

17 Things I Would Do Differently If I Were Fully Convinced I'm Going to Die by Eric Jones

1. I wouldn't do a single thing differently, but I'd be utterly transformed. Most everyone around me would notice that I had changed, but they'd find it almost impossible to say how. If pushed, they might say something like, "He hasn't changed at all, but everything he does he does more slowly, as if he wants to remember the way it tastes."

2. I would stop doing almost everything I'm doing now, stop working, stop spending long hours indoors typing emails, checking check boxes that mostly go unchecked until I simply cross them out, laying down tasks in the broad afternoon sunlight of each day like a man cutting down flowers so that he can come to the end of the field and finally stop worrying about all those flowers left to cut.

3. I would spend most of my time outside under the sky, which just happens to be blue but could just as easily be another color, couldn't it?, given how diverse and profligate everything in the solar system and universe is. After all, there are whole giant planets made of gas, Jupiter and Neptune and maybe Uranus, too, plus a giant red cloud storm on Mars as old as a tree and and bigger then the country of Brazil and Czechoslovakia with Rhode Island and Delaware added in for good measure. I would spend more time looking up at the blue sky and marveling that it might have been any other color but this, just this very shade of pale milky blue, with nothing else like it in the known universe of planetary skies.

4. I would almost certainly inhabit my body differently, let it carry me around for the sheer thrill of it, enjoy its self-maintaining, self-tuning, self-healing, self-harmonizing orchestral humming amongst its tens of trillions of cells, plus all the fluid inside the cells, and the interstitial fluid, and not to forget all the ion channels and miraculously facilitated crossings across all the walls and boundaries and borderlands between the trillions of insides and outsides inside our one body, and the trillions of makings and un-makings of origami-folded proteins with their hidden locks and their matching enzymatic keys, all performing with their fail-safes upon fail-safes, their redundancies upon redundancies, the miraculous machinery that ends at the dulled tip of the spear that is my ordinary dissatisfaction with myself.

5. Would I have more sex or less? It would be hard to have less sex than I have now, so

quite possibly I'd have more sex, though it's truly hard to say, since sex seems like something you'd wish you'd done more of when you reached the end of your life, wishing to be free from the pinned to the mattress of your own failing body, the turning of the nurses to avoid the bed sores, the chucks and the cheeks spreading by gloved hands. But maybe not.

6. I think I would go to the places where things are disappearing so that I could kiss them all good-bye before we both go, the barrier reefs of Australia, the polar bears all skin and bones but still ferocious, or especially ferocious, the lobster fleeing Maine's waters for the cold of Newfoundland, the Right Whales so close to extinction now, their numbers smaller than a single high school graduating class, and the mountain gorillas and snow leopards and leatherback turtles, and then all the insects disappearing into silence, the thawing perma-frosts of Siberia and the Northwest Territories, and the glaciers that are retreating what is likely to be their last retreat for the next half a million years or more. I would kiss them all good-bye for myself and my children and the great grandchildren of the children half a world away I will never meet.

7. I think I would be in love with everyone the way I'm in love with my own son, the way everyone's hair falls over their heads when they're sleeping, the way everyone sleeping is like everyone else sleeping, so perfectly and utterly alone and far away and asking for protection. It's one of the loveliest things about flying or traveling on an overnight train, all the passengers on their secret trajectories falling asleep together as if it were the most natural thing in the world to close your eyes amongst strangers while traveling 500 miles per hour 5 miles above the earth. I would even love their hot animal breath, every widower, every sprawling teen, every mother and father with their children heaped upon them like flotsam, the tender shoot of every him and her and theyness suspended in the darkened cabin. I think what I'm saying is that I would be more like Walt Whitman.

8. I would make up excuses to meet everyone I could to shake their hands and gaze into their eyes before we both disappear forever. "I'm your neighbor from down the street, your neighbor from two towns over, I'm an Iowan, an American, I've been meaning to tell you that I'm very interested in whatever yard sign or bumper sticker or t-shirt you've placed to let strangers know something about you. I'll bite, I'm biting and asking you please will you tell me more, why don't you tell me more? I'm here to listen.

9. I think the relationship between my generosity and my greed would flip, and I would give away as much as I possibly could (instead of saving as much as I could) and save as little as I needed to survive. What getting and saving, what safety and security in the \$468,234 I and my wife currently have in our 401Ks and 502zs or 403cs when the colonoscopy results take 8 days and you're waiting to know whether or not it's cancer and blessedly, just like every other big shoe in your life so far it stays suspended, doesn't drop, for now, for now. But if I, looking up, could really see the shoe, and knew deep in my bones that it would surely fall, then what savings, what safety, what 95% certainty that I won't outlive my life savings and have the same lifestyle I enjoy today until I'm 92.5 years old, which is when a financial advisor told me he expects that I'll die.

Of course, I don't believe him.

10. I don't know why I didn't say it before but I would almost certainly quit my job. Maybe not right away, because there's good I could do if I were working at my job but also saw clearly and truly that I must and that I will die. But then, after that, how could I not quit my job when I've seen and done so little? And it's not really the traveling that I mean, though that's what comes first to mind. It's the deep, deep grooves that I've driven into my life by staying at the same job for so long. Even if I never left Iowa, I would have so much more to see, so many more people to meet, so much more to know and be curious about than the little corner of my own tiny business that I've been sweeping and tidying for almost half of my life. And I don't even think I'm particularly good at doing what I'm doing, which isn't to say that's the right reason to keep doing something, but it would be one compelling argument, if you were especially suited or especially talented at what you decided to spend 20 years doing.

I would definitely quit my job.

11. If I truly knew, if I were truly convinced in my body that I'm going to die, I think I would hold the largest piece of awakening. Is death denial the primary source of all my distracted, disconnected living? Absent that denial, I would see the drama of this world, the drama of my internal world, as a kind of amusing side-show, a feathery, glittering diversion from the main event of my life. I would know that the place to look would be where almost no one else is looking, or at least no one I know.

12. I think I would spend far more time with animals, and far more time in fields and forests, oceans and streams. When I think about what it might be like to leave this planet for good, my heart longs for animals in the way that a child's heart longs for animals, and not just in their fanciful anthropomorphized form, but in their true twinned strangeness to our own forked strangeness. Their hearts, their vessels, their brains the consistency of firm tofu like ours, and also their several stomachs and many eyes and ability to find themselves to the very spot on the other side of the planet where they were born many moons ago. They are in a very real way our forgotten companions, the only ones we know about in the entire universe looking at us from their own strange eyes, the only beings that can look at us looking back at them. I miss them now: I'll miss them when I go.

13. I would be kinder in the most ordinary of ways.

14. I can't be sure of any of this, of course, because I can only imagine what it would be

like to truly be connected to the fact of my own mortality. I can glimpse my own death only in my peripheral vision, as a figure, or is it a shadow of a figure, a flash of darkness, and then I turn to face it and it's gone, and instead I see just one day after another of this ordinarily charmed and world-never-ending life. Only in dreams have I tasted impending death.

Once in a dream I was shot in the chest at close range, and the pain was the most excruciating I've ever felt, the bullet tumbling through my torso and exiting just below my right shoulder blade. Something deep in my animal body knew that the wound was not only catastrophic but that I would die soon, in seconds or minutes. And I'm trying to remember now what dark panic that was, what that full throated realization was as the blood drained from my body and the pain was like a thunderbolt flashed on in my brain without cease. It's like trying to imagine living on an asteroid. How unlikely the world would seem, and how strange and wondrous I think, if I lived in touch with interstellar death.

15. I fell asleep at the wheel once when I was in college. The details are sad and sordid, but the key fact was that I was driving stone-sober north on Interstate 87 at dawn after having stayed up all night. The sun was just about to come up, and the struggles of nighttime driving seemed to be over, and my guard came down against my own bone tiredness. I was in the left lane of the highway doing perhaps 70 miles per hour when it was as if a giant pair of scissors came and snipped the film of my consciousness clear through and then all went black. In the blessed darkness of sleep, I heard the most horrible sound like the thundering hooves of many horses underneath me, and then I opened my eyes and looked out the driver side window to see us sliding very fast sideways down an embankment. I cranked the steering wheel in the direction instinct told me, and the car seemed to drift upwards the way a leaf lifts from the ground in a stiff gust of wind.

It was at that exact moment that I heard a cool, calm male voice in my head, a kind of scientific, clinical, absurdly neutral voice say, "You are going to die." I knew the voice was telling the absolute truth. The voice was like water; tasteless, clear, cold, and unimpeachably essential and perfectly real. And somehow, I was the voice. I wasn't sad, wasn't afraid, wasn't anything. When I read the line from Yeats that said, "Cast a cold eye, on life, on death, horseman pass by" I remembered that moment. The tires held, the car leapt back up the embankment, back onto the highway, spun three times around and then came to rest against the guardrail just beside the breakdown lane, as if a tiger had swatted us for sport. If I knew death like that every day, I would be thrilled to be alive, absolutely damn thrilled.

16. What if all my imaginings are plain wrong? It seems I'm suggesting that all terminal cancer patients should become gurus, can see through the veil of self-delusion far more easily than the terminal but undiagnosed. Is it even possible to live in touch with death or is the organism too defended against it, or simply built in such a way that the truth isn't available for inspection, much in the way that it's impossible to see the backs of our

heads without a mirror.

I can't even travel too far with that line of thinking. Something in me resists that conclusion with more than logic - deep in my bones it feels like death is buried there, is hidden in every moment. In fact, rather than being convinced that the true reality of death is finally unavailable to me, I might believe that death is one of the only things I know, and that I die to myself 1,000 or 10,000 times a day. I don't say that to get mystical or abstract - the deaths and births are there to be seen and experienced, but they're blurred by the narrative in the same way 24 frames per second blurs into a film. Death is all around us, giving birth to new life. And I'm disconnected from both. Disconnection from one is inevitably a disconnection from the other. When I say I don't know death, I'm also always saying I don't know life. If I knew death I would know how to live.

17. It's a remarkable thing to sit with the dead body of someone you've known and loved all your life. I want to say the word for the feeling is uncanny, though I don't know if that would be the right word - it's just the word that comes to mind. When I sat beside my father's dead body at the funeral home in South Portland, Maine, I knew more than the fact that he was dead; I also knew that he was absolutely and utterly gone. In that instant, I knew that he had existed within his body like luminescence, like sparks, and the lights had been snuffed out completely and forever. Of course, I don't know if what I was feeling is correct, but in that moment as I sat or knelt beside his body, I can't remember which, I held his cold hand and looked at his ashen and bruising face and knew that he had completely and utterly disappeared from the universe of infinite things. The fact that his body was still there without him seemed like the most bizarre magic trick imaginable; he had completely vanished into the black hat of death. Oddly, his total disappearance didn't feel like a betrayal or make me more or less despondent. It was somehow obvious to me. It seemed like a bare fact that shone light on other facts. Like, my father was a brief flowering of irreproducibility and now he was gone. What was there to quibble with over the life he lived, whether good or bad or neutral? Confronted with the fact that he had existed in the exact form that he had for as long as he had and that now he would forever and ever be gone, as one day would all of his children and his children's children and their children, what was there left to do but sit in wonder and love and marvel that any of us exists at all.