

IT'S MY BIRTHDAY, THEN...

Would I regret it if I died? A birthday meditation on time, regret, and the stubborn pleasure of being alive.

BY KARIM SPRING

It's my birthday. Today I am what I am, and the familiar ritual has already begun. The first message arrived before I had finished my coffee.

By evening there may be a dinner, and somewhere a cake will appear with candles standing in for the years I have lived. We will laugh. Someone will say that another year is a blessing, and someone else will wish me many more.

Yet there is something extraordinary hidden in this ordinary ritual. We are celebrating the passage of the one thing we can never recover. Every birthday marks another year of existence, and also another year subtracted from whatever remains.

We know this perfectly well. And we celebrate anyway.

When we are young, the contradiction barely exists. A birthday means progress: we are growing up, gaining independence, reaching milestones on the way to the future we imagine. At eighteen, twenty or thirty, time feels abundant, a long road running past the horizon.

Later, the arithmetic changes. At fifty, sixty or seventy, we begin to suspect that the road behind us is longer than the road ahead. Some friends are no longer at the table. Parents may be gone. Our bodies remind us, gently or not, that they have carried us through decades of use.

And still, we light the candles.

Perhaps the interesting question is not why we celebrate another birthday. It is why we go on living with such appetite while knowing, with complete certainty, that it will end.



ABOUT THIS ESSAY

Every birthday celebrates a year we can never get back. Would we regret it if we died, or is that the wrong question?

Every birthday, we celebrate another year of life. Yet we also know that another year has passed, never to return.

As we grow older, the meaning of that celebration changes. We begin to appreciate time differently, question what remains unfinished, and sometimes wonder whether we have lived as we intended.

But perhaps the real question is not whether we will regret dying. It is whether our awareness of death prevents us from enjoying the life we still have.

It's My Birthday, Then... explores mortality, the strange arithmetic of birthdays, and why the certainty of an ending need not diminish the joy of being alive.

As another year is added to my age, I find myself facing a stranger and more personal question: Would I regret it if I died?

It sounds almost absurd. If death ends consciousness, who would be left to feel regret? And if something lies beyond death, we have no way of knowing what form awareness, let alone regret, would take there.

But the question is not really about afterward. It is about the person who is alive today, looking back at the years already spent and wondering what would be left unfinished if tomorrow never came. It is about the odd fact that we know we will die and still behave, most of the time, as though life were an open-ended project.

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I. THE CERTAINTY WE RARELY CONFRONT

There is a great deal we cannot know about our future. We cannot say where we will be in ten years, what the world will look like, or which opportunities and troubles are on their way.

But one fact applies to every human being who has ever lived: our lives will end. It is the most reliable piece of information we have about our individual futures. And it is the one we least often organize our days around.

We buy houses, build businesses, raise children, save for retirement and book holidays months ahead. We get irritated by traffic and by messages that go unanswered. We spend real emotional energy on matters that would look small from the vantage point of a whole life.

None of this is irrational. Daily living demands attention to ordinary problems. Someone who spent every waking moment contemplating death would struggle to function at all.

Biology helps explain why. Living things evolved to favor survival, and humans carry sophisticated emotional machinery that reacts to danger long before we can think it through. Fear protects us from the cliff edge and the speeding car.

But we face a difficulty no other animal seems to face. We can imagine a future in which we do not exist. We understand that the consciousness through which we experience everything is finite, even though we can never directly experience our own absence.

We can hold this thought intellectually. Holding its full emotional weight all the time would be unbearable.

So our attention returns to the immediate world. We wake up, make coffee, answer messages, argue about politics, worry about our children, complain about the weather and wonder what to cook for dinner. Tomorrow looks like another ordinary day, though tomorrow has never once been guaranteed.

We do not forget mortality. We move it to the background and let the business of living occupy the foreground.

Tolstoy captured this beautifully in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Ivan has always known the textbook syllogism: all men are mortal, Caius is a man, therefore Caius is mortal. It was perfectly true of Caius. It simply never seemed to apply to Ivan himself, with his childhood memories and his particular tastes, until illness made it impossible to ignore.

Most of us live a little like Ivan. We accept death as a general truth while quietly exempting ourselves from it day by day.

The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker went further. In *The Denial of Death*, he argued that much of human civilization is an elaborate effort to manage the terror of mortality, often by attaching ourselves to something we believe will outlast us. Psychologists later developed his ideas into terror management theory, which studies how awareness of death may shape identity, cultural beliefs and behavior. The evidence is still debated, but the underlying question is hard to ignore: how do we keep living while knowing that life will end?

A family, a book, a business, a scientific discovery, a reputation: each can offer the comforting possibility that something of us will continue after we are gone.

There is real insight in this. But I am not sure it explains everything.

When a mother sits up through the night with a feverish child, must we read her love as a flight from death? When someone plants a garden, writes a novel or loses an evening in conversation with a friend, are they secretly purchasing symbolic immortality?

Some achievements are surely shaped by the wish to be remembered. Others grow out of curiosity, affection, responsibility, ambition, or the plain pleasure of doing something well while we are here. We do not have to assume that every expression of life is a disguised fear of its ending.

Which brings me to a distinction that may matter more than denial itself. Knowing that life ends does not stop us from finding reasons to take part in it.

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II. LIFE DOES NOT WAIT FOR AN EXPLANATION

Consider the extraordinary persistence of living things. Every organism depends on processes that keep it going: cells burn energy, tissues repair themselves, systems adjust constantly to a changing environment. Life is not a possession we hold. It is an activity we perform, second by second.

Across generations, organisms reproduce, adapt and pass on what they carry. Individuals die, but life on Earth has continued unbroken for billions of years.

There is something quietly remarkable in that. The individual is temporary; the larger process goes on.

We enter that process without being asked. We inherit bodies, abilities, circumstances, and a world already crowded with people who arrived before us. We grow, learn, love and make plans, usually without stopping to ask why existence was handed to us in the first place.

The question comes later, if it comes at all.

For most of our lives, living supplies its own reasons. Hunger sends us looking for food. Curiosity sends us exploring. Affection draws us toward other people. Responsibility gives shape to our days. Pleasure invites us to repeat, and pain teaches us to avoid.

None of these requires an answer to the ultimate question of why we are here. We live before we understand life, and most of us keep living without ever fully understanding it.

This may be why even people who have thought hard about mortality go on caring about ordinary things. A philosopher who has made peace with death still enjoys breakfast. A scientist who studies aging still looks forward to her grandchildren's visit. A man told he has months to live may still want to know tomorrow's weather, or how his team does on Saturday.

Those who have kept company with the dying often notice the same thing. Interest in small things is rarely the first to go: a question about whether the tomatoes have ripened, a favourite programme not to be missed, news of a neighbour's new baby.

These interests are not denial. They are simply what being alive feels like from the inside.

We often assume that awareness of death ought to turn every moment into something profound. If time is short, surely we should spend it only on what

matters most.

But a human life cannot be made entirely of extraordinary moments. The ordinary is not just filler between the important events. Much of what makes existence precious lives there: familiar voices, repeated gestures, shared meals, absorbing work, conversations that go nowhere in particular, and small pleasures we would grieve if they vanished.

You can understand that life is finite without turning every remaining hour into a project of optimization. In fact, the demand to make every moment count can become its own source of anxiety. We start to fear not only death, but the possibility of wasting the time before it.

And who decides what counts as waste? Is an afternoon spent reading worth less than one spent working? Is a quiet conversation less meaningful than a public achievement? Must every year produce visible progress to justify having been lived?

Perhaps one of the freedoms that come with accepting mortality is this: life does not always have to prove its value through accomplishment.

Sometimes taking part is enough.

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III. THE MODERN LUXURY OF HAVING A FUTURE

Our relationship with death has changed enormously in a short span of history.

For most of the human story, infectious disease, childbirth, poor sanitation, hunger and violence made survival far less predictable. Child mortality was brutally high. Many families buried children, and adults died at ages we would now call tragically young.

People did reach old age, and attitudes toward death varied widely across cultures. But in most societies death was visible. It happened at home, in the next room, in the family's own bed.

Vaccines, clean water, antibiotics, better nutrition and public health have transformed that picture. In much of the world, most children now survive into adulthood and can reasonably expect to grow old. Someone in a wealthy country can plan education, career, home, family and retirement across half a century.

This is one of humanity's greatest achievements. It has also quietly changed how we imagine time.

We now treat longevity as something to manage. We track blood pressure, cholesterol, sleep, steps and diet. We calculate retirement savings against life-expectancy tables. We see doctors not only when we are ill but to lower the odds of illness decades from now.

None of this is wrong. Prevention and planning have saved countless lives. But there is a subtle psychological side effect: the better we organize the future, the easier it becomes to experience that future as already promised.

A forty-year-old talks confidently about retiring at sixty-five, traveling at seventy, moving somewhere quieter at seventy-five. These are reasonable plans. They are expectations, not appointments.

Modern medicine has widened the horizon within which we can plan. It has not removed uncertainty from that horizon.

The Roman philosopher Seneca saw this trap two thousand years ago, long before pension funds. In *On the Shortness of Life*, he mocks the man who postpones living until he has finished his obligations, as if he could be sure the years would wait for him. Life is not short, Seneca argued; we make it short by deferring it.

And as we get older, a new question surfaces. If I have already lived sixty or seventy years, what should I expect from the ones that remain? Should I keep

chasing the ambitions of my younger self? Lower my expectations? Begin preparing, psychologically, for the end?

There is no universal answer. Some people discover new ambitions late in life. Others turn toward relationships, reflection, or pleasures they once had no time for. Some experience aging as liberation from professional and social expectations. Others struggle with failing health, loneliness, or lost independence.

Old age is not a single emotional destination.

Still, research points in an interesting direction. The Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen has spent decades studying how people's goals shift as they sense time running short. Her socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that when the future feels open, we chase new information and new people. When it feels limited, whether because of age, illness or some other ending, we turn toward emotional meaning and the people who matter most.

Crucially, her work suggests this shift is driven less by age itself than by perceived time. Young people facing a serious illness or a looming departure show the same pattern.

In other words, the awareness of limited time does not just sadden us. It sorts us. We grow less interested in collecting acquaintances and more interested in keeping the friendships that matter. We care less about proving ourselves and more about how we spend an ordinary afternoon.



FROM THE ESSAY

“Tomorrow is not guaranteed. But neither has it been cancelled.”

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That does not mean ambition disappears, or that older people are automatically wiser. It means the time we believe we have shapes what we think is worth pursuing.

The future still matters. We simply stop imagining it in the same way.

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IV. WOULD I REGRET IT IF I DIED?

Back to my birthday, and back to the question.

Suppose I knew this would be my last one. What, exactly, would I regret?

My first answer would be unfinished plans. Places I meant to visit. Books I meant to read. Ideas I meant to develop, projects I kept postponing, experiences I

assumed there would be time for. A language never learned. A city always one trip away. A manuscript still waiting in a drawer.

There would be many. Human ambition has no natural finish line. Finishing one project usually seeds the next. Reaching a destination reveals new ones. Even the most accomplished person alive can imagine more worth doing.

If dying without regret meant finishing everything we ever hoped to do, nobody would manage it.

But I suspect the regrets that would really hurt are not about projects. They are about people.

Conversations I avoided. Affection I assumed was understood but never said out loud. Time I failed to give someone who needed it. Relationships worn down by pride, impatience, misunderstanding, or the comfortable belief that there would always be another chance to repair them.

Most of us carry at least one of these: a call we kept meaning to return, an apology that came too late, or one we still have not made.

The Australian palliative-care worker Bronnie Ware became widely known for writing down what her dying patients told her they regretted. Her list was anecdotal, not scientific, but it struck a nerve with millions of readers. Near the top: wishing they had lived truer to themselves rather than to others' expectations, wishing they had not worked so hard, and wishing they had stayed in touch with friends.

The psychologists Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec found something similar in a more systematic way. In the short term, people tend to regret things they did. Over longer stretches of time, the regrets that linger tend to be about things they did not do: the chances not taken, the words not said.

This is the crucial distinction. Unfinished ambitions are partly a matter of fate. We cannot visit every country, pursue every career, develop every talent or live every possible version of a human life. Time and circumstance limit us all.

But some regrets concern things that were already within reach. There are apologies we could have made, calls we could have returned, questions we could have asked, people we could have listened to more carefully.

Not every regret can be prevented, and not every broken relationship can be mended. Yet the awareness of mortality can help us tell apart two kinds of

unfinished business: ambitions that can stay unfinished without diminishing a life, and responsibilities whose neglect we would genuinely want to correct.

Still, I wonder whether the question itself contains a mistake.

Over two thousand years ago, Epicurus offered a famously tidy argument. Death is nothing to us, he said, because where death is, we are not, and where we are, death is not. We never actually meet it. Whatever death is, it is not an experience we will have.

The argument rests on a premise: that death is simply the end of awareness. Not everyone accepts that premise. But if it holds, the logic applied to my question is hard to escape. Death is not an event I can review afterward, the way I might review a failed investment or a missed train. I can fear dying. I can fear pain, separation, or the disappearance of everything I have known. But there is no reason to think a future version of me will be around to regret being dead.

What I can experience is regret now, while I am alive. I can regret how I have lived, what I have neglected, and what remains unresolved. And I can fear that my life will end before I get around to doing something about it.

So perhaps the real question is not whether I will regret dying. It is whether I am living in a way that creates regrets I already recognize, and keep postponing.

That question is less dramatic. It is also far more useful. It requires no position on the afterlife or the nature of consciousness. It concerns only the life I have in front of me.

And unlike the certainty of death, it leaves room for action.

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V. THE STRANGE ARITHMETIC OF A BIRTHDAY

Look closely at what a birthday actually celebrates.

The candles stand for years already gone. We count them proudly, though not one of them can be spent again. In almost any other context, watching a finite

resource shrink would feel like loss. Nobody throws a party because their bank balance fell or their fuel tank is lower.

Yet time behaves differently. A year lived is not simply a year used up.

It may hold friendships formed, things learned, children raised, difficulties survived, pleasures enjoyed, and memories that have become part of who we are. The year itself is gone. Its effects are not.

Of course, not every year is a happy one. Some are marked by illness, grief, money trouble or events we would rather forget. For some people a birthday brings loneliness or painful memories, and celebrating is genuinely hard. If the past year was one of those, the birthday does not have to pretend otherwise.

Even that tells us something. Birthdays are not just numbers. They are the days when the passage of time becomes visible, carrying with it whatever our lives currently hold.

In youth, we count forward, celebrating the doors that are opening. Later, we count backward, remembering the people and places that shaped us. And perhaps, eventually, we learn to count in a different way altogether: not just how many years remain, but what it means to be present in the one we are living.

A birthday dinner at seventy may be smaller than one at thirty. There may be fewer people around the table, fewer ambitions to announce, and less interest in impressing anyone.

Yet that smaller table may carry a depth the earlier one could not. The people there are not just guests. They are witnesses to a shared history. They have seen each other through marriages, births, careers, disappointments, illnesses, reconciliations and losses. Their presence holds memories no photograph can fully keep.

The conversation may be entirely ordinary. Someone complains about the food. Someone tells the story everyone has heard a dozen times. There is laughter, a small disagreement, and eventually the cake arrives.

Nothing extraordinary needs to happen. The remarkable fact is that these people are still here to share it.

And there is something else. A birthday does not celebrate the completion of a life. It marks a point inside one.

Even late in life, tomorrow can still bring something new: an unexpected friendship, a reconciliation, a discovery, a new interest, or simply a good day. The remaining future may be shorter, but it has not stopped being a future.

Perhaps this is why celebrating another birthday is neither denial nor resignation. It is a recognition that the passing of time means two things at once: something has been lost, and something has been lived.

The candles acknowledge both, whether or not we think about it as we blow them out.

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VI. THE FREEDOM TO KEEP LIVING

We often describe human existence as a battle against death, as if life and death were rivals competing for victory.

The more interesting question is why we insist on measuring the value of existence against permanence at all.

A beautiful afternoon is not worthless because the sun goes down. A conversation does not lose its meaning because it ends. A piece of music does not have to play forever for listening to it to matter. Nobody leaves a concert complaining that the symphony finished.

We accept this easily when we talk about single experiences. We struggle to apply the same reasoning to life as a whole.

We want more time, of course, and for good reason. More time means more chances to love, learn, repair, explore and take part in the world. But wanting life to continue does not require believing that its end makes everything before it meaningless.

We can know our lives are finite and still plan next summer's trip. We can know our bodies are aging and still look after them. We can know the people we love will not be with us forever and still enjoy their company tonight, perhaps more because we know it.

A book is worth writing even if it will one day be forgotten. A child is worth raising even though no parent controls the future. A friendship is precious without any guarantee of permanence.

And a birthday is worth celebrating without any promise that another will follow.

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VII. IT'S MY BIRTHDAY, THEN...

So here I am, a year older, sitting with the same strange certainty that has accompanied every human being who ever lived.

I know that my life will end. What I do not know is when, how, or how much living remains between today and that moment.

I know some ambitions will stay unfinished. Some places will never be visited, some books never read, some ideas never developed. Even a very long life cannot hold every possible experience.

I also know that age will not automatically resolve my regrets or turn uncertainty into wisdom. There may be mistakes I still need to own, people I should see more often, and decisions I keep postponing for reasons that will look flimsy later.

So, before the cake, a small and practical resolution: one call, one letter, one plan finally booked, this week. Not because I expect to die soon, but because there is no good reason to keep waiting.

Those are things worth attending to while I still can.

But I do not want my birthday to become an annual audit of everything I failed to accomplish. There is something exhausting about treating a whole existence as a project awaiting a final grade.

Life was never a contract guaranteeing enough time to finish every ambition. Nor is it a competition in which whoever achieves the most gets to claim victory over death. Perhaps its value does not depend on a final result at all.

We were born into a world we did not make, given a stretch of consciousness whose length we cannot control, and allowed to take part in experiences that would otherwise never have been ours. Some are hard. Some are extraordinary. Most fall somewhere in between.

Together, they make a life.

A birthday offers an unusual chance to recognize that life while we are still living it. We can look back at the years without turning them into a catalogue of mistakes. We can look ahead without assuming the future has been promised. We can enjoy the people around us without pretending that their presence, or ours, will last forever.

The question Would I regret it if I died? may never have a meaningful answer in the form I first asked it.

But another question does:

While I am alive, am I letting the certainty of death shrink the experience of living?

I would rather not.

There will always be unfinished business, unfulfilled ambitions and uncertainties I cannot control. That is not proof of a failed life. It may simply be proof that life holds more possibilities than any one person can use up.

So if there is cake, I will enjoy it. If friends gather, I will be glad to see them. If someone makes a joke about my age, I will probably laugh, even if I have heard it before.

And when the candles are lit, I do not need to pretend that blowing them out denies the passage of time. They stand for years I have already lived.

Tomorrow is not guaranteed. But neither has it been cancelled.

It's my birthday, then. I am one year closer to the end, and I am also here, celebrating another year of being alive.

Today, that is reason enough.

A question for you: Is there one regret you already recognize, something still within reach, that you keep postponing? You don't have to name it. But if you're willing to share how you finally acted on one, I would love to read it.



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