

# On the World and Time, Life and Death



We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.

—Tom Stoppard, 1966

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

—Anatole France, 1881

Nothing is as far away as one minute ago.

—Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

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Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.

—Democritus, third century BC

God made everything out of nothing, but the nothingness shows through.

—Paul Valéry, 1941

Eternal nothingness is OK if you happen to be dressed for it.

—Woody Allen, 1971

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The whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.

—Umberto Eco, 2014

The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.

—Albert Einstein, 1955

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted, without a date, in many collections, with attributions either to Jef Mallett or to Jim Bishop. Unfortunately, I was unable to resolve this dilemma.

Nature, in her indifference, makes no distinction between good and evil.

—*Anatole France*, 1914

Nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent.

—*Richard Dawkins*, 1995

This universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly. It is simply indifferent.

—*John Haynes Holmes*, 1932.

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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.

—*William Shakespeare*, 1599

All the world's a stage,  
And most of us are desperately under-rehearsed.

—*Seán O'Casey*, 1964<sup>2</sup>

All the world's a cage,  
And all the men and women are merely hamsters.<sup>3</sup>

—*Tony Vigorito*, 2017

It is impossible to imagine the universe run by a wise, just and omnipotent God, but it is quite easy to imagine it run by a board of gods. If such a board actually exists it operates exactly like the board of a corporation that is losing money.

—*H. L. Mencken*, 1956

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When I was born I wept, and every day brings a reason why.

—*Spanish proverb*

Maybe this world is another planet's hell.

—*Aldous Huxley*, 1954

Who made the world I cannot tell;  
'Tis made, and here am I in hell.

—*A. E. Housman*, 1936

The world's a sorry wench, akin  
To all that's fail and frightful:  
The world's as ugly, ay, as Sin –  
And almost as delightful.

—*Frederick Locker-Lampson*, 1862

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<sup>2</sup>I am not fully confident this publication was the first one.

<sup>3</sup>This is an extension of the earlier first line by Jeanne Phillips.

The world's a fine place for those who go out to take it; there's lots of unknown stuff in it yet.

—*John Galsworthy*, 1901

The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.

—*Steven Weinberg*, 1993

The actual tragedies of life bear no relation to one's preconceived ideas. In the event, one is always bewildered by their simplicity, their grandeur of design, and by that element of the bizarre which seems inherent in them.

—*Jean Cocteau*, 1955

Tragedy is the difference between what is and what could have been.

—*Abba Eban*, 1963

Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.

—*William Hazlitt*, 1819

The mark of your ignorance is the depth of your belief in injustice and tragedy. What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.

—*Richard Bach*, 1977

This world is a comedy to those that think; a tragedy to those that feel.

—*Horace Walpole*, 1769<sup>4</sup>

Life is a festival only to the wise.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1841

Life is too tragic for sadness: Let us rejoice.

—*Edward Abbey*, 1990

Life would be tragic if it weren't funny.

—*Stephen Hawking*, 2004

Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.

—*George Bernard Shaw*, 1911

Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.

—*Oscar Wilde*, 1882

Not a shred of evidence exists in favor of the idea that life is serious.

—*Brendan Gill*, 1975

The more you find out about the world, the more opportunities there are to laugh at it.

—*Bill Nye*, 1892<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Sometimes misattributed to Jean de la Bruyère.

<sup>5</sup>Frequently misattributed to "Bill Nye the Science Guy" (William Sanford Nye, 1955–present).

In the end, everything is a gag.

—*Charlie Chaplin*, 1974

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What is life but a series of inspired follies?

—*George Bernard Shaw*, 1912

Life is just one damn thing after another.

—*Elbert Hubbard*, 1909

Life is a four-letter word.

—*Lenny Bruce*<sup>6</sup>

Life is never fair.

—*Oscar Wilde*, 1895

Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.

—*Paul Gauguin*, 1903

Life *is* pain, Highness! Anyone who says differently is selling something<sup>7</sup>

—*William Goldman*, 1987

Life is one long struggle in the dark.

—*Lucretius*, first century BC

Life is a warfare.

—*Seneca*, 64 AD

Life is a struggle, but not a warfare, it is a day's labor, [...] where we may think and sing and enjoy as we work.

—*John Burroughs*, 1913

Life is an offensive directed against the repetitious mechanism of the Universe.

—*Alfred North Whitehead*, 1933

Life is like an onion. You peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.

—*Carl Sandburg*<sup>8</sup>

Life is made up of sobs, sniffles and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

—*O. Henry*, 1906

Life is a protracted struggle against the Adversary, who is man himself.

—*Max Lerner*, 1959

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<sup>6</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reputable sources including *Wikiquote*.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. "Life's good", the LG corporation's motto.

<sup>8</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reputable collections, starting not later than 1970.

Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that?

—*Marie Curie*, 1937

Life is easier to take than you'd think; all that is necessary is to accept the impossible, do without indispensable, and bear the intolerable.

—*Kathleen Norris*, 1928

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Life is a hospital where each patient is possessed by the desire to change his bed.

—*Charles Baudelaire*, 1862

Life is like a department store: it has everything but what you are looking for.

—*Emil Krotky*, 1966

Life is a zoo in a jungle.

—*Peter De Vries*, 1967

Life is a sexually transmitted disease.

—*Anonymous*<sup>9</sup>

Life is not an exact science, it is an art.

—*Samuel Butler*, 1912

Life is something that everyone should try at least once.

—*Henry J. Tillman*, 2009

In spite of the cost of living, it's still popular.

—*Laurence J. Peter*, 1977<sup>10</sup>

Life is a long lesson in humility.

—*J. M. Barrie*, 1891

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This life is a test – it is only a test. If it had been an actual life, you would have received further instructions on where to go and what to do.

—*Jack Kornfield*, 1993<sup>11</sup>

Life can only be understood backwards. But [...] it must be lived forwards.

—*Søren Kierkegaard*, 1844

Life is fired at us point-blank.

—*José Ortega y Gasset*, 1957

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<sup>9</sup>To this joke, popular at least since 1980, R. D. Laing added (in 1985): "...with the 100% mortality rate".

<sup>10</sup>Sometimes misattributed to Kathleen Norris.

<sup>11</sup>I have seen claims that this joke had been used by others earlier than 1993, but was unable to confirm them.

Life is half spent before one knows what life is.

—*French proverb*

Life is like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on.

—*Samuel Butler, 1895*

Life is a maze in which we take the wrong turning before we have learnt to walk.

—*Cyril Connolly, 1933*

Life is the only art that we are required to practice without preparation.

—*Lewis Mumford, 1951*

Life is the art of drawing without an eraser.

—*John W. Gardner, 1992*<sup>12</sup>

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Life is something that happens when you can't get to sleep.

—*Fran Lebowitz, 1978*

Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans.

—*Allen Saunders, 1957*<sup>13</sup>

Life flows on within you and without you.

—*George Harrison, 1967*

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Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experimentation perilous, and judgment difficult.<sup>14</sup>

—*Hippocrates*<sup>15</sup>

Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering - and it's all over much too soon.

—*Woody Allen, 1975*

Life isn't long enough for love and art.

—*W. Somerset Maugham, 1919*

Life is too short to stuff a mushroom.

—*Shirley Conran, 1975*

Growing old is no more than a bad habit which a busy man has no time to form.

—*André Maurois, 1939*

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<sup>12</sup>Actually, he began this line as "Somebody said that ...".

<sup>13</sup>Frequently misattributed to others, including John Lennon, who included this line into his song (recorded in 1980). A more recent popular (anonymous?) version of this maxim is: "Life is what passes by while you're texting."

<sup>14</sup>From the context, the word "art" here means the art and science of medicine.

<sup>15</sup>This sentence was popular already among the Romans, in a shorter Latin form: "*Ars longa, vita brevis*".

The secret of staying young is to live honestly, eat slowly, and lie about your age.

—*Lucille Ball*, 1983

Live forever or die in the attempt.

—*Joseph Heller*, 1961

The proper function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them.

—*Jack London*, 1916

Quit worrying about your health. It'll go away.

—*Robert Orben*, 1991

Old age isn't so bad when you consider the alternative.

—*Maurice Chevalier*, 1960

I detest life-insurance agents: they always argue that I shall some time die, which is not so.

—*Stephen Leacock*, 1910

The majority of people, though they do not know what to do with this life, long for another that shall have no end.

—*Anatole France*, 1914

Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

—*Susan Ertz*, 1943

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A sage dies in time.

—*Maxim Gorky*, 1908

Tired of all this, for restful death I cry.

—*William Shakespeare*, 1609

Death [is] the only thing we haven't succeeded in completely vulgarizing.

—*Aldous Huxley*, 1936

On the plus side, death is one of the few things that can be done just as easily lying down.

—*Woody Allen*, 1976

When I die, I want to go peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather. Not screaming in terror, like the passengers in his car.

—*Jack Handey*, 1993

I'm having a glorious old age. One of my greatest delights is that I have outlived most of my opposition.

—*Maggie Kuhn*, 1978

[He] is one of those people who would be enormously improved by death.

—*Saki*, 1914

I have never killed any one, but I have read some obituary notices with great satisfaction.

—Clarence Darrow, 1932

I didn't attend his funeral, but sent a nice letter saying that I approved of it.

—Anonymous<sup>16</sup>

They say such nice things about people at their funerals that it makes me sad to realize that I'm going to miss mine by just a few days.

—Garrison Keillor, 2005

It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.

—Marcus Aurelius, second century AD

A man should be mourned at his birth, not his death.

—Montesquieu, 1721

The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that this bothers him less and less.

—Václav Havel, 1988

What remains of most people, is only a dash between two dates.

—Georgi Polonsky, 1968<sup>17</sup>

Let life happen to you.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, 1904

You can't do anything about the length of your life, but you can do something about its width and depth.

—Evan Esar, 1924

Life has a value only when it has something valuable as its object.

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1832

It's not the things we do in life that we regret on our death bed, it is the things we do not.

—Randy Pausch, 2008<sup>18</sup>

It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives.

—Samuel Johnson, 1769

You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.

—Anonymous<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>This popular joke, frequently misattributed to Mark Twain, is actually just a paraphrase of a longer statement by Ebenezer R. Hoar, made in 1884.

<sup>17</sup>Polonsky was the screenwriter of Stanislav Rostovsky's movie *We'll Live Till Monday*, in that this phrase is pronounced, but I am not confident that it was fully original at that time. Later (in 1996) this idea was used by Linda Ellis as the basis of her popular poem *The Dash*.

<sup>18</sup>From the author's famous *Last Lecture*, given knowing of his impending death of cancer in a few months.

<sup>19</sup>I have seen a rather questionable attribution of this quote to Mae West.

We should remember our dying, and try so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world.

—*John Steinbeck*, 1952

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.

—*Steve Jobs*, 2005

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.

—*Henry David Thoreau*, 1854

The great end of life is not knowledge but action.

—*Thomas Henry Huxley*, 1877

It is absolutely a crime for any man to die possessed of useful knowledge in which nobody else shares.

—*J. A. L. Waddell et al.*, 1933

What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains, and is immortal.

—*Albert Pike*, 1860

Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.

—*Albert Einstein*, 1932

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Lost wealth may be replaced by industry, lost knowledge by study, lost health by temperance or medicine, but lost time is gone for ever.

—*Samuel Smiles*, 1864

A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life.

—*Charles Darwin*, 1836

We have only this moment, sparkling like a star in our hand and melting like a snowflake. Let us use it before it is too late.

—*Marie Beynon Ray*, 1953<sup>20</sup>

We all have such a finite time to leave the world better than we found it.

—*Dave Kellett*, 2012

Time is the most valuable thing a man can spend.<sup>21</sup>

—*Theophrastus*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>In several quote collections, the second name of the author is misspelled as “Beyon”.

<sup>21</sup>Here I have to mention the extremely popular European proverb “Time is money” (frequently misattributed to Benjamin Franklin), but only to register my humble opinion that it is rather shallow.

<sup>22</sup>First quoted by Diogenes Laërtius in third century AD.

Lost time is never found again.

—*Benjamin Franklin*, 1748

Time is a trust, and for every minute of it you will have to account.

—*John Lubbock*, 1895

If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

—*Rudyard Kipling*, 1896

One should count each day a separate life.

—*Seneca*, ~65 AD

Thing of today, accomplished today.

—*Chinese proverb*

Do not wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day.

—*Albert Camus*, 1957

Live neither in the past nor in the future, but let each day's work absorb your entire energies, and satisfy your widest ambition.

—*William Osler*, 1899

Happy is the man who can recognize in the work of to-day a connected portion of the work of life and an embodiment of the work of eternity.

—*James Clerk Maxwell*, 1854

Life itself is brief, and that is what charges each day with such ridiculous beauty.

—*Garrison Keillor*, 1990

If a man has a great deal to put into them, a day will have a hundred pockets.

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1888

I still find each day too short for all the thoughts I want to think, all the walks I want to take, all the books I want to read, and all the friends I want to see.

—*John Burroughs*, 1913

I arise in the morning torn by a desire to improve (or save) the world, and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

—*E. B. White*, 1969

The intellect of man is forced to choose  
Perfection of the life, or of the work.

—*William Butler Yeats*, 1933

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No man loves life like him that's growing old.<sup>23</sup>

—*Sophocles*, fifth century BC

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes, hasten to their end.

—*William Shakespeare*, 1609

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If thou wouldest win Immortality of Name, either do things worth the writing, or write things worth the reading.

—*Thomas Fuller*, 1727<sup>24</sup>

Seek not, my soul, immortal life, but make the most of the resources that are within your reach.

—*Pindar*, 498 BC

Reason is immortal.

—*Pythagoras*<sup>25</sup>

Immortality is to labor at an eternal task.

—*Ernest Renan*, 1890

If you want immortality, make it!

—*Joaquin Miller*, 1908

Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal.

—*William Faulkner*, 1958

If all else fails, immortality can always be assured by spectacular error.

—*John Kenneth Galbraith*, 1975

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[French chemists Auguste Laurent and Charles Frédéric Gerhardt] died, ignored by most; they never sought nor found public favor, for high roads never lead there.

—*Le Moniteur Scientifique Du Docteur Quesneville* (editorial), 1862

Those only deserve a monument who do not need one; that is, who have raised themselves a monument in the minds and memories of men.

—*William Hazlitt*, 1823

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<sup>23</sup>A much later similar confession by Frank Lloyd Wright is also popular.

<sup>24</sup>Frequently misattributed to Benjamin Franklin, who just paraphrased it (in 1738) in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

<sup>25</sup>First quoted by Diogenes Laërtius in the third century AD.

I have built a monument more lasting than bronze  
and set higher than the pyramids of the kings.  
It cannot be destroyed by gnawing rain  
or wild north wind, by the procession  
of immeasurable years or by the flight of time

—*Horace*, 23 BC<sup>26</sup>

The monuments of wit survive the monuments of power.

—*Francis Bacon*, 1595

If you seek Hamilton's monument [in Washington, DC], look around. You are living in it.  
We [...] live in Hamilton's country.

—*George Will*, 1992

I would rather have men asking why I have no statue than why I have one.

—*Cato*<sup>27</sup>

[Lise Meitner's] work was crowned by the Nobel Prize for Otto Hahn.

—*Renate Feyl*, 1981

The seeds we have sown are germinating under others' names.

—*Alexander Gorodnitsky*, 1959<sup>28</sup>

I must consider the organizer as more important than the discoverer.

—*Wolfgang Ostwald*, 1927

In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the man to whom the  
idea first occurs. Not the man who finds a grain of new and precious quality but to him who  
sows it, reaps it, grinds it and feeds the world on it.

—*Francis Darwin*, 1914

Discoveries are usually not made by one man alone, but [...] many brains and many hands  
are needed before a discovery is made for which one man receives the credit.

—*Henry E. Sigerist*, 1951

It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.

—*Anonymous*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>From his *Ode III.30*; translation by David West.

<sup>27</sup>As quoted, without a date, by Plutarch in the early second century AD.

<sup>28</sup>A verse from a popular Russian song, in a fair but prosaic translation.

<sup>29</sup>This wisdom and its variants are attributed to many, including Ronald Reagan and Harry S. Truman, with the earliest (circa 1863) attribution to some Farther Stirckland, but I could not find a reliable confirmation of any of these authorships.