5 times a day, the WeCroak app reminds me that I’m going to die

I liked this, until I didn’t.

by Matt Fitzgerald in the November 7, 2018 issue

It feels ridiculous to say that a smartphone app changed my life. I'm not that shallow. But it happened. *A smartphone app changed my life.* I'm not certain my life is better, but I know I'll never be the same.

The app is called WeCroak. Five times a day, WeCroak sends an alert to its users. They arrive at random moments but always say the same thing: *Don't forget, you're going to die.*

WeCroak is based on a Bhutanese aphorism: "To find happiness, contemplate death five times a day." You might expect the app's inventor to have a touch of the executioner about him, but Hansa Bergwall is charming. He works in public relations and practices Sikh meditation. When he learned that some Buddhists meditate on death, he resolved to do so himself.

As Bergwall tells it, "I thought, 'OK, I'll think about death five times a day.' Then I'd go through the whole day without doing it once. I would find myself scrolling through social media on my phone and comparing myself to other people. We've outsourced so much of our minds to our phones. So, unless I was going to throw away my smartphone and become a monastic, I needed to turn this tool of distraction into a thing that could ground and focus me. The app is a form of acceptance, but it began in a fit of rage against my iPhone."

Don't forget, you're going to die. Five times a day sounds excessive, almost gleeful, like a dog rolling in a rotting fish. But if you've been refusing the reality of death for years, an occasional reminder is easy to bat down. And those of us who encounter death regularly might be the best at defending ourselves. It's a skill we've honed.

Ten years ago I interrupted a workshop for tax assessors. A married couple from my church were both in attendance. A police officer and I pulled them out of the seminar and into a small, empty room. We told them their teenage son had just died by suicide. The room buckled. The boy's mother collapsed. His father howled. I willed myself numb. This wasn't the first time I'd had to tell someone their child was dead. I knew the rules. You can't keen like a grief-stricken parent while ministering to grief-stricken parents.

That sort of dissociation might be professionally necessary, but it is impossible to master. I can turn my feelings about death off in the middle of a funeral. I can't guarantee they'll come back on. Practice it long enough and compartmentalization

becomes imprisoning. I used to flit between positions; calm while others wailed, human afterward. Then my priest mask froze. On Ash Wednesday, I put the dirt on you. “You are dust.” I’m just doing my job.

I need more than the occasional reminder that I wear the ashes too. Five times a day feels right. I don’t need to worry about contracting grave-sickness or becoming a middle-aged goth. What I need is the reality check this app brings.

WeCroak inflicts a cumulative wallop. If you have strong feelings about death, it will intensify them. WeCroak will let you contemplate mortality in the abstract, but it won’t let you stop at the conceptual. It will force you to consider the grave personally. It doesn’t happen immediately. The app’s effect unfolds like a slow-motion bomb, wrecking whatever defenses you’ve erected to protect yourself from death’s sting. The bizarre thing is, WeCroak made me happy as it blew me apart. This app gets weird and intensely personal. It will mess with you.

A microdose of mortality can make the day glow.

Don’t forget, you’re going to die. My teenage son refused to do the dishes. I asked, he ignored me. I insisted, he refused. I tend to explode when something like this happens. I enjoy it. Rage can be an intense pleasure. For an instant anyhow. Afterward, I’m seized by regret so fierce it lacerates. “Never again!” And then, again. I can’t stop myself. This time, before I opened my mouth, my phone buzzed. “Don’t forget, you’re going to die.” I inhaled sharply. The poet John Ashbery says the grave carries “radish-strong gasoline fumes.” My eyes watered. Death’s scent and sting stopped me. I stood silently, as if I had just discovered something. I had just discovered something. I don’t want my rage lodged in my child’s psyche. I spoke softly to my son. I was happy.

In recent years, I’ve found myself sweating the prospect of a large and unnamed trouble. On certain days I could feel it creep and loom while I waited for the train or walked down a long hallway. People waiting on biopsies tell me that the unknowing can be worse than the worst news. Facing a specific illness is preferable to staring down a mystery. I knew I suffered from a sense of dread, but naming the feeling didn’t help. Dread slithers and lacks definition, making it doubly unsettling. WeCroak brings the diagnosis: I am going to die. Death is a fact. I may as well embrace it. After six weeks with the app I felt calm, relieved. WeCroak named the object of my dread, then sucked the threat right out of it.

Last month I visited a church member who had her left leg amputated below the knee. She is in a Medicaid-funded nursing home, stuck in a windowless room with another sick woman. After we prayed, my phone chimed. WeCroak. I glanced at the alert and felt ashamed at my self-indulgence. No one who just lost a limb needs a buzzer to remind them of their mortality.

Five members of my church are living with terminal cancer. Others are dying of Alzheimer's. Several live with HIV under a medical clemency that still feels tenuous 15 years in. I am not in a rush to tell any of them about the happiness WeCroak is bringing me. I tell myself that the difference between contemplating death and dying is akin to the difference between watching a fight and getting punched in the face.

In March I went to see a church member who believes my "crypto-evangelicalism" is placing an obstacle between him and God. "We aren't children. We know how the Bible got written. But you stand up there and you never tell us the stories didn't happen." I spent 20 minutes on the train rehearsing my defense. I continued the exercise in the elevator up to his apartment. One floor away, my phone chimed. "Don't forget, you're going to die."

The doors opened. I smiled. This visit wasn't going to kill me. Neither would a strong dose of humility. I spent the hour listening carefully, speaking only to apologize. When we were done, I floated out of his building, relieved once again. Snow was falling furiously. I looked up. The Willis Tower was half obscured by the blizzard. Steel beams played peek-a-boo with the snowfall. The game perfected the tower's cross-hatched rigidity, made it casual, childlike. I stood in the street, neck craned like a tourist, marveling at a building I've ignored at least 1,000 times. The grave gives you eyes to see.

Most of the alerts arrive when I'm in the middle of nothing much at all. I've received several while drinking coffee in the morning. My kids are asleep. My wife is in the shower. "Don't forget, you're going to die." Nothing happens, but my coffee tastes better. Nothing changes, but I notice the sunlight pouring through the bay window. Before I had the app, I rarely found such pleasure in the mundane. A microdose of mortality can make the day glow.

I woke up early, sat in the bay window, and wept at the passing beauty of our city street. When my daughter came downstairs, she was startled. "What's wrong? Why

are you crying?” I started to tell her but caught myself. When she left the room I wept more intensely. She is almost 14, as old as I was when my father died. I would have noticed this milestone without WeCroak, but I wouldn’t have felt its sting.

Don’t forget, you’re going to die. Bergwall told me his mother died when he was 11. I wasn’t surprised. WeCroak wants to reconcile the good in life with the pain of loss. That’s the lifelong task of every child whose parent dies. Those who succeed learn a good lesson early: nihilists and hedonists are fraternal twins. To be grief-stricken is to learn that life is tragic. To be a child is to know that life is full, bursting with promise. Parental death can create a near-permanent state of grateful realism in the lives of those it leaves behind.

It can also make us want to shake others with the truth. This is why WeCroak appealed to me when I first heard about it. I suspect it’s why Bergwall invented it. He says he grew up suspicious of our culture’s refusal to acknowledge life’s impermanence. I grew up angry. I sneered at intact families. I wanted everyone to know what I knew, to suffer something of what I was suffering. “The people you love are going to die! You are! I am! We . . . croak.”

I need more than the occasional reminder that I wear the ashes too.

In adulthood I floated up into a second ignorance of death, a dumb luxury afforded by the passage of time. Remote in one hand, phone in the other, mind on my job, I spread myself thin across life’s surface, distracted from almost everything but my own irritation. But before that, I spent years in the depths. As WeCroak pulled me under, down into the depth of existence, it also pulled me back into pain I’d silenced long ago. I assume the app will do the same to anyone who has let their grief go unresolved.

My father had been dying for more than a year before I noticed. Most days he put on a tie and went to work. Some days he put on a tie and went to chemo. I was 14. I didn’t pay attention to his schedule. His illness seemed unremarkable. And then he stopped getting dressed. He stayed in his room wrapped up in blankets, sucking on hard candy.

He loved me earnestly, often joyfully, but for as long as I could remember my father had hassled me about my inattention, my grades, my refusal to concentrate. Years before his illness struck, he sat me down on the couch, barely able to contain his anger, my report card in his hand. “I have a job,” he said. “And you have a job. My

job is the church. Your job is your school. If I don't do my job, we don't eat. And if you don't do your job . . .” I don't remember what he said next. It couldn't have made sense. I looked out the window. He got angrier. “You don't give a shit.” I didn't. I was ten years old.

I tuned him out until he weighed less than me and refused to change out of his bathrobe. Then I buckled down. I tried out for the school's spring play because he loved theater. I studied ferociously. Two weeks before his death, my report card boasted a 3.8, As in every class but math. I raced straight from the school play's dress rehearsal into his bedroom, makeup still on my face. He was gooned on morphine, flat on his back. I sat on the edge of the bed and showed him my grades. He didn't congratulate me. When I fell silent he mumbled, “I don't understand.” I tried to explain how a grade point average gets calculated. He waved his hands feebly. I told him I'd finally met his expectations. He repeated himself. “I don't understand. I don't understand.” I broke down and sobbed. The school's mascara ran down my face so heavily it ruined my shirt. He died three days later.

Months afterward, my mother enrolled me in an improbably named support group: Teen Grief Chat. A room full of teenagers with a dead parent or sibling. The consensus was clear, God did not exist. Daron, a high school sophomore whose dad had hanged himself from a beam in the family garage, said it best: “If there were a God, my dad wouldn't have died. He's dead. So there isn't a God.” Daron smoked and wore a leather jacket. The other grieving teens fell in line. The social worker murmured sympathetically. I kept my mouth shut. I may have even nodded my head. But I didn't buy it. I don't know what Daron felt when he went to the garage to get his skateboard and found his dad instead. I wonder if he felt alone. I know I did. Sitting in my parent's bedroom with my father's ruined shell, I was alone. And yet, I didn't feel abandoned.

Anglican theologian J. K. Mozley wrote, “It is as if there were a cross unseen, standing on its undiscovered hill, far back in the ages, out of which were sounding always, just the same deep voice of suffering love that was heard by mortal ears from the sacred hill of Calvary.” I heard that voice in my father's bedroom. Christ's suffering harmonized with the sound of my own crying. That might sound unbelievably pious, but it's the truth. My father's death brought me to the suffering love that sits at the center of existence. Until that point, I had a child's faith. In grade school I slept on Noah's ark sheets. At night I rode the same waves Noah rode. We prayed before every meal. We never missed church, so I knew about Good

Friday. Which is to say, I believed in Christ's forsakenness long before I felt it for myself. Then I felt it. I believe the feeling saved me. If Jesus' pain had not met mine, abandonment and isolation would have thrown me through the glass of my parent's bedroom window. I wouldn't have survived.

Don't forget, you're going to die. It was snowing when we left for the cemetery to bury my father. The snowflakes were huge, but spare. The sun was shining. Snowflakes dotted everything. They fell slowly, turned slowly, springtime prisms. I stood on the church steps, rocked by loss, watching a snowfall carry spring.

In that moment I felt the same love that held me as my dad lay dying. But it was joyful, not suffering. No voice spoke. He didn't have to speak. I already knew His words. *Why do you look for the living among the dead? I go to prepare a place for you. Where I am, you will be also. Peace be with you.* I already knew their implications. *All will be made alive in Christ. Death has been defeated. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . . the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* I did not feel relieved. I felt new life. It was an absolutely unnerving experience. I couldn't listen. I was too raw for resurrection. I may have been too young. I wasn't ready to stop crying. None of that matters. The Risen Lord does not respect our boundaries. If the grave could not hold the first fruit back, what chance do we have? All we can do is resist.

I didn't resist the risen Christ because he is unbelievable. I resisted him because I felt his power. Our graves and Christ's victory clash, but they also overlap, and when they clash and overlap joy gets lit by the sparks they throw. Such flames are threatening to those whose circumstances require them to feed on heartbreak. Standing in that springtime snowfall, I did my best to smother them. I was naive. I didn't know my tears would run dry. In the years immediately after my father's death, I wept until I couldn't any longer, just like some drunks drink until their bodies won't permit another sip. Then I spent three decades in a tearless holding pattern. Dry drunk, dry grief, neither condition should be confused with healing.

Don't forget, you're going to die. Bergwall told me he developed WeCroak in order to accept his smartphone, to make peace with its necessity. He said the question isn't whether to have one, "but how to use such distracting technology against itself." But your phone is far from the biggest thing WeCroak wants you to accept. WeCroak wants to use the grave against itself. It brightens your days by insisting that they'll end.

It took six months for me to realize this gift and one funeral to ruin it. The deceased was a World War II veteran named Ed. His uniform fit him well into his nineties. He wore it to parades. At the funeral, it dressed a headless mannequin that stood next to a table, directly before the front row, where I sat. The smell of mothballs and old wool overwhelmed the funeral flowers. The table held Ed's photograph and his French horn. On the other side of the aisle, Ed's husband, Larry, sat alone. He and Ed had been together for 55 years, sustained by a partnership most people refused to recognize. Larry wept through the service. There was no glow. When held against the real thing, WeCroak's attempt to deal death in small doses feels repulsive.

Scripture came on like a cattle prod. Having spent months shaping my mind to die, I heard Paul's contempt for the grave in all its crowing fury. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Hit by the faith that fed me before I learned to speak, my newfound Stoic happiness cracked like a plastic bumper.

WeCroak is powerful. The app broke me open. Its daily reminders are forcing me to grieve again. If I continue using it, it will continue changing me. I'll grow to see the grave with equanimity.

WeCroak is so powerful I worry that it might dry my eyes before Christ can find me again. The Buddhist and Stoic assumptions that inform WeCroak are not going to let me cry for long. And yet, tears could be the lens one needs in order to see the risen Christ.

In the end, it comes down to this: WeCroak thinks death is natural. Christianity says death is obscene. Worse than this; WeCroak can make you happy. The risen Christ can give you joy. So delete the app!

I would, but I have stopped raging at my children. I'm less defensive in the face of criticism. I'm aware that the beauty we are given is fleeting, and more beautiful for that fact. I'm happy. Christian joy is not happiness. It doesn't even necessarily bring you happiness. It just overwhelms you. Rilke says it best: "How superficially must happiness engage us, after all, if it can leave us time to think and worry about how long it will last." In my experience, WeCroak establishes that happiness can be willed and sustained. It is strong enough to take the everyday and make it bearable. In these ways, happiness is like faith. It can be practiced. It *must* be practiced.

But joy is like Christ. Joy arrives on its own terms. It turns tables over and leaves you gasping in its aftermath. Happiness and joy are different, not mutually exclusive. I

shouldn’t have to choose between the two, but with this app, a choice presents itself: I am a Christian, and WeCroak is asking me to place my faith in the grave.

My father is buried in northern Michigan. His headstone sits flush with the ground in the newest part of an old cemetery. There is a sapling my mother planted and a few ancient pine trees at the road’s edge. We visited over the Fourth of July. It was a hot afternoon, the grass around the grave was fried by midday light that overwhelmed the piney shade. Our kids extended vacation play straight into the cemetery. They ran between the tombstones, laughing.

I stood in front of my dad’s grave, waiting to be sad. One of my sons came racing toward his headstone and jumped right over it, clearing an entire generation in a flying leap. I wanted to grab him out of the air, “No! Have some respect,” but as he cleared the grave he grinned. I could almost see him levitate for a second. It was as if the great last-trumpet love upending every grave came early, caught the child, and held him in mid-air. I could see the blue in his eyes and the brown-blonde in each strand of his hair. I could see him so clearly. The sunlight wasn’t stark. The oak near my father’s grave had not been a sapling for years. The cemetery shone gold and green, and my boy was laughing as he landed. My phone buzzed. I left it in my pocket.

I aim to leave it there. I won’t forget. I’m going to die. For now, I’m trying to remember something else. We will rise again.

I turned WeCroak off. Of course I still use my phone. My record collection is on it. Email must be read. I need Google maps to tell me where to go. Lately, a different alert keeps popping up. This one asks, “How many stars do you give WeCroak?” The answer is either zero or all of them. The app made me a better parent, tricked me into part-time Buddhism, stoked the dying embers of my adolescent grief, and made me run to Jesus. Instead of stars, WeCroak ought to come with a warning, like a chain saw or prescription medication.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Shaping my mind to die.” That version includes a few inaccurate details about the World War II veteran’s funeral, which are corrected here.