, and artists; provider of behind-the-scenes intel about funerary practices in her books (including the recent *From Here to Eternity*) and on her Ask a Mortician YouTube channel (350,000 subscribers and counting)

Her mission: "To make people feel better about death and mortality so they live better lives."

Thinking (death) positive: Question why you fear mortality, then address it directly. If you worry what will happen to loved ones, get your affairs (e.g., a will) in order. If you're stressing about the afterlife (or possible lack thereof), talk to your religious leader or a physicist who can explain how energy returns to the earth. Knowledge is power. The fear will fade if you engage it.



The Death Education Hostess

Megan Rosenbloom, medical librarian and director and cofounder of Death Salon, a series of events around the country where experts demystify funerary and burial practices for members of the general public

Her mission: "To open up conversations surrounding death, something that happens to everyone but somehow is impolite to talk about."

Thinking (death) positive: Contemplate death on a more regular basis by reading books, like Mary Roach's *Stiff*, about what happens to cadavers donated to science, or Antonius C.G.M. Robben's anthropological reference tome, *Death, Mourning, and Burial*. Or explore death themes through art. The Burns Archive's collection of post-mortem photographs (burnsarchive.com) shows a once-normal way of honoring loved ones in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



The Body Composting Innovator

Katrina Spade, founder of Recompose, a company poised to provide recomposition, a method to convert the dead into earth-friendly soil

Her mission: "To create sustainable urban body-recomposition centers." One method she's investigating: allowing remains to decompose naturally between layers of wood chips in a container.

Thinking (death) positive: Remember, in nature, death begets life. When organic material dies, microbes and bacteria break it down into nutrient-rich soil, completing the life cycle. We're all a part of that rhythm.



The Death Ritual Disrupter

Amy Cunningham, cocreator of The Inspired Funeral (a site for planning end-of-life rituals) and founder of Fitting Tribute Funeral Services in Brooklyn

Her mission: "Finding diverse ways to acknowledge a deceased person's life."

Thinking (death) positive: Putting together a lovely, healing end-of-life ritual or service is a powerful way to honor a deceased person's values. This can mean finding the perfect poem to read at a funeral or even creating an appropriate playlist for a memorial service.

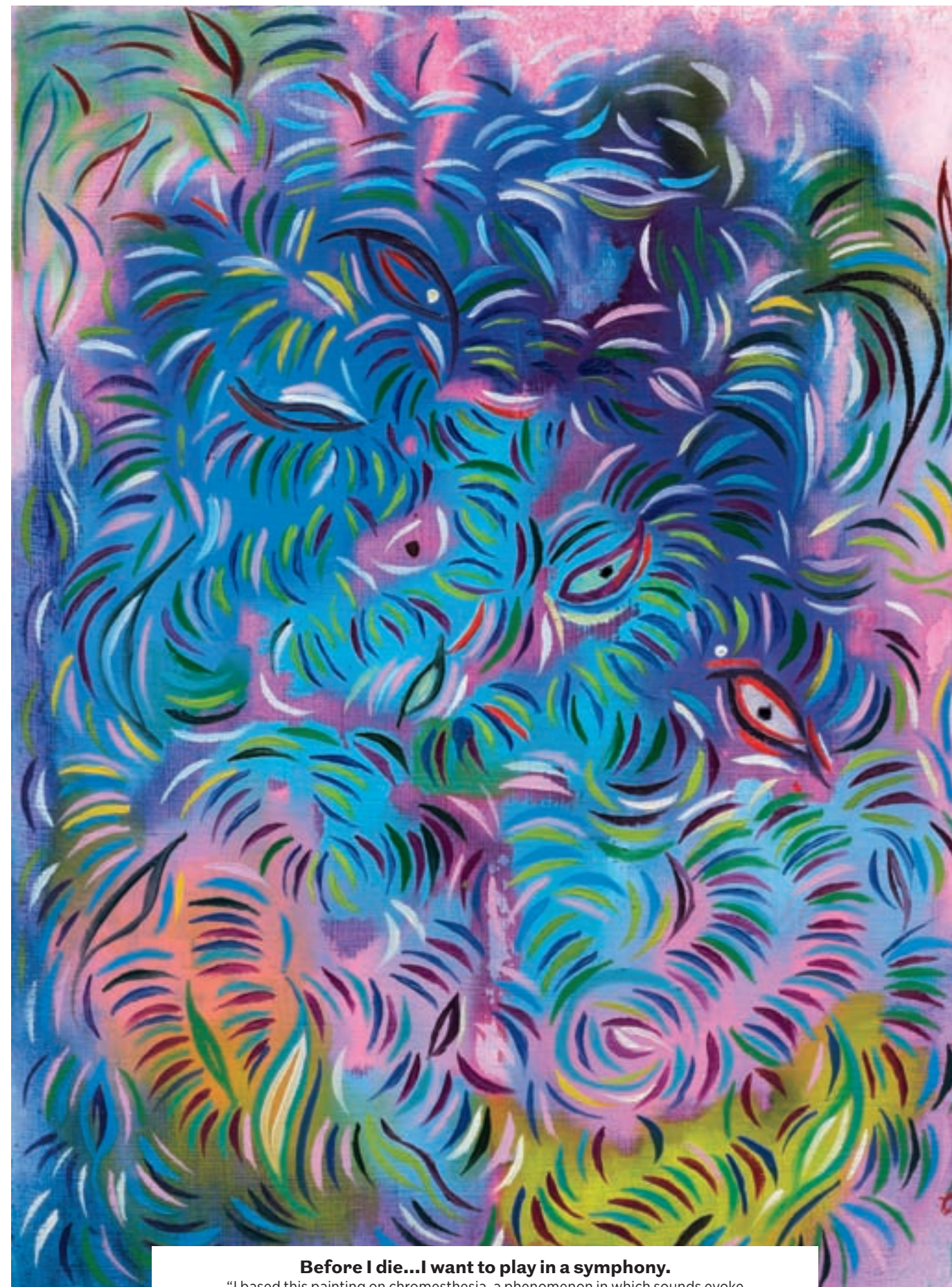


The Companion for the Dying

Laura Saba, death doula—a rising profession; just as there are doulas for bringing people into the world, there are ones who support them as they exit it

Her mission: "To help people be present and comfortable—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—on their deathbeds."

Thinking (death) positive: Dying is often treated as a medical emergency, but it's one of the most important, most connected moments of our lives. You're forced to deal with the very human experience you're going through. Life is beautiful and fragile, sweet and short. We should embrace it.



Before I die...I want to play in a symphony.

"I based this painting on chromesthesia, a phenomenon in which sounds evoke an experience of color. My musical inspiration was 'Clair de Lune,' by Claude Debussy, an impressionist composer." —Saira McLaren, *New York City artist*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF SUBJECT; RANIA SPADE (SPADE); COURTESY OF SUBJECT; ELLI & POLLY PHOTOGRAPHY (ROSENBLOOM)



Before I die...I want to kiss her one last time.

"Love is so intimate and personal that I would find it coarse to show the face of the subject. Better to have it be just an inflection, a hint, of the feeling."

—Vivienne Flesher, painter and photographer in San Francisco

Uncomfortable Conversations

Hosting our own mini death café, *WH* brought together eight readers and editors to discuss mortality in a safe setting. We used the tips below from death educator Kathy Kortés-Miller, Ph.D., and former hospice physician Karen Wyatt, M.D., to steer the dialogue. Try them yourself (one-on-one or in a group); research suggests your chats will be as life-affirming as ours was.

Start with an icebreaker.

Ask others how they've personally been touched by death. "Most people have likely lost a family member, friend, or pet, so this can establish connections, driving home the point that death is not an isolating event," says Wyatt. One woman in our group lost her brother when she was 12; another's father had recently passed. Within minutes, these perfect strangers were bonding over the shared experience.

Draw people out with thought-provoking questions.

We leaned on *Mortalls*, a card-based discussion game started by death-positive father-daughter duo Jim and Jess Erskine (\$12, mortalls.com); you could also use a book like Kortés-Miller's new *Talking About Death Won't Kill You* (available March 6), which contains convo-starter Qs. Some intriguing ones from our event: "If you were given an envelope with the date and time of your death, would you open it?" (The group was split.) And "What's one question you'd like an answer to before you die?" (Kristine Thomason, *WH* online associate editor, said, "I would want to know if the people I've lost can see what I've done and what my life has been like.")

Or pull examples from everyday life.

If you're watching a film (or the news) and someone dies, a simple "How do you think you would cope with that?" can spur meaningful conversation. And don't shy away from asking people about their own experiences—for

example, say to a colleague, "I heard about your brother passing. Do you want to talk about it?" If they don't, they'll let you know, but often people stay quiet to avoid burdening the listener. So they might be glad to have the opportunity. "It felt really good to open up about my dad," said Krystin La Fleur, the woman at our event whose father had recently died. "I didn't realize that was something I had been suppressing as a way of coping."

Don't be afraid to laugh.

There were zero tears in our group, but plenty of humor—a pretty natural reaction that sometimes serves as a coping mechanism (for, say, nervousness). But it can also be quite genuine, says Wyatt. "Laughter can help us relate to one another and feel comfortable together so we can listen more openly and with less resistance. It helps us get over the idea that death is always scary or horrible or tragic."

Reflect.

Post-chat, check in with how you feel. You may be surprised. Having discovered the topic wasn't all doom and gloom, everyone left our discussion feeling encouraged and more positive. "We always say we want to live in the moment and life to the fullest, but this was a real reminder, and it makes me think about what matters the most," says Kristine.

—Jamie Hergenrader

The Existential Slap

That's what experts call the moment someone understands—*really* understands—that death is imminent. Our writer, Meirav Devash, is one of the lucky few who lived to tell what a psychological brush with the other side feels like.

If you've gotta die, the type of spontaneous gastrointestinal bleed I had in 2011 isn't the worst way to go. Losing about 40 percent of my blood wasn't physically painful; it was black bowel movements and abdominal bloating that made me go to the ER, not discomfort. Once there, I was passing out from blood loss, but doctors couldn't immediately locate the bleed. I found myself lying in the ICU, getting an emergency blood transfusion. An orderly looked in my eyes and prayed over me, crying. That set off a little pang of panic. On the other side of the privacy curtain, another patient was also bleeding internally. It didn't sound good for him. Maybe it wasn't going to be so good for me either. I realized I might not survive and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I spiraled into terror, heartbreak, and rage, but within the hour, my mind went quiet. I felt...oddly content. Even at 34, I'd had an amazing life. I loved my family and friends. My husband. Burritos. Red lipstick. New York City. If this is all there would be, I had a good run, I thought. I did okay here.

Ultimately, my existential slap was more of a tap. Doctors were able to stop the bleeding, and six days (and a few more blood transfusions) later I left the hospital—and immediately changed everything. I quit my office job to be a freelance writer and began giving fewer f-cks about things like to-do lists and the numbers on a scale. I took up yoga and meditation. I stopped accumulating stuff. I traveled—to Rome, Maui, Barcelona, Reykjavik, Sydney, Budapest. I explored the Paris catacombs, hiked with a shaman in Sedona, Arizona, cruised to the Bahamas with 2,400 metalheads, vaped in Vancouver, and ate Thanksgiving dinner at the base of Mount Fuji. Each time I see a sunset, I stop dead in my tracks and feel grateful. I make a point of it. Deep down, we all know the raw truth. It's hard to accept but so important that you do. Live every day like you're going to die. Because you are.

Grief in Practice

There's no right or wrong way to deal with a loved one's death or dying. These three women coped how they knew best.

With Openness

Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner both lost parents (at 30 and 24, respectively) and felt that the usual reactions from others—platitudes, avoidance—made navigating their grief harder. So in 2013, they launched ModernLoss.com, a website where people can candidly share their experiences with death so they feel less alone, marginalized, and stigmatized. One tip from their new book, *Modern Loss*: Don't be scared to mention the person who died. "I love when someone says, 'I thought about your mom today because XYZ reminded me of her,'" says Soffer. They may not want to talk about their grief yet, but it shows you're open when they are ready.

With Prayer

Joyce Smith endured a parent's worst fear when her 14-year-old son, John, fell through an icy lake one wintry morning in 2015. As he lay clinically dead in the hospital, Joyce loudly called out to God, praying for a miracle. Suddenly, John's heart—which had been silent for over an hour—started beating again, to the amazement of doctors. (One called it a miracle.) John has since fully recovered. "Prayer has been my go-to my entire life, and there's a peace that comes from faith in these times," says Smith, whose book, *The Impossible*, documents the experience. "I believe God is who he says he is, and he can do the things that he says he can do."

With Humor

Kate Spencer lost her mom to pancreatic cancer in 2007. A writer and comedian in Los Angeles, Spencer celebrates her mother onstage and in her frank and irreverent book, *The Dead Moms Club*. "My mom was always funny, even while dying. At 27, I had been dating my now-husband for a few years. One day she said, 'If I die before you get married, you should have the flower girl sprinkle my ashes down the aisle instead of flower petals.' We laughed about it forever." Humor connects us through our shared experience and helps us keep normalcy when the world is crumbling, says Spencer. "I don't think it removes the gravity of the situation."

Museum of Modern Death

Dark art isn't all Goth-inspired skulls (though if that's your bag, it's definitely out there!). These artists produce and sell works that are beautiful, introspective, provocative...and just a touch creepy.

1. Jessica Joslin's cicada skeleton is made from scavenged brass and antique bits and bobs; other pieces incorporate legally sourced bone. See them all in her book, *Strange Nature*. \$75, jessicajoslin.com

2. Artist Courtney Lane creates commemorative jewelry crafted from hair of people who have passed, like this necklace face with petals made of hair. Pieces start at \$250, neverforgottencl.com

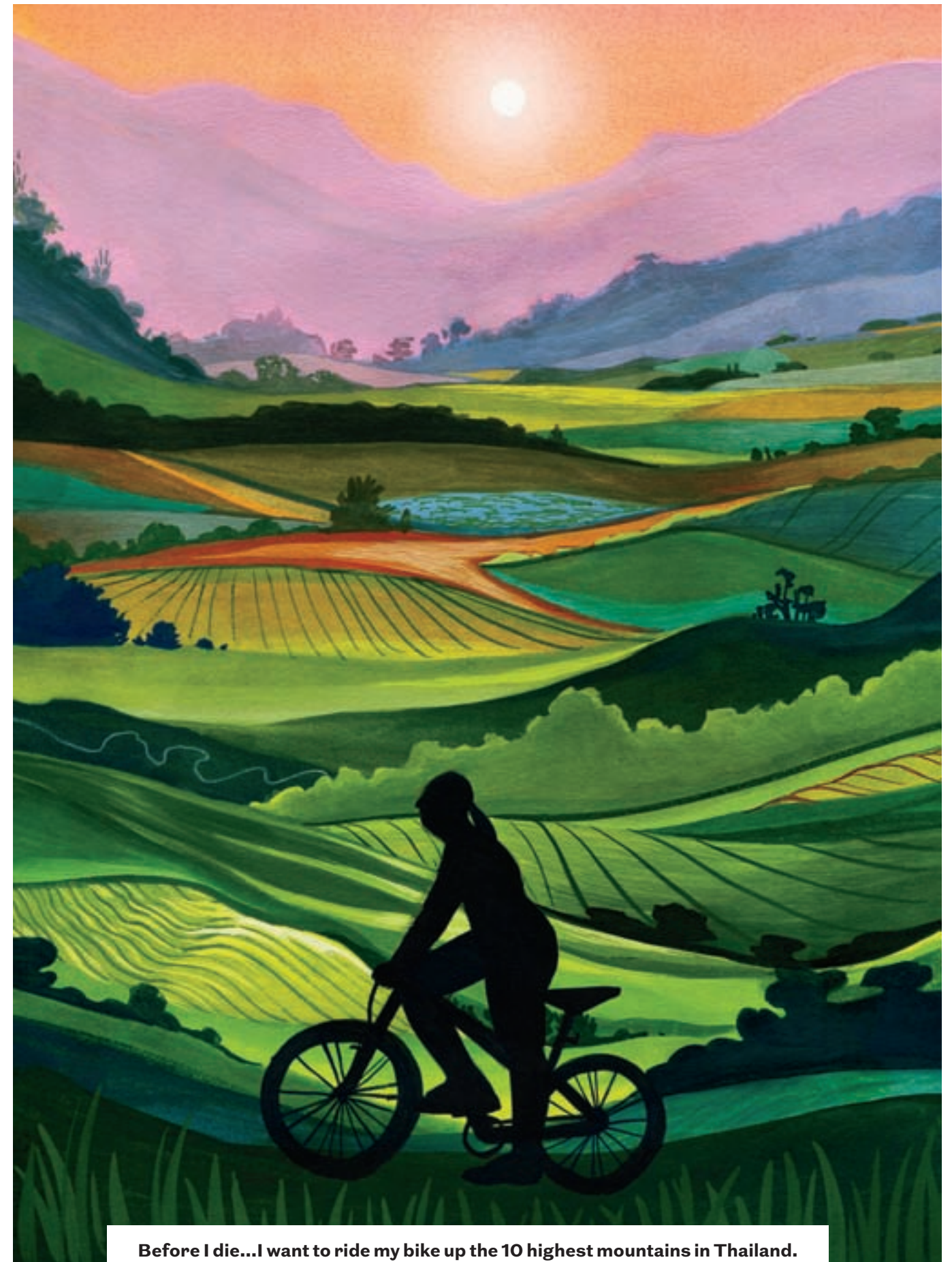
3. Illustrator Landis Blair draws pen-and-ink custom memorial portraits of deceased pets. \$65, etsy.com/shop/landisblair

4. Caitlin T. McCormack uses cotton string inherited from her grandparents to crochet animals like this seahorse. Similar works from \$450, paradigmarts.org

5. The mourning jewelry popular in Victorian Europe is having a resurgence in modern styles, like this coffin-cut opal ring from Goldengrove By Margaret Cross. \$575, goldengrovejewelry.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JESSICA JOSLIN (1); COURTNEY LANE (2); LANDIS BLAIR (3); CAITLIN MCCORMACK/JASON CHEN/COURTESY OF PARADIGM GALLERY + STUDIOS (4); GOLDENGROVE BY MARGARET CROSS (5)



Before I die...I want to ride my bike up the 10 highest mountains in Thailand.

"Conquering a mountain is an act that is isolating, difficult, and unknown, just as death inevitably is for everyone. Yet there is so much beauty that can be found through the journey."

—Casey Landerkin, Philadelphia artist and illustrator

Outside the Box

Casket burials are pricey (on average, over \$8,500 for a traditional one), toxic (embalming fluid contains carcinogenic formaldehyde that can seep into the earth), and, soon, potentially unavailable (reports show that the U.S. is starting to run out of cemetery space). So when planning your end-of-life options, consider these new possibilities—many of them eco-friendly—that let you turn your literal last act into a statement of your values. Settling this now means your loved ones won't have to later. If the options that require cremated ashes appeal, go to nolo.com to see if your state is currently one of the 10 that allow water cremation, in which the body is decomposed in a nontoxic liquid chemical bath. The method uses one-seventh the energy of a fire cremation.

Become One with the Earth

Coeio's Infinity Burial Suit—a full-body covering—contains mushrooms and other organic materials that are fertilized by your body as it breaks down. You still take up cemetery space, but at least you're enriching the soil. \$1,500, coeio.com

Feed a Tree

Post-cremation, your ashes are placed in a biodegradable, plantable urn, where they provide food for a seedling tree of your choice that loved ones can nurture. From \$119, thelivingurn.com

Be Transformed into Treasure

Carbon, pulled from your ashes or a lock of hair, can be converted into a clear or colored diamond in about six months. From \$2,999, lifegem.com

Sleep with Fishes

Ashes, mixed with cement and sand, are molded into a structure that's placed on the ocean floor (locations span from Texas to New Jersey) and create new habitats for marine life. From \$2,995, eternalreefs.com

Leave a Message

Cremated remains are pressed into a vinyl record on which you can prerecord up to 24 minutes of audio—your voice or music—for friends or family. From \$3,000, andvinyly.com

Orbit the Earth

A high-altitude balloon can launch your ashes into space and release them into the atmosphere. From \$4,500, mesoloft.com

—JH

Meaning from Mess

The latest trend in Swedish minimalism: Death Cleaning, or whittling down belongings while alive, so your loved ones aren't burdened with them when you're gone—a painful duty usually left to emotionally and physically exhausted women, says Elaine O'Connell, a New York City social worker.

The Swedes undertake Death Cleaning near retirement age, but you're never too young to toss or donate stuff you no longer want, says Margareta Magnusson, author of *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*. To turn the task into something meaningful, invite loved ones over for that too-small cocktail dress or Le Creuset Dutch oven—and tell them the item's history and importance. “Now the person on the receiving end has a memory attached to the object that reminds them of their connection to you,” says O'Connell.

Curtain Call

Horror flicks aside, watching death explored on-screen is a healthy way to begin confronting our own demise. Really. “It makes us challenge our perspectives on mortality,” says Jamie Goldenberg, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Six depictions to get you thinking.



ROMANCE: *Love Story*

Seeing Jenny (Ali MacGraw) die in the arms of Oliver (Ryan O'Neal) can reassure you that death isn't as frightening when you're surrounded by those you love, says Jeff Greenberg, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Arizona in Tucson.



ACTION: *Saving Private Ryan*

The devastating realism of war shows us there can be dignity and bravery in dying, and that knowing what you stood for in life gives it value.



ANIMATION: *Coco*

Pixar's flick visits the afterlife on the Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos. Journeying through this underworld may comfort people that we live on in others' memories—if not as spirits—post-mortem.



DRAMA: *Meet Joe Black*

A.k.a. Brad Pitt as “Death” in the form of a man. He proves that although living forever sounds good in theory, it's mortality that makes things meaningful.



COMEDY: *The Bucket List*

The lesson learned by watching Morgan Freeman's character skydive? One's demise is less scary when we remember we have full control of our lives.



TV: *Six Feet Under*

HBO's hit about a family who runs a funeral home offers a safe (distanced) way to deal with our anxieties and reminds us that passing is a part of daily life.

—Elizabeth Bacharach



FROM TOP: EVERETT COLLECTION (2); © WALT DISNEY STUDIOS MOTION PICTURES/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION; AF ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; WARNER BROS./KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK; HBO/PHOTOFEEST

Before I die... I want to swallow my pride.

“Pride is a darkness that can limit our palette of opportunity and stand in the way of rewarding personal growth. But if, through inner reflection—represented by the eye—we let it go, we're open to the light in life.”

—Emma Larsson, artist and sculptor in Stockholm, Sweden



Before I die...I want to build a school.

"I believe we all have something to learn from one another. Each of the strong, caring, intelligent women in the painting are meant to represent different areas of education."

—Ana Leovy, Mexico City artist and illustrator

Practical Prep

Writing a will is on most people's "I'll get to that later" list—less than a third of us have one. But creating one now can minimize family fights over who gets what, says Bridget Crawford, Ph.D., a professor of law at Pace University School of Law in White Plains, New York. It also may reassure you that things will be properly taken care of when you pass. (For example: If your sister, who is bad with money, will get custody of your kid, you can appoint another person to be in charge of doling out the funds to care for your child.) Complete these docs, then keep signed copies in a safe place (and give copies to your lawyer, if you have one), or use a digital lock box like AfterVault.com; for \$70 per year duplicates can be stored and information passed on to your designees when you are gone.

1. Will

This document explains who gets your assets and property, and custody of your children, if necessary. Create one online for as little as \$20 using a site like rocketlawyer.com. If that feels overwhelming, hire an estate planning attorney. Tip: Ask if your employer will cover the cost; estate lawyers can charge several hundred dollars an hour. If your work won't pay, your local bar association will have a directory of professionals in your area. Whether you DIY or hire a pro, appoint an executor (pick a family member or friend who is unfazed by the prospect of filling out detailed paperwork) to ensure everything goes as planned. *Don't* include details of what type of funeral service you want and where your remains should be stored or disposed of in this document; wills typically aren't read until after the funeral. Write down those details elsewhere and give them to your executor and immediate family members.

2. Living Will

This doc, also called an "advanced directive," states which end-of-life medical treatments you do—and don't—want, including life support and hospice care. Be radically clear: For example, instead of just specifying that you don't want treatment to artificially prolong your life, specify whether you'd want a feeding tube, dialysis, or other measures; your doc will use this to make decisions. Give your GP and your executor a copy.

3. Health-Care Proxy

Also known as a "medical power of attorney," this record lets you appoint someone (and a backup) to make any health-care decisions if you can't speak for yourself. Make sure they have a copy of your living will. (If your wishes in that document weren't specific enough, your proxy can make judgments about treatment.) Forms vary by state; download the one for yours at caringinfo.org.

4. Power of Attorney

A common form that designates a person to make all financial and legal decisions (e.g., handling investments, filing taxes, managing health insurance, and arranging payment for medical care) on your behalf if you're alive but incapacitated. You can do this online for \$35 at legalzoom.com.

On Your Own Terms

Should a terminally ill person be able to end their own life?

It's such a contentious question that right now, only six states (Oregon, Washington, Montana, Vermont, California, and Colorado) and the District of Columbia have laws on the books that allow medical aid in dying, though 27 more are considering following suit. Meaning: They let doctors offer mentally sound, terminally ill adults prescription drugs they can take to expire in their sleep.

Beyond providing faith-based arguments, critics of the practice cite the "slippery slope" theory that such laws will open the door for more extreme practices like euthanasia (in which a physician ends the patient's life via, for example, an injection; this is illegal in every state). Eric Kress, M.D., a physician in Missoula, Montana, who has legally prescribed aid-in-dying medication to dozens of qualifying patients who requested it, disagrees. "My terminal patients don't want to die, but the fact is, they will. They only want to control the way it happens," he says. The majority are at what he calls "the bitter end," where their suffering will only steadily get worse. He notes that not every patient he's prescribed the drugs to uses them, but knowing they have that option sets their mind at ease.

To learn more, including which laws are being considered in your state, look into organizations like Compassion & Choices (compassionandchoices.org) or Death with Dignity (deathwithdignity.org).

Your Online Legacy

The Internet is forever, which is why some social media sites, including Facebook, let you choose a "legacy contact"—someone to manage your account (or remove it) if you die. For other online accounts (such as other social media platforms or a recurring subscription to a news site), create a running list of usernames and passwords for your executor and keep it updated. Without these measures, it can take weeks or months for family and friends to find all your accounts to cancel or modify them. ■