

Memento Mori: Meaning, History, Art, Culture (Stoicism)

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— By [Dr. Sandip Roy](#).

The ancient Stoics told the greatest story about remembering the shortness of life. Generations have retold that original story through art and culture. It is called memento mori, a call to embrace life fully and mindfully.

Approach me, stranger. Nothing in my story should startle you. Your flesh has always known it. I just remind you. I'm Memento Mori.

— *Michael Coy*

In the Middle Ages, tombs and monuments often bore carvings of skulls and skeletons. These figures were memento mori motifs. They reminded the onlookers that they, too, were marked for the end.

But the greatest story of memento mori is older, told by the Romans. It traversed time, from the generals, slaves, pharaohs, and philosophers to playwrights, painters, the Grim Reaper, and skull tattoos.

Memento Mori Meaning

“Memento mori” is a Latin phrase that means *“Remember that you are finite.”*

It is both a reminder that life is short and its end unavoidable, as well as an exhortation to live life to the fullest and stay prepared for that moment.

The Stoic philosophers of ancient Rome popularized it, asking their followers to use their limited time on earth wisely and live virtuously and mindfully.

A “Memento” is a souvenir or object you keep as a reminder. And “Mori” is the end.

[Please note it is “**memento mori**” — *not* “**momento mori**”.]

Memento Mori Origin & History

1. Origin Story of Memento Mori

According to the Galileo Galilei Institute in Turin, the origins of memento mori go back to ancient Rome. This is that origin story.

Rome in those days had the tradition of holding a *‘triumphus.’* It was a gala parade to honor a triumphant general who had just returned from the battlefield.

The victorious general would enter Rome riding a four-horse chariot. The people he captured were held in chains, and the souvenirs he seized were laid on trolleys, both paraded ahead of his horses.

His troops would march beside and behind his chariot.

The procession would march through the streets to reach the temple of Jupiter, where the general was to offer a sacrifice.

People would throng in large numbers on the sides of the streets, shouting the deeds of their hero and rejoicing at the occasion.

A triumphal procession tended to fit a formula. First to come were the captive leaders, usually walking in chains. They were followed by their captured weapons and armor, along with the spoils of campaign and any exotic objects which might impress the citizens of Rome.

The ultimate bit of propaganda, a procession of painted posters and statues depicting the notable events of the campaign, came next, followed by Rome's senators and magistrates, all on foot as a sign of humility before the great hero of the hour. The conquering general came towards the end in a four-horse chariot, dripping with gold leaf and animal furs, followed by his loyal soldiers wearing laurel leaves and togas and shouting in unison "io triumphe" — behold the triumph!

— *John Welford, retired librarian, Leicestershire*

The lofty *triumphus*, the most cherished ambition of every Roman general, was extremely hard to obtain.

The Roman senate did not grant every battle-winner this honor. Of the many conditions, one was that the general must have slain at least 5,000 of the enemy in a single battle.

The triumph parade was such a magnificent ceremony that it could make any general feel like a god.

Here comes the twist in that tale. In the chariot, as legend has it, a slave stood close behind the euphoric general.

This slave's sole duty was to whisper into the ears of the commander every once in a while:

"Respice post te. Hominem te memento", which meant *"Look behind, remember that you are a man"*.

That repeated reminder forced the general to stay humble on this grand occasion. It kept him aware that when he passes away, his heroic tales and fame will be forgotten within days.

That custom was the origin story of the *memento mori* tradition.

Memento-Mori – Remember your impermanence

But how could a piece of Stoic advice be a reminder to live life free from your fears?

See these [Memento Mori Bracelets: Wearable Symbols of Life's Fragility](#).

2. Memento Mori In Stoicism

The concept of memento mori is a central tenet of Stoic philosophy.

Stoics believe that the end is a part of life. So, instead of fearing it, we should use its awareness as a motivation to live our lives to the fullest.

However, memento mori was not a tradition of the Early Stoa (Zeno to Antipater), or the Middle Stoa (Panaetius and Posidonius). It was the philosophers of Late Stoa, the Roman Stoics, who took up the idea of memento mori.

These Roman Stoics extensively used memento mori to urge people [to live virtuously](#). They taught that people had only a little time to do good since the end could come at any moment.

In fact, people lived very short lives back then. The average life expectancy in the Roman Empire was just over 20 years. And 50% of infants born in Rome would die before they reached ten years old ([Stoicism and acceptance](#), Menzies & Whittle, 2022).

Memento mori told them to stop being arrogant or narcissistic, jealous, spiteful, or mean.

No one can take their possessions and prizes when they leave the living world. Everything stays behind, even if their graves are filled with riches and comforts.

They saw each day as a gift and stopped wasting time on trivial matters. It is a good reminder for us today, as we waste time scrolling social media for hours.

Ryan Holiday, who single-handedly brought Stoicism into modern social consciousness, is fond of saying,

“Live your life as if you’re not sure whether your time on this earth is ending or not. Get your s**t together. Handle what’s important. Take care of others. Enjoy yourself. Be at peace.”

What is memento mori – Ryan Holiday

But the end is such a fearful thing, you may exclaim in horror.

The Stoics tell us that the end is a natural part of life, is nothing to be afraid of.

Epictetus said, *“If you’re fond of a jug, say, “This is a jug that I’m fond of,” and then, if it gets broken, you won’t be upset.”* Think of that jug as your life, and you lose the fear.

The Stoic sages Seneca, Epictetus, and [Marcus Aurelius](#) extensively meditated on their last days. They gave us this mind-altering understanding:

The end is not waiting for us at the end of our lives, but it is already upon us. It has already claimed each day that we have lived until now.

It opened my eyes to a profound realization when I first learned about it.

Seneca On The Shortness of Life

Seneca, the Roman philosopher, statesman, and dramatist, wrote about the importance of memento mori in his essay “On the Shortness of Life.”

He said, “It is a wise man who, when he looks upon the life of man, remembers that it is short and fleeting.”

Seneca believed that awareness of the end can help us to focus on what is truly important in life, and to live each day as if it were our last.

Seneca advised,

“Let us prepare our minds as if we’d come to the very end of life. Let us postpone nothing. Let us balance life’s books each day. ... The one who puts the finishing touches on their life each day is never short of time.”

Marcus Aurelius On Being Like Someone for Whom Time is Limited

The philosopher king of the Roman Empire ([read his most famous quotes here](#)), Marcus Aurelius, frequently reminded himself of his finality:

- Once he was telling himself: *“Do not act as if you were going to live ten thousand years. While you live, while it is in your power, be good.”*
- Then he reminded himself thus: *“You have lived your life. Now, take what’s left, and live it properly.”*
- And once again, he warned himself: *“Let each thing you would do, say, or intend, be like that of someone completing their final task.”*

The phrase “Yesterday, you said tomorrow” is thought to have originated in ancient Rome, where it was used as a reminder of the inevitability of the end.

The idea was that if you put off something important until tomorrow, there is no guarantee that you will actually get to it tomorrow. Something could happen, and then you would have missed your chance.

It was used by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who said,

“Yesterday, you said tomorrow. Make today the day.”

Epictetus On Freedom From Fear

[Epictetus, the former slave who became a Stoic Philosopher](#), also stressed the importance of memento mori and often said, *“Remember that your existence is finite.”*

Epictetus believed that awareness of the end could help us to live a more virtuous life by freeing us from fear and allowing us to focus on the present moment.

He often reminded his students this way:

“If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that it is a human being that you’re kissing; and then, if one of them should ..., you won’t be upset.”

— *Epictetus, Enchiridion, 3*

That advice from Epictetus seems inhumanely cruel. William Irvine, the author of [A Guide to the Good Life](#), tries to explain its import.

Irvine says that parents who remember the transience of life will never take their children for granted. They would instead pause each day to shower them with love and appreciation.

Epictetus’s more palatable advice on the subject was:

“Keep ... and exile before your eyes each day, along with everything that seems terrible— by doing so, you’ll never have a base thought nor will you have excessive desire.”

3. Story of Diogenes And Memento Mori

Diogenes the Cynic was a rebel philosopher of ancient times who lived in a wooden cask and barely wore clothes. He stressed extreme self-sufficiency and the absolute rejection of luxury.

Once, [Diogenes of Sinope](#) was asked how he wished to be buried. He replied that he wanted them to throw his body outside the city walls, unburied. They expressed concern that wild beasts would feast on him and asked if it would upset him.

Diogenes replied, *“Not at all, as long as you give me a stick to chase the creatures away!”*

They laughed and pointed out that since he would be gone and hence have no awareness, he couldn't fend off the wolves with his stick.

To this, Diogenes replied,

“If I lack awareness, then why should I care what happens to me when I'm gone?”

He was unconcerned about what happened to his body after he was gone. To him, how he practiced his philosophy of Cynicism while he lived was more important.

By the way, behavioral scientists call extreme self-neglect in older adults *“[Diogenes syndrome](#).”* Sufferers live in dirty, untidy homes and show little shame for their filthy personal appearance or the state of their surroundings.

With *memento mori*, we also stop worrying about what would happen to the people we love, and who would take care of them, along with our pets and plants. Instead, we go ahead and love them more in our lifetime.

Memento mori reminds us that the great equalizer awaits us.

4. Memento Mori And Egyptians

The Romans and the Egyptians were destined to share profound bonds in history.

- Julius Caesar fell in love with Cleopatra and helped her ascend to the throne of Egypt as its sole ruler.
- After Julius Caesar's assassination, Cleopatra began a romance with Marcus Antonius, or Mark Antony, the Roman general.
- Then, when Mark Antony faced a crushing defeat at the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra chose to meet her end by the venom of an asp rather than being captured.
- The man coming after Cleopatra was Octavian or Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.
- Augustus took the whole of Egypt for himself, and the Nile-irrigated Egypt became the breadbasket of Rome.

The Egyptians had always celebrated the lore of *memento mori* in a way that was much grander than that of the Romans.

For them, the end was merely a passage into an afterlife. They built magnificent pyramids as timeless shrines to the pharaohs resting in their graves.

The pyramids display the unique way the Egyptians remembered life. They show how the Egyptians had devised ingenious methods to mummify the corpses.

Memento Mori – James H Capshew (Tate)

They designed exquisite face masks for their departed and built intricate and luxurious chambers. All to show their many ways to honor life, even in the end.

5. Memento Mori And Church

This idea of “keeping the end in mind” spread with the growing influence of the Church.

In the 2nd century, the Christian writer Tertullian's version of the triumphal parade described the slave as whispering,

"Respice post te. Hominem te memento."

Translation: "Look behind you. Remember you're [only] a man."

"Ars Moriendi" was the first Medieval text on passing away and preparing for it in European devotional literature. It was published around 1415 CE at the request of the Council of Constance, Germany. It had practical advice on the rites and procedures of a good end and *how to depart well*.

Ars Moriendi was a much-needed response by the Roman Catholic Church to the widespread fear and social upheaval caused by a devastating [medieval plague](#).

The Book of Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach), 7:40, reads as:

"In all thy works be mindful of thy last end and thou wilt never sin."

Memento Mori In Popular Culture

The concept of memento mori has been important in Western culture throughout the centuries. Used in art, literature, and philosophy, it continues to be a reminder to us that we should live our lives to the fullest, knowing that the end is inevitable.

1. Music & Dance

Memento mori was a genre of *requiem* and funeral music, and it had a rich traditional history in early European music. Jewelry like rings and pendants, pens, belts, skulls, and coffin motifs inspired by *memento mori* became popular towards the end of the 16th century.

Another notable genre of *memento mori* is [Danse Macabre](#). It is a type of dramatic play that highlights the universality and inevitability of the end.

The tradition traces back to the middle of the 14th century. The early plays featured **a skeletal figure** wearing a hooded robe and carrying a scythe: [The Grim Reaper](#).

The Grim Reaper would ambush a powerful person, usually a king or a pope, and tell them their time is over. As he took him to his grave, he called on people from all walks of life to dance all the way to the cemetery.

The purpose was to remind them of the fragility of life and the futility of earthly glories. It was a *memento mori*, that the end was coming for them, regardless of where they lived.

The Danse Macabre also found expression in fine art, and many murals, frescoes, and paintings celebrated it.

The ["Triumph" at Pisa's cemetery](#), painted between 1360 and 1380, is one of the most famous paintings on the theme. The Cimetière des Innocents in Paris may have the oldest image of the Danse Macabre (1425).

[Hans Holbein the Younger](#) was one of the greatest portraitists of the 16th century. He crafted a series of the "most marvelous woodcuts ever made" on Danse Macabre. The first book edition, containing forty-one of Holbein's woodcuts, came out in 1538.

2. Books & Literature

Among the best-known literary meditations on the end in English are Sir Thomas Browne's *The Urn of Burial*.

The Roman poet Horace used the Latin phrase "*carpe diem*" to exhort people to "seize the day." It was to tell the people that they should enjoy life while they can, since no one is promised a tomorrow.

In the eleventh poem of his Odes, published in 23 BCE, he wrote:

"carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero"

It translates as "*pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in the next one.*"

Epicurus, who lived around 300 years before Horace, philosophized on the idea of *carpe diem*.

The Epicureans believed living for today while enjoying the pleasures of life can help them attain a state of tranquility or *ataraxia*.

Epicurus believed pleasure is the greatest good, and one should live a life of pleasure, free from all fear. The [Epicurean way to a happy life](#) is something we can achieve today, once we are ready. Epicureanism later became the inspiration for Horace.

"There is only one chain that keeps us bound, the love of life, and even if this should not be rejected, it should be reduced so that if circumstances require nothing will hold us back or prevent us from being ready instantly for whatever action is needed."

— *Epicurus*

Shakespeare wrote of it in many of his plays. His play *Hamlet—Prince of Denmark* begins with the appearance of the ghost and ends with several tragic conclusions.

In between, Hamlet develops an obsession with the afterlife. In an iconic moment, he holds up the court jester Yorick's skull and ponders its transition from life, grieving what became of even the most alive and vibrant of people: all reduced to a hollow skull.

Hamlet finally accepts the end, without fear or longing, and points out that "*the readiness is all.*"

3. Art: Vanity, Vainglory, And D...

Perhaps the most notable art genre associated with *memento mori* is [vanitas](#), which started emerging in the later years of the 15th century.

They showed both *vanity* (deep interest in appearance and achievements) and *vainglory* (excessive boastfulness and vulgar display), and their futility in the end.

memento-mori-ipsa-adeo-morti

The painting above is inscribed with these Latin words: "*ipsa adeo morti vel formosissima cedvnt.*" Translated, it means "*Even the most beautiful one gives in to morti.*"

The *vanitas* art form focused on still life and contained various symbols reminding the viewer of the worthlessness of worldly goods and vanities.

Mostly, they carry traditional memento mori symbols such as skulls, extinguished candles, withered flowers, books, hourglasses, sundials, and musical instruments.

Memento mori flowers – Still Life with Bouquet and Skull, by Adriaen van Utrecht, 1642

Memento mori art: Some famous paintings centering on *memento mori* are:

- “Skull” by Albrecht Dürer, 1521
- “The Scream” by Edvard Munch, 1891
- “The Nightmare” by Henry Fuseli, 1781
- “Pyramid of Skulls” by Paul Cézanne, 1901
- “Young Man with a Skull” by Frans Hals, c. 1626
- “Bull Skull, Fruit, Pitcher” by Pablo Picasso, 1939
- “Skull with Burning Cigarette” by Vincent van Gogh, 1885
- “Still-Life with a Skull” by Philippe de Champaigne, c. 1671
- “Saturn Devouring His Son” by Francisco Goya, c. 1819-1823
- “Girl with Mask (She Plays Alone)” by Frida Kahlo, 1938
- “Judith Slaying Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1614-1620

Bull Skull, Fruit, Pitcher by Picasso

4. Day of The *Muertos*

Día de los Muertos is celebrated all throughout Mexico and other Latin American countries like Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

Every November 1st and 2nd, they build altars to honor their deceased family members, decorated with marigolds, candles, incense, food items, and toys.

el Día de los in Mexico

It originated with the **Mayans** (250 to 900 CE) and the **Aztecs** (1345 to 1521 CE). They believed it was the way a person passed that dictated where the soul would go in the afterlife.

The Mayans held that those who went out by self-injury, sacrifice, in battle, and during childbirth, had their souls go straight to heaven.

Similarly, the Aztecs held that the souls of soldiers slain in battle, and the women who passed away giving birth, traveled with the sun into the heavens.

Meanwhile, the souls of those Aztecs, who had a normal end, had to pass through nine levels of the underworld.

Based on these beliefs, those ancient civilizations developed a rich ritual around the cult of ancestors and passing away.

In later days, they transformed into the current Mexican celebrations of the Día de los Muertos. In 2008, UNESCO added it to its list of [Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#).

Since 1994, the citizens of Aguascalientes, a city in central Mexico, have celebrated the *Festival de Calaveras*, or the “Festival of the Skulls.” It draws from the *Día de los Muertos* tradition.

Festival of Skulls

Why is memento mori important?

Memento mori is important because it helps us face the end fearlessly. Remembering the end makes us want to live for goodness, not for profit or glory.

Once we are ready for it, we no longer bother about who would claim our lands and goods, or what might happen to our legacy.

- **It can help us to live in the present moment.** When we are constantly aware of the limited nature of time, we are less likely to dwell on the past or worry about the future. We are more likely to focus on the present moment and appreciate the good things that we have in our lives.
- **It can help us to let go of attachments.** When we realize that it is inevitable, we are less likely to become attached to material possessions or worldly success. We are more likely to focus on what is truly important in life, such as our relationships with loved ones and our own personal development.
- **It can help us to live a more virtuous life.** When we are aware of life's finitude, we are more likely to act in a way that is consistent with our values. We are less likely to engage in harmful or destructive behaviors, and we are more likely to help others and make a positive contribution to the world.

Everyone passes away, so why remember it? We do so to cherish our loved ones before our or their times come. So we make it a point to talk to them, hold them close, and give them our presence. So we leave them with good memories of us.

What Do We Get From Practicing Memento Mori

Memento mori helps us:

- Accept that the end is nothing to fear
- See the transience of wealth and fame
- Be mindful of the present moment
- To not postpone what we must do
- Disconnect from the future results
- Be grateful for the things we have
- Let go of the grudges and regrets
- Appreciate our loved ones

Memento Mori Symbols

Carrying a memento mori personal symbol reminds one to embrace the transient nature of life.

They remind them how useless earthly riches, status symbols, and titles are. And how short our time on Earth is.

A memento mori ring, memento mori jewelry, memento mori coin, or memento mori watch that urges them to finish their moral duties [before it "smiles at us"](#). Some people like to have a memento mori tattoo on themselves.

Practicing memento mori meditation

Memento mori meditation can help us [live a meaningful life](#). Here's how to practice the **memento mori meditation**:

1. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Take a deep breath and relax your body.
2. Think of a skull image, or a skull motif like a memento mori ornament or artpiece.
3. Remind yourself that someday in a distant future, you will no longer be here.
4. Think about what big goals you wish to accomplish in life before that.
5. Spend some time sitting with these thoughts and feelings.
6. Open your eyes and return to your normal awareness.

The memento mori meditation is a powerful tool, so be gentle, patient, and kind to yourself as you do it. If you find yourself getting scared or anxious, stop.

FAQs

1. What impact does “memento mori” have on Stoic philosophy?

Stoics practiced memento mori to see life as short and precious. It forced clear priorities, made each day a gift, and stopped them from squandering time on vanity. It taught them not to let the body, career, reputation, or wealth be masters, since the end can sweep them away in an instant.

Today, many [modern Stoics](#) carry memento mori coins or wear rings to remember to use each day well and to lead a full life.

2. What was the historical significance of “memento mori” in ancient Rome?

In Rome, *memento mori* served as a philosophical reminder of life’s brevity. This practice kept leaders and victors humble, preventing arrogance when triumph made them feel like gods.

The best-known example involved a slave who would stand behind a victorious general during his parade through Rome, constantly whispering “Memento mori,” to remind him that even the greatest soldier is simply human.

3. How does memento mori connect with Halloween?

Halloween, also known as **All Saints Eve**, heralds the arrival of winter and is celebrated as a day when the graves may open and “*the departed ones awake and speak to many.*” The true message behind Halloween is an ancient one: *Memento mori*.

4. How can ‘memento mori’ impact our daily lives?

- **Appreciate the present moment.** An awareness of life’s finite nature makes us less likely to dwell on the past or worry about the future. We, instead, focus more on the present and feel grateful for the good things we have in our lives.
- **Become less materialistic.** The sobering thought that the end will take away our possessions, fame, and all else helps us stop material pursuits and worldly success. And turn to what matters: relationships and self-growth.
- **Live a more virtuous life.** When we see the end as final, we avoid destructive habits, choose better actions, help others, and make a real contribution to the world.
- **Make better decisions.** When we face the finite span of existence, we choose actions that match our values and improve our lives. We avoid impulsive, reckless decisions that could have negative consequences.

Final Words

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Finally, here’s a brutal reality about memento mori.

People in Roman Stoic times lived in an extremely harsh world. Periods of unrest, diseases, famines, and tyrants kept reminding them that the end was near.

Memento mori was a heavy weight placed on their lives, as they were sharply aware of life’s brevity. They didn’t have to buy skull jewelry for that.

Over the centuries, as health care and living conditions improved, life expectancies increased. That brutal version of the memento mori left our social consciousness. Today, we live much longer. Yet, the end of anyone remains much unpredictable.

It is something that I cannot escape, So whenever my time comes,
I accept my fate.
I'll carry to the afterlife my heart and soul, But I accept the inevitable,
And what I cannot control.
So I will live in the moment, one day at a time, And each day I'll show
gratitude,

For this life I call mine.

I am not scared, since my life is a story, So I'll live by these words,

Memento Mori.

— *Matt Lillywhite, Sep 2020*

It has been following us our entire lives, and it can come in without knocking. So, carpe diem as you memento mori.

√ **Also Read: [Did Marcus Aurelius say, "It smiles at us all?"](#)**

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