



Video Transcript

Finding Peace and Meaning in Mortality: Embracing Life Through Awareness of Death

When we think about death, it's something we become aware of very early on in our life. Death is shrouded in the unknown. It's a mystery. And very often the way we as human beings respond to mystery is by feeling afraid, and that's natural. It's just human. I want to suggest a few ways that this might benefit you and how you can enter into that conversation.

Hi, my name is Dr. Judith Ehrman Shapiro, and in Learning with Gaia today, we're going to be talking about the topic of death, learning to find peace and meaning as we consider our own mortality. I found this poem called Talking with Grief by Denise Levertov, and I love it. I really love it. It's called Talking to Grief, but I want you to think about it as talking to death. And she says, oh, grief. I should not treat you like a homeless dog who comes to the back door for a crust, for a meatless bone. I should trust you. I should coax you into the house and give you your own corner, a worn mat to lie on, your own water dish. You think I don't know you've been living under my porch? You long for your real place to be readied before winter comes. You need your name, your collar and tag. You need the right to warn off intruders, to consider my house your own and me your person and yourself my own dog. When we think about death, it's something we become aware of very early on in

our life. We see plants and trees outside that fade at wintertime. We experience the loss of pets very often, the loss of loved ones very early on. And as soon as we're able to abstract, to hold abstract thoughts in our head, ones will die as well. And yet, the conversation around death remains difficult at times. It's very complex. So there's you and your personality. There's your religious and your spiritual beliefs. There's the experiences that you go through and sometimes there's trauma that you go through around loss. We also have cultural conditioning. There are cultures that embrace death and there are cultures that bury death. There are even cultures where bringing up the topic of death is considered bad manners. You also have a family culture of death. I know in my family, we never do anything in a facility. Everything is done graveside. But that's my family's culture. So we come into the world with all these experiences. And it's not simple. It's not a simple relationship. So much goes into how we feel. In this conversation, I want to suggest to you the idea of beginning a conversation that embraces the reality that death is inevitable. There's kind of an evolution that's happening right now in the death culture in the world, and it very often goes by the name good life, good death. Well, what does that mean, and how do we participate, and what do we stand to gain in a conversation about good life and good death? I want to suggest a few ways that this might benefit you and how you can enter into that conversation. One is to realize, and I want to validate and stand by you, if you feel that death is a difficult topic. Death is shrouded in the unknown. It's a mystery. And very often the way we as human beings respond to mystery is by feeling afraid. And that's natural. It's just human. We all have habits of personality of how we deal with fear. Some of us love to rush at our fears. Some of us avoid them. Some of us... dance and denial around them. So what's the value of confronting a fear of death? The value begins when I practice radical self-acceptance. What does that mean? It means that I check inside of myself, what am I feeling? I feel nervous. I feel afraid. I feel blissful. I feel joy and gratitude. Whatever I'm feeling as a human being does not need to be pushed away. I just open my heart and accept whatever it is that arrives when I think about my life and my own death. And then with that, I practice something that I call self-companioning. I'm a trained end of life doula. And an end of life doula trains to walk with people in the last stages of their life, whether it's through terminal illness, whether it's with advanced age. We're not imposing structures on the person who's getting close to the end of their life. We're there to listen, to validate, to have them with a companion to walk through those end of days. And I've realized at the end of my training that I could do that with myself, that I could offer the same gentle, kind, present, and engaged presence for myself as I contend with the idea of death.

The second thing that I wanted to mention is that You know, there have been a lot of studies now of people who experience near-death experiences. They kind of come to the brink. Maybe they're in an accident. They suffer an illness. Maybe they die for a few minutes, but they're able to return into life somehow. You'll see a lot of these on social media, and I really encourage you to watch them because almost inevitably, the person comes back and says, you know what? I realize how precious and how dear and how fragile and how blessed and how miraculous it is that I am alive right at that moment. I'd like to read to you. a beautiful poem by Mary Oliver called The Summer Day. And she says, who made the world? Who made the swan and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper? I mean, the one who has flung herself out of the grass. The one who is eating sugar out of my hand. Who is moving her jaws. back and forth instead of up and down, who is gazing around with her enormous, complicated eyes. Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. Now she snaps her wings open and floats away. I don't know exactly what prayer is. I don't know how to pay attention. how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I've been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do? with your one wild and precious life. So a conversation on good life and good death asks us to embrace the miracle of every day. And it also gives us the opportunity to show presence and purpose as we move forward. There's a psychologist named Ken Wilber. And he used these four phrases. And I laugh because sometimes I get them wrong and I make them up. But it basically goes like this. And it's a little bit harsh. You ready? Clean up, grow up, wake up, show up. So clean up means attend to what you need in your life for your own self-healing to make life. worth your beautiful effort and time. Grow up, allow yourself to change, allow yourself to evolve, allow the experiences of your life to help you reach forward, reach up, to show up in your life with presence and with meaning. and to wake up to an extraordinary opportunity that each one of us has been given with life on this planet. So rare, so precious. An encounter with death allows us to focus our attention, to live with appreciation and gratitude, and to live life more fully. Thank you so much for joining with me in this conversation. From my heart to yours. We hope you enjoyed this practice with Gaia. And if you did, make sure to heart it above and explore more suggestions below. Till next time, love, light, and Gaia.

