Death

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Mortality in Numbers

About 150,000 people die every day. You and I will too. Maybe in five minutes from a ruptured artery. Maybe next year in an accident. Maybe in twenty years. Maybe tomorrow.

I am seventy now. 25,701 days. Websites calculate my probable date of death. One says October 2026. Another January 2026. A third claims I already died two years ago. Statistics dressed up as oracles.

I take a blood thinner every day. A cholesterol inhibitor. A stomach-acid reducer. I eat almost no meat. I exercise. I drink less tinto de verano than I used to. It may help. But one day it will not.

The Fear Is Not Pain

I do not want to die.

Not mainly because I fear pain, but because I fear disappearance. The idea that at some moment there will be no experience at all. No inside. No seeing. No hearing. No anything. That thought stuns me.

Suffocation, burning, a failing heart. These are images. But underneath them lies something more basic. The fear of ceasing to exist. The fear of the end of experience itself. Like the panic that rises in the body when you look over the edge of a high building, before any thought has time to form.

What Happens at the End

What happens at the final moment?

Most likely nothing remarkable. Like going under anesthesia. Lights out. No dream. No darkness. No witness. The body has been dying for years. Cells die and are replaced. Structures weaken. One day the heart stops, the brain no longer receives oxygen, and that is that.

I think this. But I do not know.

This would only be true if our existence is entirely material. And perhaps it is. Perhaps consciousness is simply what brains do. Perhaps it ends when brains end.

Some say there is something in us that is not material. A mind, a soul, something that continues. That this life is only a phase. That another phase follows. Many people believe this.

But why should I believe it?

There is no solid evidence for personal survival after death. Near-death experiences are not death. They are experiences of living brains under extreme conditions. Such ideas seem to arise mainly from desire. We do not want to disappear, so we invent a form in which we do not.

When Experience Refuses to Behave

And yet something keeps disturbing the picture. Not as theory, but as experience.

During a therapeutic MDMA group session, I was sitting opposite a friend. Suddenly a very clear image appeared: somewhere in Japan, on a bridge, kneeling, while that same friend was beheading me or about to. I did not see it as fantasy, but as a scene I was witnessing from outside. I said nothing. But he looked at me and said he had seen that he had beheaded me. We both began to cry.

I have no idea what this was. Drugs. Projection. Coincidence. Suggestion. Telepathy. Muscle reading. Neurology. Archetype. Trauma. Nonsense.

But it happened. And it does not fit neatly into my own explanatory frameworks.

My mother once told me that as a small child I walked around saying things like: “big sword, head off, lots of blood.” I still sometimes get images of beheadings. I am still terribly afraid of them.

This proves nothing. But it does show how thin the line is between what we think we know and what simply presents itself.

No One Knows

Perhaps there is something non-material. Perhaps there is not. Perhaps consciousness does not exist apart from the body. Perhaps it does. We do not know. Nobody knows.

And in this not-knowing, the idea that a “person” dies also begins to dissolve. If there is no stable, independent self, what exactly disappears?

Life as a Continuous Dying

What we call life is a continuous dying process. Every exhalation is a letting go. Every sleep a disappearance. Thousands of cells die each moment. Without death, no life. The body is not a thing but a temporary pattern in an ongoing breakdown.

Death does not stand at the end of life. It runs through it.

The Dream of Immortality

This makes the dream of immortality strange. Uploading ourselves into machines. Replacing organs endlessly. Switching off aging. Perhaps it will become technically possible. But suppose it succeeds. What would it mean to no longer be able to die?

Never to exhale. Never to vanish. Never to let go. Never to sleep in the sense of ceasing. Never to be absent from oneself. That does not sound like victory. It sounds like torture.

Death is not the enemy of life. It is its condition.

Meaning as Defense

Still we desperately search for meaning. For a plan. For a purpose. As if life must be going somewhere in order to be bearable. As if existence must justify itself.

This hunger for meaning seems to arise from a feeling of separation. A self here, a world there, and somehow it must add up. Something must carry it. Something must make it right.

But how could anyone ever know whether life has an ultimate meaning? That would only be possible if one could stand outside life. Outside experience. Outside time. Outside everything that appears. And that is impossible.

Not Consolation, but Fact

What is possible is simpler: life is happening.

There is experience. This seeing. This hearing. This fear. This breathing. This thought appearing and disappearing. This body aging. This moment presenting itself without reason and without explanation.

Perhaps that is not little. Perhaps that is everything.

Not as an answer. Not as consolation. But as a fact.