FINAL THOUGHTS

One mortal’s quest to laugh at death
in fables, lyrics, aphorisms, riddles, rhyme and reason

Mark Mathew Braunstein

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Final Thoughts
Beginner’s Guide to Death

A Thanatology Anthology of Fables, Lyrics, Aphorisms, Riddles, Rhyme and Reason

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other books by the author:

Radical Vegetarianism: A Dialectic of Diet and Ethic  

Sprout Garden: Indoor Grower’s Guide to Gourmet Sprouts  

Microgreen Garden: Indoor Grower’s Guide to Gourmet Greens  
(2013, Spanish translation 2019)

Good Girls on Bad Drugs: Addiction Nonfiction in a Revised Edition  

Some portions of this book were adapted from earlier versions first published in these books and magazines:

- Chapter 04: the “Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait as Zeuxis” passage in Iris – Notes in the History of Art, December 1983.
- Chapter 06: the “Rynn Berry” eulogy in Vegetarian Voice, Spring 2014.
The Bookmark in the Book of Life

When she first learned how to read, she began reading a thick tome intended for adults. At first, she struggled yet persevered. The book seemed so long that she doubted either she or anyone else could ever finish reading it. She placed a bookmark to indicate the page to where she had read.

As she matured, her reading skills improved, and her speed and comprehension increased. Protruding beyond the top edges of the pages, her bookmark slowly advanced towards the middle of the book. As more years passed and she read more pages, that bookmark still seemed stuck somewhere in the middle, holding the promise of still more pages ahead of her. This continued for years, as the final half of the book remained ever more elusive and ever more unread. At first, she thought it peculiar that no matter how many pages she left behind, just as many pages awaited ahead. Eventually, she no longer noticed. The strange became the norm. The norm became forgotten.

Then after a lifetime of her reading this same, seemingly endless book, quite suddenly that bookmark leaped from the middle of the book to its back pages. Perhaps a veil of unconscious denial had shielded her eyes, and now it had fallen from her face. Or perhaps the cataracts of old age had clouded her vision. Or perhaps her eyesight, sharply focused on the book, had grown dim to the bookmark. When her eyesight was restored as if with a flash of lightning, only then did she realize not only where she was in the book but where the book had been taking her all along.

When she finally finished reading and closed that book, she thought what a quick read it turned out to be after all, especially its last half. Then she flipped to the back cover to read the blurbs and endorsements. There were none. There was only the title. While on its front cover the title was The Book of Life, on its back cover the title over the course of many years had been revised and the tome had metamorphosed into The Book of Death.
Chapter 02

Epigrams and Epitaphs

As Life Is a Joke, so Death Is Its Laughter

Sung to the tune of “Happy Birthday”:
Happy Birthday to me.
Quite soon I’ll be free.
Every year brings me nearer,
When I’m buried at sea.

Sung to the tune of “Happy Birthday”:
Happy Birthday to you.
You’re no longer new.
Every year brings you nearer,
When soon you’ll be thru.
An outgoing voicemail message:
“This is the voice of my present, which to you is my past.
This is the voice of the ghost in the machine.
The ghost is asleep, dreaming about death.
The machine is dead, dreaming about life.
You who are awake may speak a message to posterity,
which shall be heard in eternity.”

An outgoing answering-machine message:
“Despite this answering machine,
thousands of calls later my questions remain unanswered.
I’ll ask one last time.
What is Life?
And what is Death?
Are we angels who have lost our wings,
Apes who have lost our hair;
Or apes who have lost our angels?
And least but not last, who am I?
And last but not least, who are you!”

An announcement on citywide outdoor loudspeakers:
“This is a test of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's emergency broadcast system. This is only a test. If this were a real nuclear emergency, you would not be listening to this broadcast. You would be dead.”

Consumer beware:
Microgreens and sprouted mung
and gluten-free bread
will make you live so long,
you’ll wish you were dead.

Principium mortiendi natalis est. Dying begins at birth. Principium est finis.
In the beginning, awaits the end. Inside the cradle lies a coffin. Tailgating the baby carriage is the hearse. Within every voluptuous body lurks the skeleton.

If our spirituality is measurable in inverse proportion to all the possessions that we have amassed, then we ascend to the pinnacle of enlightenment when we leave it all behind and die.

Life is cyclical in the same way that the Earth is round. Traveling a straight path will return you to the same place where you began. To fear death is to fear birth and, therefore, life. Those we know will die ahead of us or we will die ahead of them. Death should come as no surprise. Expressed in colloquialism “Get used to it.”

Life is lived day by day the way that pinball is played game by game. The winner’s prize is merely another game. The survivor’s reward is merely another day. The winner is duped into playing until the game that she loses. The survivor is compelled to live until the day that she dies.

At class reunions, we view the march of time etched upon the faces of our former classmates, most who have grown to look as old as our own parents did when we were youthful students. At their fiftieth high school reunion, all the classmates had the same shocking news to share. During their recent annual physical exams, their doctors informed them that they all had less than twenty years left to live.

Day by day, we awaken, shower, scarf down breakfast, shuffle off to work, work, gulp down lunch, work, some more head home, have dinner, watch a video, and read ourselves to sleep. Year by year, we get born,
learn to walk, grow up, go to school, learn to drive, go to college, learn a trade, get a job, get married, beget children, get divorced, get old, falter and stumble, stumble and fall, get injured and hospitalized, get buried and become forgotten. What did we learn?

After the brief grief of painting herself into a corner, the abstract artist turned to painting landscapes. Her painting was a race between running out of paint and running out of canvas. Then, after putting everything into its proper perspective, she ran out of time and disappeared beyond the vanishing point.

All now alive will die, if not today, then tomorrow. Might as well buy your burial plot today, which is putting the coffin in front of the hearse.

People who lie in glass coffins should never throw bones.

At birth, we are grandfathered into our coffins. So there’s no point in devoting our lives to making tons of money, if all we will have to show for it is our burials in expensive coffins that are no longer visible even to our children who visit our graves.

Q: Why did the chicken cross the road?  
A: To get to the other side of life.

We are students in the course called Life, but because we die, we all flunk out. The suicide is a student so fearful of failing the course that he drops out.

What the hell is hell? Living hell is a life so painful and miserable that the afflicted commits suicide to end his pain and misery even though, as a Christian, he fears his suicide will condemn him to hell.

The best joke she ever heard:

Q: What did the farmer say when his horse died?  
A: “That’s funny. He never did that before.”  
And she died laughing.

He was always in a hurry, yet he was always late. He was late even to his own wedding. He arrived on time only to his own funeral.
He grew weary of breathing, so welcomed that last breath and, with one last exhalation, sputtered out his famous last words, “I can’t breathe.”

An inmate on death row, strapped down to the gurney in his execution gas chamber, should be breathing a sigh of relief. Yet, though doomed, he still fights for his life even with his last breath.

The only two things certain in Life are Death and axes. — Henry VIII

Is Life the candle or its flame? Is dying the flame or its smolder? Is Death the smolder or the air, its oxygen consumed?

The subject heading of an email announcing someone’s death usually states only so-and-so’s name, nakedly and with no modifiers, or issues the warning: “Sad news.” But when the dearly departed was ninety-nine years old and was of sound mind and healthy body until nearly the very end, that is “Happy news.”

Doctor Death’s appointment cards all come preprinted:
“ You will be unable to keep this appointment, so please cancel within 24 hours so that your time on Earth may be given to someone else.”

“Knock, knock.”
“Who’s there?”
“Death.”
[“The rest is silence.”]

This is a Death sentence.

Someone always is dying, yet he always is laughing. During his once-in-a-lifetime death experience, he will laugh especially hard and die laughing.

In the game of tug of war between Life and Death, Life struggles in its losing battle to pull Death over the line temporarily demarcating the two. Ever sympathetic to the underdog, you can add your muscle to the losing side of Life but should place your bets on the winning side of Death.

Birth: rising from less than nothing, to nothing.
Life: gone today, gone tomorrow.
Death: easier dead than done.

In the game of hide and seek, we the living run to find a place to hide from the irreversibility of time. Yet without even bothering to seek us, Death always finds us.

As a little boy, whenever he passed a cemetery, he thought to himself, ‘That’s where I want to live when I grow up.’

The armed bandit mugs a woman in a dark alley. He demands her wallet, so she removes it from her purse and hands it to him. He demands her ring, so she removes it from her finger and hands it to him. He demands her watch. “Oh, please,” she pleads, “the last thing my grandmother did on her deathbed was hand me this watch.” Taking a hint, he shoots the woman dead, and he removes the watch from her wrist.

Life is a book written in a dead language that no one speaks any longer, so the book remains unopened and unread, and its potential readers all die no wiser than when they were born.
An only child became a single mom who died during her only childbirth. Her son then grew into an adult who neither married nor sired any children, and who aged into an elderly man who outlived all of his friends. As an only child of an only child, he more than any seventh son of a seventh son can fully grasp the ephemerality of life and the inevitability of death.

Death is a forthcoming book of existential philosophy announced years ahead of publication and waitlisted at the library and backordered at the bookstore. While awaiting its release its eager audience instead reads fairy tales and comic books just to retain their reading skills, but by the time that book wanders into print, its anticipation has been forgotten, and everyone dies happily ever after.
The author at age 166

About the Author
Mark Mathew Braunstein walks in the March of Time on crutches. As a paraplegic since 1990, he is half-dead below the waist. And as a vegan since 1970, he is twice-alive above.

He is the author of four other propagandizing books that have exceeded their life expectancies by remaining in print even to this day. He also has scribed more than a hundred ephemeral articles in trashy consumerist magazines, most of which have since folded, and in obscure pedantic academic journals, all written with his intent to save the world, though now he is content to save his breath and his ink.

If he lives that long, he will die too soon. Until that inevitable end, as he believes in neither afterlife nor aftershave, he aspires to spend the rest of his life as a very hairy and very healthy corpse, always looking and feeling ten years younger than his age. Indeed, even at the age of nine, he looked and felt ten years younger than his age.

He believes in all of the gods, but none of the religions. Born an agnostic agnostic, he is not religious, but if he were, he would be a Zen monk, were he not more any than zero.

He may never attain enlightenment nor see god, but perhaps he’ll see into you if you stare and see you having endured reading all the way to the end of this book, in which case he will be a happywhen.