CHAPTER

1

Principle 1: Embrace Your Coffin

We are going to die.

This is the opening line to every keynote that I deliver, whether I'm standing in front of a crowd of investment bankers or schoolteachers. And every single time that I utter these words, there is an audible gasp in the room. I can feel the event organizer squirming in the back of the room with a look on her face that says, "Should I have hired this guy?" People turn to look at each other. Some of them mouth to their neighbors, "Did he just say that?"—to which I respond from the stage, "Damn right, I said it!"

When I was growing up in East Texas, I'd hear people ask my grandmother about her plans. Whether she hoped to go to the store, church, or bank, the coda to her itinerary was always the same: "That is . . . ," she'd say, "if the Lord says the same and the creek don't rise."[1] In short, she was saying this: "Here is my itinerary, but let's see what the universe has to say about that." She recognized that what *she wanted* and what *would happen* were two distinct realities.

Our first principle, Embrace Your Coffin, challenges us to acknowledge and honor our temporary status on this twisting sphere we call earth. Scientists estimate our planet has been in existence for 4.5 billion years, give or take a couple of million. The average American lifespan is 77.5 years. I know it's been a while since many of you were in grade school, so I'm going to put the average lifespan in the numerator, the earth's age in the denominator and the number we get is $1.72222222e^{-8}$. Can't remember the rules of exponential numbers? Don't worry, me either. Here's the key takeaway from the math: the amount of time we are alive compared to the life of the earth is small. Tiny. Miniscule. Negligible.

But, that is not to say that our existence is insignificant. Our words and actions sow ideas into the people around us. Those beneficiaries, in turn, sow seeds into the people around them and the cycle continues. This spillover effect is potent enough to alter the future of people we'll never know. And it's this fact alone that should inject a level of

intentionality into our existence. We should approach life with a gentle sense of urgency.

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Gentle Urgency

For eight years, I taught undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin. Over the course of that time, I had 2,842 students. As I sat down to craft my first syllabus, I thought, *What are the things that I wished I had learned about as an undergrad?* The list was long: vulnerability, empathy, and budgeting to name a few. As I worked through the texts for the course, meticulously charting the blueprint for "Gameplan for Winning at Life," one thought kept nagging me.

What about mortality? To be sure, I encountered mortality in college. I was a Plan II major with a minor in classics.[2] Philosophy, history, literature, genetics, sociology. These classes featured various ways of looking at mortality. But what about meaning? What could I, as a college professor,

do to incite my students to think more deeply about their place in the world and the meaning of their lives?

The first couple of years, I sidestepped the question until my mentor texted me with an unusual command:

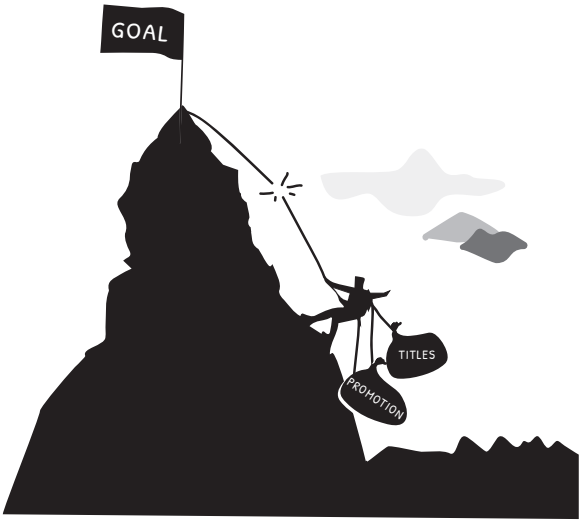
Read David Brooks's NYT article. It's in today's paper.

My mentor has a penchant for cryptic texts, but when he types, I listen. And so I pulled up the article, "The Moral Bucket List." Brooks writes: "It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral—whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful."

I took a deep breath. This Brooks guy was getting personal.

I learned a tough lesson during the first seven years of my professional life: Job titles make for poor traveling companions. At first, I thought the sexy brands that I had worked for—United States Senate, Kansas City Chiefs, Detroit Lions—would satisfy me. In the short term, they armed me with a sexy introduction. We have all been to the happy hour that masquerades as one big comparison party.

TITLES AND PROMOTIONS MAKE FOR POOR TRAVELING COMPANIONS



The inevitable, "It's so nice to meet you! So what do you do?" is code for, "Let me figure out if you're worth talking to." My life had revolved around trying to impress people who weren't even impressed with themselves. And so that night, I decided to write my eulogy.

What did I really want someone to say about me?

I imagined myself lying in a pine box. I even toyed around with the idea of asking a local mortuary to let me spend the night in a coffin as an experiment. No tweets. No business cards. No email. Just Daron lying in a box.[3]

What was interesting to me about what I wrote was what it did *not* contain. I didn't list the sexy stuff that we throw on our LinkedIn pages. Degrees and awards seemed inconsequential. Who would give a damn that I went to Harvard Law School? And who would care that I was the Big East Recruiter of the Year? No one, at least no one who mattered to me.

But what did matter, however, was how I made people feel during my time on the earth. That was the nagging question that kept percolating to the surface. Not *what* but *how*. Would any of my lessons land with my children? Would they remember me being present in their lives? Not merely around but *present*? Would my wife feel I had loved her? Not the love of perfunctory farewells, but real love—the sterner variety.

This was April 2015 so I still had plenty of time to embed a eulogy writing exercise into my syllabus for the fall. I intentionally placed it at the end of the semester, tucked far below the midterm so as not to alert anyone, except for my teaching assistants.

I remember that fall semester as being one of my largest classes, numbering close to 300 students. As expected, no one uttered a word about the assignment until after Thanksgiving.

Professor Roberts, you want me to write my eulogy?

Yes.

But, that means that I'm dead.

Theoretically, yes.

Are you being serious?

Yes.

One of my teaching assistants asked for a meeting with me.

"Professor Roberts, you know that I respect you, but during section today, a few students made some convincing arguments for not writing the eulogy and they asked for an alternative assignment," she said.

Dive into Darkness

In class the next day, I led the class in a moment of breathing. You could feel the tension rise into the rafters. I thought of how this challenging assignment coincided with the final exams they were taking in their other classes. With holidays and travel around the corner, these young people were anxious, stressed, and scared.

The brain wants to protect us. Its job is to keep this vehicle we call our bodies humming along at the speed of homeostasis. Our brains—a three-pound ball of proteins, fat, water, carbohydrates, and salt—is built however for survival, not thrival.[4] Our goals (the big, hairy, scary ones that keep us up at night) lie just north of the homeostasis line. Just thinking about those goals is enough to increase our heart rate and trigger the release valve on our cortisol tanks. I like to think of a cortisol release in the body like an indoor fire sprinkler. Once the smoke from that overcooked

chicken reaches the alarm, water rains down. It's a protective device, but it can also be an inhibitor for action.

As I listened to the purr of my students' exhales, I began to empathize with their fear. Turning back to the assignment, I encouraged the undergrads to reimagine the exercise as a celebration. I compared the challenge to a deep-sea expedition. The floor holds both wreckage and treasure, but you can't get to the latter until you wade through the former.

Well, they did it. I expected some form of mutiny or even worse, a pile of half-hearted eulogies, but I wasn't prepared for the sincerity. Sitting on my couch with a stack of papers in my lap, I read every eulogy over a two-day period. If I'm honest, the experience felt like a never-ending funeral. Not only did these undergrads complete the assignment, but each one of them dug deep. They painted intricate landscapes of *who* they would become and *how* they would improve the human condition. I left the University of Texas a couple of years ago, but to this day, those eulogies are my most prized possessions. I've lost the plaques and medallions that I received for teaching awards. But in the northwest corner of my garage stands a stack of banker's boxes that contains every eulogy that was written. Here are a few excerpts:

> *From her days working for Teach for America, students of Catherine remember how enthusiastically she taught math. Every day was a surprise and she exhibited the patience they needed to learn the algebra they hated.*
>
> *Without Gerald's encouragement, the author Drake Simpson says he wouldn't have written his first book.*

> *She leaves behind a host of nieces and nephews. Their fondest memories are of her infamous "Samantha Summer Camp" sessions hosted at her cabin in Maine each year.*[5]

Notice the feat that these undergraduates pulled off. First, they confronted the fear of thinking about their death. Then, they embraced vulnerability and used their imagination to create a picture of their future selves. For many of them, it was the most challenging assignment they'd completed in school. But they pushed through the agitation.

Confronting our mortality exercises our sense of urgency. It reframes failures from catastrophic to instructive. When we confront death with a vulnerability, it frees us to reimagine how we can leverage the time we have today.

In an interview, Maya Angelou was asked, "You're not afraid of life?" to which Angelou responded, "No." The interviewer couldn't seem to understand her answer, so Angelou continued: "I gave in to [death] which was a great, freeing production for me. Once I really admitted that I would die. That it is the one promise I can be sure will not be reneged upon. Once I understood that, then I could be present. And I'm totally present all the time. I try now, I don't make it all the time, but I try to bring all my stuff here in this studio. Everything I've got is here. And when I leave here, everything I got will be in that taxi."[6]

To close this chapter, let's take a deep dive.

Deep Dive: My Eulogy

First, take a deep breath. I understand this work may be more unsettling for some of you than others. So take as much time as you need to close your eyes, quiet your body, and breathe with intention.

Let's craft *your* eulogy. Don't try to get Shakespearean with it. No one is grading what you write. Make this exercise personal, and this is not the time to be modest. Let's build an aspirational blueprint for the rest of our lives.

Imagine that you are your best friend, and you're standing before an assembly of people who are attending your funeral. What mark do you want to leave on the people around you? How would you want to be remembered?

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