

Contemplate Your Own Death, Save the World



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[Living / Culture](#)
July 4, 2012



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As a rule, I generally refuse to contemplate my own mortality. Mostly because it's just a waste of energy; by the time I near death-age, there will be an abundance of immortality-guaranteeing super-technology, right? I should, for instance, be able to download my consciousness into a robot, or cybernetically regenerate my cells so that I can live forever. Ray Kurzweil [told me so](#). Barring that, I can always cryogenically freeze my head.

But it seems that I should be thinking more about death, after all, even though such ponderous topics make lousy fodder for blogging. Psychologists now have evidence that contemplating your own death activates what they call the "legacy motive"—a powerful but fleeting sense of generosity and drive to make the world a better place before you kick the bucket.

[TIME reports](#) on a new study in [Psychological Science](#):

Momentary social cues about death, such as reading about a death in the newspaper or walking past a funeral hall, activate the “legacy motive,” which contributes to the drive to gain a sense of purpose in life and to make an impact that will live on after death. The legacy motive enables us to look past inherent barriers to the use of resources in ways that will leave resources for the future, rather than immediate consumption by individuals in the present.

“That kind of motive can override narrow, self-interested behavior,” study co-author and University of Michigan assistant professor Leigh Tost said.

Consider your own demise, become a better person.

The study is a little surprising to me, given that talk of death can also activate our nihilistic impulses, too. But I guess that's just us cynics, who are going to live forever anyway.

It makes sense that people want to feel like they've accomplished "something meaningful" in their lives, that their existence has left the world a better place (which, if they're a resource-hogging American, it sorta hasn't by default. sorry!). But I'm not sure this new knowledge will help us address our most pressing concerns much, unless thinking about death also makes millions of Americans change their minds about the veracity of climate change.

The sort of impulsive do-gooding triggered by a brief musing on death seems to be structured much like those activated by "buy green" shaming—both instincts seem likely to be channeled into one-off reactions (lease a hybrid! donate to Sierra Club! all done) to what is of course a deeply structural problem.

But it is interesting. Perhaps those who contemplate death as a direct result of climate-related disasters—say, any of the 36,000 or so people who lost their homes in the Colorado wildfires—might be more likely to direct their do-gooding impulses towards a pertinent arena that's constructive in the long-term. That's another study, I guess. And then again, [someone would actually have to tell them](#) that all those fires had something to do with climate change in the first place.

Until then, I guess the environmental movement should just go around telling everyone they're going to die.

Tags: [Global Climate Change](#)

