

Confronting Our Final Deadline

February 28, 2013



This past December, I spent the holidays caring for my 87-year old uncle as he succumbed to a brain tumor. Ira was a childless widower. I was his closest living relative and primary caregiver. As I sat in a Boston hospice, watching Ira's life drain out of him, I was powerfully reminded that yes, there is a Judgment Day.

Regardless of whether or not we are religious, most of us, in our last weeks, will give ourselves the ultimate performance review. Barring sudden death, we'll ask some variation of the inevitable questions: did I live the life I wanted to live? Did I realize all the possibilities of what my life could be?

Such was the case with my uncle. By most measures, Ira did well in life. He made a good living and had many friends. But sometimes he let his insecurities dominate him. He passed up on an offer to take on a career-defining job, deeming it too risky to leave the sanctuary of a familiar workplace. He wanted a family, but married too late to have one. He was loved, but he died alone. During his last months, his one big regret was that he never seized on all the opportunities that life presented.

Years ago, when I watched my mother and, later, my father die, I realized that death informs life. My uncle's death reminded me that when we let it, death forces us to focus on what we truly want to do with our lives. In his Stanford University commencement [speech](#), Steve Jobs underlined the notion

that death is a potent catalyst for life-altering change: "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life."

There's just one thing. For the promise of death to shape our lives, we can't do as my uncle did, which was to lead a largely unexamined life and then, in his last year, conduct a post-mortem on his life's journey. By then it's too late to change for the better. Instead of a post-mortem at the end of life, what's needed is a *pre-mortem* in the here and now.

The cognitive psychologist and [author](#) Gary Klein conceived the mental simulation called the "pre-mortem": you look into the future, think about what you want to achieve, and imagine your efforts have failed. The exercise pushes you to take an unflinching look at the obstacles you'll likely encounter and honestly reckon with the challenge of how best to accomplish your goals.

With a pre-mortem, I imagine myself on my deathbed, looking back on my life. The simulation reminds me that success is a byproduct, not an end in itself. For me, a successful life comes from knowing what will matter to me when I'm dying and ensuring that those things are in my life while I still have breath in my lungs. And what will matter most will be the quality of my relationships with my family, my God, my work, and all the people who count on me to be a good steward of Panera. If I prove myself worthy of those relationships, I will reap the byproduct of having lived a successful life.

The logic of a pre-mortem can be applied to our work lives as well as our personal lives. A leader's foremost challenge is to figure out where the world is headed and ensure that the organization is prepared for tomorrow's arrival. A pre-mortem allows my Panera colleagues and me to imagine the future in our industry and what consumers will desire in, say, five years. It pushes us to identify and commit to initiatives that will help us exploit opportunities in our markets and build competitive advantage. Above all, a pre-mortem injects a sense of urgency into our planning, by reminding us that tomorrow is fast approaching.

So it goes with life itself. If I die at the same age as my mother, who died too young, I have roughly 1500 days left to make a difference in the world. When it comes to stripping away all of what's superfluous in life and homing in on what's really important, there's nothing quite like acknowledging the promise of death, our ultimate deadline.

Photo: [microcosmos/Shutterstock](#)