



Dr David Webster, principal  
philosophy lecturer at the  
University of Gloucestershire



# The meaning *of life?*

How do you live a good life in a broken world? By forgetting the idea of eternal life, concentrating on the here and now, and slowing your thought processes down, says Dr David Webster, principal philosophy lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire

WORDS BY: KATIE JARVIS

**B**ear with me on this one. Because it's not an easy subject. (Though do please note that Woody Allen has seen fit to turn it into his latest film, *Magic in the Moonlight*, if you're more comfortable with the rationalist screen version.) It's about death and how we should stare it firmly and unflinchingly in the face. But it's about life, too.

It's about how dreadful the world appears to be - violent, unpredictable, full of people with desperately clashing opinions; people who are convinced, no matter what their neighbour believes, that they are categorically right. And it's about how we probably can't change them. But about how we can recognise and change ourselves.

And just because I know this is a difficult subject and that you're about to flick to *My Cotswold Life* - as I would - I'm going to start with a story.

This story begins one morning in June 2012 when Dr David Webster, principal philosophy lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire, woke up feeling things weren't quite right. A fit man in his early 40s - no stranger to running and climbing - he quickly began to feel much more ill. "Luckily, my wife was on hand to ring an ambulance, and I was rushed to A&E in Cheltenham," he recalls.

As we talk, two years on, in a café in one of the uni's social buildings, there are few

signs that what this articulate man was experiencing was a devastating stroke. But during those first few hours of illness, it became clear that his right side had been paralysed; he could no longer walk, use his right arm, or speak properly.

"The initial prognosis was that they didn't know whether or not I'd ever recover. A lot of people who'd had similar experiences simply didn't get better," he says.

I could now describe how his determination kicked in immediately, and how - by day three - he was back on his feet, relentlessly beginning to pound the hospital corridors; or how, a year later, he helped raise £2,000 for a rehab centre in Cheltenham by scaling the Excalibur Tower in Holland - the world's highest free-standing climbing wall at 121ft.

But what I want to ask him is a giddily different question. Because David Webster is an atheist, who believes we'd all be better ditching any ideas that we're 'spiritual' beings, and - instead - facing up to the fact that this life is all there is. So did his own early brush with death not change his views at all?

He laughs. "I did have a lot of queries from friends, asking if I'd had any kind of vision or religious experience, which I only half took seriously. If anything, it brought home to me even more clearly that the present moment is the one we should consider."

OK. Suppose we were to adopt his

viewpoint wholeheartedly. Suppose we were to do as Buddhist monks (and Woody Allen) do and - instead of politely dismissing the end-of-life process as a 'passing away', or 'kicking the bucket' (I found 213 euphemisms in one quick search) - suppose we were actively to meditate on death. Even (as just the monks do) to look at corpses; to imagine ourselves as corpses. What is the point of life, then, if it's so focused on nothingness?

"Firstly," David Webster says, "you have to decide whether or not that question makes sense. Does there have to be a meaning or a purpose to life separate from the conducting of it?"

"And then we might take the point of view that living well - living the good life in the Aristotelian sense - is actually the point. Instead of trying to find a meaning that is separate from life - some mystery we need to unlock - actually what matters is right in front of us: treating other people well; not causing suffering to other living beings; reducing suffering, maybe by being active politically or in the community?"

But hang on. Surely one could argue the opposite to same effect: Be good because this life is the only chance you've got to secure eternity?

"Ah," he says. "The basis of my argument is that living the right life is important in and of itself. What's essential is the doing of it."

Strangely, perhaps, his blue-print for life doesn't dismiss traditional religion

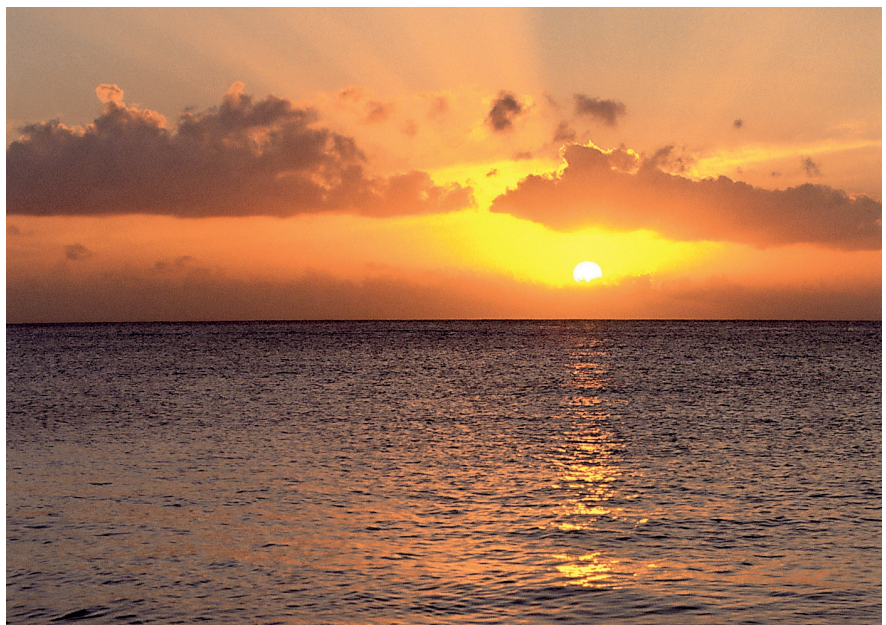
completely. Or, at least, he's more in favour of religion than the modern penchant for 'New Age spirituality', which he brands consumerist and commercial. (His arguments are more fully set out in his latest book, *Dispirited*, if you want more detail; though, believe me, it's not a walk-in-an-intellectual-park.) "Although, as far as I'm concerned, there are things wrong with traditional religion, one aspect that's at least interesting to people, ethically, is that it challenges their behaviour; it isn't always convenient; it makes them do things they wouldn't want," he explains. "Whereas a lot of the New Age mystic material that's taking its place is a bit too easy: you can put your lifestyle first and get the spirituality to suit it. That stops people from being ethically and philosophically challenged."

Instead, his advice to people is to adopt a more Buddhist lifestyle - not just in terms of facing our own mortality but by taking a meditative approach that slows down hectic 21st century lifestyles and makes us consider issues properly and non-aggressively. If we were to do that, he says, the world would inevitably become a more tolerant place. Some of the exercises he uses with his own philosophy students include being made to argue points of view they don't share: "There can be a tendency to think that everyone who doesn't agree with you is an idiot. Yet when you come across someone who's perfectly clever, but who thinks the opposite of you, they must have good reasons."

He advocates his students reading plenty of material that's contrary to their own opinion. "One of the problems with the internet is that there's so much stuff out there that it overwhelms people. As a result, they start tailoring it to suit: you can end up having a lifestyle that endlessly self-reinforces. The only people you look at who are different from you are trolls - you find extreme points of view that are different from yours and mock them. We see a lot of that on twitter."

He also encourages people to read one book, really slowly, a page at a time; to study it in detail and to understand it completely. In other words, to analyse and take in material that leads us to form valid opinions. "There seems to be this idea that everyone's feelings about things are equally valid. To give an example, there was a report, just the other day, saying that business confidence was rising. Yet it wasn't about statistics or data; it was about 40 people who felt things were getting better. That doesn't show they were or weren't."

"Students often say to me, 'Can we



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include our opinion in essays?’ I always reply that I don't want to know their opinions unless they can include why they think them, in a way that is evidence-based.”

Whether you agree or not - and I'm sure you'd only disagree rationally and respectfully - this philosophy teacher does seem to be offering sound advice for a broken world: challenge your own opinions; respect those of others, if they can offer appropriate evidence; slow down; stare mortality in the face, and live the good life for no other reason than that a good life should be lived.

“When we're with other people, we often find ourselves trying to pay them attention while, at the same time, eating a meal and texting somebody else. We rush through things, doing all of them badly. We think we know how to live and react to things, but often we're not very good at being alive,” David Webster says.

“By spending time meditating and slowing down our thoughts - like slow reading - and by concentrating on the here and now, we can develop a quality of attention that really will help us lead a good life.” ■

## How to live a better life: why not try David Webster's five simple suggestions:

1. Think about death as an end in itself; consider how you should live this life, for its own sake;
2. If you believe strongly in something, make yourself argue the contrary point of view. Such an exercise promotes understanding of why perfectly intelligent and caring people might think differently from you;
3. Surround yourself with things you disagree with - magazine articles; books; television programmes - in a positive way. Don't always choose things that 'suit' you, because that can lead to extreme patterns of thought;
4. Practise slow reading: read a book carefully, and in detail, so that you pick up every nuance and truly understand what the author is saying;
5. Take up mindfulness. It's easy to dismiss it as a fad, and it isn't the answer to everybody's problems, but it can be self-revelatory.

## More information

• David Webster is the author of *Dispirited: How contemporary spirituality makes us stupid, selfish and unhappy*, published by Zero Books, price £9.99. You can also follow him on twitter, @davidwebster

• Dr Webster is leading the university's new online master's degree in philosophy and religious thought. More details from [www.glos.ac.uk](http://www.glos.ac.uk)

