

## NOTES FROM: *A Matter of Death and Life*, by Irvin and Marilyn Yalom

**SUMMARY:** Irvin Yalom is one of the grandfathers of existential psychotherapy, along with Rollo May and others, and he's spent his entire career counseling others with respect to the fear of death, anxiety, purpose in life, and more – basically everything having to do with being a fully alive human being on this planet. His wife Marilyn is an extremely accomplished author herself, and they wrote this book together as she was dying of cancer.

They take turns, writing chapter for chapter, until Marilyn's health deteriorates to the point at which she's unable to write. It's exactly as sad as it sounds, but this is probably one of the most important books I read this year. It's essential reading because, like Marilyn and Irv, all of our lives will eventually come to an end.

However, I must say that their relationship – all seven decades of it – sounds like one of the most perfect love stories I've ever read about. They seem to have drained every last drop out of life in those seventy-plus years. In fact, that's one of the things they say has somewhat fortified them against the fear of death: the fact that they've lived their lives fully.

This book is absolutely amazing – in case I haven't made the case for it well enough already – but no matter how old you are, you will find something here that will help you live more intensely, love more deeply, and really make the most out of the life that you've been given. We can't stave off death forever, but we're alive now, and now is amazing. We have this one chance to go out and do everything we ever dreamed of, and before the end enjoy this last perfect day of summer.

---

“Mourning is the price we pay for having the courage to love others.”

“She was never happier. From that point on, we were fellow writers, and for the rest of her life, despite four children and full-time teaching and administrative positions, she matched me book for book.”

“Both of us feel we've lived our lives fully. Of all the ideas I've employed to comfort patients dreading death, none has been more powerful than the idea of living a regret-free life. Marilyn and I both feel regret-free – we've lived fully and boldly. We were not to allow opportunities for exploration to pass us by and now have left little remaining unlivable life.”

Seneca: “A man cannot stand prepared for death if he has just begun to live. We must make it our aim to have already lived enough.”

Nietzsche: “Living safely is dangerous.”

“Ten years later, my sister and I visited my mother in the hospital: she had fractured her femur. We sat and talked with her for a couple of hours until she was taken into surgery. The two of us took a short walk outside, and when we returned her bed was entirely stripped. Only the bare mattress remained. No more mother.”

“I am always touched by my fan letters, though, at times, I am overwhelmed with their number. I make an attempt to answer each letter, taking care to mention each writer by name so they know I’ve read their letter. I store them in an email file marked ‘fans’ which I started a few years ago and which now has several thousand entries. I mark this letter with a star – I plan to reread the starred letters some day in the future when my spirits are very low and need bolstering.”

“It was such an odd experience to have thoughts in your brain that you simply cannot turn into speech.”

“But our greatest problem will be disposing of our books, some three to four thousand of them.”

“Look into any room (except the dining room) and into several of the closets, and you will find books, books, books. We have been book people all our lives, and even though Irv now reads largely on an iPad, we still seem to be acquiring books in their familiar paper form. Every few months we send boxes of books to the local public library or to other non-profit organizations, but that scarcely makes a dent in the wall-to-wall shelves that line most of our rooms.”

“There’s nothing wrong with privilege. Everyone should have it.”

“I grow aware of important chunks of my past disappearing from my memory. Marilyn shields me from this by her astounding recall. But when she’s not available, I am staggered by the holes in my memory. I realize that, when she dies, a great deal of my past will die with her.”

“Could I really have been as kind and generous as my friends said I was?”

“She pulls me toward her and says, ‘Irv, don’t forget I’ve been living in pain and misery for ten months now. I’ve said to you again and again *that I cannot bear the thought of living like this any longer*. I welcome death, I welcome being free of pain and nausea and this chemo brain and this continual fatigue and this feeling awful. Please understand me: trust me – I’m certain that if you had lived all these months in my condition you’d feel the same way. I’ve alive now only because of you. I’m devastated at the thought of leaving you. But, Irv, it’s time. Please, you’ve got to let me go.’”

“Still, even if I am not afraid of death itself, I feel the continued sadness of separating from my loved ones. For all the philosophical treatises and for all the assurances of the medical profession, there is no cure for the simple fact that we must leave each other.”

“I have no higher pleasure than holding hands with Marilyn. I cannot get enough of her. It’s been like this since junior high. People kidded us about always holding hands at lunchtime in the Roosevelt High School cafeteria – we’re still doing it seventy years later.”

“Several hours later, when I go to bed for the night, I feel unmoored and unreal. This will be my first night without Marilyn. The first of all my solitary nights until the end of my life. Oh, I’ve had many nights without Marilyn as I lectured in other cities or when she was visiting Paris, but this is the first night I’ve ever gone to sleep when there was no Marilyn, when Marilyn no longer existed.”

“Perhaps this is part of the reason for my sadness when I can no longer recall the face of a patient I knew long ago. It’s as though I’m releasing someone’s hand allowing them to drift off into oblivion.”

“The more fully you live your life, the less tragic is your death.”

Zorba: “Leave death nothing but a burned-out castle.”

“I know that I will exist in ethereal form in the minds of those who have known me or read my work but, in a generation or two, anyone who has ever known the flesh-and-blood me will have vanished. I shall end our book with the unforgettable opening words of Nabokov’s autobiography, *Speak, Memory*: ‘The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.’ That image both staggers and calms. I lean back in my chair, close my eyes, and take comfort.”