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Memento Mori, Amor Fati

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Editorial

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"*Timothy Leary's dead*
No, no, he's outside looking in
He'll fly his astral plane
Takes you trips around the bay
Brings you back the same day
Timothy Leary, Timothy Leary"
-Ray Thomas, The Moody Blues, Legend of a Mind (1968)

The Funeral Pyre

April 15, 2019, 18:20 CEST. I am sitting in front of my television, Notre-Dame de Paris is ablaze in flames. With a view from the Quai de Montebello, the television cameras capture the flames engulfing the roof of the cathedral, and then suddenly the towering spire of this 800-year-old iconic structure topples and collapses into the roof of the cathedral which seems to be completely engulfed in flames. This UNESCO World Heritage Site, whose construction began in the 12th century, was being destroyed by fire with the entire world watching. In the center of Paris, the heart of Paris. My heart sank, so many personal memories of Paris passing before my eyes. So many of these memories involving at least a quick visit to Notre-Dame de Paris, a touchstone for all my trips to Paris. A city I love, a city so many of us love for so many reasons. For me, a place of romance, love, art, style, food, philosophy, LIFE. It was the city in which I proposed marriage to my wife. managing to hide the ring until the last evening of our trip when I proposed in a small quaint restaurant just in the shadow of the Notre-Dame de Paris spire. How could the Notre-Dame de Paris of Paris be no more, just cease to exist? The shock was a revelation that nothing is permanent. That all things must pass.

Memento Mori

Memento mori - remember that you must die. I am not a scholar of the Stoic philosophers, which include Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca, and I am not a practitioner of Stoicism. However, the Stoics used the principle of *memento mori* as a reminder to affirm life and to create the urgent pursuit of a meaningful life as a constant and focused priority. A call to life! And affirmation of life. The Stoics saw each day of life as precious, a gift, and the awareness that we are mortal, and the fact that we all must die serves as a constant reminder not to waste the most precious commodity in life: time. The imperative was to focus your time on priorities that served your authentic purpose in life. The purpose of life was to serve others, to serve truth and wisdom, to learn and to teach, to be true to ourselves and our nature, to live in acceptance of the natural world, to focus only on what we can control (our thoughts and attitudes, and how we respond to all we encounter), and not waste time on what we cannot control (our internal bodies, external events, other people and what they thought or how they behaved, outcomes beyond our control like aging and death). *Memento mori* is a recognition that the fact of death can save our lives. That death teaches us how best to live. That in creating a human life, we are creating a life that ends and so this creative process of living must be informed by the limitations and reality of death. We must pursue a meaningful life as we pursue a meaningful death. Living is, in great part, a preparation for how to die. Seneca (1997), in *On the Shortness of Life*, wrote "Let us prepare our minds as if we'd come to the very end of life. Let us postpone nothing. Let us balance life's books each day…The one who puts the finishing touches on their life each day is never short of time." Nietzsche would remind us of the countervailing concept of *memento vivere* - remember that you must live. Live each day with urgency because we die, and each day of life is precious.

We live, however, in a death-denying culture. Fear of death, or what Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) called "death phobia," is pervasive in our culture. It appears to be an innate biological response of our central nervous system to the threat of extinction. Ernest Becker hypothesized that human beings created "culture" to deal with Death Terror. Early cultures were all primarily religions and they all supplied a literal or metaphorical solution to the problem of death, which was that death is NOT the end of existence or of

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consciousness. Death is not the end but rather the beginning of an even more important existence in heaven. Death is not the end but rather the beginning of a series of rebirths and reincarnations. Death is not the end of consciousness, but that consciousness continues to exist beyond death. As young Harvard professors in the 1960s, Leary and Alpert intensively studied psilocybin and eventually more potent psychedelic drugs like lysergic acid (LSD) in order to explore and expand consciousness, a consciousness that transcended the death of the body and the brain and existed beyond death, as revealed by powerful, mystical psychedelic experiences that awakened us humans to the truth of existence and the infinite nature of consciousness. Leary and Alpert saw these mystical or "sacred" experiences as having great potential for the dying and the relief of death phobia. If consciousness exists beyond death, then there is existence beyond death and death is not truly the end. After hundreds of personal psychedelic sessions with psilocybin and LSD and accompanying others in what he estimated to be over 3,000 "trips," Timothy Leary was still afraid of dying when he was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. "It's all in the nervous system" he would say, ascribing his fear to his human animal biology. Understandable and probably accurate, but clearly for him, the "powerful awakening truth of our universal consciousness" revealed in his many psychedelic-induced mystical experiences was not sufficient to assuage death anxiety. Had he truly accepted his fate, his destiny, that we die? Was he truly on an astral plane looking in from the outside, detached and accepting of the outcome?

Amor Fati

The Stoic philosophers did indeed emphasize that the path toward equanimity and freedom from anxiety (e.g. death anxiety) was to live life guided by an understanding of "what is under one's control, and what is NOT under one's control." It was prudent and useful to be spending time, energy, and worrying about things that were under one's control; very little, in fact, is under our control. In fact, all that is under our control is how we think about events and circumstances, choosing our attitude and how we respond to events. We can control nothing else. We cannot control external events, what others do or say, internal events in our body such as mutations of cellular DNA and the development of mutagenic tumors, etc. We can, of course, eat healthfully, exercise, get screened for illnesses and cancers, etc., but ultimately this is no guarantee of not developing cancer or other illnesses, aging, and dying. The Stoic philosophers would use the metaphor of the expert archer. The good archer possesses the most magnificent bow possible, flawless arrows with design, and materials that optimized accuracy of flight. However, in optimizing the outcome of hitting his target, this archer could control only the use of the finest equipment, practice hours and hours for many months honing his skills, but once the arrow left his bow, the archer loses all control of the arrow hitting the target. The wind may shift, the target might move, a bird might cross the arrow's path, etc. Thus, the Stoics urged us to not be attached to "outcomes" but rather the processes; focus on living, meaningfully, in the moment, preparing for the future prudently, but accepting that the ultimate outcome of all endeavors, of Life itself, is out of our control. They advocated becoming less attached to outcomes and more attached to processes. They advocated not worrying about outcomes you have no control over. They advocated accepting the laws of nature and physics and existence, that all humans are mortal and finite. That we are born, live, and die, and it is all natural, all consistent with nature, all inescapable because of the laws of nature, and therefore our destiny. Our inescapable fate; a fate that had to be and could be no other way, and so was normal, natural, and nothing to fear. *Amor fati* in Latin means "love of fate" or "love of one's fate." It's a Stoic call to embrace your mortality, to strive toward acceptance of death as normal, natural, and an opportunity to affirm the meaning, significance, and love you've lived in your life. A life that Timothy Leary and Ram Dass would point out was "highly unlikely to have occurred in the first place! A miraculous feat of randomness."

Turn on, Tune In, Drop out

Timothy Leary exhorted us to "Turn on, tune in, drop out." What was he truly advising? Perhaps he was advising us "to live fully, with urgency…to turn inward" and be sure that we live our lives authentically, prioritizing what is meaningful and loving, and finally, to understand that "our death is not about us" but about the people we love and need to teach how not to fear death. To strive to find meaning in death, to accept the life we've lived, forgive ourselves for being mortal, to face death with some peace and equanimity, and to teach our loved ones not to fear our fate.

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