

How to Live Forever: A Guide to Writing the Final Chapter of Your Life Story

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Introduction

Preparing to Use This Study Guide

The end of life is not an easy subject for anyone – not for those facing it nor for the loved ones who will be left behind. Yet, if we can begin to change how we view death, acknowledge that death is part of life, and live in fullness rather than in fear, we can have a better life all the way to the end.

“How to Live Forever” asserts that, “Your life is a story, and it’s yours to write, all the way to the end. There are numerous decisions to be made regarding aging, illness, and end-of-life issues, but many people put off those decisions until it’s too late. We may be purposeful in planning for our lives, but we often leave the last piece, the final chapter, undefined.”

This leader guide serves to help facilitators support discussions around beliefs and attitudes on life, aging, death, and dying. This guide includes prompts, questions and conversation topics to guide readers through tasks such as creating a will, arranging a healthcare plan, preparing for one’s own funeral or celebration of life, and finding peace and resolutions within our most meaningful relationships. These prompts and activities are designed to aid participants in navigating these difficult decisions. Our life is our story, our story is our legacy, and the goal is to live well in the time that we have, to write our final chapter the way we want it to be, and to finish our life without regret.

Participant Preparation and Engagement

This guide assumes that the participants have read the chapter for each session beforehand. It intends to engage them in analysis and reflection, with the goal of facilitating insights into their own lives. The leader should involve everyone in discussion rather than lecture on the subject.

If possible, arrange the group in a circle, so that all are equal and can see one another. Allow time for thought and introspection. In every group activity, participation is voluntary. No one is required to talk, but all will hopefully feel free to share.

Making the Most of Your Time

Here are a few tips to create a successful group engagement.

1. Encourage open listening. A group like this is not the time to criticize other’s stories and beliefs.
2. Encourage curiosity. Ask follow-up questions where appropriate to delve deeper into initial responses. Since you know your group, write down your own questions as you read through the chapters.

3. If the conversation goes off on a tangent, decide if that new direction is helpful to the whole group or if you need to guide the conversation back to the original question.
4. Do not feel like all of the questions in each section need to be answered. Feel free to choose the questions that seem most relevant to your group.
5. Try to pay attention so that everyone has an opportunity to speak. That opportunity does not need to be equal, as some people tend to be more vocal while others enjoy listening, but feel free to direct questions to specific people to encourage participation.
6. Provide nametags, if possible.

At the beginning of each new section, begin by asking if there are any thoughts, questions or insights pertaining to the previous week's lesson. Decide how much time you'd like to allot for that reflection, then continue with the current chapter.

Session 1

Forward: The Most Meaningful Things and Introduction: It's Your Story

"Death is a challenge. It tells us not to waste time.... It tells us to tell each other right now that we love each other." - Leo Buscaglia

Objectives:

- Identify and discuss cultural and personal attitudes around death and dying and how those attitudes impact our lives.
- Identify our own fears and biases on the issue of death and explore new perspectives which might change how we view death.
- Identify ways in which having open conversations on our mortality might change how we view death and how we live.

To Begin:

Welcome the group. Introduce yourself and briefly explain why you decided to lead a group on this topic and book. What spoke to you? Keep personal comments brief. Have the group introduce themselves.

1. What thoughts does the above quote by Leo Buscaglia evoke for you?
2. What experiences have you had around death in your own lifetime? How do those experiences influence how you view death now?
3. How does your faith affect your thoughts on death? Do your personal beliefs in an afterlife influence your perception of death? How much?
4. What is the most frightening thing about dying, for you? List the things that have given death it's powerful, negative persona.

5. Explore the possibility of shifting how we view death from something that shouldn't happen to a beautiful closing of a personal story, a celebration that we lived. What is the "best" story that you can tell yourself about dying? What might "not dying" or living forever look like?

6. The author notes that many of us are never more committed to living fully and gratefully than when we leave a funeral or celebration of life service. Why is this so? How can you take that same commitment and carry it forward as a life value or principle? Is there value in doing that? What might change about how you write your story if you adapt that as part of your daily living?

7. What is on your bucket list? What are things you'd still like to do?

8. Read the quote aloud (after the Forward) by George Bernard Shaw. Discuss your thoughts and feelings around this. What relevance does this have in your own perceptions of how you want to live your life? Write your own mission statement for how you want to live.

9. Invite participants to keep a journal, jotting down any thoughts that come up around today's conversation. Note any changes to how you are writing your story this week.

10. Wrap up with final thoughts and impressions.

Read Chapter 1 – Legal Considerations: Organization Matters, for the next class.

Session 2

Chapter 1 - Legal Considerations: Organization Matters

“Estate planning is not just for the wealthy. It’s for anyone who happens to love and care for someone.”
– Living Trust Network Staff

Objectives:

- Identify and discuss the usefulness of having legal affairs in order and explore what consequences might ensue when legal affairs are *not* in order.
- Begin conversations around who might be involved in the process of putting affairs in order.
- Identify the essential components needed to have legal affairs and paperwork accessible for future use.

To Begin:

Welcome the group. Introduce any new members. Begin the discussion by asking if anyone has thoughts, ideas, or impressions around the prior unit. Encourage reflection.

Note: Whether preparing a Will or deciding healthcare planning, it is often best to have discussions with everyone who is close to you and ideally all together. Getting everyone on the same page will help decrease conflict later. This can be done by ensuring that everyone can understand what you really want, why you’ve made the decisions you have, and each individual’s role in those decisions. Full disclosure and open sharing can take some time, but time spent on the front end of these conversations is so much easier than addressing them later and can produce much better outcomes. Remember, one of your goals here should be to finish your story well, which also includes consideration of how your loved ones are impacted after your death.

1. What stood out the most for you in this chapter?
2. A 2020 survey by Caring.com says that less than 25% of adults have Wills even though 60% say that having a Will is important. How many people in this class have a current Will? Do you have any other legal papers in place for estate planning? Why or why not?

3. The author tells us that statistics say that 90% of people say that talking about end of life issues is important, but only 27% of people have had those conversations. How many people in this class have had these conversations? Why or why not?
4. Does anyone have a story of how having a sound plan, whether a Will, healthcare decisions, or end of life celebration planning has been beneficial to surviving family members? What was this like?
5. Does anyone have a story of how *not* having a Will, healthcare decisions, or end of life instructions has been a trial for surviving family? Discuss these effects.
6. What benefits would there be to *you* in planning as outlined in this chapter of the book? List as many ways as you can.
7. How would this planning benefit your family and friends? List as many ways as you can.
8. Now that you are thinking about the end of your life and the necessary steps to finishing well, what thoughts and feelings did this chapter invoke in you?
9. Continue to journal whatever ideas, feelings and thoughts around this chapter.
10. Wrap up with final thoughts and impressions.

Read Chapter 2 – Healthcare Decisions: Your (Quality of) Life Depends on It, for the next class

Session 3

Chapter 2 - Health Care Decisions: Your (Quality of) Life Depends on It

“A few conclusions become clear when we understand this: that our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and the aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer; that the chance to shape one’s story is essential to sustain meaning in life; that we have the opportunity to refashion our institutions, our culture, and our conversation in ways that transform the possibilities for the last chapters of everyone’s lives.” - Atul Gawande

Objectives:

- Determine and understand what legal documents are important for medical decisions and why you need them.
- Determine and discuss what your personal expectations of the medical system are and to empower you to be proactive in understanding your options, the side effects of treatments, and making decisions that work best for you personally.
- Discuss quality of life as you see it and consider how far you would want treatment to go and under what circumstances.
- Begin to develop and plan your own end-of-life wishes.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they’d like to make regarding last week’s meeting.

Note: This is likely to be the most difficult chapter. It requires being able to see yourself in a failing health state that it is uncomfortable to envision. These are not easy decisions. It’s ok that it’s difficult. A lot of things that we do in life are difficult, but having the discussions and developing a plan can make the process much less difficult in the end. People I talk to almost always say they feel much more peace knowing they have done this, despite the difficulty. I also like to remind people – *you* know you and you are in charge of you. Decisions about your care are ultimately up to you, not your healthcare providers. The more information you can have, the more collaborative you are with your healthcare team, the better the outcome is likely to be for you.

1. What thoughts and feelings did this chapter invoke in you? What impact did the stories have on you? Do you have stories of family members going through similar situations that you'd like to share?
2. How do you typically prepare for going to the doctor? How do you make your healthcare decisions? Do you feel informed about your healthcare and your options? What could you do to take more charge of your treatments?
3. What are your expectations for how much a healthcare system should be able to "fix" a sick or injured person?
4. I understand that we are all very different and might respond differently to treatments and that often treatment is trial and error, to find the best thing that works for an individual. What do you think of this statement? Do you agree or disagree?
5. *Quality of life* can be defined by being as healthy as you can and living as meaningfully as you can under your specific circumstances. Based on this definition, what does quality of life look like for you? What can you not imagine life without? What defines quality of life for you?
6. Caregivers of the elderly often say they value safety for the elderly as their number one concern, yet for themselves they prioritize autonomy and independence. Given that death is inevitable, how can we balance safety with the need for autonomy and independence, especially when considering the aging and infirm?
7. Eighty percent of people say that if seriously ill, they would want to talk to their doctor about end-of-life care, but only seven percent of people have done so. Why do you think this is true? What are the benefits to having these discussions? What could be the downsides?
8. The author believes that talking about death and dying is the "final frontier" in conversations we are beginning to have. We have an opportunity to model having these conversations for our loved ones and children. Read the above quote by Atul Gawande aloud. What needs to be transformed in our conversations, culture, and institutions to have a better outcome for the sick and aging? What would an ideal look like? How can change begin to take place?

9. Dr. BJ Miller said, “*Death is not life interrupted – this is life.*” How might accepting death as an inevitable part of life change how you make healthcare decisions?
10. How does your faith impact your view on aging, death and dying, and on how you make healthcare decisions?
11. Continue to journal this week any thoughts, feelings, ideas, even memories that may come up for you around the subject of healthcare decisions.

Important note: “*Being Mortal*”, by Atul Gawande, is perhaps the most powerful, readable and comprehensive book around the subject of healthcare, aging, and dying. I highly recommend reading it to make your most informed decisions.

Read Chapter 3 – It’s My Party: Planning Your Celebration of Life

Session 4

Chapter 3 - It's My Party: Planning Your Celebration of Life

"If you carefully consider what you want to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success." - Stephen Covey

Objectives:

1. Explore alternatives to celebrations of life in addition to the "traditional" funeral.
2. Begin discussions on how you might want your own end of life celebration to look.
3. Discuss and plan our eulogies.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they'd like to make regarding last week's meeting.

Note: "Let's all get together and have fun planning our own funeral," said no one ever! Why not, though? Why not have fun with this. It's a party. It's a celebration of your life, of who you are, and how you will be remembered. Some of my family's best memories are of gatherings after funerals. Funerals serve to remind us that we are mortal. They remind us to live how we want to be remembered. They remind us of what matters the most.

1. What thoughts and feelings did you have about this week's reading? Do you have any stories from funerals/end-of-life celebrations that you'd like to share?
2. What advantages are there to planning your funeral ahead of time? List as many as you can.
3. What role does your faith have in your end of life options? How do you want to incorporate your faith practices into your own service?
4. Describe what your ideal celebration of life would look like. What mood would you like to prevail? How do you want people to remember you? How do you want them to remember your service?
5. Discuss the idea of a "living funeral".

6. Take a few minutes to research newer “green” options to funerals and burials. Decide if you would like, as a class, to bring some new ideas into the beginning discussion next week.
7. What do you want your obituary to read? Who do you want to write it for you? Have you considered writing something to leave behind to be read to the people at your celebration?
8. I know a woman who writes her own obituary on January 1 of every year. What do you think of this? How might this be a useful practice?
9. Journal any thoughts or ideas about your celebration of life and reflections on your obituary. Be as creative as you’d like. Remember, this is *your* story.
10. Wrap up with any final thoughts and impressions.

Read Chapter 4 – Telling Your Story

Session 5

Chapter 4 - Telling Your Story

“Let no one weep for me or celebrate my funeral with mourning; for I still live, as I pass to and from through the mouths of men.” - Quintus Ennius

Objectives:

- Recognize and discuss the importance of stories and what value they have in humanity.
- Identify and discuss various ways we leave our story behind.
- Decide what how we would like our own story to read and decide what we need to do to write the story that we would most like to leave behind.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they'd like to make regarding last week's meeting. Share any new thoughts and ideas.

Note: Who we are is due largely to genetics and largely due to our interactions with our families and friends while we were growing up. Nature and nurture. And then of course, we have choice. However, it is fair to say that we are all, to some extent, a product of the generations who have gone before us. In the same way, we are also a link to the future generations. One of my own favorite stories was sent to me by a reader. She told me that her mother had handwritten her own life story for her children. It was, she said, the greatest gift she could have received. Her mother wrote, “This is not the end of my story. But from your beginning my story lives on.” I couldn't have said it better.

1. What reaction and thoughts do you have to the above “Note”? Discuss.
2. Why is it useful to think of our lives as stories? How might believing that we are constantly writing our own story affect how we live?
3. A recent survey by an insurance company states that only 11% of people surveyed wanted to receive some type of estate gift from a Will as an heirloom, while 77% of those surveyed would prefer to be left stories and wisdom to remember those who have gone before them. Does this surprise you? What does this say to the value of sharing our life lessons?

4. What stories, knowledge, and wisdom do you wish you would have learned from loved ones whom you have lost? What would you like to have known? Can you think of questions to help facilitate these discussions, in addition to the ones in the book?
5. We can leave our stories behind in writing. What are other ways we leave our story? List and discuss as many as you can think of.
6. The author postulates that our story makes us immortal. Terry Pratchett writes, “No one is actually dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away.” Do you agree with these statements? In what ways are they true? Does our story truly live on in every interaction that we have? Do you live in a way that aligns with your reactions to the statements above?
7. If you decide to purposefully leave your story or a message from you for your loved ones, what are some creative ways in which you might do so?
8. Throughout the book, the author maintains that our life is our story and that it is ours to write all the way to the end. What do you want your story to look like? What ending would you write for yourself? How do you want your story to be remembered? How do you need to live so that your story reads you to be the main character you desire to be?
9. Journal an outline of your own story, begin writing your story. Use the questions in the book as a guide.
10. Wrap up with any thoughts or feelings. How did today’s topic effect you?

Read Chapter 5 - Relationships: The Characters in Your Life

Session 6

Chapter 5 – Relationships: The Characters in Your Life

“In the flush of love’s light, we dare to be brave, And suddenly we see, That love costs all we are, And will ever be. Yet it is only love which sets us free.” - Dr. Maya Angelou

Objectives:

- Discuss reasons why relationships are inherently difficult and explore ways to mitigate those difficulties.
- Identify reasons why some relationships fail and what we can learn in hindsight from those failures. (Note: there is a difference between a relationship failing and *you* failing).
- Identify and lists skills that work for creating and nurturing positive relationships.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they’d like to make regarding last week’s meeting. Share any new thoughts and ideas.

Note: One thing I learned from Encounter Training (encountertraining.com) is that in relationships we will sometimes disappoint and be disappointed. It just happens. Said another way, as someone once so wisely explained to me, sometimes we will step on each other’s toes. We are human. We will make mistakes. However, we are not just the sum total of our mistakes, and neither are other people. Have you ever noticed how we draw a broad-brush stroke over someone’s mistake and turn the whole person into their mistakes? This is unfair! If I lied, I don’t become a liar. I have told a lie. I lied this time. I also tell the truth most of the time. If I break trust, that doesn’t mean I am completely untrustworthy. It means I messed up that time. Yet I often hear people say, “I can’t trust that person” after a breach of trust. They may have done something that broke trust, yet it is likely that they also do things that we can lean into with trust. These virtues are not all-or-nothing, and it would help relationships to remember this. We will err in life. So will others.

There are two psychological processes common to interactions, that can destroy our relationships if we are not conscious of them. One is attribution bias and the other is confirmation bias. Attribution bias says that when we make a mistake, we justify it and make light of it. We may think, “Oh, I didn’t mean to say that. It was just a mistake.” Still, when someone else does the same thing, we often judge it as a character problem. We might think, “Oh, that person is just rude. They should have known better.”

Confirmation bias says that we look for things in another person that will confirm what we've told ourselves about them. Do you think someone is lazy? Chances are, you'll only see them idle. Do you think someone is too loud? You'll note when the decibel level goes up. Our brains are wired to find what we seek. Instead, consider forgiving as you'd want to be forgiven, judging as you'd want to be judged, and looking for what is good and right over what is wrong. We don't always have to be the "mistake police" and point out when other people miss.

1. List all the reasons that you can think of for why relationships could be inherently difficult.
2. Discuss your usual ways of handling relationship difficulties. What have you done that has not worked well in the past? What have you done that has worked well?
3. How does your faith influence who you are in relationships and how you respond to others? List faith principles that might influence how you show up in relationships.
4. In psychology, there is a theory that the things we don't like in ourselves are the things that often drive us the craziest about other people. Discuss this concept. Think of the things that you dislike most in other people. How do these traits show up in you?
5. What stories do you tell yourself about what is going on in the hearts and heads of the people you are in relationships with? Can you *really* know what someone is thinking or what motivates them? What would it be like for you if you asked for confirmation of the story you tell yourself? What might it be like for the other person?
6. Try this experiment: Think about a recent time when you came to a conclusion about why someone acted or said what they did. Now imagine saying to them, "The story I'm telling myself on why you... (i.e. Didn't empty the dishwasher) is that... (i.e. you don't care about me). What was going on with you?" What does this approach feel like for you? What would it be like to hear?
7. List guidelines that you think should be present for the best relationships.
8. Spend time reflecting on the relationships that have not worked out in your life. What has hindsight taught you? Are there relationships that you wish could be reconciled? What would it take to do that?

9. What are you doing well that keeps the relationships in your life happy and fed?
10. Who are the most important people in your life and how do you want them to remember you?

Read Chapter 6: Communication Tools to Resolve Conflict: Beyond Heroes and Villains

Session 7

Chapter 6 – Communication Tools to Resolve Conflict: Beyond Heroes and Villains

“The Earth is too small a star and we too brief a visitor upon it for anything to matter more than the struggle for peace.” – Colman McCarthy

Objectives:

- Understand the normal reactions to conflict and stress and identify what goes on inside of ourselves during conflict.
- Understand our own responsibility and the power we have in how conflicts are handled.
- Develop skills for self-awareness and tools for handling conflict.
- Discuss the power of apology, how to do it right, and what stands in the way of a good apology.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they'd like to make regarding last week's meeting. Share any new thoughts and ideas.

Note: We can't be in relationship without sometimes stepping on each other's toes. We won't be in relationship without being disappointed and sometimes disappointing others. Our conflicts are not in the way; they are the way. Conflict is an opportunity to deepen understanding and relationships. For most of us, we just haven't learned how to engage in conflict well. One of my favorite life lessons is from a dear friend. She told me once that she could win all of the arguments with her husband. Being more verbally skilled (and quick minded), it was easy for her to win. Then one day she realized that in order for her to win, she had to make him lose. With this realization, she decided that she wanted to love him enough that she didn't make him lose. That same logic can be applied to being right or being wrong. I want to love enough that I don't have to make someone wrong. So then, how do we set each other up to win? Sometimes it means holding more than one truth – yours and mine. Sometimes it means listening more than talking. Always it means trying to find where we are connected. It means listening for what is right instead of what is wrong. It means valuing the relationship throughout the entire conflict, and it means valuing the whole person more than their mistake. It also means taking responsibility for my own words and actions and recognizing the value of apologizing and learning to apologize well. When we do the work to handle our own inner conflict then we can become responsible for ourselves and our own behavior. It's only then that we understand what our deepest needs are and that we can act in a way that gets our needs met instead of pushing others away.

1. How was conflict handled in your home when you were growing up? What happened when *you* were the source of the conflict?
2. How do you usually handle conflict? How would your loved ones describe what approaching you with problems is usually like?
3. What triggers you? What happens to you physiologically when you are triggered? How good are you at recognizing that you are triggered, before you react or respond?
4. Discuss ways to regain calm when we feel triggered.
5. What are your thoughts around apology? What are your thoughts about the book's description of a "good" apology?
6. Are you holding on to any unforgiveness for yourself? What price are you paying for that?
7. Are you holding on to any unforgiveness for someone else? What price are you paying for that? What might change for you and for the other person if you chose to forgive?
8. What does your faith tell you about forgiveness? What about humility? Compassion?
9. What is the relationship between love and forgiveness?
10. What do you think of the poem "Outwitted"? Discuss.

Read Chapter 7 - Mediation: Handling the Plot Twists

Session 8

Chapter 7 – Mediation: Handling the Plot Twists

“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.” - M. Scott Pec

Objectives:

- Understand and name where in our relationships we might be struggling and how we might get help.
- Understand what mediation is and how we might use mediation as a resource for handling our conflicts.
- Apply mediation techniques to our own conflicts.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they'd like to make regarding last week's meeting. Share any new thoughts and ideas.

Note: Families, individuals, and groups can experience a tremendous amount of stress and heartache during times of conflict and disagreement. A skilled mediator can reduce these overwhelming feelings by creating a safe environment to discuss issues and to help reach solutions that provide the best outcome for those individuals involved. In mediation, problems can be identified and participants can brainstorm resolutions. Mediation is not about blame or fault, but about solutions and resolutions. It's about setting everyone up for good outcomes.

1. Think of a time when you had a conflict that seemed insurmountable. How did that conflict end? How might a third-party advocate have made it better?
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of litigation (lawsuits). How might suing effect relationships?
3. Describe benefits as you see them for mediation over litigation.

4. Besides in Elder Care and End of Life issues, what other times could you see mediation being beneficial?
5. Do you have any conflict currently where mediation might be beneficial? What results would you hope for?
6. How might mediation change the future of conflict management and conflicts in general?
7. How open are you personally to trying a new way of negotiating with the people whom you disagree with or find difficult? How would it change your life if mediation did help people you are in conflict with be able to hear and understand each other?
8. What would your faith likely say about mediation?

Read - Conclusion: Ending with Purpose

Session 8

Conclusion: Ending with Purpose

“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”
- C.S. Lewis

Objectives:

- Discuss how reading this book has affected your view of your life and the lives of others.
- Discuss what changes you might want to begin to make in order to write your own best ending.
- Share what impact this book and these conversations have had on your own views of mortality.

To Begin:

Welcome the group and introduce any new members. Ask participants if they have any points they’d like to make regarding last week’s meeting. Share any new thoughts and ideas.

Note: Congratulations to you for being brave enough to tackle these difficult discussions! By talking about our final chapter and making decisions around what we want that experience to be like, we are navigating an important final frontier. I have seen over and over the benefits that result from putting in the hard work to make difficult decisions around end of life. These discussions and decisions ultimately make our lives easier and our loved ones’ lives immensely easier. When we plan well, our loved ones can find peace in knowing that they are honoring our wishes. At the same time, we are demonstrating to those we leave behind how to bravely face their mortality and live fully, all the way to the end. I hope you learned a lot about yourself, the power of relationships, and the preciousness of every moment. I wish you a beautiful story.

1. What was your biggest “take-away” from walking through this book and these discussions?
2. How has this book changed how you will “do life” moving forward?
3. The author writes, “I do not know how much time I have, but I do know that I have one day less than yesterday.” Discuss your feelings and thoughts around this sentence.
4. How does your faith inspire how you view preparing for the final chapter of your life story?
5. What would you have added to this book as a tool that might have made it better?

6. What has your purpose in life been, so far? What would you like for it to be, moving forward?
 7. Do you agree that quality of life matters more than quantity? Why or why not?
 8. What, as individuals and as a society, could we do differently regarding our care for people in the last chapter of their lives? What would you like to see change?
 9. What are your strengths that you can bring to this next part of your life? How will you use them to write your ending?
 10. Throughout the book, the author postulates that we can't always control the circumstances of our lives, but we can control who we are in those circumstances. Who do you want to be and how do you want to show up in the last chapter of your life?
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