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As told to Annie Bielski, 2322 words.

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# On letting grief transform the creative process of your life

Death Doula Alua Arthur discusses living as a creative process, how meditating on our death can help us in our life, and why her work is informed by a broken heart.

**You speak and write about death as a natural occurrence that the body knows how to do. I've been thinking about resistance and procrastination and the word "deadline" with respect to creative output and the fact that you just wrote a book about your work as a death doula.**

I had this epiphany about the word deadline—it's a word we use so regularly. After a while I was like, wait a minute, dead line. You cannot do anything more after this point, you can't create anymore, there's no more time to tinker with it, that's just it. I think of it with our lives as well, the terminus point, which means that up until then, we can do all the tinkering we want to and need to, [thinking of] our lives also as art, right? Life is a creation. I'm in a creative process all the time, and my deadline is going to be my actual death. So I can tinker and tinker and tinker until I get it as perfected for me as possible until I reach that deadline.

When I noticed [that about] the word, it blew me away. I was like, I've been saying this for my entire English speaking life, and never paid attention to what it was saying. But within it holds its truth, "the end."

**I saved the epilogue of your book for my oil change this morning. As I waited, court TV played in one corner of the room, someone scratched a lotto ticket in the other, a woman came in with a flat and the mechanic said, "I hope your day gets better." The waiting scene was mundane but also sort of theatrical. And at the end of your book, while sitting there, I felt like crying and cheering, a testament to how let in I felt as a reader. What was the process of writing and getting to the end like for you?**

First of all, you paint such a wonderful scene and I hope that people are taking it in in the middle of life, life, life happening, you know? It's always stunning for me to hear that somebody got it, because I was just in some room by myself looking at something beautiful for a while, click, clack, clacking, pouring my heart out, and now people are reading it and they're like, "I got it." And I'm like, what? It's so cool.

[Writing the book] was really tricky because I don't consider myself a writer at all. I haven't done anything creative before, other than Instagram posts, but I've been writing in journals since I was 16, so I have that. I'm used to expressing myself through writing, but very privately for myself. So sitting down to write a book felt like a mountain to climb. Have you played Tetris on the internet? All those little blocks, when you make the wrong one, they just go so fast and you're like, "No." It was like that, but with the words, so they came out in a fury, which made it not seem like a mountain to climb. Then it became about moving things around, and making sure it felt like it made sense.

**Thinking about putting things out into the world, I know many of us struggle with conflating self-worth with productivity.**

I got hit by this really hard when I had the flu a couple years ago, and I was like, oh my god, there's all this time that I am wasting. All this time that I can't spend making things or doing things. I'm just recovering. I found myself getting up and trying to clean the house if it had gotten too dirty, or order some food. I even tried to walk to the grocery store. This is after three days of the flu—I had a mask on—but I walked maybe a block and a half, and I had to call Uber to take me back home. Girl, sit down. Sit down. Sit down. How resistant we are to the idea of rest and recovery and allowing ourselves a little bit of space and grace just to be and to divorce ourselves from producing as a testament to who we are in the world and our place in the world and our value.

I had a nice, juicy conversation with my niece who's now 14, the niece in the book. She's starting to think about ideas of success and what that means, and so much of it is based on what she does. She would be successful if she made this, if she did this, if she did that. It's also about people's perception of what she created in the world as opposed to the type of person that she is. I have 31 years on her, but I realized that for a long time, my definition of success also was based on what I was able to create and do as opposed to just the type of person I was or how I felt in my life as opposed to any external, something

that was tangible to market with. We live in a capitalistic society.

**Absolutely. You've said that meditating on the fact that you are going to die one day helps you in your decision-making in the day-to-day. I know some may feel "Oh my god, thinking about the fact that I'm going to die is the thing that makes me feel like I can't take a nap, take a break."**

When we think about it, not in the "Go, go, go, do, do, do" capitalistic way of productivity, but rather [in the way of] "Who am I being? What does it feel like to be in this body at this time?" it's much easier to honor our necessity for rest.

**Is there a typical day in your life?**

Not anymore. Right now, I'm doing a lot of interviews and trying to find somebody to help me hang up all this artwork. We have an end-of-life training retreat that's coming up, so a bunch of students are coming to Lake Arrowhead for six days where we'll dive in. But [generally] it's like you wake up in the morning, check to see what happened while you were sleeping, if clients are still alive or where somebody else is in the process, or I noticed often, too, that even my end-of-life consultation clients, the ones that have hired me just to help them complete their documents, they come to some big realizations about their lives, or the planning they want to share, so I check in on them, go visit somebody, talk to caregivers, eat some potato chips, eat some cake.

**In the book you wrote, "change is the god we must bow to," a nod to Octavia Butler. You seem to be someone who truly embraces change, in your line of work, certainly, but also how you've moved around so much in your formative years, your travel, your major career pivot from lawyer to death doula. What do you want to say about change?**

It's the imperative, right? We don't have a choice in it and we must adapt. I find that the only thing that makes the process of dying a teensy bit simpler is adaptability. How hard we can flex that muscle of being like, "This is what's happening now, this is where we are right now. How am I going to deal with what is in front of me as opposed to what I want it to be or what it used to be?"

During business, this comes up all the time. First of all, I am still so surprised that I'm running a business because I'm like, what the hell? I can't keep my socks straight, let alone taxes and job descriptions. That aside, throughout it, there's me that's also had a change to adapt to running a business, had to adapt to everything about this part. Doing it publicly, writing the book, doing interviews, it's really a shift.

Often when there is a change, there is some grief in it because something old is going and something new is coming. And sometimes we're holding onto the old and we don't want the new. Sometimes it requires us to grieve a little bit, or at least to acknowledge and to ritualize that a change has occurred. Yeah, I think that vow can be that ritual.

**That's beautiful. I also appreciate how you speak about the liminal space and how uncomfortable our western culture is with it, and what it means to sit with it in your work.**

I love the liminal. The not knowing, the patience with the process. Don't get me wrong, I get frustrated with it, too. I just moved into this house and I can't find a handy person to help me do some of this stuff, so all the artwork is still on the floor, and I'm like, "Oh my god." But also, there's a process. It's always a process. And if I can just be with where I am right now, between the old house and set up in the new house, there's pure potential there. Right now, nothing is on the walls, it could be anything.

**It could be anything. I love that. I recently moved too, and I feel that extra.**

Are there things on your walls?

**A couple of things, but for a long time there were no things because they were in a storage unit, a very liminal space.**

That's such a liminal space. Hey, is most the stuff on your walls your stuff, or is it other people's stuff?

**Other people's stuff. A favorite part of the book was getting to know glimpses of your clients through you. I felt your sense of reverence for them and their process at the end of their lives.**

It's such an honor. It's hard not to fall in love with my clients because I tend toward the folks that are willing to be vulnerable and intimate and messy right off the bat. That is that type of space. There are clients that put up a front for a while, but at some point it crumbles down and they show me who they really are. So when I get to be with them in that way, it really fills me. It makes me love humans and humankind and being alive a little bit more. Obviously, it's sad when they die. It's part of the job.

**Something I've been thinking about for the past few years is the tragedy of a lot of lives leaving at the same time, in the event of a pandemic, war, genocide.**

So much of the work is about honoring the lived experience and creating an ideal death for folks. Or supporting them in having the most ideal death under the circumstances. So when death doesn't occur that way, it's devastating. Like in the early days of the pandemic, in the toilet paper hoarding days, the

Tiger King days, I was out of my mind because I couldn't do the thing that I so desperately wanted to do, and it helped me de-center myself from what occurs for other people. It is hard to sit with so much violent and painful and death that just feels really wrong, death that feels like people shouldn't be dying this way. At the same time, [acknowledging] the how of people dying is important. How they lived up until then is also very, very important. Often we get stuck in this idea of the good death versus the bad death.

Violent death, genocide, all that is really, really bad death. At the same time, if we take away the value judgment, then death just *is*, which it is for everybody. I can still live a really good life, I can still feel embodied and empowered and live according to my values, and gratefully for me, despite all of it—call it the world, being a Black woman—I can still live and feel good about the life that I've led. That, to me, ultimately makes a good death regardless of how the death actually occurs.

It's tough. It's tough. My heart is broken all the time, but I've also gotten really used to having a broken heart by virtue of doing this work. My work is informed by my broken heart, and that hasn't changed. It's just, how to honor how people are dying, is tricky.

Thank you for asking about genocide because people are really shying away from it now. It's intense. It's really intense. I feel like I had to learn very early to create a little bit of separation, otherwise I just went under. Right now it feels to be a time where we're really calling attention to this one thing that's happening, but I've also been feeling it my entire life. Coming from Ghana, there was violence there, there was colonization there, it is a violently colonized country, [there are] people snatched and raped and tortured and murdered from my entire bloodline in history. So I've had to learn how to be able to get up and do my work while there are hundreds, thousands, millions of people dying under circumstances that I deem terribly, terribly unjust.

**Thank you Alua. "My work is informed by my broken heart." A beautiful sentence.**

Always. I don't know how else to be in the world.

**Alua Arthur Recommends:**

*Fathers and Sons* by Howard Cunnell

*Broadcast No. 1* by A Race of Angels

Concrete artwork by Allison Kunath

Leaving the doors and windows open in March. The flies start to buzz inside signaling warmer weather on the horizon.

Fried plantain eaten with peanuts. The sweet, the salt, the crunch, the rapture.

Name

Alua Arthur

Vocation

death doula

Fact

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Yeofi Andoh

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