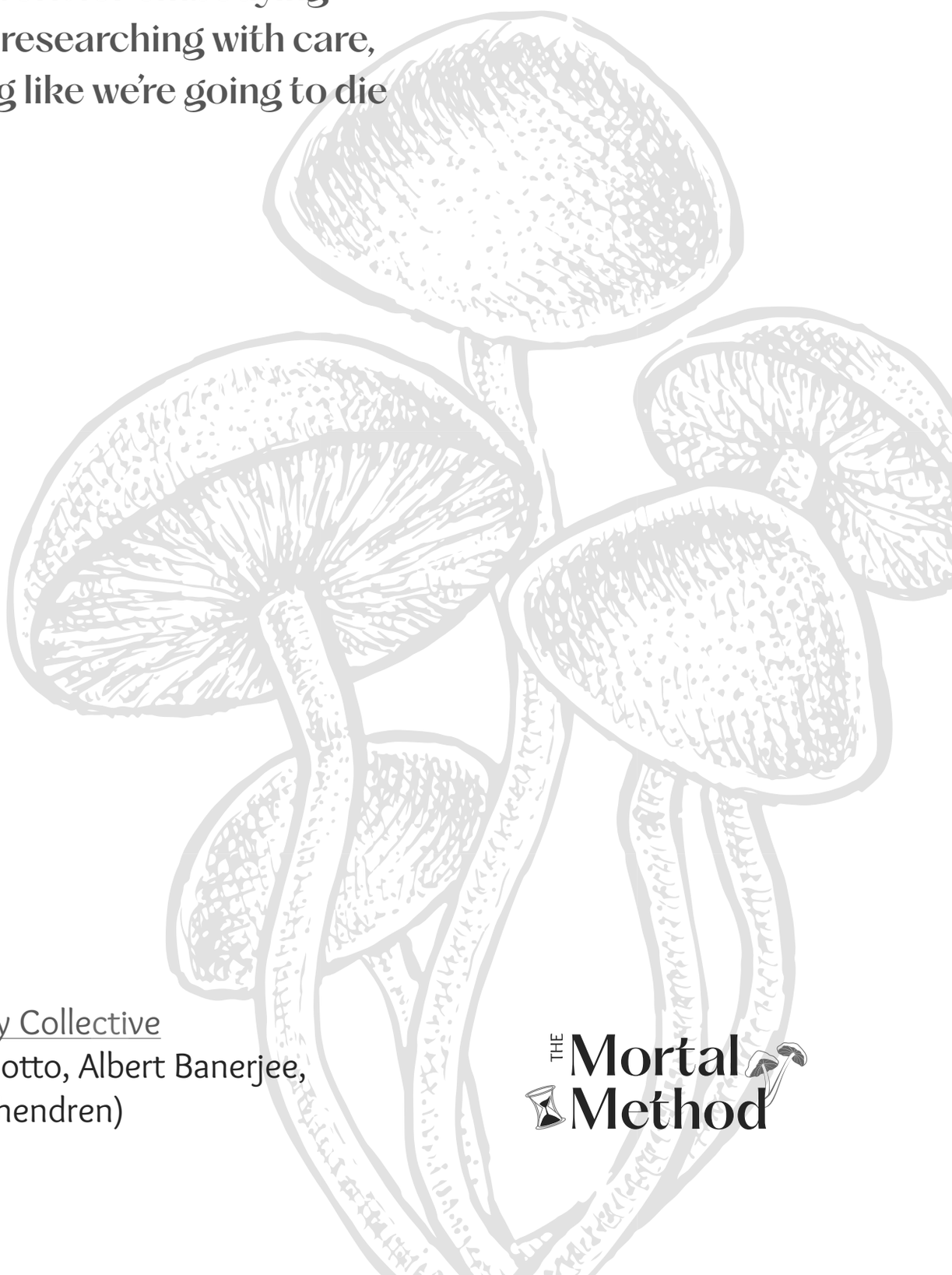
A Mortal Method:

A framework for embodying finitude, researching with care, and living like we're going to die



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THE Mortal Method

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people, places, and organizations that have made this work possible and are deserving of recognition.

First, we would like to acknowledge **our funders** **Alberta Innovates** (via Julia's New Investigator Research Chair) and **Research NB** (via Albert's Research Chair in Community Health and Aging). Their support has provided us with the financial resources to appropriately compensate our collaborator/facilitator for this significant labour, to host a week-long retreat that allowed us the time and space to develop and deepen this work, and to cover other expenses related to bringing this framework to life (like paying our incredible graphic designer Katelyn Yee from Output Media).

Dr. Tamara Daly and the SSHRC-funded **Imagine Aging Project**. Though Albert and Julia knew of each other for years, it was this SSHRC Partnership Grant (PI Tamara Daly) that facilitated our first proper introduction. Wisely, Tamara paired Albert and Julia as partners for field research and a seminar presentation. This presentation marked the beginning of our joint work on death-friendly communities, and the field work enabled many a lunchtime walk spent excitedly chatting about death.

Although most of the Mortal Method work took place virtually, and this framework will be housed in the digital realm, it is still important to acknowledge **the territories on which we each live and work, and on which we hosted our retreat.** Julia works at the University of Lethbridge, or Iniskim as it is known in Blackfoot. The institution is located on the lands of the Kainai Blackfoot Nation and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. As a resident of this community and a member of this University, she honours the Blackfoot people past, present, and future, and their ways of knowing and caring for this land. During the development of this framework, she sought inspiration from walks in the coulees, felt humbled and at home in the Rocky Mountains, and continues to unlearn and challenge mainstream Western ideas about aging and mortality that dominated her formal education.

Albert currently works in Fredericton, New Brunswick at St. Thomas University. He is a first generation Canadian, the child of two immigrants, a mother who left the oppressively Catholic-enamored dictatorship of Salazar's Portugal and a father who left the economic poverty and religious strife of India to build their life in and across Canada in the 1960s. Perhaps because of this international mix, legacy of religious oppression, and the privilege of a respected passport, he pays homage to the gods of the jet engine that have opened up this planet to him, and its diverse peoples and ideas.

Mathura lives and works in Tkaronto, the traditional and unceded territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Chippewa, Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. These and other unrecorded, distinct Indigenous communities have modelled for centuries

how to treat land as kin, as family - caring for it, defending it, and living in communion with it - and have done so despite ongoing state-sanctioned violence, cultural genocide, and forced assimilation. As the daughter of asylum-seeking Tamil refugees who fled their own state-sanctioned genocide in Sri Lanka and found their refuge as settlers on stolen land on Turtle Island, the desire to reconcile the dissonances within her lineage often manifests in her work. She sees land and body as deeply intertwined, and both have become steadfast companions in her practice of Dismantling the Master's Tools.

Our week-long retreat in December 2022 was hosted in Tofino, British Columbia. Tofino is situated within the traditional territory of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. Each day spent there involved walks and/or runs on the beach, strolls and meditations in the forests, sunrises and sunsets, and delicious local foods. The significance of place was abundantly evident and undoubtedly informed our thinking and feeling during the creation of this framework.

This work has been informed and affirmed by enlivening and inspiring conversations with colleagues, friends, and family members. These include, but are not limited to: Phil Williams, Sally Chivers, Mia van Leeuwen, Julie Young, Vishaya Naidoo, Polly Ford-Jones, Carina Zhu, Laura Earle, Remo and Dianne Brassolotto, Sachne J. Kilner, Susan Braedley, Bill Cook, Bill Randall, Gary Kenyon, and more.

We would also like to acknowledge the wonderful resource Dismantling the Master's Tools: A Somatic Approach to Interrogating White Supremacy in Social R&D and Beyond (Mahendren, 2021) for providing a template and inspiration for an intentional introduction to this framework.

Suggested citation: The Mortality Collective. (2024). *A Mortal Method: A Framework for Embodying Finitude, Researching with Care, and Living like We're Going to Die.* Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge.

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SECTION 1

Introduction to the Mortal Method Framework

What is this framework?

The Mortal Method is a framework that examines what it means to a) be mortal and b) to do academic work that acknowledges and honours our mortality. Specifically, the Mortal Method highlights five qualities of mortality: finitude, embodiment, eros, connection, and meaning-making. We begin by offering rich descriptions of each quality. These descriptions are informed by scholars in multiple disciplines, artists, thinkers outside of the academy, and other wise humans whose words inspire and move us. We invite readers to engage with the five qualities of mortality through excerpts of texts, reflective exercises, and contemplation. We provide examples of how we (Julia, Albert, Mathura - the Mortality Collective) have applied these qualities in our work and offer guiding prompts so that readers can consider how they might apply them in their own work lives. Our aim is to support other scholars in cultivating an apprenticeship with mortality. This apprenticeship enables us to work in ways that are more embodied, have healthy limits, enliven us, foster healthy connections with others, and are more meaningful and less extractive.

The Mortal Method is neither a prescriptive method nor a step-by step approach. It is theoretical in nature, with attention to both content (what does it mean to be mortal?) and process (how can we do academic work that better honours our mortality?), with an emphasis on process. We think of the Mortal Method as a compass that orients us towards the qualities of being mortal, rather than, say, Google Maps, which provides specific directions for how exactly one should arrive at one's desired destination. Gaining familiarity and skill with navigation is an intentional part of the process, and reflects the recurring concepts of practice and apprenticeship. The Mortal Method draws inspiration from individuals like Katherine McKittrick (2020) and adrienne maree brown (2019) who have produced brilliant works that subvert the boundaries of traditional academic norms, are emergent, highly relational and embodied, and trust the reader to be changed by the work and operate differently in the world as a result. In her work on Black and anticolonial methodologies, Katherine McKittrick says, "our starting point must be one of disobedient relationality that always questions, and thus is not beholden to, normative academic logics. This means our method-making may not necessarily take us where we want to go, but it will take us, as Glassant writes, to 'an unknown that does not terrify'" (2020). This affirms the value of cultivating navigational skills, and encourages us to be open to new

or different trajectories and destinations.

There seem to be widespread feelings that the academic world is filled with burnout, anxiety, competition, isolation, and extractive relations (see Berg & Seeber, 2016). This fosters an unsustainable working environment that drives out many brilliant, passionate, and curious people. We recognize that these problems are not limited to the academic world (nor are these problems prevalent in all corners of that world), but academics are the intended audience for this particular document. Our hope is that this framework offers one possible way for scholars to contemplate the way(s) in which they approach their work and design it such that it is in greater alignment with what it means to be mortal.

Intellectually, the Mortal Method is inspired by a number of traditions. For instance, it is born out of critical perspectives within aging studies and medicine that have noted that contemporary Western culture and health care researchers/practitioners are often complicit in believing that mortality can be reduced to a technical medical problem. It is also born of feminist care theories that have called for the centering of vulnerability and challenge the aspiration to mastery that has reduced mortality to death and death to disease. It draws inspiration from existential philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. The Mortal Method also draws on anticolonial scholarship that has drawn attention to the brutality the modern scientific project has perpetrated on many peoples in its compulsions to mastery.

Some core assumptions that inform the Mortal Method are as follows:

1. **Western colonial culture has a fraught relationship with death and mortality. It does not do well with acknowledging or working with finitude**. Neoliberalism demands constant increases in our output and productivity and ignores other dimensions of life outside of striving for success, personal improvement, acquisition, and ascension. Consider, for instance, the growing trend of millionaires and tech billionaires aggressively pursuing radical life extension and immortality. They are doing this while also striving to transcend limits regarding outer space exploration and/or accruing more money than any human could spend in multiple lifetimes. In this context, there is widespread unwillingness to embrace limits or contend with mortality. There are some real dangers that can come with this denial (for example, anxiety and fear around death, unpreparedness for dying and bereavement, and systems that do not meaningfully support people during these significant life events). Within the academy, there is also reward and recognition for the number of one's scholarly publications and presentations, the large sums of research funding secured, progression through the ranks of tenure and promotion, and more. There are also growing pressures to be constantly accessible, keep up with an ever-refilling email inbox, and take on as much service as possible (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Dangers associated with this way of operating can include burnout, illness, extractive relations, and a range of harms. Broadly, neoliberalism is not an

ethos that is designed to facilitate balance, provide sustainability, address our embodied needs and limitations, or encourage satisfaction with "enoughness." An increasingly neoliberalized academy encourages competition, individualism, and disconnection. We want to push back against these pressures and encourage a healthier and more humane way of being mortal in the university setting.

2. **Aging and dying have been heavily medicalized and institutionalized.** We seek to challenge perspectives that reinforce this thinking and treat these processes as primarily the domain of medical experts. We are similarly aligned with care work scholarship that focuses on our human interdependence and our vulnerabilities. By foregrounding mortality and the inevitability of the passage of time, we are reminded that aging and dying are natural, necessary parts of the life cycle. There is considerable value in bringing these processes back into public, communal life. When we are in tune with the reality of being mortal, we are better able to provide compassion, support grief and loss, adapt to change, etc. We do not suggest that our discussion of what it means to be mortal is new knowledge. Many of these ideas come from long-standing wisdom traditions (i.e., Indigenous, Eastern, Stoic, yogic, the palliative care movement, and others). Existential questions about what it means to be alive in this world are ancient ones. We do not claim to be presenting original concepts, but rather curating some of these ideas in ways that suit our current context and audience, and offering invitations to do work that is more conducive to being mortal.

3. **As an institution, the academy has privileged the work of our minds, with great neglect for our bodies.** This can include workloads that require long days of sitting and staring at screens, long or back-to-back meetings without breaks, conference travel without time to "land" upon arrival or recover before returning to regular work, a lack of appreciation for or understanding of embodied knowledge or wisdom, or a lack of consideration or support for the preparation or follow-up care that our bodies my require after engaging in particular work. Consider, for instance, Black, disabled, queer activist Eddie Ndopu who was accepted to Oxford University to do a Masters in Public Policy, but was almost unable to attend because the 'full' scholarship did not include the costs associated with the care he required to participate in the academy (e.g., an automated wheelchair and a full-time carer). The Mortal Method is consistent with the trend in critical research methods and feminist epistemologies of putting the person and the body back into our ways of knowing.

Lastly, this framework's content on what it means to be mortal is not exhaustive. There are many others who do incredible work in related fields that we did not or could not include. This document reflects our reading histories and sources of inspiration at a particular point in time. We acknowledge that this framework and our understanding of the five qualities of mortality can (and probably should) shift and evolve over time. We encourage you to adapt and refine the framework for your own context.

Mortality as a source of resistance: why is there a need for this work?

There is value in engaging deeply with mortality. There is a Bhutanese folk saying: "to be a happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily," with the understanding that doing so allows one's sorrows to feel more fleeting and one's joys to feel more precious. This is similar to the memento mori tradition, which translates in English to "remember, you will die." Awareness of death can motivate and inspire us, and clarify what is truly important to us. Approaching our work with greater attention to finite limits, embodiment, that which enlivens and excites us, points of [dis]connection, and meaning-making can enable healthier relationships with our work, with the other humans in our research worlds, and with ourselves. The Mortal Method responds to calls (from Atul Gawande [2014], Frank Oseteski [2019], Oliver Burkeman [2021], and others) for something new in terms of how we engage with mortality.

What would change about our work lives if we became more embodied, connected, in touch with eros, and embracing of finitude? What would we have to let go? What possibilities might open up? Audre Lorde says, "once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (1984, p. 89). We have found that the Mortal Method can bring about similar clarity and corresponding demands.

The apprenticeship with mortality that this framework facilitates requires spending time with the disparity between how we want to practice and how we are actually practicing. Academia and its incentive structures can sometimes shield us from this inquiry. Practicing the Mortal Method may require us to set and enforce new boundaries, to decline particular opportunities, to reevaluate our measures of success and introduce new ones, to speak up, to slow down, to move, to listen.

We recognize that career stage and employment status may impact one's engagement with the Mortal Method. Those who are pre-tenure or precariously employed likely experience less control over their workloads and greater pressure to demonstrate particular types of productivity or accomplishment. The Mortal Method has the capacity to be profound and positively impact our working lives, but apprenticeships do require investments of time. Saying "yes" to this undertaking necessarily means saying "no" elsewhere and we leave it to you to determine if that tradeoff makes sense for you. That said, there is value in developing these healthy relations early in one's career, before establishing certain norms and ways of working. We see potential for the Mortal Method to speak to mid-late career scholars with a range of interests and longings - particularly those in the midst of mid-career existential crises, we see you! Regardless of your career stage, consider this an invitation to re-examine your relationship to your work life.

We would also like to note that this work may stir up feelings and/or discomfort for some

people. Reflecting on mortality can be emotionally loaded and can surface unexpected feelings - particularly when we recognize a longing, a wound, or an incongruence between how we would like things to be and how they are. We encourage you to work through these feelings along the timeline and with the resources that are most helpful for you.

Lastly, there are multiple ways you can engage with this work. You could work through this full document and answer all of the reflective prompts, in order. You could also "choose your own adventure" and engage with the parts that resonate, on your own timeline.

SECTION 2

Five Qualities of Mortality

Introduction

In this section, we present five qualities of mortality: finitude, embodiment, eros, connection, and meaning-making. These five qualities are not an exhaustive account of all that it means to be mortal. We are not offering a theory of mortality. Rather, these five qualities reflect recurrent concepts across many different engagements on the topic of mortality.

When we met to flesh out the qualities of the Mortal Method during a week-long retreat (see the *Taking an Emergent, Responsive Approach* blog post for a detailed description of our process), we each free-wrote a summary of our understanding of each quality (informed by our prior reading, our month-long apprenticeship with mortality, and our discussions during the retreat). We had initially planned to synthesize these individual summaries for this document, producing a single description for each quality. However, they each had such unique flavours and similar-but-distinct vantage points that we decided to keep them separate so you can appreciate the way each quality can be expressed in a different voice. We hope it serves as a reminder of that which is universal across experiences and how distinctly those qualities can be felt and lived.

Below we present each of the five qualities. Each quality's section contains four elements: 1) an introduction or "entry point" to the quality, 2) sources of inspiration (quotes, poems, or images) to spark insight and enrich understanding, 3) each author's free-written summary of the quality, and 4) invitations to facilitate engagement with the qualities and reflect upon their place in your own life.

1. Finitude

ENTRY POINTS

Broadly, finitude tends to be defined as the state of having limits, bounds, or an end. Within the world that we live in, the concepts of *finitude* and *time* seem to be inextricably linked. The Ancient Greeks had two words for time, *chronos* and *kairos*. Chronos, which we still use in words like chronological, refers to clock time. It refers to time that can be measured - seconds, minutes, hours, years. Where chronos is quantitative, kairos is

qualitative. It measures moments, not seconds. The following quote is from an article where author Marney Makridakis shares an excerpt of what her father, Lonnie Kliever, a university professor in the philosophy of religion, wrote about kronos and kairos in 2003:

> *"As usual, the Greeks were ahead of us in thinking and speaking about such conundrums. Where we use one word to describe a whole range of things, they had the good sense to use different words to mark distinctions in reality and in experience. For example, they had three different words for the experience of love — eros for possessive love, philia for friendly love, and agape for sacrificial love. Not surprisingly, the Greeks had two words for marking the differences between the experiences of time — kronos and kairos…Kronos (or cronos in the English spelling, from which we take our word chronology) is sequential time. Kronos is the time of clocks and calendars; it can be quantified and measured. Kronos is linear, moving inexorably out of the determinate past toward the determined future, and has no freedom. Kairos is numinous time. Kairos is a time of festivals and fantasies; it cannot be controlled or possessed. Kairos is circular, dancing back and forth, here and there, without beginning or ending, and knows no boundaries…Kronos is mechanistic and deterministic, time that is ruled by the dead hand of the past. Kronos devours us with remorseless certainty. Kronos turns life into stone. Kairos is creative and serendipitous. Kairos is time that is energized by the living dream of the future and presents us with unlimited possibility. Kairos turns fate into destiny."*

The Greeks were not the only ancient culture to be ahead of us moderns in matters concerning time. Eastern contemplative traditions, such as yoga and Buddhism, understand finitude to be central to the human experience. Termed *anicca* in Pali or *anitya* in Sanskrit, finitude is the nature of reality. Things come and go. Existence is a process. Even who we are is a process. We have come and we will ultimately go and in between, we change. Aging involves many uncontrollable changes that happen to us. These changes require us to engage in ongoing learning: to let go, to take distance, to re-appreciate situations. Critical gerontologist Jan Baars suggests that integrating these kinds of experiences into the awareness of a finite life appears to be central to "aging as an evolving art of living." He calls our attention to the fact that, "[t]hinking about finitude is easily postponed and reserved for those who are 'really old.'" (2016, p. 969) and suggests that a meaningful and realistic understanding of aging needs to include a confrontation with the finitude of life. "Instead of reducing aging to the loss of vital adulthood, it should be seen as something with a potentially deep significance: a process of learning to live a finite life" (ibid). This idea ties back to the notion of developing an apprenticeship with mortality; honing our ability to process and accept endings and limits. This is a task that is asked of us repeatedly, even by the hour.

> *"There is a very down-to-earth kind of liberation in grasping that there are certain truths about being a limited human from which you'll never be liberated. You don't get to dictate the course of events. And the paradoxical reward for accepting reality's constraints is that they no longer feel so constraining."*
>
> **- Oliver Burkeman**

> *"One must live as if it would be forever, and as if one might die each moment. Always both at once."*
>
> **- Mary Renault**

> *"Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!*
>
> *What a task*
>
> *to ask*
>
> *of anything, or anyone,*
>
> *yet it is ours,*
>
> *and not by the century or the year, but by the hours."*
>
> **- Mary Oliver**

AUTHORS' REFLECTIONS UPON FINITUDE

Julia:

Finitude is fundamentally about temporality and our relationship with/to time. Relative to mortality, it's the fact (and our awareness of the fact) that our lives will end, as will those of every living thing on earth. When we're young, this knowledge is more theoretical. With the passage of time and our apprenticeship with loss, this ontological reality becomes apparent. It becomes more profound as we age, experience more losses and deaths, and the prospect of our own deaths become more proximal. This embodied knowledge, this wisdom, can be both a reassurance and a heartbreak. This fact, that our lives will end, can spark varying degrees of fear (from discomfort and inconvenience to profound dread and panic). We have certainty that we will die, but no idea of when. This is something that we can accept/surrender to, or not. We try desperately, in many ways to resist this inevitability. Our cells strive to continue to exist, we have a biological drive to reproduce. We have the desire for, and illusion of, control. We want to cure, treat, and extend. We are steeped in a culture that favours growth, ascension, acquisition, innovation, etc.; that describes death as defeat. Making meaning of our limited time involves both kronos and kairos (planning and romance), it involves reflection on lineage and legacy, it involves the inhale (the YOLO, the eros, the joys of being alive and embodied, the collecting of rich experiences) and the exhale (boundaries, learning to live within limits, being very selective about how we spend our precious time, accepting that we can't do it all, savouring what we have and being present, gratitude). Finitude is only terrifying (rather than bittersweet or heartbreaking) if we think of ourselves as distinct from all other living things. The end of us, our experiential selves, is what we have to contend with. But if we see ourselves

as part of a larger whole (a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the beach, a part of a family, a culture, an ecosystem, etc.) then we know that life goes on, just not our own. Something will live on (legacy, knowledge, children, the impacts we've had on friends and strangers, the impacts our work has had and will have for people, the compost that we will become), just not in the form or state that we are currently experiencing.

Mathura:

Finitude is the awareness that all things come to an end. Within mortality, finitude is the awareness that we as embodied creatures (i.e., beings that inhabit a physical body) will eventually meet our own end. The process of aging is, in some ways, an apprenticeship with our own finitude. We may orient to this reality in different ways, often oscillating between orientations as our contexts and circumstances ebb and flow. When "little us" first encounters 'no', when we first encounter limits and/or boundaries, we contend with the grief of realizing that what we expect, we may not always receive. When we first encounter death and dying, whether our own or a loved one, we realize that all that we love, we will lose. We may respond with fear - fear of the end, fear of loss, fear of living without. We may respond with grasping for control - controlling the time that we have. We may respond with abandon - the countless decisions justified by #YOLO. We may respond with presence – the fact that I'm here means that it's not yet over, and the fact that I'm here means it will one day be over. We may respond with acceptance - que sera sera, what will be will be. We may go as far as surrendering to the finitude, yielding to the wisdom embodied within limits. We may respond by looking to the ways in which those who came before us continue to live on through us – mortal yet immortalized. We may respond by pondering how we too might live on – as legacy – in those that survive us. We create legacies – relationships, children, projects, institutions – within the limitations of finitude, in an attempt to live on after the end. And if we are lucky, we may even realize that our end, when it comes, will only be the end of this embodiment and this story. That we, as a part of a much larger whole, will live on through the connections we made during our time here, the richness of our life lived becoming the compost that fertilizes the life that remains and is to come. We may realize that we only truly come to an end when we no longer see ourselves as a part of everything else.

Albert:

Mortality calls me to pay attention to finitude. Being mortal is the most obvious way finitude shows up. My own death and the death of those around me. Your death. We are finite beings subject to death. And the fear of death (or maybe more so the fear of dying badly) captures our cultural attention. Wanting to fight the dying of the light consumes our resources and colonizes our health professions. But if we step back, we can see that finitude, even in our death, is not an aberration, but the true state of things. Everything comes and goes.

From another vantage point, mortality is finitude and finitude is change. The world is change. Impermanent. So much of our culture (and my life) has been about getting and

trying to hold on. If I could just have you, I'd be happy. If I could just make this relationship last, I'd be good. But you are your own being, who I will never fully know, never fully possess. The wiser me, the being who last learned through the trials and tribulations of living, through growing older, through experiencing failed attempts at possessing, (partners, jobs, joys) knows other approaches are needed.

The paradox rears its head: I ought to slow down. Pay attention. Be present to what is here. For now. Savour or mourn. See what comes next. Other aspects of finitude emerge too. Not all endings are bad. I also cannot create without limitations. My career as an academic meant not becoming an astronaut or a stand up comic. Paying attention to finitude, to the things I may lose or become, broadens my vision, beyond me. I am called to see that I am also part of a family, an environment, circles of friends and colleagues. This makes me vulnerable but also means I will continue on in the food I become and, in the smiles, and trauma I leave behind. And maybe a book or two that can serve as inspiration, then coasters, and scrap paper for firestarter on cold wintery nights.

INVITATION TO ENGAGE

Invitation 1: Reflective journaling: What is your relationship to finitude?

In a digital document, a paper journal, or elsewhere, we invite you to respond to the following questions.

- What does "finitude" mean to you?
- What are the ways in which you contend with finitude regularly in your work and life (think everything from expiry dates on food items to "4 more winters" with your beloved aging Siberian husky)?
- How does your relationship to something change when you become aware of its finitude? What are the thoughts and emotions that tend to accompany this realization for you?
- How, if at all, does being in a kronos-frame-of-time vs. being in a kairos-frame-of-time shift your relationship to finitude?
- When you think of finitude with respect to mortality, what comes up for you?
- How, if at all, has your relationship to finitude changed over the course of your life?
- In what ways, if any, do the dominant systems in our lives manipulate our relationship to finitude in order to sustain themselves?
- What would a healthy relationship to/with finitude look like for you?

Invitation 2: Working within limits: Engaging with mortality through haiku

As an introduction to the second invitation, we begin with an excerpt from Susan Cain's (2022) book *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole.*

> *"The Japanese Buddhist poet Issa married late, in 1814 when he was fifty-one. He'd had a hard life. His mother died when he was two; his stepmother whipped him, he said, a hundred times a day. Later, Issa took care of his father, who suffered from typhoid fever, until he passed away, too. Issa's wife gave birth to two sons, each of whom died after a month. But then the couple had a daughter – a healthy, beautiful daughter named Sato. Happiness, finally! But Sato contracted smallpox and died before her second birthday.*

> *Issa was one of Japan's "great four" haiku masters. The heartbroken poet wrote one of his inability to accept impermanence: "I concede that water can never return to its source, nor scattered blossoms to their branch, but even so the bonds of affection are hard to break." He considered the subject again in this haiku:*
>
> *It is true*
>
> *That this world of dew*
>
> *Is a world of dew.*
>
> *But even so…*
>
> *It's a curious poem: so mild mannered that you hardly notice the depth of protest it contains. It appears to be about the essential Buddhist idea that our lives are as ephemeral as a dewdrop. The Buddhist (and Hindu and Jain) answer to the question of how to live, knowing that we will die, is to practice nonattachment: We should love but we shouldn't cling to our desires or aversions. Our difficulty accepting impermanence is the heart of human suffering. For this reason, many of the great contemplatives constantly reminded themselves of death. But there's a big difference between awareness and acceptance. Which is why "this world of dew/is a world of dew" isn't the heart of Issa's poem. It's true, thrumming centre is those three unassuming words: But even so. But even so, says Issa, I'll long for my daughter forever. But even so, I'll never be whole again. But even so, I cannot accept, will not accept, do you hear me as I whisper that I do not accept the brutal terms of life and death on this beautiful planet. But even so, but even so, but even so."*

Now, this excerpt resonated for us because it's such a beautiful poem and Cain provides an equally beautiful reflection on it. But we also appreciate the constraints provided by the format of haiku poetry. It exemplifies working with finitude. You have vast human experiences and complex feelings to express, but only a few lines in which to do so. The format forces us to be intentional about our word choice; to surrender all the words that just won't fit – and also to be free of the pressure to try and include everything. So, in the spirit of that, we invite you to spend 10 minutes crafting a haiku poem about mortality and finitude. Your poem can be as literal or abstract as you would like. For those who may not be familiar with the format or have not thought about it in a long time, the structure is based on 3 lines, with the pattern of 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables. It does not have to rhyme and you can

play with grammatical structure as much as you would like. Here are two examples:

By Kobayashi Issa:

Everything I touch

with tenderness, alas,

pricks like a bramble.

By Mizuta Masahide:

My storehouse burned down.

Now nothing stands between me

And the moon above.

Set a 10 minute timer for yourself and craft your haiku

2. Embodiment

ENTRY POINTS

Acknowledging mortality makes us more aware of our embodiment. And acknowledging our bodies makes us more aware of our mortality. The two are intertwined.

Those academics working in the tradition of the sciences or social sciences will be all too familiar with the disembodying assumptions of the objective pursuit of knowledge. Donna Haraway (2016) describes the dream of the scientific method as a stripping away of fleshy, embodied, situated humanness, to reach something akin to a divine perspective. The God trick, she called this: a fantasy of knowledge generated by disembodied scientists who claim to see everything from nowhere. Within the humanities, philosophy has also moved away from fleshy questions of how to live a good life (e.g., questions that concerned the Stoics) to more analytic pursuits. Grappling with ethical conduct, living well, now seems trivial, better suited to the self-help section of popular blogs and not the concern of serious thinkers. In North America, detachment is conflated with professionalism. Is it surprising that to carve out a successful career, we risk losing ourselves? Or trying to prevent this, we get caught in false dichotomies such as work-life balance, as if work doesn't contain life and life doesn't contain work (to paraphrase noted feminist political economist Pat Armstrong).

A core intention behind the Mortal Method is to support the re-embodying of our profession, reimagining academic work for fleshy creatures. Not least, attending to our bodies brings to light individual differences. It also situates us within a life course, not just a tenure and promotions stream. The two do not always map on well.

Attending to our bodies highlights strengths and capacities. Here too we find differences between people. How to develop and share our strengths well? And attending to our bodies brings to light our tendency towards ailment, troubles, and illnesses. It centers our vulnerability to accidents and harms, as well as our differing abilities. The latter may not be well accommodated by the communities and organizations we inhabit. The narrow doors that make washrooms inaccessible to wheelchair-users, for instance. We wonder whether ableism is, to some extent, a form of death denial? And we hope that developing the skills to attend mortality and our embodiment may support a greater openness to disabilities and the ailments we all have, though in differing degrees.

Attending to our bodies is not always safe. Great strides have been made in understanding the ubiquity of trauma, and we have come to understand that trauma is embodied. This is worth noting as we embark on the work of reconnecting to our bodies. Seemingly beneficial exercises such as paying attention to one's body, conducting a body scan, or being mindfully attentive to one's thoughts may trigger trauma. Rather than cultivate a sense of peace, these exercises may reveal trauma spots resulting in anxiety and discomfort, or they may cause the opposite, resulting in dissociation or numbness that may be confused with peace. Beginning to re-embody ourselves is a process, which will

be different for each of us. We ask you to pay attention to what is going on for you and in you. If you need to stop, do so. Pause, take a break. Pay attention to sensations outside yourself, which may help if the sensations within you are triggering. If you need support, here is a useful resource.

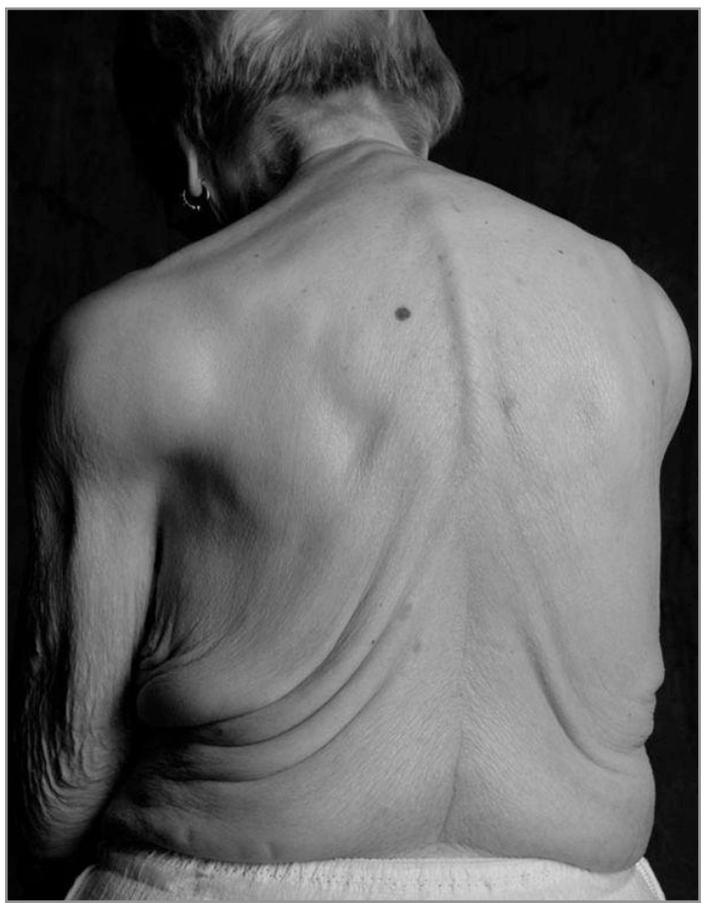
SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

> *"[Embodiment is] the sense of one's body; a non-conceptual, somatic, form of knowledge, different in kind from other types of knowledge" (Longo et al., 2008).*

> *"My body and my life are part of my research, and I use this knowledge to critique and analyze. I will not separate this from my engagement with academic literature, because in my life these things are not compartmentalized… "Theory" is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people. Theory isn't just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives."*
>
> **- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done***

> *"The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies."*
>
> **- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress***

Image of queer performance artist Andrew Henderson who, at his living funeral, had symbols of attendees' deepest secrets tattooed on his body in order to "take them to the grave" with him. Henderson died days after the performance in 2016.



Life Drawing Manchester

AUTHORS' REFLECTION UPON EMBODIMENT

Julia:

I am matter. I experience the world in and as my body. It is the only home I know. It is how I move through the world, how I perceive it. How the world perceives me. It is a source of both pleasure and pain. The eros part of me delights in embodied pleasure. Wants to collect a range of experiential stamps on my corporeal passport before I depart. "I ate this delicious meal. I sat in this soothing hot spring. I pet this soft dog." Ironically, I don't have any tattoos. I don't own my body, in the legal sense. It is not my property (that is partly why it is illegal to sell a kidney).

My body is in a constant process of change and transition. Different from each day, month, year to the next. Aging makes embodiment less theoretical too. New aches, new lines, the inability to do the backflips of our youth. Our bodies are limiting and enabling. As we age, some new limitations are imposed and some new possibilities open up. We are not taught well how to listen to our bodies. There has been an increasing movement towards wellness. Focus on breath, meditation, yoga, movement, etc. These are good things. But are we always successful in integrating them into our lives and work, as opposed to appointment-based self-care? I'm not. Listening to our bodies is a particular skill to be honed. It means listening to it in its mother tongue, learning the ways in which it asserts itself, not as a booming voice from the heavens saying, "That's enough cookies for today" or a Jiminy Cricket-type conscience on our shoulder saying "you'll regret that tomorrow". It's embodied communication. It's the impulse to lay down, to stop working, to eat, to connect. Our bodies require care. Not a commodified personal care process that involves extensive and expensive treatments, but regular, sustained, care. Duty. Reverence. Feeding it nourishing food in appropriate amounts, connecting with other bodies through consensual affectionate touch, spending time to rest it, to move it, to slow down and let it process things, to maintain it, clean it, and adorn it in ways that feel pleasurable and authentic. It requires planning and romance. Tending to the pains, preventing harms, savouring the yums, treating it as an agent rather than a tool, and making the most of being here as a body for the finite time that we have. Mortality can also be frightening because we are confronted with our embodiment, in that we are "animated meat". We will rot and decay. We will become food for other creatures that we see ourselves as above. This is an important humbling and reckoning.

Mathura:

We are embodied, meaning we are in bodies. We are in bodies that are dying, that are susceptible to breakdown. And, we are in bodies that know how to die. We arrive with the blueprint, and despite it being strategically programmed out of us over the course of our lifetimes, we also know how to attune to the wisdom of this blueprint. The work is in re-membering. The journey is in coming home to the only home we know. A pilgrimage back to our temple, our ever-present yet ever-changing sacred space. The work is in re-orienting to the body as an agent, as a teacher, rather than as a machine or a tool. To complicate

the notion of "mind over matter" and the hierarchy and paternalism inherent in it. To listen deeply and learn the language of the body, rather than listening for a translation in a language we already know. If to be loved is to be understood, what does it look like to become fluent in the body's ineffability, the language of the senses. To be able to distinguish between subtle sensations in the same way that we nod knowingly when someone distinguishes between "nice" and "kind". To hone our ability to discern between animalistic longings that feed short-term vs. long-term satiation, between "this feels good right now" and "this is good for me". To listen proactively, before our bodies force us to listen in the name of sickness and protest. To be present and engaged in preventative care, rather than begrudgingly showing up for increasingly regular resuscitation. To come home to our bodies, knowing that when we do, we also come home to the earth, our collective home, and its inherent wisdom. We are matter, we come from matter, we return to matter, and that matters.

Albert:

Mortality calls me to pay attention to embodiment. It is my body that dies after all. But the opening is a surprisingly vast one, that brings me home, as I am re-membered: head connected to heart, connected to arms, connected to feet that walk this earth and breathe this air. It is a body that also knows. Though I and many of us have forgotten to listen. Or we live in consumer cultures that actively betray our bodies, hiding salt in foods so we will eat more, buy more, get fat, and are taught to be ashamed, buy diet plans, fail diet plans, and buy counselling services. It is no wonder we have the problems we have. Our consumer culture seems not to have forgotten we are embodied.

And yet in the work-a-day world of the academy, we like to pretend we are brains that come together to think, and could think endlessly if it weren't for the pesky needs of the body. Much of modernity has been a fight against our embodied nature. And yes that nature can be pesky, there can be pain, restriction, limitation, finitude. And frustration. Not being able to access this building because there is no ramp for my wheels because my legs don't work. And the fear of aches that were not there yesterday. What do they signal? What accommodations will they require? Age is not just a number. It is humbling. It ain't for the faint hearted let me tell you.

By designing and implementing the Mortal Method we are considering the stories we have been told about our bodies, and learning to tell other ones, learning to slow down, pay attention, listen…sssshhhhh what is your body telling you? What language is it speaking in? Can you understand? Do you want to understand?

Can we build a work-a-day world that honours the temples of our body, that sees in our breath, in the in and out of it, the sacredness of connection, of Life itself?

INVITATION TO ENGAGE

Invitation 1: Reflective journaling: What is your relationship to embodiment?

- What does "embodiment" mean to you?
- In what parts of your life do you feel the MOST embodied?
- In what parts of your life do you feel the LEAST embodied?
- Who would you say is the most embodied person you know? Why? What does this choice of person tell you about your understanding of embodiment?
- In your eyes, what is the relationship between embodiment and mortality?
- In what ways, if any, are your embodiment and your mortality connected?
- How, if at all, has your relationship to embodiment changed over the course of your life?
- What are the messages that are propagated by the dominant systems with respect to embodiment? In what ways has this messaging influenced your relationship to embodiment?
- What would a healthy relationship to / with embodiment look like for you?

Invitation 2: Box breathing

We invite you to take time to pay attention to your body. Such breaks are not indulgent; they are essential. Taking time to rest, recharge, digest, and integrate ideas *is* work! A safe way to begin to pay attention to your body is by attending to your breath. It is always with you, and is relatively neutral and nonthreatening (though not always for everyone). In a number of traditions, breath is used as an anchor to calm or focus the mind while bringing attention to one's body. In Latin, the word for breath is *spiritus*. Make of that what you will.

There are many breathing techniques. The yogic science of pranayama is devoted to breath work. One easy technique is what has come to be called box breathing. We invite you to try it by following these steps:

Step 1: Sit, stand, or lie down with one hand on your chest and one on your stomach.

Step 2: Breathe normally and observe the rise and fall of your stomach and chest.

Step 3: If only your chest is rising, then you are shallow breathing. Slowly take a deeper breath until you feel the hand on your stomach rise. Practice this

until you are comfortable taking smooth, deep breaths.

Step 4. Breathe in counting four seconds.

Step 5: Hold your breath for four seconds.

Step 6: Exhale through your mouth for four seconds.

Repeat steps 3 to 5 as long as suits you.

If four seconds is too long, simply do what is comfortable, and if you choose, build up to four seconds or whatever suits.

3. Eros

ENTRY POINTS

Mortality is paradoxical. In trying to avoid death, we find it everywhere. Consider the way health education, designed to keep death at bay, is constantly pointing out risks of death. One week fats cause heart attacks; the next week carbs will kill you. Sex is risky, if loneliness doesn't get you first. As a result, death no longer comes at the end of life, according to the British Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1992), "it is there from the start, calling for constant surveillance and forbidding even a momentary relaxation of vigil. Death is watching (and is to be watched) when we work, eat, love, rest." In trying to avoid death, we fear danger everywhere.

By contrast, in opening up to our mortality, we find our way to life. We open up to the preciousness of life. This is not a saccharine, toxic sort of positivity, but a vibrancy made poignant by the very recognition that life is limited. In his best seller, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, Oliver Burkeman names this the "paradox of limitation." With respect to time management (and to much else besides), Burkeman observes: "the more you try to manage your time with the goal of achieving a feeling of total control and freedom from the inevitable constraints of being human, the more stressful, empty, and frustrating life gets. But the more we confront the facts of finitude instead - and work with them rather than against them - the more productive, meaningful and joyful life becomes." Again, this is not a facile joy. Facing finitude means making hard choices, including recognizing that we can't please everyone and deciding who we will need to disappoint. We can't chase all of our dreams, so we will have to decide which to drop. And we will need to learn to be okay with that. But at least we are asking ourselves what truly matters and taking steps toward that, rather than living in the delusion that once we get our inboxes emptied then maybe we can start working towards our dreams.

This quality of "choosing to choose" as Burkeman puts it, this quality of aliveness, vitality, and vibrancy, lives in the land of eros. While the erotic is often reduced to sex in contemporary Western culture, it is much more than that, as Esther Perel reminds us. It is passion. Vitality. Joie de vivre. It is the difference between surviving and thriving. Facing death can open us up to eros. For instance, when we develop the capacity to move through loss, loving deeply is not so threatening and joy is not so foreboding.

The Mortal Method uses the erotic as a standpoint for critical reflection. In her 1978 paper, *Uses of the Erotic*, Audre Lorde explains this standpoint:

> *"Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe."*

Where does the erotic live in the academy? To what progressive uses might the erotic be put within academic life? To be clear, we are not referring to sex. Moving forward involves reclaiming the erotic in its subversive, life-affirming, disruptive and love-enhancing power. It may begin simply by learning to connect to what we need and want, to pay attention to who feeds us positive energy, and what groups or commitments leave us reminded of why we got into this profession in the first place, and which do not. Maggie Berg, co-author of *The Slow Professor* (2016), has said that their book on the culture of speed in the corporate academy was intended to "bring out the joy in our work and focus on what gives us pleasure". Similarly, bell hooks has taught us:

> *"To understand the place of eros and eroticism in the classroom, we must move beyond thinking of those forces solely in terms of the sexual, though that dimension need not be denied. Sam Keen, in his book The Passionate Life, urges readers to remember that* ***in its earliest conception "erotic potency was not confined to sexual power but included the moving force that propelled every life-form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality."*** *Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process. Keen continues:* ***"When we limit "erotic" to its sexual meaning, we betray our alienation from the rest of nature. We confess that we are not motivated by anything like the mysterious force that moves birds to migrate or dandelions to spring****. Furthermore, we imply that the fulfillment or potential toward which we strive is sexual - the romantic-genital connection between two persons.""*
>
> **- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.**

Finally, attention to mortality reminds us that eros is not solely about aliveness as pleasure. It also includes the aliveness that we experience through profound pain and sorrow. Being sad is also being alive. Grieving is a manifestation of our aliveness. Consider Francis Weller's (2015) description of grief:

> *"Grief is subversive, undermining the quiet agreement to behave and be in control of our emotions. It is an act of protest that declares our refusal to live numb and small. There is something feral about grief, something essentially outside the ordained and sanctioned behaviors of our culture. Because of that, grief is necessary to the vitality of the soul. Contrary to our fears, grief is suffused with life-force. It is riddled with energy, an acknowledgement of the erotic coupling with another soul, whether human, animal, plant, or ecosystem. It is not a state of deadness or emotional flatness. Grief is alive, wild, untamed and cannot be domesticated. It resists the demands to remain passive and still. We move in jangled, unsettled, and riotous ways when grief takes hold of us. It is truly an emotion that rises from the soul."*

The Mortal Method uses mortality to connect us with life, the fullness of the experience of being alive, the pleasures and pains, the gains and losses, and the comings and goings. It is paradoxical and productive.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

> *"To be alive: not just the carcass*
>
> *But the spark.*
>
> *That's crudely put, but…*
>
> *If we're not supposed to dance,*
>
> *Why all this music?"*
>
> - **Gregory Orr**

The Dia de los Muertos parade in Mexico City in 2021.

Georgia O'Keeffe, Red Canna, 1924

> *"And I think that that applies to all trauma. I really don't think there's an exclusive monopoly on that for my community [survivors of the Holocaust]. But that's where I learned it. And the people who came back to life really, in some sense, had less survivor guilt, sometimes, or had suffered differently* ***or were able to reconnect with a certain fervor that basically said, "I'm not here for nothing. I'm going to make the best of it." And they understood the erotic as an antidote to death: how do you keep yourself alive in the face of adversity?*** *And from that moment, I began to actually think, my book is not about sexuality, my book and my work is about eroticism. It is about how people connect to* ***this quality of aliveness, of vibrancy, of vitality, of renewal.*** *And that is way beyond the description of sexuality. And it is mystical. It is actually a spiritual, mystical experience of life. It is a transcendent experience of life, because it is an act of the imagination. And that is spirituality, as well."*
>
> **- Esther Perel, The Erotic Is An Antidote to Death.**

> *"If you don't find the world tasty and sexy, you are out of touch with the most important things in life"*
>
> **- a Continuing Care Resident in Alberta, Canada (Brassolotto et al., 2020).**

AUTHORS' REFLECTION UPON EROS

Julia:

Eros is life force, that which drives us to stay alive, that which makes us feel alive, and that which makes life worth living. Though it is most often associated with sexuality, it is about much more than that. It involves some of the most primal and most powerful of human emotions. That's what makes it so tempting, so affirming, and so threatening. It is largely about pleasure. The joys of being embodied. Being alert, attentive, aware, alive in one's senses. Feeling stimulated, intrigued, inspired, engaged. Being spontaneous, adventurous, maybe mischievous. It invites us to listen (and perhaps respond) to our longings, our yearnings, our desires. It fills the space between longing and having – it is the tease, the wonder, the curiosity, the possibility. Eros invites us to the dancefloor to move our bodies, be unashamed, let loose, and feel good. In the words of poet Gregory Orr, "If we're not supposed to dance, why all this music?" Eros enables us to live in the world of imagination, to envision a life that is rich, expansive, exciting, and full of possibility. In this way it is creative, generative, and permits us to imagine a life beyond our existing roles and responsibilities – and sometimes, to actualize that vision. It offers a story of our future beyond a slow decline into a predictable and increasingly narrow path towards old age and death. Eros is often mistaken for youth – we talk about people falling in love being like teenagers, about childlike wonder. We don't encourage or celebrate spontaneity, rebellion, or passion in the same way as we age and are expected to settle down. Eros grants us permission for indulgence. To treat ourselves to life's tasty pleasures. It allows us to get in touch with satisfaction, to learn what feels good and what is good for us. It is, as Esther Perel says, the antidote to death. However, the point at which indulgence becomes over-indulgence is not clear-cut. Allowing eros to be in the driver's seat of our lives can cause harm – to ourselves and others. It can lead us to unbridled hedonism and a relationship with pleasure and with life that is lustful rather than loving. One that is focused on fullness rather than satiation. One in which these tasty pleasures act as anesthetics rather than treats. There is skill required in navigating this delicate balance between that which is vital to keeping us alive and that which would do us in. Our kairos requires kronos to make the trains run on time. These skills can be challenging to hone in a world that simultaneously encourages us to consume, spend, splurge, and #treatyoself and also to feel shame for being too loud, too sensual, too emotional, too hungry, too confident, too much. But eros is not only about joyous passion; it also encompasses sorrow. Our life force roars ferociously in response to loss. Weller reminds us that grief is subversive, feral, and riotous. Once again, eros calls us to rebel from the societal script, to be unapologetically alive, to wail out (in pleasure or in pain), to dance, to collapse, to weep, to hold one another, to love with wild abandon, to, as Camus says, "live to the point of tears," to love people, animals, places, and other living things so fully that to part with them causes us pain. This is the poignant bittersweetness of eros.

Mathura:

Eros is life force. The energy that emerges when our life-preserving instincts meet force, movement and momentum. Eros is birds knowing to migrate, dandelions knowing to spring, humans knowing when something is undeniably YUM, undeniably YES. Eros is *Puhpowee*, the Potawatami word for the force that causes a mushroom to spring forth from the earth overnight. Eros is the sum of all the instincts that have the potential to destroy us when left unchecked, yet also keep us alive to the richness of the worlds around and within us until we die. This life force can take many forms – creativity, sensuality, sorrow, longing, yearning, imagination, joy, lust, love, grief. The erotic is the distance between potentiality and actuality, the space between desire and having. It is the place where alternative futures are imagined, the space of transgressing boundaries, the site of the feral and the subversive. To that end, eros is outside the ordained and sanctioned norms of our culture. To tune into the erotic, to honour this life force and harness its wisdom, requires deep deprogramming. A force that pushes toward sustenance and life in a culture built around extraction, commodification, and depletion is inherently disruptive. The world we live in is not compatible with life itself. And the more attuned we are to the erotic, and the eros embodied within us, the more obvious this becomes. The world we live in is not compatible with life, and the embodiment of eros is a threat to all that has gone into constructing this world – capitalism, patriarchy, ableism, and colonialism to name a few. The dominant systems have kept this threat at bay, in part by pathologizing it, reducing it to the realm of the sexual, controlling its scope and its story through the ways it is depicted in the media. To be turned on becomes a euphemism for being horny, rather than a marker of becoming activated – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and/or politically. We are taught to fear eros, fear its power, fear its "too-much-ness". And in buying into this fear, we relinquish this power without fully understanding it. We relinquish the compass within us that tells us when we are making decisions that are incompatible with life, and incompatible with living. We relinquish our imagination – our ability to construct and explore realities that we can't yet see. And we relinquish our embodied YES, the visceral knowing that something is good for us. And yet, even as it is cuffed in this cage of systematically engineered shame, this life force persists. Like a blade of grass sprouting out from within concrete, life persists in the face of adversity. Connected to a certain fervour, an "I'm not here for nothing," it persists. And we can't help but notice it, often more attuned to it in others than within ourselves. Turns out, aliveness is attractive in a world built to dampen it. It turns heads, draws attention, and sparks curiosity. People want to have what she's having, even if secretly. Aliveness is not only an antidote to death, but also an antidote to apathy, which is one of the symptoms of a culture predicated on death rather than life. Aliveness fuels protest, aliveness feeds collective action, aliveness is the heartbeat of a new world waiting to be born.

Albert:

I start differently this time. Not with mortality. Rather with eros as my entry into mortality. It takes me back to my adolescent self. (And noooo not THAT). I mean grappling with the

question of how do I carve out a life of meaning, purpose and joy in a world that has lost its way, that values destruction and disconnection? Mortality mattered for me because any way into true living would take courage, would risk rejection, and have to hold grief. And yet, being aware of finite time heightened the stakes and called me to get off my ass. In my memory it lives as my mom telling my dad to "just be quiet for a moment" and let her speak, thank-you breast cancer. Thank you health care and healing for letting her continue to speak.

In a world of intentional disconnection, one tends to forget the intimate connection between life and death, joy and grief, love and loss. The impetus for this work on mortality is to uncover our potential for joy. It is an honest, embodied ground for critique. As Audre Lorde reminds us, when we realize our full potential for joy we are no longer willing to put up with half measures or quiet lives of desperation. We are no longer willing to merely survive, or in the academy engage with insipid "filling the gap" kind of research. It is subversive; it can be dangerous; and expansive. "Our erotic knowledge empowers us," Lorde observes, becoming "a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives."

And this is a grave responsibility, she cautions. One that ought to have been passed down from generation to generation, but has not been. For it takes skill, knowledge, and wisdom to brave well. It requires sharing knowledge, creating knowledge, unlearning and relearning; figuring out how to live well in the face of adversity, limitation, and mortality. The erotic can be an antidote to death, Esther Perel writes. An impetus for creativity and connection. It prompts us to love life, change life, even surpass our given natures, create in gentle embrace of fleshy bodies and raise our fist to the dying of the light or the shadows "they" cast over us. It is yummy belly rubbing food, a kiss and a cup of a cheek, hot blood flowing and a risky move. It is finding ways through torn ligaments and fractured bones, car crashes, and lost loves, mourning and music and dancing on tables. It is also, since this is about a concept, dancing on the graveyard of well-being, that polite compromise, that is too fearful, too complacent, to disrupt conventional models of healthy living. It is a poke in the eye.

INVITATION TO ENGAGE

Invitation 1: Reflective journaling: What is your relationship to eros and the erotic?

- In what context did you first encounter the word / concept of eros or the erotic?
- What were your initial thoughts or interpretations of eros?
- How has your understanding of eros shifted over the years? What experiences have influenced these shifts?
- What, for you, falls under the category of "erotic"? What do you experience as erotic?
- What are your body's tells around whether you are experiencing something as erotic?
- What are the thoughts / emotions that tend to precede, accompany, and succeed you experiencing something as erotic?
- What fears do you have about exploring eros?
- What boundaries, if any, would you need around exploring eros?
- How, if at all, do you see eros emerge or play a role in your work?
- If you had it your way, would you want it to play more or less of a role in your work? Why?
- In what ways, if any, do you believe death and eros are connected?

Invitation 2: Reflective journaling: The politics and freedom of "enough"

Within a consumer culture, the erotic risks being misunderstood as hedonic excess. Below is a quote from adrienne maree brown, who uses pleasure as a critical resource. Consider what she has to say about satiation, satisfaction, and limits:

> *"A central aspect of pleasure activism is tapping into the natural abundance that exists within and between us, and between our species and this planet. Pleasure is not one of the spoils of capitalism. It is what our bodies, our human systems, are structured for; it is the aliveness and awakening, the gratitude and humility, the joy and celebration of being miraculous. So rather than encouraging moderation over and over, I want to ask you to relinquish your own longing for excess and to stay*

> *mindful of your relationship to enough. How much sex would be enough? How high would be high enough? How much love would feel like enough? Can you imagine being healed enough? Happy enough? Connected enough? Having enough space in your life to actually live it? Can you imagine being free enough? Do you understand that you, as you are, who you are, is enough?"*

Take some time and consider her questions. In the academic world, it can often feel like we are never doing enough (e.g., we should be publishing more, securing more grants, supervising more students, having a wider impact, sitting on more committees, etc.). In thinking about the relationship between eros and finitude, what is your relationship to "enough" ?

- What does "enough" or satiation feel like in your body? What is present? What is absent?
- What thoughts and/or emotions accompany the experience of satiation for you?
- What external cues, if any, feed into your experience of satiation?
- If "enough" were a finish line, what are the factors that make it harder for you to get there? What are the factors that help you get there?
- In which relationships, interactions, or roles in your life do you experience the most satiation? What, if anything, does this tell you about your experience of "enough"?
- In which relationships, interactions, or roles in your life do you experience the most hunger or longing? What, if anything, does this tell you about your experience of "enough"?
- What tends to be the lifespan of your satiation? How long does your experience of "enough" tend to last when it happens? Does its lifespan change based on context?
- What would "enough" in your work look like, feel like, sound like for you? What scenarios do you imagine would bring you a feeling of satiation? How might you know when you've arrived at "enough"?
- What would have to shift, within and/or outside of yourself, for settling for enough to feel like an act of freedom?

4. Connection

ENTRY POINTS

The Mortal Method works to connect us. Death and dying put the matter at the far end of life - way over there - so we can deal with it later, or not at all. Mortality requires meeting death in the here and now. In the process, as we have been experiencing, we are connecting to aspects of ourselves and our worlds that have been pushed aside. Connecting or reconnecting to our hearts, to our bodies, to our erotic energies, to time, land, and to others. Sometimes these connections involve experiencing life in new ways, as we may distinguish between clock time and deep time or as we may begin to experience pleasure as a guide rather than a sin.

The work of reconnection may be political. Dominant systems, such as capitalism, White supremacy, and reductionist epistemologies work by fragmenting and extracting. For instance, in the corporate academic context, disconnecting our bodies and lives from our research is a fundamental tool of labour extraction. It is also a fundamental presumption in the myth of objectivity: that knowledge is independent from its conditions of production. In this context, reconnection may be an act of resistance. "My body and my life are part of my research," writes Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. "I use this knowledge to critique and analyze. I will not separate this from my engagement with academic literature, because in my life these things are not compartmentalized." How does connecting our bodies and lives to our academic scholarship transform? What does it open up? What might it shut down?

Similarly, in studying trauma, noted Canadian physician Gabor Maté (2022) observes that trauma is a form of disconnection from our Selves. When remaining connected to our authentic selves becomes too dangerous or too painful, we sever/split/dissociate. We silence aspects of ourselves for safety and inclusion. We lose connections to ourselves and cannot be authentic. This process may manifest itself in severe forms of trauma or in comparatively minor, but nonetheless consequential, ways, such as ignoring our gut feelings. Has that happened to you? When was the last time you ignored some deep knowing or said "yes" when you knew the truth was "no?"

Connection is also found at the heart of health and healing. It is paradoxical that engaging with our mortality can help make us whole. But it does so by bringing us into contact with aspects of life that have been cut off. Consider the internal connections needed to distinguish between subtle sensations, to tell the difference between "this feels good right now" and "this is good for me." Connection helps us heal and stay healthy, learning to listen to our bodies, before they force us to listen through the language of disease. Capacities such as these can be nurtured by engaging with ourselves outside of a context of fear, a context that is accepting of our mortality and open to connecting to our fleshy being.

There are many ways of connecting, however. We live in worlds that privilege ownership

(over land, ideas, people, and more). But this relation does not work so well under conditions of finitude and change. How else might we connect? Connections may be of the more reciprocal variety, in which that which we are relating to - such as our bodies or colleagues - have agency and can teach us. We may also connect in ways that move us beyond ourselves, wherein we transcend our individual, supposedly autonomous selves. We do this when we connect with something larger than ourselves, which could be the natural world, collective action, or something more esoteric, divine even. Writing about the Nishnaabeg relation to nature, for instance, Simpson (2017) observes: "Indigenous bodies don't relate to land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to land through connection - generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship."

The Mortal Method uses our awareness of death to connect us with life, and to the fullness of the experience of being alive. It invites us to explore the types of connections and relationships we may generate, alongside the pleasures and pains, the gains and losses, and the comings and goings that come with them all.

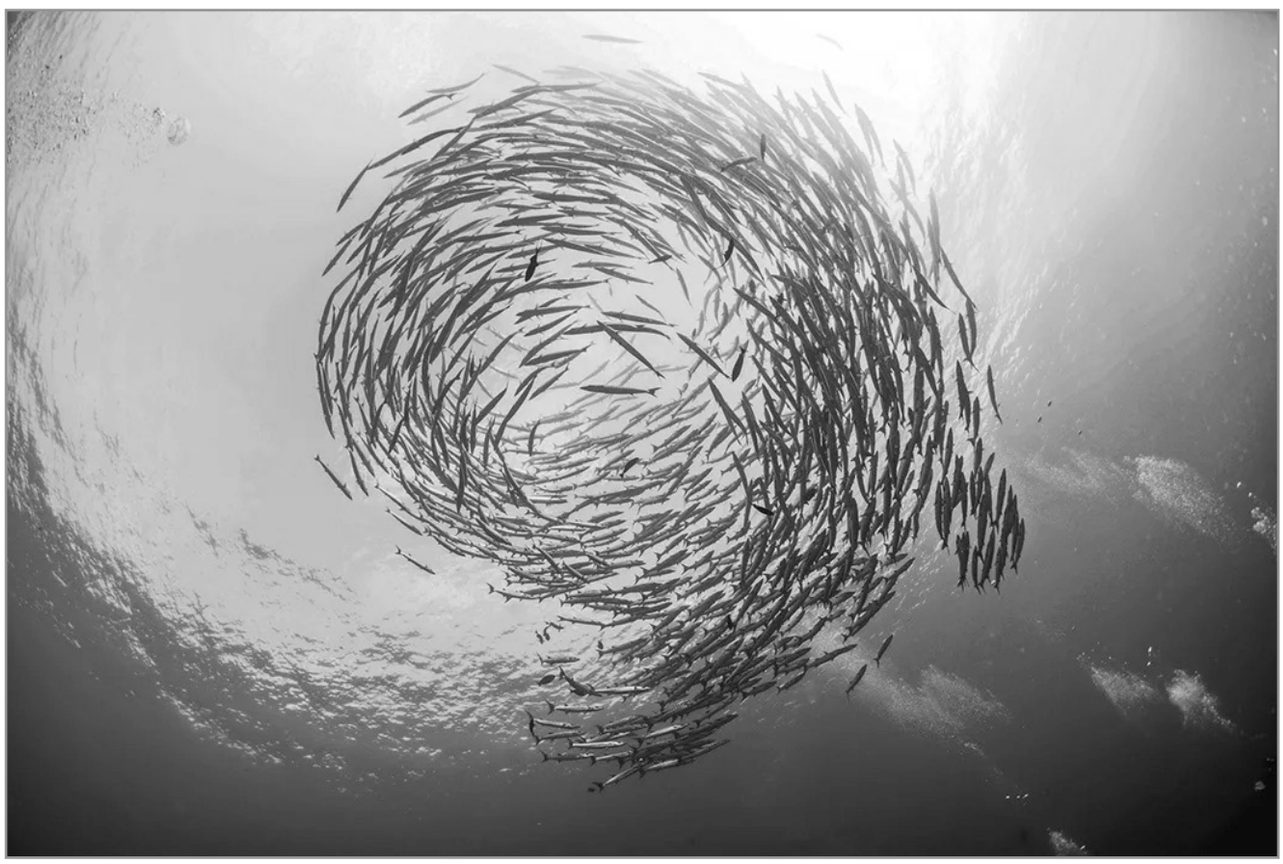
SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

> *"My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer."*
>
> **- Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass***

> *"Visiting within Nishnaabeg intelligence means sharing oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being. Visiting is lateral sharing in the absence of coercion and hierarchy and in the presence of compassion. Visiting is fun and enjoyable and nurturing of intimate connections and relationship building. Visiting is the core of our political system (leaders visiting with all the members of the community), our mobilization (Tkamse and Pontiac visited within and outside of their own nations for several years before they expected mobilization), and our intelligence (people visiting elders, sharing food, taking care)."*
>
> **- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done***

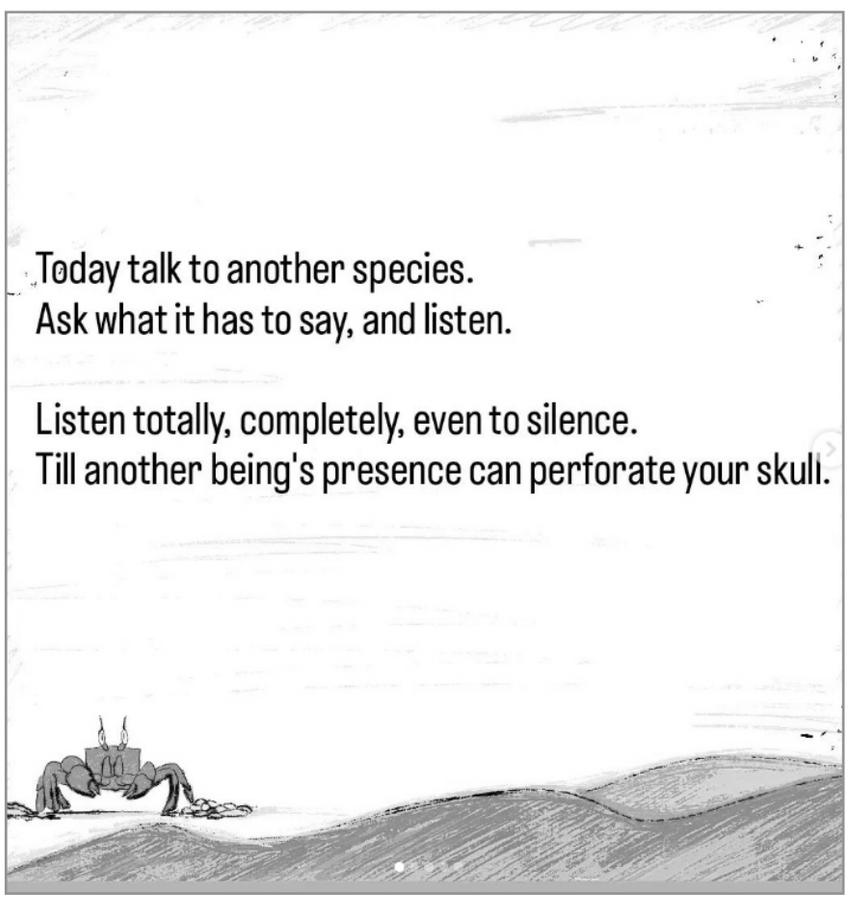
> *"The teeming hordes of living things on Earth, not only in space but in time, are actually all one massive, single organism just as certainly as each one of us (in our own minds) seems to be a distinct human being throughout our limited lifetime… We are not merely separate, lonely, disconnected beings searching for meaning; moment by moment we are unique emergent expressions of the universe itself ."*
>
> **- Neil Theise, *Notes on Complexity***

Against Forgetting Fine Art Print



7 Characteristics of complex systems

Murmuration of the starlings in a sunset by Menno Schaefer



Source: *Instagram @a_naturalists_column*

AUTHORS' REFLECTION UPON CONNECTION

Julia:

One of the many paradoxes of mortality is the fact that we experience the world through our individual bodies and yet we are profoundly interconnected with the world around us. With other human beings, with animals, with plants and ecosystems, with land, weather systems, and with the planet itself. Mortality calls us to be aware of these connections. Finitude reminds us of our legacy – our connection to the past, to our ancestors. Many people become interested in ancestry and genealogy in later life. So many of us have curiosities, urges, or longings, about our roots, wanting to understand our connection to the past. Similarly, mortality prompts a reflection upon legacy – what will we leave behind? What of us will live on? Children? Work? Feelings we sparked in others? Stories? Things that we may never know? Though our family trees or kinship venn diagrams look distinct from one another, we have a shared origin story: we all came from another human's body and we all come from this earth. We have been and continue to be reliant on other living things to sustain us. But this is at odds with some of the messaging we receive in the dominant, Western, capitalist culture. We live in a society that celebrates individualism, autonomy, independence. We don't want to be a burden, needy, or too reliant on others. We are encouraged to think about our own wants and needs, rather than those of our communities, our collectives, our planet. This informs our priorities and the choices we make while we're alive, but it also informs our feelings about death and dying.

In many cases, it isn't until there is a breakdown or threat that we experience clarity about the significance of connection. We don't realize how important our social connections are until a global pandemic forces us to remain in our homes. We don't realize how much we need others until we become sick and are unable to independently complete the activities of daily living. We don't realize the preciousness of our natural environment until it is under the threat of unsustainability and climate disaster. The fields of psychology and health have recently paid increasing attention to the harmful impacts of loneliness and isolation; to the value of therapeutic landscapes and time spent outdoors; to the fact that connection too is a vital life force. People often say that they fear dying alone. But for many of us, the period of active dying is relatively short. It's likely that we are instead fearful of living alone, without witnesses to document that we were here and that we mattered. Without others with whom we can celebrate our successes and weather our hardships. *"The terror of sickness and old age is not merely the terror of the losses one is forced to endure but also the* ***terror of the isolation****."* (Gawande, 2014). Weller talks about the fact that grief has never been private; it is communal. We require mentorship and guidance from our elders, from those with wisdom and experience, to shepherd us through life's transitions. We need them to pass along the knowledge that they have acquired over a lifelong apprenticeship with loss, sorrow, joy, and finitude. And we have a responsibility to those who come after us. To steward a healthy and sustainable planet, to create more just and humane systems, to live in better relation with one another. Seeing ourselves as part of something greater does away with some of the horror of mortality. It

reminds us that even though our personal stories end, life endures. Our bodies will break down and decay, but in so doing they will return to the earth, providing many living things with nourishment and sustenance.

Mathura:

Connection is a bond. Bonds that we inherit, bonds that we choose. Bonds that feel like obligations, bonds that feel like gifts. The ties that liberate, and the ties that oppress. Sometimes both at once. Connection can be messy like that. To connect is to extend, whether outside of oneself or into oneself. To reach an arm, or an ear, or an intention to see, hear, touch, and/or value something outside of oneself. Connection includes the kairos, the spark that accompanies the initial 'I choose you', and the kronos, the steadiness built over time as I keep choosing you, day after day.

Connection cofers protection, for better or for worse. When we extend to others, we see them as extensions of ourselves. Our kin. They become our own. And we protect our own. When we experience land as kin, we defend it. LandBack is not an act of service, it's an act of survival. Connection suspends the distance between us and them, between us and all that is living around us.

In some ways, connection – with others, animals, plants, the world around us, that which is bigger than us – springs from a desire to know and understand ourselves more fully. In choosing who / what to connect with, we choose our mirrors. In the words of Valarie Kaur, *"You are a part of me that I don't yet know."* You are one of my teachers and our connection is an apprenticeship through which I am made more and made whole.

As mortal beings, connection is a need, rather than a nice-to-have. We fear dying alone. We crave witnesses in our finite time, proof that we mattered, proof that we were worthy of love, care, respect, and belonging. I was here, and someone knows that. We live on after death in the connections we make while alive. We live on after death in the stories that these connections tell about us, and in the soil we return to as compost for the beings that live on.

While we're alive, we live in fear of the breakdown of our bodies in part because we live in an ableist system that casts us aside if we can't keep up. And yet, it is in these moments of breakdown that we become most intimate with the reality of our interdependence. Disabled communities have literally and figuratively written the book on care work. This reality of interdependence runs counter to our cultural narratives around individuality, narratives that tell us that we can and should go it alone. We fear reliance, because in an individualistic culture, reliance signals weakness. What if reliance could feel good? What if reliance was reciprocal, mutual, and alternating back and forth, rather than one-way or extractive?

We live in a world where connection signals that we mattered, and independence signals that we've made it. Would you rather matter or make it? Would it be worth making it, if it meant you didn't matter? Would it be worth it to matter, if you didn't make it? And

what if, stay with me here, mattering *was* making it? What if the marker of a worthwhile life lay in the strength of the connections made while living? Would it be a bond worth investing in?

Albert:

Mortality calls us to attend connection like little else. Get sick and suddenly you are an embodied being, aware of a wide range of connections from a context of work that either supports or endangers you, aware of relationships that you hope you may turn to for care, aware of your being born of the earth and the silent fact that you may be called home at any time and even a little too soon.

Our independence has been celebrated as a goal, but it is often merely an illusion enabled by smooth relationships. Relationships that enable our authorship and the forgetting of the state and fact of our dependence. We built our homes on the false dichotomies of mind and body, of self and society, of nature and culture, of knower and known. We embody them in our professions like counsellor and physician and our health care buildings, with their cardiac wings and hepatology clinics. Attending mortality can collapse these divides.

Attending mortality can heal us, if in healing we hear the bringing together of parts disconnected, if we remember healing's etymological connection to making whole. Indeed, if we do not get caught up in the pink, yellow, lavender, and even fuckin periwinkle ribbons (for stomach cancer) we might find solidarity in and through our mortality, attending to the aspects of life we share and how that sharing is essential for making them bearable. Maybe then care might be centered as a yardstick for civilization rather than GDP.

Connection also enlivens us. We require another to listen to our stories for us to feel we matter, we require others to hold a space for our grief, to process that sadness. Rituals, whatever they might mean, are communities coming together. Holding light and casting shadows together. Mourning rituals are often that stitching together of a community after it has been torn asunder by the cold hand of death. COVID has taught us how much we need one another just as it has taught us how much we need our space.

Connection is contradiction too. It is a tradition that binds, a husband that beats, and a school that dulls. It is why there is a need for a poke in the eye.

Connection explodes out in many directions. There is connection to the past, revisiting old haunts, songs, memories, friendships as we pull together the story of our life. There is the learning from past generations, the wisdoms and practices that enable us to bear what might be thrust upon us by our embodied, connected being. There is the connection to our society, a stake in the world that is being built, and our connection to future generations, through teaching, holding, mothering, fathering, parenting, educating.

There is also connection to the divine, to breath, spirit, transcending ourselves, expanding outward, and in the process dissolving our egoic physical container and becoming one with nature or life or the source.

There is also connection in the here and now. To the words on this page. To the sound of my voice. To the little things, if we pay attention. If we learn to appreciate in the true meaning of the word, that is understanding fully. Learning to pay attention to the ordinary, appreciate the ordinary, and now let's add a valence, valuing the ordinary, its remarkable beauty, holding it with love, even loving the gut churning grief that comes with heartbreak because it reminds us that our beating heart is still alive. Connection might even call forth an ethical orientation, not one of mastery, not one of getting and spending, not one of accumulation or improvement, not one of more, better, faster, but an ethical orientation that respects the limitation of our connection. It is an ethic of presence or even depth, of doing more with less, of learning to live well within limits. Because our connections are our possibilities and our limitations, mortality reminds us of that. It re-members us…

INVITATION TO ENGAGE

Invitation 1: Reflective conversation on connection

Reach out to someone with whom you'd be comfortable reflecting upon the quality of connection. Invite them to have a conversation and discuss these prompts with you. You can also choose to do this as a solo journaling practice, if you would prefer.

- Think about the places and spaces in which you spend most of your time. Where do you experience a meaningful sense of connection...
    - With other people (friends, family, partner[s], colleagues, neighbours)?
    - With the land and the natural world?
    - With non-human living beings?
    - With yourself?
    - With something greater than yourself?
- How much of this connection is emergent or naturally occurring? Where is there intention and effort to cultivate and sustain connection?
- How do you honour these connections?
- Where do you feel disconnected or a longing for connection?
- What barriers to connection do you experience or can you name?
- How might you move through or redesign these spaces differently in order to foster a greater sense of connection?

Invitation 2: Listening for wisdom in the outdoors

Pick a problem (no matter how big or small) that you would like to spend more time with, and take it for a walk outdoors. As you move through the natural world, instead of listening for the answers within your own mind, listen to the life around you - the trees, the earth, the sun, the rain, the wind, the furry creatures. How might you engage in *"deep oceanic listening"* as author Alexis Pauline Gumbs would say, with *"a profound generosity and wholeness to the way you listen"?*

Notice what emerges in response. In this moment, noticing is enough. In this moment, noticing is the work. Also, notice any curiosity and/or resistance that may emerge in response to this instruction, particularly the one to de-center human wisdom and tap into the wisdom of other life forms. At the end of your walk, set a timer for 10 minutes and free-write. Note down any thoughts / reflections / insights that emerged for you in the process of engaging in this exercise. Feel free to take more time if needed.

5. Meaning-making

ENTRY POINTS

In her keynote address for the 2013 Preventing Overdiagnosis Conference, published in the *British Medical Journal*, Ilona Heath remarks that we, or much of our culture at least, have colluded with modern medicine in the pursuit of "technical solutions to the existential problems posed by the finitude of life and the inevitability of ageing, loss, and death." There is much truth to her provocative remarks. Death is typically engaged with in a technical fashion. This can happen indirectly, through risk factors and diseases that have the reassuring potential to be managed or at least known and avoided. When engaged directly, death is often treated as a bureaucratic matter to be papered over with living wills and questions of policy and inheritance.

The Mortal Method hopes to disrupt this technical tendency. It invites us to think about death and finitude outside of the usual narratives of prevention and pathology. It looks not just to science but to the humanities, not just to "experts" but to our own experience, not just to new research but to ancient wisdoms, all of this with the aim of resuscitating death and rediscovering all that it might mean for us mortal beings.

There is no pretense to mastery either. This is an amateur process - a process of exploration and love - hence "amar ", the etymology of amateur, which is Latin for "lover". Nor is there a necessary end point when the meaning is settled. As we noted in the introduction, the Mortal Method is conceived of as an opening. Just as the authors of this document individually read, mused, journaled and then came together to share and learn from one another, we hope to inspire you to do the same. Despite all our musing, there is no settled endpoint. We are not done either! But, through the process, we have become more attuned to the significance of meaning-making as a strategy for living as mortals.

Indeed, paying attention to our mortality quickly moves into paying attention to what matters. What does matter? And why? Once that is clarified, and not always easily or with finality, what to do about the meanings that exist in tension? Family, love, and work matter but do not always sit together well. The clarification of meaning is but a first step in living meaningfully.

Meaning is not just for the meaningless or a balm for the depressed. Meaning also matters when we are happy. As Estragon wondered while Waiting for Godot (1954), "What do we do now, now that we are happy?" Indeed, moments of satiation and ease can be disconcerting for those so used to striving, struggle has become a baseline. How to find meaning here? How to be satisfied and have enough?

And what will our language of meaning-making be? Even the metaphor of 'language' is problematic, because not all meaning is captured in prose or even words. Drawings, sound, movement all signify. Though some forms of meaning-making have signified more powerfully, and are taken more seriously. And some forms of meaning-making have been banished or even punished. This process of meaning-making may involve recuperating

discarded forms or relearning forgotten ways. Consider the jingle dresses belonging to the Ojibwe community, which were, for a time, banned. Now, daughters are relearning the tradition, giddily bouncing, dresses singing in time, moving healing music into the world anew.

What meaning moves your heart?

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

> *"I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic "the self-transcendence of human existence." It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself - be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself - by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love - the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called 'self-actualization' is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence."*
>
> **- Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning***

> *"Meaning, then, is derived not through content or data or even theory in a Western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of difference. Individuals carry the responsibility for generating meaning within their own lives; they carry the responsibility for engaging their minds, bodies, and spirits in a practice of generating meaning. Within Nishnaabewin, I am responsible for my thoughts and ideas. I am responsible for my own interpretations, and thus you'll always hear from the elders what appears to be qualifying their teachings with statements that position them as learners, position their ideas as their own understandings, and place their teachings within the context of their own lived experience. This is deliberate, ethical, and profoundly careful within Nishnaabewin because to do otherwise is considered arrogant and intrusive with the potential to interfere with other beings' life pathways."*
>
> **- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson**

> *"Narrative care allows us to move past fixed stories and experiences. By engaging in narrative care, we hold all stories open to inquiry and possible retellings and relivings, not because we want to forefront pain or regret or a sense of loss, but because we can gain new insights and understand people in new ways. In many ways, we look backwards and forwards to continue to learn. Narrative care is about this opening to learning, to surprise, to ways in which we can retell and relive our lives in ways that allow us to become otherwise"*
>
> **- Blix et al, 2021.**

AUTHORS' REFLECTION UPON MEANING-MAKING

Julia:

We're here; so what? Most of us hope that our limited time spent on earth will have meant something. Will have mattered. We crave both a record of our existence (an "I was here" sprayed painted on the wall of an underpass") and a sense of purpose (a feeling of "this is why I'm here"). We are bits of matter traipsing around on a giant rock hurtling through space. What's the point of all of this? Why are we here? We ask these questions of science, philosophy, religion, psychedelics, of our friends and teachers.

When the question of *why* we're here feels too big or impossibly unanswerable, we often turn to the what/or how of how we've lived. We're here, now what? How can we spend our finite time well? How do we express what it is like to be alive? To process our experiences of joy, pleasure, sorrow, uncertainty, heartache, and more? We often turn to the arts as a way to express what it is like to be alive in this world. We make music, poetry, literature, films, paintings, sculptures, little cross stitch projects, and more.

We share emotion and evoke affect. We want to feel something. We want others to feel it too, to

share in this absurd and beautiful journey with us and reflect back what it is like from their vantage points. Some of us turn to career or vocation for a sense of meaning and purpose, to do work that feels of service, worthwhile, stimulating, fulfilling. Many of us devote our time to the care of other living beings. This is work that challenges us, nourishes us, and connects us. We build things. We imagine things. We even create some of those things that we've imagined.

Another way that we make meaning is through telling the stories of our lives. We document the significant (and seemingly insignificant) experiences of each embodied being's time on earth. We do this through announcements of birth weight. Report cards. Diaries. Initials carved into a tree or park bench. Instagram stories and fleeting snaps. Medical charts. Love letters. Postcards. Diplomas. Memoirs. Obituaries. As well as countless other records, recordings, and retellings.

We also foster meaning through practice. Meaning-making is both deeply personal and profoundly relational. It points to the fact that yes, we may be all walking each other home, but we are each on our own path. As living beings, we engage in shared and private rituals that ground us in our bodies and our communities. Rituals of the secular and the spiritual. We engage in the analytical examination of life that Socrates said makes life worth living, as well as forms of meaning-making that are more embodied or artistic. All of these forms of meaning-making help us move through the world. To be in and of the world.

This is it. Here we are.

Mathura:

We make meaning in order to survive. One of the earliest and lasting griefs we encounter is the one where we realize and re-realize that the other is not like us. Our fieriest arguments are the ones in which we can't understand the other's perspective. Make it make sense, we say. When an iPhone user is handed an Android, any initial curiosity is often quickly followed by frustration. When things don't make sense, our bodies register the resulting dissonance as a threat to safety, belonging, and ultimately survival. In this sense, we truly do make meaning to survive.

We may share all kinds of identities and lived experiences, and even then, another's experience is fundamentally different by way of their existing in a different and separate body. A body that experiences and processes beauty, pain, trust, betrayal, love, grief, and eros in distinct ways. Meaning-making is the journey of understanding how our own operating system works, doing the work of conveying that to the other, and creating space for them to do the same.

Meaning-making is complicated by the fact that there's no one meaning of life, a truth that we discover to culminate this voyage. Rather, it's the force that propels us to live a meaningful life. Meaning-making is finding the signals in the noise, about connecting the dots of a story that is often still unfolding. In this sense, meaning-making can feel like time-

travel. Reaching into our past to excavate memories that are re-membered differently as our embodiment shifts, and listening for whispers from the future that push us to imagine possibilities, lay the breadcrumb trail toward a life that honours the longings that still persist. It is not a one-and-done, an outcome to be arrived at. Rather, it's a practice, a cycle to be engaged with, stories to be revisited as new perspectives, new information, and new contexts emerge and demand integration. Like our smart phones, we too have system updates that need to be tended to from time to time.

In the pursuit of meaning-making, many of us turn to the arts and the humanities. Here's another place where art and science diverge. While science helps us arrive at a single truth, controlling the conditions around it in order to arrive at indisputable fact, the arts offer a blank page, with the invitation to fill as much or as little of it as we please. While science is contingent on objectivity and replicability, the arts are built on subjectivity - beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and experience is in the body of the beholder. The arts are less about proving our experience, and more about understanding and sharing it. The impulse to make meaning finds inspiration, guidance, and comradery in the arts.

And, of course, as can be the fate of all of our innate impulses, meaning-making as a ritual has also been co-opted by oppressive systems. Worship of the written word as a characteristic of white supremacy culture means that some forms of sense-making and documentation are held up as superior to others. Quantity over quality means that we prioritize stats over story, not realizing that the two are not mutually exclusive, rather they are each made more in complement to the other. Within the traditions of the academy, we tend to limit meaning-making to "analysis", "coding", "theme-ing". There is no room for spirit, no room for the wisdom and expression of the body, no room for poetry, for movement, for song and ceremony.

Ironically, this pursuit of meaning, this pursuit of purpose, this pursuit of mattering, often concludes with the realization that what we are searching for is something we already have, something we already are. We are love. We are worthy. We are belonging. We are matter. And we matter, simply by way of being here. It's not, "We're here, so what?", it's "So what? We're here." The key difference is that by the end of this journey of meaning-making, this knowledge – that we already are what we are searching for - is embodied within our cells and sinews, rather than simply known in our minds. Meaning-making is an all-hands-on-deck operation after all, calling on the mind, body, heart, and spirit to join forces as one being in this pursuit.

At the end of the day, we know how to make meaning. It is yet another birthright we are re-membering. Meaning-making is a homecoming, a coming home to ourselves.

Albert:

The beauty of mortality is that it calls us to pay attention to meaning. It might be a frantic search to desperately shore up a life unmoored by loss. Or it might be a longer inquiry, an ongoing examination of one's life, drawing on traditions and resources left by others

for our use, like pebbles on the beach, that help us tell our story. Or it might involve a rejection of the straitjacket of false prophets who have used scripture like twine to bind our hands and blind our eyes. A mortal blackmail of sorts, using our fear for their profit.

For so long I remembered feeling depressed that life was meaningless. I looked for meaning through a number of openings, peering here and there, only to find that none felt sufficient or true enough to sustain a life. I remember being scared I would not find an answer. Until that emptiness started to transform, from bleak and meaninglessness, to just empty, silent. A space for me to create in, to discover my own path, affirmed by Frankl's guidance, that I had held the question backwards. It was not for me to ask Life what its meaning was. Life was asking me. My actions, choices, decisions, were the answer. My answer. Time to start responding.

There are so many resources to help us along the way. True these resources need to be held and shared. These resources need to be updated. And they need to be engaged with to see how they fit and sit with us. Some times they fit only for a time. Some times they become long standing rituals and practices that carve canyons in our lives.

My search for meaning has taken me home to India. It has taught me to meditate, to recognise the fullness and contentment of awareness – as sufficient and unwavering in a changing world. It also took me to the university, though how I exist there has changed so much. I can't help but smile at my naively held beliefs, so seemingly thin in the full light of life. I smile at the faith I placed in science to show me the way. The arrogance of those positivists and empiricists whose convictions were fueled by fear. A most dangerous breed.

Now I get to be the teacher. Hopefully not so arrogant, but learned, humble, open and curious. I smile as I consider how I almost designed my aging and health course. I considered looking at what happens to the arteries as we age. Using the textbook that walks students through the biological changes of each system. Then talk about the health care system. That's what was generally done in such courses. I could talk biology. I could share research. I could bombard their young minds with statistics and correlations. None of this would be bad or wrong. If any one of my students aspired to be a biochemist it might actually be useful. But for me….now…it feels dishonest. It occurs to me as a modern dance that avoids mortality, uncertainty, and the heart.

Instead, I threw the textbook out. And I promised myself I'd start with death. So I now sit here with new and deepening friendships, writing in the unexpected Tofino sun, my skin warm, and heart full after days of conversation that broached love, pain, heart break, and uncertain futures, over delicious meals, sharing quiet smiles, and power outages. And the sharing of texts, songs, quotes that spoke to us, a line from this or that author that communicated a truth, highlighted a point, opened a door, sparked a conversation, that seemed true and important – not in that statistical sense of generalizations for everyone or even a delimited set of Filipino males of middle income status between the ages of 25 and 32 – but true in a sense of useful, like a hammer and nail have certain truth to them

when you are building your home.

And so we write and ponder and share and laugh as we try to produce some lines, and concepts, that might also open something up for you, that you might find useful, as you engage with your own mortality, and carve out your own life and work and work and life, even if in increments that are progressively less betraying and progressively more enlivening.

INVITATION TO ENGAGE

Invitation 1: Reflective journaling: Making meaning of endings

Think about an ending that you've experienced - the end of a relationship, a job, a life chapter, etc. How did you mark, celebrate, or mourn this ending? What is the story that you tell of this ending? [How] has this story changed over time or with re-telling?

Invitation 2: Harvesting

Below is a reflection written and shared by Mathura on January 14, 2024, to mark Thai Pongal, a harvest festival celebrated by the Tamil community. Upon reading this reflection, we invite you to reflect and journal on the question: What is your harvesting practice?

> *"What is your harvesting practice?*
>
> *To harvest means to gather. How do you gather what you know?*
>
> *Do you write? Do you make art? Do you process it out loud through conversation with others? Do you teach? Do you cry? Do you scream? Do you meditate? Do you metabolize it through moving your body? Do you read / watch / listen to it over and over again? Do you commune with the land?*
>
> *How does what you see / hear / witness become what you know? How does it become embodied? What is the process by which your body turns information into knowledge into action? This isn't and doesn't have to be the same for all of us, but we do need to know what it is for each of us.*
>
> *We are entering a different stage of this movement and we must find ways to harvest, integrate, and act upon what is becoming clear to us, if we are to sustain, endure, and reap the full bounty of our efforts to bear witness.*
>
> *On this day of honouring the sun and the bountiful harvest it affords, I'm sitting with this reflection:*
>
> *The sun can shine forever, just as we can take in information indefinitely, but if we aren't equipped with the capacity to capture and photosynthesize that energy into nourishment for our sustenance - nourishment to grow from seed to sprout to tree - we remain unchanged in a moment where the status quo is deadly."*

SECTION 3

Application and Praxis

How do we integrate these qualities of mortality into our work?

Our hope is that having read the previous section and engaged with the invitations, you have deepened your understanding of and relationship with the qualities of mortality.

The application of the Mortal Method is an ongoing process. It is not a one-time engagement or realization. Its significance unfolds over time as insights emerge and contexts shift. It is also deeply embodied work. For instance, what work means to us and our ways of working may have been learned long ago, even in childhood. For some, like Albert, studying and working may have been safe spaces. So when the longed-for free time away from work is finally created, that proves uncomfortable! There are also differing external pressures and demands (teaching, emails, service, evaluation metrics, promotion criteria, etc.). There are also differing career stages. Contract faculty have different experiences and pressures than faculty who are close to retirement. But it is not all constraint in the former and freedom in the latter. We bring our own chains with us. We also fail to see opportunities that are in front of us. Indeed, we aren't always in touch with what we need. We may not have the time or mentorship to sort that out. This method uses mortality as a guide, to disrupt ways of being and seeing, and to create spaces and communities to try something different. Then to evaluate and assess, and perhaps try again. When we find something that works better, instituting that as a habit we can rely on is also a process.

Why an 'apprenticeship' with mortality?

This is not just reading about mortality; it is also learning by doing. It is applied learning. It is "on-the-job" training, meaning in this context we are integrating this wisdom into our lives (both personal and work life) as we live them. It requires ongoing practice - both because practice enables us to hone our skills and form habits, but also because without ongoing efforts, it is easy to slip back into "default" ways of being and working. In this apprenticeship, mortality is our guide. The cliché is that if we are told we are going to die soon, we might live differently; we would be selective about how we spend our limited time (finitude), we may spend more time with people we love or be sure to tell them how we feel (connection), we might enjoy a delicious last meal or have more sex (eros, embodiment), we might prioritize comfort or authenticity (embodiment), and we may

reflect upon our legacy and the story of the life we lived or enjoy art or ritual (meaning making). Apprenticeship takes this from a momentary awareness into a practice, accompanied by skill-building.

We have been inspired by Francis Weller's (2015) call for us to cultivate an apprenticeship with sorrow. Change and loss are inevitable parts of the human experience. There is value in reframing sorrow from something we want to avoid into something that can guide us to live well. Engaging with sorrow, and learning to feel these things more fully, enables us to fortify our interiors and build resilience and endurance for challenging times. The apprenticeship enables us to do the work of "becoming elders" and becoming resources for our communities, recognizing that wisdom is not something that comes automatically with age or with time in the academy. An apprenticeship with *mortality* builds on this thinking.

Similarly, Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1992) highlights the importance of apprenticing with loss, "In each thing there is an insinuation of death. Silence, stillness, serenity are all apprenticeships." Silence, stillness, serenity are not things we typically associate with academic work. In many ways, busy-ness can shield us from our fears, anxieties, and existential concerns. It can distract or anesthetize us from that which we would be more comfortable avoiding (or just do not have time to consider). In which ways do we actually come to rely on the adrenaline or charge that comes with panicked deadlines, conveyor belt meetings, or packed calendars?

Lastly, apprenticeships are not a solitary endeavour. Although we see mortality as our guide in the Mortal Method, there is also value in having other apprentices with whom to share this work. We are not referring to people with whom we can vent about work or engage in typical career mentorship. We are suggesting cultivating 'work' relationships in which there is space to be authentic, vulnerable, exploratory, and playful. There is value in stepping outside of our department or program (in which there are complex webs of relationships, responsibilities, and power dynamics) and engaging with colleagues from other faculties, programs, or institutions. It may be easier to have these discussions with people who understand your context but have some distance from your more immediate work life. Having a peer in this work provides opportunity for shared reflection and meaning-making, but also creates conditions for accountability.

Insights from our apprenticeship with mortality

Much of our work with the Mortal Method involves figuring out how to apply the insights born of engaging with mortality to our daily lives. In this process we have learned some lessons that you may find useful. We share some below, and you will find others discussed more fully in the Mortal Method blog posts.

- While this is intentional work, it is sometimes sparked by an intuition or embodied sense of disquiet. As Rumi has said, "There is a voice inside that does not use words. Listen." The process can thus begin by paying attention to these feelings, listening,

and gently inquiring.

- Because deep listening is important to the process, we have also found it important to have a runway or warm up before apprenticing with mortality. This might be a short meditation, a walk, or stretching. Different moments call for different activities. This practice also recognises the value of transitions and the need for time to land between activities; to process what you have just come out of and make space for what you are going into.
- We have also found rituals useful. We do not mean ritual in a decorative sense, but in a transformative sense because it is intended to produce an effect. To start a meeting with the following question: "What do we need to get off our chests to be fully present here?" is an example of ritual that can be useful in creating space. We have used lighting incense or preparing hot beverages as rituals. Rituals can be powerful. Create some, and use them to support you for as long as they are supportive.
- We have found acknowledging limits to be an important part of our apprenticeship with mortality. We now see them more readily, and prepare for them more regularly. As a result, we are experiencing more ease. The trade-offs are rarely as costly as we may have feared. And often we are surprised with how much we have gained. Less is, indeed, often more.
- Openness is also a practice. The Mortal Method is not a productivity hack (though it may help there too). These hacks assume you know where you are going. We have sometimes found the guidance of mortality calling into question our presumed destination. It also helps to be open to emergence, and we have learned to trust the process.
- All the above means that this process has changed us and continues to do so. There are many areas of our lives and work that have been transformed and we have elaborated on them in the blog posts.

Application guide: how might you engage with the Mortal Method in your own work?

In this section, we offer prompts, questions, and invitations for you to reflect on how you might engage with the Mortal Method in your own work. The Mortal Method involves approaching our work from a place of care, connection, finitude, intention, and with opportunities for meaning-making built in. It means focusing on process as well as outcomes, and revisiting our beliefs about what constitutes "success" (e.g., if in a meeting your team accomplished your stated objective but it was hurried, ran long without checking in with attendees, some people did not have the opportunity to contribute, and there was not adequate time for discussion, was it in fact a success?). This is not a to-do list. You need not answer every question. Feel free to take what feels good and leave the rest. Be motivated by your inspiration rather than a desire for completion. You can return to it at any time.

1. Project planning for mortals

There are many ways to engage well with mortality in our work. We have especially found a need to engage with finitude, such as limited capacities and resources. This involves taking limitations into account from the start and planning around them. We have found that emotions come up when doing this, and this work may not always be comfortable. It is also paradoxical, in that respecting constraints can be enlivening. When you have fewer things to focus on, for instance, you can engage deeply and richly. You may find room for creativity and play when you are not racing to get through as many things. An example might be creating more modest agendas for meetings, so that there is greater clarity in purpose (narrowed scope of discussion), less sense of urgency to make it through the list (and thus greater presence), time for more fulsome and relational discussion of the agenda items, and, ideally, more effective decision-making. Ideally, planning with mortality in mind can make what we do more meaningful.

Invitation: Three possible project plans

This invitation is designed to have you [re]examine a research project plan and engage with finitude (of available time, energy, funds, and other resources). We hope to use finitude to surface what matters to you, uncover tacit or explicit feelings around productivity and performance, and create room for the predictable unpredictability of life.

- First, create a list of *ambitious* timelines and goals for your project. What are all of the outputs, outcomes, and milestones that you would love to accomplish? Dream big! Second, create a slightly more *realistic* list. Imagine that things will take more time than expected, that you'll have a 25% reduced budget, and that you'll be able to create fewer outputs than originally planned. What informs your choices to make this project more feasible/realistic? Third, pare that list down to a *bare minimum of*

acceptability (as determined by you). What are the absolute essentials that need to come out of this work?

Follow up questions:

- What are the elements of the project that really matter to you? What are the non-negotiables? What are the parts that you can more willingly omit?
- What fears or anxieties (if any) surfaced as you pared down the lists?
    - What might you need to let go of?
    - Who might you need to disappoint?
- Let's return to the concept of enoughness from Invitation 2 of the Eros section. What could enoughness look like to you in this work? How will you know when the work is done? When will you consider it ready to be shared with others?
- Is there built in "wiggle room", space for the unanticipated, or opportunity for something unplanned to emerge?
    - This can include space to pursue new and exciting opportunities that come out of the work (e.g., unplanned papers about an exciting idea, new connections, space to digest and explore unanticipated findings and to redesign elements if needed). This could also include space or contingency plans for life events to assert themselves and impact the work plan. For instance, an illness or death in the family, a pregnancy or parental leave, a divorce, someone quitting the project or moving away, and more.

Having this combination of the three plans may allow you to engage in planning as a form of dreaming, to be creative and ambitious, to put those ambitions in conversation with the realities of finitude, and to establish a floor (and knowing that, in some cases, even that established minimum may not be feasible).

2. Working with ourselves

Invitation: Being our own teachers

The past is often (though not always) prologue. With that in mind, consider your past work.

- When have you aptly worked within limits? What enabled you to do so?
- When have your assessments of capacity or limits been off? Why do you think you misjudged your capacity? What were the consequences of doing so?
- What sorts of patterns or tendencies of yours does this reflection reveal?

- Where is there room for you to learn and grow in terms of having realistic and compassionate expectations of yourself and others?

Invitation: Using your body to guide decision-making

This exercise uses your body to think. Consider different projects you might be involved with, or different tasks that you are responsible for. Write them out in a list (or on post-it notes stuck on the wall), naming them out loud as you do so. Listen to your body.

- What sensations do each of these commitments conjure in your body?
    - Is there a particular project or committee that makes you tense up or hold your breath? Is there a surge of excitement or a feeling of calm? Do you start to fidget?
- In which ways does your body affirm or challenge your decisions to engage in certain work?
- How often or how well do you listen to your body when making decisions about where to allocate your time and energy?
- What might you be willing and able to let go of if you listen to your body's cues?
- What possibilities might flourish if you lean into the body's yes-es?

Invitation: Tending to your body as part of your work

- Where and how does your body fit into your work day?
- Have you done or had done an ergonomic assessment of your work space? Do you use a sit-stand desk? A balance ball? A chair? A combination thereof?
- Do you make time to stretch, walk, or move around?
- Do you ensure that you eat meals or snacks when you're hungry?
- Are you someone who prefers to stand or pace during meetings? Can you do this?
- Do you stop working when your body is done or when the work is done?
    - What would happen if you lived by the former? What costs might come with the latter?
- How can you plan to do your work in ways that are more attentive to your unique embodiment?

3. Working with others

Invitation: Understanding people as bodies

Think about the people involved in your work (research participants, colleagues and

collaborators, students and trainees, community members, knowledge users, etc.). Now try thinking of them as bodies.

- How might you attend to their needs differently if you foreground their embodiment? To begin, are there considerations of the need for rest, hydration, nourishment, and bathroom breaks that need to be built in?
- Have you asked people about their needs (e.g. dietary considerations, times of day that they work best, accessibility requirements, etc.)?
- How might you prepare their diverse bodies for engagement in this work? What kind of care/preparation is required for the emotional, cognitive, and/or physical labour that is involved in your work? What could this preparation look like?
- What kinds of supports or contingencies/flexibility are in place to support these bodies when they assert their needs or experience challenges?
- What might these bodies require in the way of after-care, following the completion of this work?

Invitation: Undoing the myth of the solitary scholar

- In what ways is your work relational, even if you do most or some of it on your own?
- What commitments, boundaries, supports, etc. does this relationality require of you? What do you require from others? [How] are these commitments and needs communicated and supported?
- Which work can be done together (online or in-person) vs. independently? How is that decided and communicated? What are the mechanisms for accountability?
- How do you prefer to address or work through conflict?
- What does reciprocity look like in your work? How might you improve this aspect of your working relationships?
- Consider work with collaborators, trainees, participants, knowledge users, etc. Where is there risk for extractive relations? In which ways can you mitigate or eliminate this risk?

Invitation: Working with/in space(s)

In this activity, we invite you to consider situated cognition (the influence of place on our thinking) and distributed cognition (the effects of thinking with others) (Murphy Paul, 2021).

- Where do you do most of your work? Is it a space in which you enjoy spending time? If not, what can you do to improve this space?
- [How] is place significant for your work? Where is this work done? How do the

geography, the social context, and the cultural context impact it? How might the work be different if it were done elsewhere? In which ways does this matter?

- Do you create opportunities for yourself to think in connection to your environment (e.g., going for a walk with an idea)? If not, what possibilities might these practices open up for you?

4. Career lineage and legacy

Invitation: Acknowledging and honouring lineage

- What relevant personal history do you bring with you to your work? In which ways might these elements of your history inform your work?
- Who have been your academic influences (those whose work you cite, but also those who inspire you, who have mentored or supported you, etc.)? What might your academic family tree or your academic kinship Venn Diagram look like?
- How do you recognize, honour, or express gratitude for those who have come before you?
- Who has your discipline or tradition told you not to listen to? What do you make of this?

Invitation: Considering legacy

- What do you hope to leave behind when you come to the end of your current project(s)? How do you want your team, your field, your workplace, and the world to be impacted by your work?
- How do you make meaning of the work you're doing? Why are you doing it? What is the story you tell of your work? To yourself? To your colleagues? To an acquaintance at a social event?
- What formal or informal rituals do you include in your work, at all stages of the design process? What new ones might you consider? How might you formalize some of these? What significance might this have for others who are involved in the work?
- How do you mark the beginning and the end of a project or collaboration?
- What are the most important things you hope to pass on to students, trainees, and junior colleagues? Which of your mistakes do you hope that they avoid?
- What are some of the lasting lessons that you've learned from your students, trainees, and/or junior colleagues?
- How do you want your career to be remembered? What kinds of things would you hope to hear at your retirement party?

- If you do not already use the arts to disseminate research findings, what type(s) of artistic expression could help you tell the story of your work in a new and meaningful way?
- With whom do you typically share your findings? In what forms or formats?
- Which types of knowledge-sharing does your discipline value? Does this align with your values or interests? If not, how do you navigate this tension?

5. The work-life continuum

- Which aspects of your work enliven you?
- When do you feel most excited by/engaged in your work? At which stages of a project? Under what conditions? In which spaces?
- Consider the role of pleasure in your work. What do your enthusiastic YESes feel like?
- How can you help to make work more pleasurable for others (colleagues, trainees, participants)? How do you know if your collaborators are enjoying themselves?
- Where is there opportunity within your work to play/be creative?
- Are there aspects of your work that are painful or involve grief? If so, how do you attend to this pain – for yourself, for others?
- Where do you experience a sense of longing in your work life?
- Support structures: how do you process the thoughts and feelings that surface for you in your work life? Do you have friends or colleagues with whom you connect about these things? Do you see a counselor or therapist? Do you have other outlets or practices that help you to process these experiences?

Conclusion

The Mortal Method is a living process for the three of us who wrote this document. In reviewing it to bring it together for publication, we are no longer where we were when we began writing it. And so it should be. Therefore, rather than wrap things up, or summarize an ever-evolving process, we leave you with a few remarks.

First, we hope that engaging with this document has proven beneficial. We hope some of the elements have resonated for you, moved you, supported you, inspired you or even troubled you. Second, if you are interested in further learning and engagement, please check out the apprenticeship offered through the Mortal Method website and, of course, read the blog posts. Feel free to dive into the sources listed in our reference page as well.

And finally, we created the Mortal Method because we believed, like many others before us and beside us, that engaging with mortality could be a source of positive personal and social change. We had no idea what this would look like when we began. The creation of this document has been a joyful journey and only one example of how a relationship with mortality might be fostered. Feel free to share this with people who might be interested. Or feel free to invent your own process.

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