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Discover Memento Mori: Meaning, Origin, Culture, Importance

Discover the meaning of memento mori and explore the origins of this Latin phrase and its significance in history with our 3900-word guide. Find peace and joy.

What does memento mori mean and why it's important to meditate on it?

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. It was to remind onlookers that they, too, were marked for death. These figures were known as "memento mori".

However, the history of memento mori runs deeper. We take a trip through the ancient world on death, with generals, slaves, philosophers, playwrights, painters, pharaohs, and The Grim Reaper.

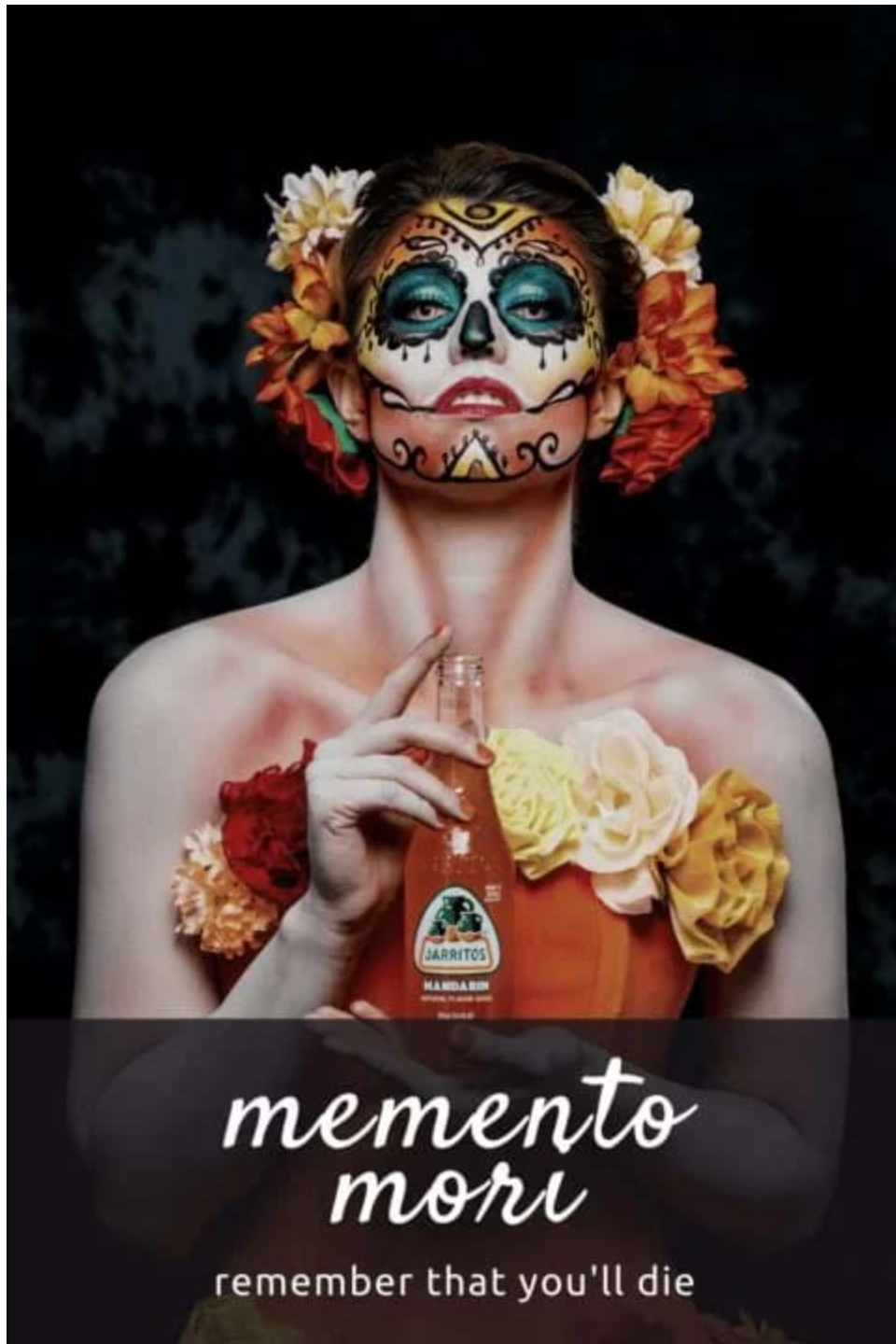
Memento Mori Meaning

The Latin phrase “memento mori” means “remember you have to die” or “remember your death.” Originating in ancient Rome, death awareness became a philosophical tradition that advised one to embrace life’s fleeting nature. It urges us to live virtuously and make the most of our time without wasting it, as death is unpredictable.

Memento mori warns us to finish our duties [before death knocks](#) at our door. It reminds us how worthless our earthly riches, status symbols, and titles are, and how little time we have in our hands.

Remembering our death reminds us to perform our duties as best as we can while we are living, and be ready to leave life whenever death arrives.

The concept of memento mori may seem morbid, but it was held in high regard in ancient Rome.



Memento mori – Remember that you will die.

Memento mori can be defined as an emblematic object or personal ornament, such as a skull, used as a reminder of one's

mortality, since “Memento” means an object kept as a reminder, and “mori” means death.

Before we dive into its origins, please note it is “**memento** mori” — *not* “**momento** mori”.

Memento Mori Origin & History

1. Origin Story Of Memento Mori

This is the fascinating story of what is memento mori.

Ancient Rome had the tradition of holding a ‘*triumphus*.’ It was a gala parade honoring a triumphant general who has freshly 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.

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 war 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 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.

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, the general had to 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.

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:

“Remember, you are but mortal.”

That grim reminder of his mortality was delivered to force the general to take in the entire scene wisely and reasonably.

So that he doesn't get carried away believing he's the new god of Greece.

So that he treats the grand occasion with humility, without forgetting that fame and glory are but fleeting.

And remembers that when he dies, he and his heroic tales will be forgotten.

Many believe this custom was the origin story of the *memento mori* tradition.



Memento-Mori – Remember that you will die.

2. Stoicism And Memento Mori

Is *memento mori* a part of Stoicism?

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*. They rose to popularity as prominent teachers and avid practitioners of Stoicism.

But how could a piece of Stoic advice to keep death in mind be rational? And how could a reminder that you are going to die can free you from your fears?

The Stoics used memento mori to urge people to live virtuously, without any delay.

They called upon their followers to see each day as a gift, to stop wasting time on trivial matters, and to do all the good that they can.

Since death could come at any moment, a human has only a little amount of time to accomplish good.

The simple reminder of *memento mori* urged people to detach themselves from their earthly riches and recognition.

It told them of the fleeting nature of luxury and vanity. And the fact that no one could carry these with them once death claims their lives.



The Stoics repeatedly tell us that death is a natural part of life and not something to be afraid of.

Seneca, Epictetus, and [Marcus Aurelius](#) talked about the importance of meditating on one's own death. They taught

death is *not* waiting for us at the end of our life, but it is *already upon us*.

Death has already claimed each day that we have lived until now.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher, statesman, and dramatist, 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.”

Memento Mori & Marcus Aurelius:

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

- Once he was telling himself: *“Do not act as if you were going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over you. While you live, while it is in your power, be good.”*
- Then he reminded himself thus: *“Think of yourself as dead. 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 a dying person.”*

Epictetus, himself a former slave, often reminded his students of the slave whispering *memento mori* to the celebratory

general, in this way:

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. 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 die, 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 **parents who always remember the transience of life will never take their children for granted. They would rather pause each day to shower them with love and appreciation.**

Epictetus' more palatable advice on death was:

"Keep death 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."

Ryan Holiday, the person 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."*

3. Memento Mori And Church

This idea of “keeping death 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.*” (“Look after you [to the time after your death] and remember you’re [only] a man.”).

In European devotional literature, **Ars Moriendi** (“**The Art of Dying**”) was the first Medieval text on dying and preparing for death. It was published around 1415 CE, probably at the request of the Council of Constance, Germany. It offered practical advice on the rites and procedures of a good death and **how to “die well.”**

Ars Moriendi was a much-needed response by the Roman Catholic Church to the horrific effects of the [Black Death](#). The [first chapter of Ars Moriendi](#) explains the good side of death and assures the dying person it is nothing to be afraid of.

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.*”



Skull of St. Getreu in Ursberg, Germany. [Photograph by [Paul Koudounaris](#), author of *The Dead Among Us*]

4. Memento Mori And Egyptians

The Romans and the Egyptians were destined to share profound bonds in history when **Julius Caesar fell in love with Cleopatra**. He helped her ascend the throne of Egypt as its sole ruler.

After the assassination of Julius Caesar, **Cleopatra began a romantic affair with Marcus Antonius or Mark Antony**, the Roman general. When Mark Antony faced a violent defeat at the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra chose suicide 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. As Rome expanded, 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, death was merely a passage to 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 death. They show how the Egyptians had devised ingenious methods to mummify the corpses.

For one, they fabricated exquisite face masks for their dead and were experts at designing **intricate and luxuriant death chambers**. All to show their many ways to honor life, even in death.

Memento

by James H. Capshew



Home
History of Psychology
History of Indiana University
Earth's Body
Memento Mori



“The prospect of death
is reason enough to embrace life.”

James H. Capshew, 1997



Memento Mori

Memento mori means “remember that you must die” in the language of Latin. It serves to remind us of our own mortality, of our mistakes and failures, of the inevitable transformation of life into death. For me, it holds a deep personal meaning that I can barely articulate, being bound up with my own bodily experiences and health, the passing of family and friends, and living in American culture.

Memento mori engendered an opposite imperative -- *memento vivere* -- the Latin for “remember that you must live.” Less common and of more recent vintage (according to the Oxford English Dictionary), *memento vivere* seems to imply that a preoccupation with death is perhaps unwise and unhealthy.

The links contain my personal tributes to departed family, friends, and colleagues.

Memento Mori – Tate – James H Capshew

Memento Mori In Popular Culture

1. Memento Mori In Music And 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** (**Macabre Dance** or **Dance of Death**). It is a species of

dramatic play that spotlights the universality and inevitability of death.

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 death 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 of Death**” 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 Dance of Death (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 Dance of Death. The first book edition, containing forty-one of Holbein’s woodcuts, came out in 1538.

2. Memento Mori In Literature

Among the best-known literary meditations on death in English are Sir Thomas Browne's *The Urn of Burial* and Jeremy Taylor's *The Holy Dying*.

The Roman poet Horace used the Latin phrase "*carpe diem*" to exhort people to "seize the day." It was to tell them they should enjoy life while they can because 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.

The man who has learned to die has unlearned how to be a slave; he is above all power, or at least beyond its reach. What do prison and guards and locked doors mean to him? He has a free way out. 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 death in many of his plays. **Hamlet—Prince of Denmark** explores death in its many aspects. The play begins with the appearance of the ghost and ends with several violent deaths.

In between, Hamlet contemplates suicide and develops an obsession with death.

In an iconic moment, Hamlet holds up the court jester Yorick's skull and ponders its transition from life to death. Hamlet grieves on what becomes of **even the most alive and vibrant of people after death—reduced to a hollow skull.**

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



Handcrafted Memento Mori Rings by Sawanya Singthawa

3. Vanity, Vainglory, And Memento Mori Symbols

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 at death.



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 death."

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.**

Some famous paintings centering on death, fear of death, and *memento mori* are:

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



Bull Skull, Fruit, Pitcher-Picasso

4. Day Of The Dead & Halloween

The **Day of The Dead** (*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.



Day of the Dead or 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 died that dictated where the soul will go in the afterlife.

The Mayans held that those who died by suicide, sacrifice, in battle, and during childbirth, had their souls go straight to

heaven.

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

While the souls of those Aztecs, who died a normal death, 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 death. In later days, they transformed into the current Mexican celebrations of the Day of the Dead.

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 *Day of the Dead* traditions.



Festival of Skulls

How Does Memento Mori Connect With Halloween?

Halloween, also known as **All Saints Eve**, began to be observed around 1556. It heralds the arrival of winter and is celebrated as a day when the graves may open and *"the dead awake and speak to many."*

Today, it is tightly woven into popular culture all across the world. The true message behind Halloween is an ancient one: *Memento mori*.

Memento Mori Importance

Why Is Memento Mori Important?

Memento mori is important because reminding ourselves that we have to die, and that life can end at any time,

helps us face death fearlessly.

Remembering death prods us to live for goodness, rather than for profit or glory.

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

Of course, we all die in the end. We also suffer and rejoice in our own ways through life to reach death. So, what do we gain by remembering it?

Perhaps this. In loving those that we care for while remembering that they would die one day, we cherish them more. We hug them tight and love them with our full presence.

Beyond death, ours or theirs, what remains are those memories.

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.

In his honor, behavioral scientists named [Diogenes syndrome](#), a disorder of older men and women. Its main symptoms are excessive hoarding, dirty houses, and poor personal hygiene.

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 dead 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 dead?"

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

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 Meditation](#)

Memento mori reminds us that the great equalizer, death, awaits us.


We could meditate on our death by pausing for a few moments in our day and softly telling ourselves, "*Memento mori.*" It will remind us of our own mortality, the shortness of life, and the fickleness of death.

When we meditate on memento mori, it helps us to:

- Appreciate our relationships
- Be mindful in everything we do
- Not delay carrying out our duties
- Disconnect from the future results
- Accept death as non-intimidating
- Be grateful for the things we have
- Let go of the grudges and regrets
- Work harder towards our life goals
- Avoid hubris, anger, egoism, vanity
- Focus on the processes and actions
- Try learning/experiencing new things
- See the transience of wealth and fame
- Accomplish more, live better, love deeper

Ryan Holiday starts his TEDx talk on *memento mori* with this right at the beginning:

"You're all gonna die. Every single one of us in this room is going to die. There are no exceptions to this rule."





Wars, diseases, famines, and tyrannical rulers kept reminding people that the *Grim Reaper* was lurking somewhere close by.

Looking back at those times, *memento mori* was a forced, cruel burden on their brief lives. Their memories needed to erase deaths, even if for a while, as they lived in an atmosphere of doom.

Over the centuries, as health care improved and lifespans increased, that *brutal version of the memento mori* disappeared from our social consciousness.

Today, we expect to live much longer than those ancient Roman generals. Still, death remains as unpredictable as in those times.

And yet, we remain unprepared for death in the uncertain times of modern pandemics.

*Death 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](#)

Remember, death has been following us our entire lives, and it can come in without knocking.

Decide now to be prepared. And *carpe diem* as you *memento mori*.

• • •

21 Unforgettable Stoic Quotes On Death!

Did Marcus Aurelius say, “Death smiles at us all?”

• • •

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• **Our Happiness Story!**

✓ *If you liked it, please spread the word.*

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Memento Mori Meditation

Final Words: A Brutal Version of Memento Mori That We Forgot

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