

The canvas of life's seasons

Autumn offers us an opportunity to contemplate our own mortality

ENUMA OKORO

Enuma Okoro 6 HOURS AGO

On a beautiful recent fall morning, I was sitting on my porch watching the wind blow through the tree in front of my apartment. The leaves were shaking fiercely on their branches, and every now and then one would succumb, slowly falling to the ground. I was struck by the graceful motion with which they fell and the sense of accompanying peace.

Autumn is such a glorious season, but it's also a time that's rich with the symbolism of mortality. And the longer I sat there, the more I thought about how we shy away from talking about or reflecting on death as an inevitable stage of life. It is not an easy topic to confront, especially when there are people in our lives who are seriously ill or grieving a loss. But if we had more courage to broach this taboo topic, I wonder if it could open up an opportunity for us to consider what we might gain by recognising the interwoven state of life and death.

There is a lot happening in the 18th-century painting "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump" by Joseph Wright of Derby. Ten people occupy a room lit only by a candle and the glow of a full moon. The group are gathered around a table to observe what happens when a bird trapped in a glass jar is deprived of air.

The onlookers' responses seem to offer an insight into the ways we approach death when it's before us. The couple to the left, in the throes of young love, focus only on themselves, as if the consideration of mortality might seem morbid or even unreal. The boy seated beside the couple looks on with rapt curiosity, wondering, as a child would, what happens when something living dies. Of the two gentlemen seated at the table, neither has his gaze on the bird, as if reluctant to contemplate the question of mortality. The young boy at the back glances across to see the fate of the bird, his expression almost sad. To the left of him, a little girl looks up at the bird with both curiosity and fear, clinging to her older sister, who covers her face with her hands while their father calmly points at the air pump, as if trying to draw her attention to what is happening.

The suffering of the bird is something I imagine many of us would turn away from. Yet there is something about acknowledging mortality and the process leading to it that forces us to recognise what a thin threshold lies between life and death. I will never forget the experience of having to put down my beloved dog. We had been together for 11 years, from the time she was eight weeks old. I held her head in my lap and stroked her face as the tears poured down mine. But at the same time, I felt a clear and indescribable sense of relief from my dog. And as painful as it was, it felt an honour to share her last hours, remembering her as a puppy and as a wild, vibrant dog who would tear through the yard before showing up at the kitchen door, panting and exuberant.

I do not have Buddha-like words of wisdom about death. But if we took a minute to imagine where we might insert ourselves into Wright's painting, it could lead us to surprising trains of thought or offer feelings to explore about where we find ourselves in our own lives. That itself seems to me of value.

In "Sleep and His Half-Brother Death" (1874) by John William Waterhouse, the artist references the Greek mythological story of Hypnos, god of sleep, and Thanatos, god of death, who were twin brothers. A boy dozes on a chaise, his head resting on the shoulder of his brother, who sits shadowed beside him in the dark. In many ancient stories, sleep and death are likened to one another. When we're asleep, it's as if we have temporarily left the world; there's no certainty that any of us will see the dawn. Waterhouse's painting offers a visceral reminder of that: how easy, it seems to say, for life and death to rest against one another.

And yet, in my experience it can be a challenge to recognise and accept how close we all are to death — something that becomes painfully apparent when we struggle to stay close to someone we know when they lose a loved one or are themselves dealing with looming mortality. I have been in that heartbreaking and heart-expanding situation a few times in my life, when I have felt ill-equipped to walk compassionately with the other person. I wonder if we might be better at supporting one another if we were more practised in sharing our thoughts, beliefs or questions about the end of life.

Recently I was in conversation with the Ghanaian-German artist Zohra Opoku, as part of Berlin Art Week. We were talking about her 2020-22 body of work, "The Myths of Eternal Life", which she began while receiving treatment for breast cancer in her early forties. Opoku naturally turned to thinking about her own mortality, and was moved by an encounter with ancient Egyptian artefacts at a museum. She began to research the "Spells for Coming Forth by Day" (more commonly known as the Book of the Dead), an ancient collection of spells meant to protect and help those passing from this life to the afterlife.



Zohra Opoku's 'I am the terror in the storm who guards the great one [in] the conflict. Sharp Knife strikes for me. Ash god provides coolness for me' © Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim

Many of the works in Opoku's series have portions of the ancient spells as their title. Her 2023 piece "I am the terror in the storm who guards the great one [in] the conflict. Sharp Knife strikes for me. Ash god provides coolness for me" is an embroidered screen print in which the artist is shown striding forward. Her body, however, is not whole: her head, torso and legs are detached from each other, and the limbs and hands multiplied. It is as if she has come undone from the illness and the treatment it entailed, but the work also speaks in some way to her awareness of the different parts of herself — even parts she may be losing — and her efforts to come to terms with this.

Images of her cupped hands are spread across the top half of the canvas, simultaneously releasing things from her life and receiving new realities. Bare winter trees in the background reference her experience of finding spiritual and emotional succour in nature. It is an artistic representation of a woman celebrating the life she still has while navigating the reality of a sick body over which she has little control. Opoku's work invites us to consider what it is to be both living and dying at once, a phenomenon heightened by a diagnosis and yet true for all of us every day. When I asked Opoku what had surprised her about her experience of illness, she said it taught her to live with more self-respect, to be more intentional about her art-making and her relationships.

I do not think any of us can fully imagine what our own response might be when faced with the vivid possibility of our own death or that of someone dear to us. But I know that on the occasions when I do confront the prospect of my mortality, I am led to think about how to live now, the state of my relationships, and the value I'm placing on any number of things or experiences. If contemplating our mortality can lead us to stop and ask ourselves if we are content with the way we are living, isn't it worth the courage to look life and death in the face every now and then?

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