

ALSO BY STEPHEN LEVINE

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A Year to Live

HOW TO LIVE THIS YEAR
AS IF IT WERE YOUR LAST

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THREE RIVERS PRESS • NEW YORK



CATCHING UP WITH YOUR LIFE

As I have accompanied the dying to the threshold over the last twenty years, it has become painfully clear how often death takes people unawares. Even those who had months or even years of illness to prepare themselves often lamented how completely unprepared they were for their death.

In their last year many people feel as if they have a second chance at growth and inner healing. Many speak of catching up with their lives just "in the nick of time." Having observed the renewal that occurs for so many people because they have been given a terminal diagnosis or because their natural wisdom inspires them to open more profoundly to life, I offer an experiment that amplifies your potential for healing by living the next year as if it were your last.

On their deathbed some people look back on their lives and are overwhelmed by a sense of failure. They have a closet

full of regrets. They become disheartened when they reflect on how they have overlooked the preciousness of their relationships, forgotten the importance of finding their "true work," and delayed what some call "living my own life." Because they had left so many parts of their life for "later," they felt frustrated about unsatisfying work, unfinished business in relationships, and compromised lifestyles. But "later" came much sooner than they expected, and they found themselves burdened by unfulfilled dreams and a sense of incompleteness.

Many people, although they have few other complaints, experience a certain remorse about having neglected spiritual growth, while even more express dismay that there has been so little authentic joy in their lives. All but those who have fully opened to life say that they would live differently if they had just one more year.

We don't have to die feeling like a failure, full of shame and fear, unable to navigate by the clear light of our true heart. Indeed, that is what this book has to offer: a year to live as consciously as possible, a year to finish business, to catch up with our lives, to investigate and deal with our fear of death, to cultivate our true heart and find our essential wisdom and joy. A year to live as if that is all that remains.

Many people say that if they had another year to live they would change their work situation. Some say they would quit. Most concede that they would at the very least reduce the number of hours they work, change jobs, or perhaps study some long-admired skill even though there might be no job at the end of the rainbow. More than a few with advanced degrees say they would like to have been carpenters or stone ma-

sons. Many people speak of interests that had to be put aside because of family responsibilities, country, and social acceptability. Some, recognizing their desires, bought themselves the cello they had always wanted or the lathe, the canvas stretcher, or the new computer crammed with art programs. Many acknowledge a love of nature that they allowed to go dormant, and are drawn to long walks in the woods and sitting quietly by the sea. Some went back to church, some took up a meditation practice, turning toward the mystery, investigating wholeheartedly their own deathless nature.

One day in San Francisco, a dentist friend, while working on my teeth, told me that it was his fiftieth birthday. "Well then, just ten more years to live, to really live!" I joked through the nitrous oxide. Knowing his delight in physical sport, I floated the possibility that his body might have only another ten years of the energy and stamina necessary for his favorite endeavors, backpacking and wild-river rafting. Though I was only half-kidding, and fifty-five years old myself at the time, he was apparently ripe to hear this, and a few months later changed his office hours to a four-day week, finalized his divorce, and bought a new pair of skis. I have never seen him so lighthearted as when he speaks about how much more time he has to live by giving himself one extra day each week. Now the game is to remind him not to overbook those four days. Clearly we reclaim our lives one step at a time.

There were those with tangled and unsatisfying relationships who in their last year healed so much unfinished business, offering up their heart to that which remained disheartened and in fear of change. For some this resulted in a new living relationship, for others divorce and a whole new course to their lives. Many seemed to concentrate on expanding their horizons

so as to become yet more gracious in the eyes of someone they admired, for some that was a lover or mate, for others it was God. But all of those who seemed to make the best use of a terminal prognosis began to change their relationship to relationship itself. They had a going-out-of-unfinished-business sale.

Many said they would have adopted a gentler pace of life, changed their surroundings, been less preoccupied with social and material ambitions. Some said they would have moved to the country, some to the city; some would have built new homes, others would have torn down old ones. But almost all said that they would have slowed down and stopped to smell, if not plant, the roses.

I suspect that if many of the people I have worked with had been offered a book like this a year before they died, they would have benefited greatly and had an easier death. This book was written as a one-year experiment in consciousness renewal, intended to sharpen life and soften death "while we still have the chance." How and where the answers to these essential questions are found is the subject and object of this book.

Some, I suspect, will come to this book because of their fear of the unknown, others because they respect it. Some because they sense the remarkable potential of dying consciously, others because they dread an unconscious departure. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that a part of us seeks relief from our fears, while another aspect causes our focus on life to intensify, to push us to look deeper into just who or what took birth and who, indeed, it is that will someday die.

Whatever our situation, the progression—sudden or gradual—is the same: to remember, to let go, and to trust the process.

For some this may be a romantic, even casual, undertaking;

a playing with death. For others this may be the sweat-soaked struggle of a lifetime attempting to catch up with itself, to pull itself together before it departs with the last breath.

For the person with AIDS, advanced cancer, ALS, or for a dying child, this is no academic exploration. It is work that needs to be undertaken now from the deepest level available. For those who refuse to accept that they are dying, a deeper truth is offered. Preparing for death is one of the most profoundly healing acts of a lifetime.

For all of us there is an approach to the seemingly unapproachable. This is the life-affirming work of learning to stay present even under difficult circumstances, to embrace mental, physical, and spiritual pain using techniques suitable for each particular level of discomfort.

This book is intended to offer a healing process that allows a gradual completion of all that lies behind and a clear-eyed entrance into whatever may lie ahead. A process of clarity, insight, and closure.