

What a Way To Go

I'm not one of those who can chop parsley and put a last-minute singe on the steak while simultaneously greeting guests. I try to get party preparations done in advance to avoid last-minute fussing. Once I've done what I can and guests start to arrive, I surrender to the will of the occasion, to its alchemical (or lack of) success. Que cera, cera.

Doing all we can with the best of intentions, then saying goodbye to any fixed notion of how it's going to turn out, is a lesson that life teaches. So, too, the contemplation of death. Though the Grim Reaper isn't generally characterized as welcome or pleasant company, readying for its arrival in advance renders it less of a surprise, less the party crasher, and provides the chance to learn from it while we're still kicking.

It's recommended to begin preparations while you still have the mental, physical and legal capacity to document your end-of-life wishes. Note to self: That would be now!

[Deathwithdignity.org](https://deathwithdignity.org) is one of many resources that helps individuals plan for the last hurrah. The website includes a Life File Checklist prescribing what to do, from data to advanced directives, from memorial to burial. If you find yourself procrastinating, there are organizations that can help, such as Bend's thepeacefulpresenceproject.org. Their highly skilled doulas assist with the emotional as well as the practical side of things. You can also take care of the planning yourself.

For the DIY-ers, writing your own obituary ahead of time is the rare opportunity to have, well, the last word. It's uncanny how differently you see yourself when observed from the third person, from the impassionate distance of he or she, never mind the reality check summing up one's life in 200 words provides, and the realization there really is no time to waste.

Funerals and memorials also allow for before-the-fact participation. At a recent celebration of life I attended, the deceased had curated the slide show, given the speaker's time limits and topics, created a playlist for the event, and even provided all in attendance with a to-go list of aphorisms he'd collected over the course of a rich life. My favorite: "Nothing good happens after midnight." His death-defying energy and unique signature suffused all aspects of the memorial.

Speaking of signatures, signing off on an advance directive becomes more complex as new choices about where, when and how to exit become available. The desire to be the architect of one's waning days has increased in proportion to medical advances that artificially prolong life. There are now at least 10 states, including Oregon, that offer Death with Dignity. One courageous and elegant implementation of this process was shared by Oregon's accomplished fiction writer Cai Emmons in her online piece, "Wrapping Up a Life." After years of living with ALS, she orchestrated her death in 2023. As an alternative, Switzerland, Canada, Belgium and The Netherlands offer assisted death services. In a November 2021 article in The Guardian titled, "A trip to Switzerland in search of a good death," Charlotte Naughton movingly recounts her aunt's decision to go to a clinic near Basel to die intentionally. These are both must-reads.

And then the question, what to do with the body that isn't the Aunt-Edna-strapped-to-the-roof-of-the-station-wagon" solution? As concerns about the toxicity of the cremation process increase, other options, such as aquamation, are becoming more popular. In both cases, an urn of remains

is provided to survivors to distribute in the location specified (hopefully) by the deceased. Also for environmental reasons, burial in a non-biodegradable coffin is being supplanted by green burial, also known as human composting, using a biodegradable casket or shroud. Some are enhancing biodegradation by selecting the "mushroom burial suit" infused with spores to hasten the process and filter all toxins from the decomposing body. And what about anatomical donation? At his death my beloved father was, according to his wishes, whisked away to a nearby medical school in a refrigerated van. For my money, both green burial and body donation strike me as paying it forward in some funky afterlife kind of way.

My irreverent tone notwithstanding, I tremble in the face of the mystery, of the vast unknown. But whether death is seen as eternal oblivion or sure resurrection, being as ready as possible allows us to enjoy the party, to surrender to *que cera, cera*. On her death bed, my friend's aunt, distracted by the commotion in the hospital room made by grieving family members, called her favorite niece over to her and whispered, "Please, Jane, tell them all to leave. I have never died before and I want to enjoy it."