

On the Shortness of Life



"What you do today is important because you are exchanging a day of your life for it."
—Unknown

Dear friend,

Today I want to share something personal with you; for a guy who is so young (I am only 27 years old) I think about death a lot-- nearly on a daily basis. Why? I used to have this fear and superstition that I would die young.

I think this fear of death has given me the sense of "hustle" in my life, not to waste a precious minute of my time. After all, time is the ultimate non-renewable resource in our lives.

I have a friend who just recently passed away. We were good friends in middle school and high school, having lots of fun playing Counterstrike, hanging out at PC cafes, talking random shit with the boys during lunch, going to the movies, having good laughs, and stuff like that. He was supremely intelligent, talented, and had a bright future ahead of him. He graduated top of the class in high school, and went off to UC Berkeley. Once in college, we didn't speak much.

About half a year ago, I heard from a friend that he had seizures-- apparently he had some sort of brain tumor that was "under control." At first when I heard this, I thought about how shitty his situation was. I felt horrible for him, but at the same time I knew that there was nothing I could do about it, but have empathy and pray for him.

Fast-forward to a few months ago; I get the news that he suddenly died. He was 27 years old, the same age as me.

--

Friend, we never know when we are going to die. I am only 27 years old, but who knows, I can get hit by a car tomorrow, I can find out that I have lung cancer (have spent time hanging around smokers my entire life), I can find out I have some rare heart condition, I can die in a plane crash, I might accidentally trip while looking at Google Maps, slip, and crack open my head, or (hopefully not) piss off someone from street photography that they stab me or something.

There is a quote I read from Seneca's ["On the Shortness of Life"](#) which really spoke to me:

"What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily?" - Seneca

We are dying daily. Time is the ultimate non-renewable resource.

For example, we can lose \$100 and always in the future gain another \$100. But when we lose a year of our life, we can never "add" another year of our life (no matter how rich we are). Similarly, every hour we spend in the day is one less hour that we can live.

I have a mental exercise: I pretend that every night I go to sleep it is the last day on earth that I have. I know some friends in their 70s, and one of their honest-to-God fears is that they won't wake up the next morning. And when they wake up in the morning, they are excited, happy, and grateful; God has granted them another day to live.

I try to apply the same philosophy. I try to treat everyday like it were my last. And when I wake up the next morning, it is simply a bonus-- a gift from God. Now whether you believe in "God" or any other supernatural power it doesn't really matter -- being grateful for life is one of the most valuable things in life.

--

We often make the worst tradeoff in life; we trade our time for money. Whereas in reality, it should be the opposite; **we should trade our money for time.**

For example, will I trade 30 years of my life working in the corporate grind hoping to trade it for a retirement package, BMW, and white picket house? Fuck that. I want to live and enjoy my life to the fullest.

Don't get me wrong, I am a greedy and self-interested bastard. I love the security of money, and nothing makes me more excited than adding more 0's to my bank account.

But at the end of the day, I can't take my bank account with me when I die. No matter how expensive of a car I buy, it will all look shitty and outdated in a few decades.

I want to tell you one of my vices; I love cars. I have always loved cars since I was young. Perhaps it was because I am an American, and we have such strong car culture. Or perhaps it is because I was addicted to the whole "rice rocket" fast and the furious phenomenon. Regardless, I think us Americans waste a shitload of time, money, and effort in trying to get a nice car. And what a useless "investment" that is. After all, according to the ["hedonic treadmill"](#) -- enough is never enough.

Let's say I bought a BMW 3-series, I would get a huge rush of happiness for the first month or so. Then after a month, I get "used" to it. Then I am jealous of my neighbor who has the BMW 5-series. I then (after emptying out my bank account), "upgrade" to the 5-series. It is awesome for another month, then once again, I go to the baseline happiness (similar satisfaction when I had the 3-series). Then I see the friend with the 7-series, upgrade to that. Then you see the friend with the Maserati, the Bentley, the private jet, the private island, then the private spaceship to Mars. When is enough truly enough?

I still am suckered by cars. I currently drive a 2010 Prius that was a gift from Cindy's (very generous) sister. It is an awesome car, great on gas, and perfect for that "eco-hippie trendy, conscious citizen" image in Berkeley. But at the same time, I crave a sports car. I had a 1991 Sentra SE-R (modded it out) and a 1990 Miata in college (sister crashed the car). Now I look at envy with those with the Fiat Abarth (sweet little car), as well as the Ford Fiesta ST (even Jeremy

Clarkson loves it). Sure these are pretty modest cars, but I know if I ever got them, I would want to upgrade to a BMW M3, than a Tesla, Ferrari-- whatever.

But a technique I have used to try to deter me from buying these material cars is this; I imagine how shitty the car and "outdated" it will look 20 years from now. And not only that, but at the end of the day, a car is just a metal box with 4 wheels that takes you from point "A" to point "B". The only reason I ever crave a car is when I am bored or dissatisfied with my life, and I want more excitement. Because I am a sucker to advertising, I (wrongly) believe that buying a new car will fix my life's problems. It never does.

And a new car is damn expensive. Start at around \$30,000 in most cases. But what else can you do with \$30,000?

You can go on 30 round-trip flights around the world. You can shoot 6,000 rolls of film. You can live for 30 months in a south-east Asian country (2.5 years). You can invest that money in yourself; to attend photography classes, to buy photobooks, and travel. Money can only buy you happiness, if you [spend it on experiences, not gear](#).

Sorry I got distracted, but realize that your time is so much more valuable than any dollar amount in your life.

--

Don't imagine you will live forever. The only two things certain in life; death and taxes. If you're some Russian mafia tax-dodging boss (who lives cozily in Switzerland), maybe you can avoid the taxes. But death is the only certainty in life.

Sorry to break it to you (spoiler alert), your mom will soon die, your father will soon die, your loved one will soon die, your friends and other family member will soon die, and you will soon die.

Thinking about death constantly helps us savour life, and appreciate it.

I learned this one tip from Marcus Aurelius in "The Meditations" -- he says whenever you kiss your child to sleep, you silently tell him, "Good night my son, I love you, and know that you might one day die on accident. I cherish the time we have right now."

But isn't that bad luck, bad karma? That is just superstition and nonsense.

Another tip: **every time you say goodbye to a friend or loved one, imagine it is the last time you will ever see them again**. Because nothing is certain in life. So give them a genuine hug, and tell them how much you love and appreciate them. Then if they happen to pass away suddenly or get into a car accident (I had another friend who got killed by a drunk driver at the age of 16) it will not hit you by surprise.

--

Time is the quickest fleeting thing. Imagine you were stranded in a desert island, thirsty, and famished. You have gone 2 days without water in the blazing sun (110+ degrees F or 40+ degrees C). You stumble upon a stream that is gushing with water. But you are informed that this stream will only gush out water for an hour. Would you sit around and let the water go to waste? Hell no, you will fill your stomach with as much water as humanly possible, and not let any drop go to waste.

I think this is a good analogy to time. Time is like that stream of water; it is constantly flowing out, but sooner or later, it will cut out.

I am a guy who has a humble goal in life; I just want to be happy. But what is "happiness" to me?

To me, "happiness" is less of a pleasure-based thing. I am not a hedonist. I don't think happiness is eating 3-star michelin meals everyday, driving a range-rover, living in a mansion, and fucking beautiful women. Rather, I prefer the Greek interpretation: "[eudaimonia](#)", which means "**human flourishing**."

What is "human flourishing?" Well to me, it is on the top of Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" -- seeking "[self actualization](#)." Which means using all of your talents, passions, and energy to create something meaningful that you can ultimately give back to society.

"He who lives for himself is truly dead to others." So **my goal in life is to live for others; to help others find satisfaction and happiness in their life**. To create information that empowers people and brings them joy. I want to build communities, and bring passionate (and lonely) people together. I don't give a fuck about how many 0's I have in my bank account, whether I have the fanciest new camera, whether I drive a fancy car, whether I have a bigass house. Just give me my espresso, free wi-fi, and some eggs (so I don't starve to death) and I have all of my basic needs met.

But going back to the point, I need to stick this piece of advice from Seneca to my desk:

"Hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of to-day's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon to-morrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by. Nothing is ours, except time."

So what is "today's task" for me? It is to produce information, and to write these articles and letters for you. Tomorrow is uncertain; I don't know whether I will still be alive or not. But I want to live everyday like it were my last.

The only thing that pisses me off is if I can't get any writing done. My only goal in life: to write a little bit everyday, and to contribute a little to the happiness and peace of mind of others. I want to help relieve the suffering of my friends and loved ones; whether that is through my writing, or the time I spend with them. One lesson from Tim Ferriss in his article, "['Productivity' Tricks for the Neurotic, Manic-Depressive, and Crazy \(Like Me\)](#)" is just to block out the first 3 hours of your

day to doing the task which brings you the most satisfaction. Once again, that for me is writing. I try not to ever make any appointments before noon. The morning is my sacred time to get writing done.

"But what if I have a day job or office job, where I am forced to answer emails, and do shiit for my boss? Not everybody can live a life of luxury like you Eric, where you have so much free time. You insensitive asshole."

Don't get me wrong, I am extremely blessed to have the life that I do. But realize that me and you are in the same boat. I get tempted by doing bullshit admin work in the morning that doesn't contribute to my happiness or feeling of "[eudaimonia](#)".

My advice is this: everyone can make 3 hours of "alone time" for them. It just comes down to the question; "How bad do you want it?" For me when I had an office job (and blogging was my passion), I intentionally got up about an hour or two early everyday to get a little bit of writing done before going into work. Sometimes I would be so in the "[flow](#)" of writing that I would actually get into work late and get yelled at my boss. But it was totally worth it.

Honestly making time for yourself is easier than it may seem. Rather than downloading new "productivity" apps on your phone, rather than reading more "productivity" business books, or listening to podcasts, the secret to creating time is to cut out bullshit and "time-wasting" activities from your day. As Nassim Taleb calls it in his book "[Antifragile](#)", the "[via negativa](#)" approach. That [you add to your life by subtracting from your life](#).

So if you want to find more time for your passion in life and photography, here are some things that I have personally subtracted from my life. Now I have a shitload of time to do what I am passionate about; which include writing, photography, reading, teaching, and spending time with loved ones.

1. "Networking" meetings

They never go anywhere. And honestly, the only reason that I ever network is for the hope of some future gain. I think a networking meeting will help me gain more future power, influence, fame, or money. But I don't need any more money, fame, power, social media following, whatever. So why should I waste my time networking? I'd rather spend time with loves one that I truly care about; without some hope of future gain.

It is great, Seneca (God I think I might change my middle name to his) gave some practical advice on how networking is a waste of time (incredible that not much has changed over the past 2,000 years):

"How much time they waste ingratiating themselves with higher-ups or networking or legal matters. Of how many that very powerful friend (who you think is your friend but is just using you for the friends that you have, people he would like to know and perhaps keep in his retinue)?"

I have to admit, I know some “influential” people and spend time with them (not because I truly enjoy their company), but I hope some sort of “future gain” -- and the hope that one day that I need a favor from them, they will be in my back pocket. This is shallow, and I need to stop doing this bullshit.

I also think that it is better to piss off and disappoint people for the greater good. After all this is the advice I often give myself (and ask myself): “Is this hour or two you spend with this person truly worthwhile, or would I be better off using this time to write an article that can potentially help thousands?”

Of course I don’t have that same mentality when spending time with loved ones and friends. To me, **any time spent with someone you truly love and care about is time well-spent.**

2. Media (blogs, television, video games, magazines, frivolous books)

I haven’t watched television for the last 10 years. I used to be addicted to it; watching it as a teenager until 1-2am (Adult Swim). But once I got into college, I traded that time for playing video games. But my third year in college, I stopped video games cold turkey as well, because I literally didn’t have time (and had better things to do).

I honestly think that TV is the biggest waste of time. Sure there are some TV shows on Netflix which are great and inspire. But 99% of it is trash to be honest. It is just like junk food.

I feel bad for people who have this daily grind; wake up, go to work, come back home from work, watch 2 hours of netflix, and go to sleep, and then rinse and repeat their schedules.

So many people complain they don’t have enough time to do what they want to do. Television watching is horrible because it is so damn passive. True happiness and having “leisure” time isn’t sitting on your ass on some beach and watching Netflix from your iPad. True “leisure” is being active, and doing something that you are passionate about-- something that feels meaningful.

If you subtracted 2 hours of Netflix or TV watching from your life, how could you better use that time? Perhaps that can help you sleep 2 hours earlier, so you can wake up at 5am instead of 7am to go to work. And from 5-7am you can use that time to shoot street photography (beautiful sunrise early morning shooting), you can use that time to meditate, to read, write for your blog or that novel you’ve always wanted to write, play an instrument (quietly), or any other passion you have in life. Perhaps you can go into the office 2 hours early (before anyone is there, and get some meaningful work done in the office, if that is what you feel is your passion and calling).

I also think that 99.9% of blogs on the internet are just noise. I know I spew a lot of random noise on this blog too, so feel free to unfollow whenever.

Honestly, all the greatest ideas and inspirations I have ever gotten were from books, never from blogs. Blogs are just distillations of ideas and information, most of that information is rooted in books. So go straight for the source.

What do I have against blogs? My biggest problem; they are distracting, and breed dissatisfaction in our lives as well.

For example, I (still) suffer from G.A.S. ([gear acquisition syndrome](#)). I love material possessions, and I always want the newest and greatest equipment or gadgets. Not only that, 99.9% of photo blogs on the internet are just trying to sell you cameras. I have a personal rule, **never trust the opinion of a camera review or rumor blog if they have affiliate links** (this includes this blog). After all, it is always in the blogger's best interest to write great things about a camera (or at least downplay the negatives) because if you buy a camera through a blogger's affiliate link, they will get a small percentage. The solution? First of all, realize you don't need a new camera. If you really want a new camera, just test and try it out for yourself (rent it and try it out or simply buy it and return it before 30 days).

Not only that, but I don't trust any blogs that have display or banner ads. Why not? I do realize they need to make a living; but banner ads always tempt me to buy shit I don't need. Everyone on the internet is trying to sell you something (even I have the hidden hope that you might attend one of my workshops one day). But I always try to remind myself: the purpose that I blog isn't to have you attend my workshop. The workshops are a way for me to bring people together and build confidence; but the true purpose of my life is to produce these articles and information that will help the greatest amount of people.

So as a challenge try this; **don't read any blogs for a month**. Trust me, you will have so much more happiness and clarity of thought. And nobody is going to die. Sure you might miss out of the news of that new rumored camera coming out, or Justin Bieber getting into another drinking and driving episode. Rather than falling victim to "[FOMO](#)" (fear of missing out), embrace "[JOMO](#)" (joy of missing out).

I used to play a shitload of video games as well growing up. I regret every minute spent on video games. Sure I made some "online" friends and joined "online communities"-- but honestly at the end of the day, what good does having virtual gold on World of Warcraft contribute to society as a whole? Do you really need to spend another 100 hours "grinding away" killing monsters to get that treasured mystical sword that you can simply buy in a virtual store for \$25? How much do you value your time? Okay if you are paraplegic and your only way of communication is living in second life; that is fine-- but I also believe 99.9% of video game playing is a massive waste of time, I wish I told myself that earlier.

3. Not giving a fuck of what others think of you

I want to give fewer “fucks” in my life. The problem? I do give a big fuck about what others think about me.

Because I give such a huge flying fuck about what others think of me, I work hard (and waste time) trying to craft a certain image of myself. I spend a lot of time trying to meet up people that I “should” meet (rather than people I “must” meet). I waste a lot of time worrying whether people are judging me in a positive or a negative way. I waste a lot of time lying on the bed, regretting some stupid shit I said earlier that was insensitive, that hurt someone’s feelings (on accident). I waste a lot of time on social media, trying to argue with trolls and haters that I am a good person and not just some narcissistic asshole.

But if I want more time in my life, what do I need to do? Give no fucks, yes, NO fucks about what others think of me-- whether positive or negative.

Another lesson of wisdom from Seneca; **do not be overjoyed from the compliments of others, nor overly depressed from the criticisms of others.** The secret is to have a steady stream of consciousness, where you are always feeling “pleasant”, mild, constant, unperturbed, and steady.

This is the source of ultimate freedom.

It took me a long time to realize this-- **that praise (and hate) are equally useless.**

Why is praise useless? Well, advice from Marcus Aurelius from “The Meditations” (paraphrased from my memory):

“Does the vine need ‘praise’ when it produces grapes? Does the sun need ‘praise’ when it wakes up everyday (without fail) and shine its rays upon the earth? Does the horse need ‘praise’ for transporting our things for us? Does the emerald need ‘praise’ to be told that it is beautiful?”

So why do I need “praise” for what I do? **The reward is the act itself.** If I clean the dishes and Cindy doesn’t mention it nor pat me on the back, why should this disturb me? I am cleaning the dishes because they need cleaning, not to get some sort of approval from Cindy. If I give a friend a hug and tell him/her how much I appreciate them, do I need them to say it back to me? Absolutely not, I am not telling them how much I love and appreciate them in order for them to mutually tell me the same. If I donate a dollar to a homeless person, do I need him to thank me? No, I am giving him a dollar to help him, not to feel like a “good” person. In-fact, **the only way to be truly “generous” is to give to an ungrateful person** (credit Nassim Taleb).

Similarly, why do we care if others dislike us, hate on us, say negative things about us, gossip about us behind our backs, or judge us?

For example, let's say you took a photo of a stranger, and they told you: "Fuck you, you fucking pervert. Who gave you the fucking right to take a photo of me? I'm going to call the fucking police on you, you fucking asshole."

Of course this would bother you (it would bother me as well).

But what are words? Words are just vibrations of sound in the air. **It isn't the words that hurt us, but our *interpretation* of the words which hurt us.**

A personal way I have been able to not take the hate and criticism of others? **Take the piss out of myself.**

For example, once some negative troll left a comment on my blog and said: "Eric, your photos suck, you're a scammer, you're only 'click baiting' people to have them attend your shitty workshops, and you are only famous because you know how to game social media and add tags to improve your 'SEO'". Rather than saying, "fuck you" to this commenter, I said: "*I also don't fold my bed sheets in the morning, and I'm a horrible cook.*" Another tip from Nassim Taleb: never take negative hate from anybody if they criticize you for more than one thing (it is superfluous to say that an author is a horrible writer *and* a bad cook).

I will tell you another personal story of the real best way to deal with negative people; **simply ignore them.** Would people shout at a mirror? No way, it would just make them look (and feel like) an idiot. So embrace this "[Taoist](#)" philosophy and act like a mirror; don't retain any negative feelings or emotions, just be still, and don't respond.

I remember when I was a kid, a lot of kids would bully me, make fun of me, call me a fag, gay, whatever. It would make me feel like shit, and then I would go home, feel sorry for myself, and then for the next day or so, think of clever ways that I could revenge them. In the shower I would think of witty comebacks, or ways for my friends to go and beat him up.

But once again, that is a massive waste of time and energy. Granted I didn't know any better when I was a kid, but there are adults out there seeking revenge all the time. But according to Marcus Aurelius, his advice is this: "The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury."

Think about all the time you've one wasted, feeling negative thoughts about someone, or plotting ways to get back at him or her. Think about the time you wasted how you could get "even." But why not invest your time in more noble pursuits; like complimenting a friend, calling up a friend and telling them how much you appreciate their friendship? Or going out and making some beautiful photos that will make both you and your viewers happy?

Another last point on not giving a fuck of what others think of me; **I want to learn how to be okay with disappointing people.**

One of my character flaws is this; I want everybody to like me. And what causes me the most psychological pain is letting others down, not living up to the expectations of others, not spending enough time with them, etc.

But honestly, I have a noble and grand mission in life to help society as a whole. So I need to learn that is okay to let some people down, and disappoint some people, for the greater good.

For example, I might decline a meeting with somebody because I want to use my time in the morning to write. I'm going to feel really guilty about it, but I need to stop caring about what they might judge me as. Because after all, "letting someone down" or "disappointing them" is just a mental construct that I have in my mind. Who knows, maybe the person that I disappointed will quickly forget feeling offended. This also means being less responsive with my emails, so I can be more productive as a writer.

4. Not worrying about the future

If I truly believed that I am "daily dying", and that today might be the last day I have on earth, why do I concern myself with the future?

What Seneca taught me is that only a foolish man thinks that he has a long life ahead of him, or can plain with "certainty" about the future. After all, it makes no sense to plan for "retirement" at age 65, if I am not 100% certain that I won't get hit by a car or get some sort of rare cancer before then. Steve Jobs died at age 56 to cancer. He didn't worry too much about the future; but what he did was live everyday like it were his last from his [Stanford Commencement speech](#):

"When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: 'If you live each day as if it was your last, some day you'll most certainly be right.' It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' And whenever the answer has been 'no' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something."

According to the [Steve Jobs biography](#), when Steve Jobs realized that he had cancer, he put a huge emphasis on trying to squeeze the most out of each of his days on earth. He dedicated his entire heart, soul, and being into Apple; to create products that inspired people and contributed to humanity in some sort of way. And contribute he did, most of my best work has been done on Apple products (11" Macbook Air and iPad).

I also recall another quote from Nassim Taleb from "Antifragile" which says; **never plan a day in advance.**

I have a problem where I had too rigid schedules and todo lists for myself. I try to live in the future.

For example, I will go to bed thinking to myself, "Oh, when I wake up in the morning, I am going to do "X", "Y", and "Z". I'm going to wake up super early and get all this shit done." Of course in reality, I wake up super late, and then I am upset and frustrated at myself. Or perhaps I wake up and I feel sick, and I am no longer able to do the work that I planned the night before. Another tip from Nassim Taleb; **never plan an appointment with someone unless it is the day-of**, because we always under-estimate how chaotic things will be in the future. They call this the "[planning fallacy](#)" (first proposed by proposed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, read more in the excellent book, "[Thinking Fast, and Slow](#)").

Regarding the "planning fallacy", think of the last time you had a project. You first told your boss it would take you a week; then it ended up taking two weeks, and you felt massively guilty. Remember the last time you were running late for a meeting or a dinner appointment with a friend. You text them and tell him: "Sorry, running 10 minutes late" and then you get stuck in traffic (for even longer), and show up 20 minutes late and feel massively guilty. This has happened to me so many times I can't even count.

The solution? **Always add an approximate buffer of 25% of how long you think something will need.** For example, when I am traveling and I think I need \$200 for the week, I will get \$250. If I think I need 50 rolls of film for a trip, I will bring 75 rolls. If I think I am running 10 minutes late to an appointment, I tell them I'm running 20 minutes late. If I think a book project will take me a year, I make that a year and 3 months.

Sorry, I got slightly off-topic again. But the point; never worry about the future. You have no control over what the future brings. **You only have control over the present moment.** Like literally, this present moment. You have the power to think about positive things now, whether you want to go read a book, whether you want to go take some photos, whether you want to look at some photobooks, or whether you want to give a loved one a hug.

So don't waste time "planning" for the future, or worrying about the future.

For example, I have sat down and made a "10-year plan", trying to set goals and all these other benchmarks for myself. But that is a massive waste of time; who knows if I will still be alive 10 years from now?

Similarly, I have often lied in bed worrying about the future-- and losing sleep over it.

I will share a personal story for you: Last year (2014) I was in London for about two weeks on my own. It was one of the most depressing times I've had in the last 5 years. Why? I rented an Airbnb room on my own, and Cindy had gone back home. I was alone, to think negative thoughts. I had a difficult time finding a dinner partner in London, so I would eat in the apartment alone. [Publilius Syrus](#) once wrote "Solitude is the mother of anxieties."

Even though both of my workshops in London were sold out, I realized I had no workshops planned for 2015. I started to panic. I realized I had overdrawn money from my Paypal account, and I felt anxious without having "cash-flow" to my bank account. I started to "catastrophize"

and imagine all these “worst-case” scenarios. I imagined that suddenly street photography would fade into obscurity, and nobody would ever attend one of my workshops again. I imagined myself being homeless, destitute, and alone. I imagined dying alone.

Of course all of these thoughts were overly dramatic; but I wasted so much precious time worrying about my future-- when in reality (looking back), everything turned out fine.

And the truth of life and reality is that everything work out okay in the end.

A method that I have discovered recently to avoid this anxious fear of the future is to think of the worst-case scenario.

For me, honestly the worst-case scenario is that I go bankrupt, nobody in the world is interested in street photography, I end up moving in back with my Mom, and becoming an Uber driver. But what is so bad about that? I will have my mother’s delicious cooking, I will spend more time with her and family, and perhaps have a fun time driving my car and meeting new strangers as an Uber driver.

I think the ultimate fear we all have of his death. But once again, we’re privileged to live in a society where all of our basic needs are met (food, water, shelter).

So what are we afraid of? That we will have to sell our car? So what? We learn to take public transport, and appreciate being able to take a nap on the bus on the way from one place to another. Are we afraid that we will be homeless? You will be able to get (some) help from the government, so you won’t literally be sleeping on the streets. And if you can always find a friend or family member to stay with (at least for a month or few weeks). Are you afraid that everyone will hate you? Does the opinions of others physically hurt you? Of course not.

5. Not doing more than one thing

One of the best books I read was “[Essentialism](#)” (another good read being “[The One Thing](#)”). The concept in a nutshell: **just focus on one noble task or mission in your life, and disregard everything else.**

So for you, if that is photography, focus only on photography. Disregard all your other hobbies (playing music, learning a new language, martial arts, whatever).

I’m not saying that you shouldn’t have more than one hobby if that makes you happy. But if you want to truly become great at one thing, you can’t divide your attention. The rays of the sun is pleasant when it is spread over the earth. But if you focus the rays of the sun through a magnifying glass, you can burn holes through steel (think of a laser).

Once again the master Seneca shares from “[On the Shortness of Life](#)”:

"No single worthwhile goal can be successfully pursued by a man who is occupied with many tasks – lawyer, teacher, however - because the mind, when its focus is split, absorbs little in depth and rejects everything that is, so to speak, jammed into it."

So practical ways you can apply this to your photography:

- Focus only on one project
- Focus only on black and white (or only color)
- Focus on using only one camera and lens
- Focus only on one subject matter
- Focus on shooting only one area or neighborhood
- Focus on only studying one [master photographer](#)

For me, I would rather be remembered for one great project in my life, than 20 mediocre projects. I would rather be remembered for one great shot, instead of 20 mediocre shots.

If I could be remembered for one thing in terms of contribution to society as a whole, it is to spread the "[open source](#)" school of thought; that information should be open and free to empower people, not locked by "copyright" to be monetized and hoarded.

Similar line of thought; Nassim Taleb calls it "Bergson's Razor" in "Antifragile"; the concept that a philosopher shouldn't be known for more than 1 main contribution to society. Similarly; all the nobel prize winners are generally known for only 1 main contribution. Also think about the greats in history: Einstein and the Theory of Relativity, Edison and the light bulb, Obama being the first black president, Steve Jobs and the iPhone, Henri Cartier-Bresson and the concept of "The Decisive Moment", Henri Ford and the automobile, etc.

So realize that you are dying daily, and you only have a limited time on the earth. But if you are single-minded in your life's purpose, and give it all your energy, time, and attention, and soul-- you can still live a long and meaningful life.

For example, I mentioned earlier that my friend passed away at 27. That fucking sucks, but at the same time; if his parents were told that he would die at age 5, and he lived to 27, what would you say about the length of his life? You would say that he was blessed to live to 27, would you not?

Similarly, someone who lives to 80 years old, or even 100 is a "long life" by most standards. But there is a difference between "living long" and "existing" long, as Seneca says:

"A grey-haired wrinkled man has not necessarily lived long. More accurately he has existed long."

Once again, what is the difference between "living" and "existing"? The difference is this; living is to use everyday like it were your last, trying to do everything in your greatest power to make a

meaningful contribution to society. "Existing long" is to simply dwell for a long period of time on earth before dying.

Some people tell me, "Eric, doesn't thinking about death make you depressed, and lose motivation?"

Hell no; **I appreciate life a hell of a lot more because I know that one day I would die.**

For example, have you ever lost your wallet, and "miraculously" found it under your car seat or in-between the sofa? Think about the extreme joy that gives you. You don't know how much you appreciate something until you lose it.

Similarly, you don't know how much you appreciate your loved ones, until they die (or someone else close to you dies).

The death of close friends and family have caused me to be more appreciative of my life, and the life of other loved ones in my life.

6. Don't delay gratification

We are often taught that we should delay gratification as long as we can. There are a lot of psychological studies which show that those who are able to delay gratification end up becoming more wealthy, healthy, and well-rounded (look at the "[Stanford marshmallow experiment](#)"). The concept was this:

"In these studies, a child was offered a choice between one small reward provided immediately or two small rewards if they waited for a short period, approximately 15 minutes, during which the tester left the room and then returned. (The reward was sometimes a marshmallow, but often a cookie or a pretzel.) In follow-up studies, the researchers found that children who were able to wait longer for the preferred rewards tended to have better life outcomes, as measured by SAT scores,[2] educational attainment, body mass index (BMI), and other life measures."

Part of it is the "puritan work ethic" of Americans, and the Protestant/Christian notion that if we work hard in this life, we will enjoy the fruits of our labor later in our life (or after we die).

But the problem is that many of us waste our times getting ready to live. We live for tomorrow, rather than for today.

Think of all the people you know who say, I will work hard for 40 years, and one day retire at age 65, and have a comfortable retirement package, and then finally travel the world.

Problem? What if you die at age 64? Then all those years were wasted in vain.

A story I thought of; There was once a married couple that planned their entire life to travel the world. They were both super frugal, never went out, and never enjoyed themselves; thinking that once they retired, they could finally “start living.”

Sadly, one they both turned their mid 60's and were able to retire, the wife suddenly died of a heart attack. How sad, they should have spent their days living it to their fullest, and not banking all of their happiness on the future.

Seneca gives great advice:

“The greatest obstacle to living a full life is having expectations, delaying gratification based on what might happen tomorrow which squanders today.”

Now don't misconstrue this as living a “YOLO” (you only live once) lifestyle. Don't just go out get drunk, do drugs and have sex with strangers, and live irresponsibly. Rather, think of how you can be happy today; rather than happy tomorrow.

I know a lot of photographers who have a dream of traveling the world, or going to Paris, Tokyo, wherever. But they spend their lives in a fantasy world, not being able to enjoy the opportunity to shoot their own backyard.

Or I know photographers who have great ideas for photographic projects, but they get so swept up in the details and the concept, that they don't actually go out and shoot it.

So don't delay your gratification creatively; live today. Think about the one small step forward you can make to make your photographic vision and project possible.

Not only that, but think of what you can do to be happy, at this present moment. Perhaps that is counting your blessings, calling up a dear friend, going out to take photos, taking photos of what is right next to you, or jotting down project ideas, or starting to edit some of your images.

Another practical way to live life (also from Seneca), which is to **live your life, a minute at a time**:
“The present offers one day at a time, divided into minutes.”

So the next time you feel dissatisfied, lost, or curious-- ask yourself, “What can I do for the next minute which will help advance my goals and happiness in life?”

7. Don't waste time seeking more

“A man is never satisfied.” - Seneca

What true words; enough is never enough. We never have enough money, enough power, enough prestige, enough friends, influence, cars, homes, cameras, lenses, gadgets, watches, bags (I have

so many camera bags its ridiculous), “time-saving” appliances, social media followers, clothes, jewelry, purses, shoes, books, souvenirs, and of course-- we never have enough time.

But if we cut out all this materialistic bullshit from our lives, imagine how much extra time we would have. Why? Because the less money (and time online shopping) we spend, the more money (and time) we will have to do things we truly love; things that bring us true happiness and joy.

Even 2,000 years ago-- materialism ran rampant (in ancient Rome). Seneca shares how people towards the end of their lives often regret living a life of luxury and materialism:

“They cry out that they have been fools, because they never really lived, and vow to live a true life if spared from their disease. Too late they realize what time they wasted pursuing worthless things, and how so much hard work seeking happiness from materialism was in vain.”

He also really looks down upon luxury:

“Expensive vices fuel their blissful ignorance. Such a life of luxurious despair is beneath human dignity.”

I’m a materialistic, shallow, self-serving American. I love my materialistic shit. My Leica makes me feel important, special, and “artsy.” My iPad makes me feel more creative. My Prius makes me feel eco-friendly and environmentally conscious (which is absolute bullshit). My love of “third wave” hipster espresso makes me feel important, informed, and sophisticated. The Nike’s I wear make me feel more confident and fashionable when I walk around town. My Lindberg glasses make me feel sophisticated and low-key, because only “true glasses connoisseurs” know the brand. I wear my North jackets with pride; knowing I have the ultimate in water and cold repellent, while still being functional/fashionable. I have far too much useless and superfluous knowledge about designer watches, sports cars, fashion brands, and sunglasses.

I want to cleanse and purge myself of all this materialistic bullshit. I am a sucker for advertising, and I have been bombarded by it my entire life. But how do I break free from it?

What has worked well for me is to avoid shopping areas at all costs.

For example, I live close 4th street, a trendy high-end place in Berkeley, where old rich white people go to buy designer furniture and drink expensive coffee (ironically at Artis coffee, where I spend all my time in Berkeley with my homie Walter and others). Anyways, there is an Apple store on the end of the street. Without fail, I always go there, and am suckered into having a craving or a desire to buy something new. I see the new 27” iMac Retina, and I daydream of all the creative opportunities it will give me. I see the new (slightly lighter) iPad Air 2, and imagine myself pretending to be artsy at a cafe, with the golden back, sketching “important” ideas with my fingertip. I see the 15” Macbook Pro, and imagine what I would do with all that processing power, and how many more YouTube videos I can produce.

The solution I need to do is avoid entering the Apple store (at all costs). That little 5 minute journey into the store might give me a week-worth of craving for expensive electronics (I don't really need). I also try to remind myself how quickly electronics get outdated (look at a 4-year old iPad or iPhone and it looks like it is from a prehistoric time). But then remember when the original iPhone came out, how futuristic everyone thought it was.

I am also a sucker for clothes. Whenever I enter a mall, I will somehow wander into UNIQLO or some hipster boutique (with \$200 flannel shirts). I see these advertisements that sucker me into thinking that once I buy those expensive clothes, I will be more creative, artsy, and important.

For example, Cindy's younger sister works at the mall-- and whenever we would go to pick her up, I would always happen to buy something at the mall (I didn't need, and promptly returned the next day). Do I really need new clothes? No, the purpose of clothing is to keep me warm from the cold, nothing else. Fuck fashion, nobody gives a shit of how I look (except my insecure self-ego).

Enough is never enough for any of us.

Even if we do achieve some success in life,"Hope begets more hope, ambition more ambition." Furthermore, he tells us: "The higher up you go, the greater the fall."

Even though I have achieved some moderate "success" in my life; having done exhibitions with Leica and Fujifilm. Also having shown my work in Melbourne, Downtown LA, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Paris, Seoul, Cambodia. I've been interviewed for VICE, the BBC, Leica, Petapixel, Salon, The Candid Frame, and had work featured in Black and White Magazine and Popular Photography. I've done commercial work with Ford, Leica, Fujifilm, Ricoh, Olympus, Samsung, and I have also traveled to most of the big cities all around the world. I make my full-time living traveling and teaching workshops, and rubbing shoulders with other famous photographers.

Yet it is never enough.

I am still so jealous of those who are more famous and influential than me. I am jealous of [Zack Arias](#), and the amount of influence and following that he has. I am jealous of [Ming Thein](#), who is smarter than I am, and seems to make more money than I do. I am jealous of [Steve Huff](#), who has more influence than me and a larger and more engaged community. I am jealous of [Matt Stuart](#) who is having his work featured all around the world with Leica. There are tons more people I am jealous of, not enough room here to include.

"As soon as we have some success, we seek more." - Seneca

What is the solution to all of this? I need to learn how to be satisfied with what I have. I need to desire the life I already live, rather than looking up at those higher up on the mountain than me, hoping that I was where they currently are.

I need to stop bitching and moaning, comparing myself to others. I need to not compare myself with anybody; because my life situation is different from them. My circumstances, and my abilities are

different from them. And no matter how rich, successful, handsome, or beautiful someone is-- there is always someone else they are jealous of (or comparing themselves to).

What is the problem of being jealous and coveting what others have?

Once again to tie it back, it is a waste of time. Why should I be jealous -- and waste my precious energy and time desiring the life that they have? Rather than sitting and plotting on how I can gain more money, power, and prestige; I need to look inwards and see how I can be use my (very short) time on Earth to make a difference.

So how do we find more gratitude in our lives?

One thing that has helped me; imagine myself from 5 years ago, and how much I would desire the life I currently live. My good friend (and manager) Neil Ta wrote this in a recent essay, "[On Feeling Inadequate as a Photographer](#)."

So I reflect and appreciate how far I have come. Even taking it a step further back; I reflect on how grateful I am to have the life I have now.

I came from humble backgrounds; single mom with 3-part time jobs (cleaning houses, cashier, waitress), and not knowing whether the rent would be paid (it didn't help that my dad didn't work ever since I was 2 years old, or how he gambled away our rent money). I think about the fear that I had that we would be homeless the next month (a lot of stress for a 12 year old kid). I remember how frightened I was when I saw my parents fight, both physically and verbally. I remember how afraid I was when I would lock myself in my room, wishing that my parents would have money, and we could all live as happy family.

I know this is cheesy and repetitive; but I think true happiness is to [be happy regardless of your external circumstances](#). It is to be [grateful for what you have](#), to be grateful for how far you've come, and how good your life is in comparison to the lives of others.

Also another tip; imagine life as a race, and even though you see others ahead of you, **you must turn back and look at all of those behind you**. We all know the cliché; think of the starving kids in Africa. But at the same time think about all the people in America (or the West) that would envy your nice camera, smartphone, car, home, income, and lifestyle.

I also try to remind myself whenever I bitch and moan about my "problems" in life, it is just a "[first world problem](#)."

Another embarrassing story; you don't know how much time I wasted and anguished over whether I should buy an iPhone 6, iPhone 6 plus, Galaxy S6, or Galaxy Note 4. I seriously lost sleep over this. Eventually I got lucky; Samsung gave me a free Galaxy S6, and even after getting it; I would still envy my friends who had iPhone 6's and 6 plus's. Sometimes I need to slap myself in the face.

My next experiment when I go back to Berkeley is this; trying to go a week without a smartphone. While traveling I have had this experiment; trying to uninstall an app a day. The other day I uninstalled Instagram and email from my phone. And wow, how much clarity of thought and happiness this has brought me. When traveling I only need a smartphone for Whatsapp and Google Maps; everything else is extraneous. Honestly, I probably can even do without those applications (but it is a luxury I enjoy).

So I want to practice what I preach; when I get home, I want to try to go a year without accumulating any more physical possessions. The only thing I might buy is a new laptop or computer; but I might see if I can just get by using my iPad and a keyboard. I will try not to buy any new clothes. I will try not to buy any more books (rather, enjoy the books I already own, and donate the ones I no longer read, or books that others would use better than I would).

I don't want to have any desires for any more materialistic crap, and spend more time with friends, family, loved ones, to shoot without concern about external recognition, to not desire a new camera or equipment, a new car, new electronic devices. I want to be perfectly content with what I have, count my blessings, and appreciate what I already have. Even more so; to cut down and edit down my life (giving away more of my possessions).

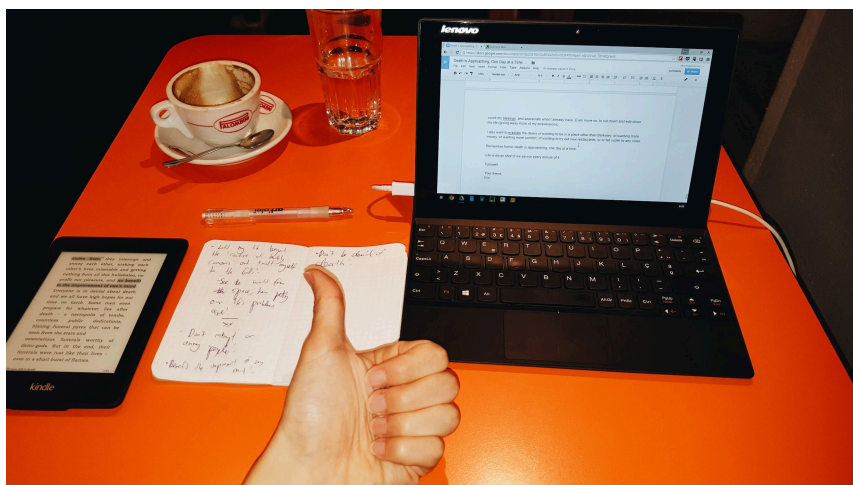
I also want to eradicate the desire of wanting to be in a place other than Berkeley, of wanting more money, or wanting more comfort, of wanting to try out new restaurants, or to fall victim to any vices.

Remember friend, death is approaching, one day at a time.

Life is never short if we savour every minute of it.

Farewell.

Your friend,
Eric



Written @ cafe in Stockholm. Aug 27, 2015 @ 3:14pm. After drinking an espresso (Nespresso), earl grey tea (with foamed almond milk), a long espresso (Espresso, with foamed almond milk), and a soy cappuccino at Cafe.

Some life updates:

The good news is that it looks like perhaps this weird throat-swelling thing was because espresso by itself is quite acidic, and caused some sort of acid-reflux that caused my throat to block up a bit. It seems adding some sort of "base" like almond milk (I'm lactose intolerant) has caused this to go away. I prefer espresso, but whatever-- caffeine is caffeine.

I'm excited to visit my friend Mattias for dinner tonight with his family, and also to start my workshop in Stockholm tomorrow evening! Also super excited to almost be back home to Cindy, I miss her dearly. Flying back to Berkeley on Tuesday.