

Eleven

My ~~Ten~~ Favorite Books Related to Death

The Art of Dying Well: A Practical Guide to a Good End of Life

by Katy Butler

This book is about living as well as possible for as long as possible and adapting successfully to change. The author, an award-winning journalist and prominent end-of-life speaker, shows how to thrive in later life (even when coping with a chronic medical condition), how to get the best from one's health system, and how to make one's own "good death" more likely.

Packed with helpful insights and inspiring stories, this handbook of step-by-step preparations—practical, communal, physical, and sometimes spiritual—will help the reader make the most of his or her remaining time—be it decades, years, or months.

Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine, and What Matters in the End

by Atul Gawande

Medicine has triumphed in modern times, transforming the dangers of childbirth, injury, and disease from harrowing to manageable. But when it comes to the inescapable realities of aging and death, what medicine can do often runs counter to what it should.

The author, a practicing surgeon, examines his profession's ultimate limitations and failures—in his own practices, as well as others'—as life draws to a close. Riveting, honest, and humane, the book shows how the ultimate goal is not a good death but a good life—all the way to the very end.

The Divine Art of Dying: How to Live Well While Dying

by Karen Speerstra and Herbert Anderson

This book looks at the unique moment when a person turns toward death and examines what the dying person and their caregivers can expect. Based on the author's own experience, it's about how we might die well and live well up to the very end of our physical existence.

Combining personal stories with solid research on palliative and hospice care, the book identifies the decisions the dying one and his or her loved ones and friends must make. It takes a broader approach than just a medical one, including spiritual insights from many sources along with references from literature, movies, and current culture.

Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life

by Ira Byock

The book brings the reader to the homes and bedsides of families with whom the author, a palliative care physician, has worked, telling stories of love and reconciliation in the face of tragedy, pain, medical drama, and conflict. Through the true stories of patients, he shows that a lot of important emotional work can be accomplished in the final months, weeks, and even days of life.

It is a companion for families, showing them how to deal with doctors, how to talk to loved ones, and how to make the end of life as meaningful and enriching as the beginning.

Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved

by Kate Bowler

The author is a professor at Duke Divinity School with a modest Christian upbringing, but she specializes in the study of the prosperity gospel, a creed that sees fortune as a blessing from God and misfortune as a mark of God's disapproval. At thirty-five, everything in her life seems to point toward "blessing." She is thriving in her job, married to her high school sweetheart, and loves life with her newborn son.

Then she is diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

The prospect of her own mortality forces Kate to realize that she has been tacitly subscribing to the prosperity gospel, living with the conviction that she can control the shape of her life with “a surge of determination.” Even as this type of Christianity celebrates the American can-do spirit, it implies that if you “can’t do” and succumb to illness or misfortune, you are a failure. Kate is very sick, and no amount of positive thinking will shrink her tumors. What does it mean to die, she wonders, in a society that insists everything happens for a reason? Kate is stripped of this certainty only to discover that without it, life is hard but beautiful in a way it never has been before.

Frank and funny, dark and wise, the author pulls the reader deeply into her life in an account she populates affectionately with a colorful, often hilarious retinue of friends, mega-church preachers, relatives, and doctors. This book tells her story, offering up her irreverent, hard-won observations on dying and the ways it has taught her to live.

The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully

by Frank Ostaseski

Life and death are a package deal. They cannot be pulled apart, and we cannot truly live unless we are aware of death. This book is an exhilarating meditation on the meaning of life and how maintaining an ever-present consciousness of death can bring us closer to our truest selves.

As a renowned teacher of compassionate caregiving and the cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project, the author has sat on the precipice of death with more than a thousand people. In this book he distills the lessons gleaned over the course of his career, offering an evocative and stirring guide that points to a radical path to transformation.

The invitations show readers how to wake up fully to their lives. The invitations can be understood as best practices for anyone coping with loss or navigating any sort of transition or crisis; they guide toward appreciating life’s preciousness.

Here If You Need Me: A True Story

by Kate Braestrup

The book is the story of the author’s remarkable journey from grief to faith to happiness—as she holds her family together in the wake of her husband’s death, pursues his dream of becoming a minister, and ultimately finds her calling as a chaplain to search-and-rescue workers. It is dramatic, funny, deeply moving, and simply unforgettable—an uplifting account of finding God through helping others and of the small miracles that happen every day when a heart is grateful and love is restored.

How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying

by Karla A. Erickson

As we live longer and die more slowly and differently than our ancestors, we have come to rely more and more on end-of-life caregivers. These workers navigate a changing landscape of old age and death that many people have little preparation to encounter. This book is an absorbing and sensitive investigation of end-of-life issues from the perspectives of patients, relatives, medical professionals, and support staff.

The author, a sociology professor, immersed herself in the daily life of workers and elders in a Midwestern community for more than two years to explore important questions around the theme of “how we die now.” She moves readers through and beyond the many fears that attend the social condition of old age and reveals the pleasures of living longer and the costs of slower, sometimes senseless ways of dying.

For all who are grappling with the “elder boom,” the book offers new ways of thinking about our longer lives.

Mercy: Life in the Season of Dying

by Peter Roebbelen

What would you do with your life, if you knew it was going to end soon? This book is a pastor's recording of the life lessons he's discovered as a result of sitting at the bedsides of courageous people facing death's certainty. He explores the gifts that people have given him and the wisdom he's gleaned from them—almost as if he's been the one being counseled, rather than the other way around.

This joyful and instructive book will encourage anyone who reads it to live to the fullest in the present and to love the people around them as never before.

On Living

by Kerry Egan

As a hospice chaplain, the author didn't offer sermons or prayers, unless they were requested. In fact, she found that the dying rarely want to talk about God, at least not overtly. Instead, she discovered she'd been granted a powerful chance to witness firsthand what she calls the "spiritual work of dying"—the work of finding or making meaning of one's life, the experiences it's contained and the people who have touched it, the betrayals, wounds, unfinished business, and unrealized dreams.

Instead of talking, she mainly listened: to stories of hope and regret, shame and pride, mystery and revelation, and secrets held too long. Most of all, though, she listened as her patients talked about love—love for their children and partners and friends; love they didn't know how to offer; love they gave unconditionally; love they, sometimes belatedly, learned to grant themselves.

This isn't a book about dying—it's a book about living. Each of the author's patients taught her something about what matters in the end—how to find courage in the face of fear or the strength to make amends; how to be profoundly compassionate and fiercely empathetic; how to see the world in grays instead of black and white. In this hopeful, moving, and beautiful book, she passes along all their precious and necessary gifts.

When Breath Becomes Air

by Paul Kalanithi

At the age of thirty-six, on the verge of completing a decade's worth of training as a neurosurgeon, the author was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. And just like that, the future he and his wife had imagined evaporated.

The book chronicles the author's transformation from a naïve medical student "possessed," as he wrote, "by the question of what, given that all organisms die, makes a virtuous and meaningful life" into a neurosurgeon at Stanford working in the brain, the most critical place for human identity, and finally into a patient and new father confronting his own mortality.

What makes life worth living in the face of death? What do you do when the future, no longer a ladder toward your goals in life, flattens out into a perpetual present? What does it mean to have a child, to nurture a new life as another fades away? These are some of the questions with which the author wrestles in this profoundly moving, exquisitely observed memoir.

Other Books About Death

The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of Dying
by Jeffrey P. Bishop

The Art of Dying: Writing the Final Story
by Edwidge Danticat

At the Edge of Life: Conversations When Death Is Near
by Richard L. Morgan

Before Forever After: When Conversations About Living Meet Questions About Dying
by Helena Dolny

The Conversation: A Revolutionary Plan for End-of-Life Care
by Angelo E. Volandes

Crossing the Threshold of Eternity: What the Dying Can Teach the Living
by Robert L. Wise

A Faithful Farewell: Living Your Last Chapter with Love
by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife
by Lisa Miller

How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter
by Sherman B. Nuland

In Awe of Being Human: A Doctor's Stories from the Edge of Life and Death
by Betsy MacGregor

A Long Letting Go: Meditations on Losing Someone You Love
by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

Mortal Blessings: A Sacramental Farewell
by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Time to Talk About Dying: How Clergy and Chaplains Can Help Senior Adults Prepare for a Good Death
by Fred Grewe

What Do I Say? Talking and Praying with Someone Who Is Dying
by Margrit Anna Banta

Other Memoirs

The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying
by Nina Riggs

Dying: A Memoir
by Cory Taylor

The End of Your Life Book Club
by Will Schwalbe

Knocking on Heaven's Door: The Path to a Better Way of Death
by Katy Butler

Letters from the Land of Cancer
by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

The Long Goodbye: A Memoir
by Meghan O'Rourke

The Space Between: A Memoir of Mother-Daughter Love at the End of Life
by Virginia A. Simpson

DVDs

Being Mortal
a Frontline production

Confronting Death: A Christian Approach to the End of Life
with Walter Wangerin, Jr.

Consider the Conversation
a documentary on a taboo subject

Into the Night: Portraits of Life and Death
a documentary by Helen Whitney

On Our Own Terms
with Bill Moyers

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