

The Guide to Being Totally Alive

A.K.A.: THE GUIDE TO BEING WAY LESS DEAD IN YOUR LIFE

Do you wonder about what another version of your life could look like... the better version?

Do you sometimes feel like you're letting your life down? Like you're not living up to your potential?

Do you ever worry that you're "not doing life right"?

If you were on your deathbed, would you be full of "could have/ should have/ would have" thoughts?

Do you feel like you're not really participating in your life? And/or like you're lacking in some sort of life purpose to make your years worthwhile?

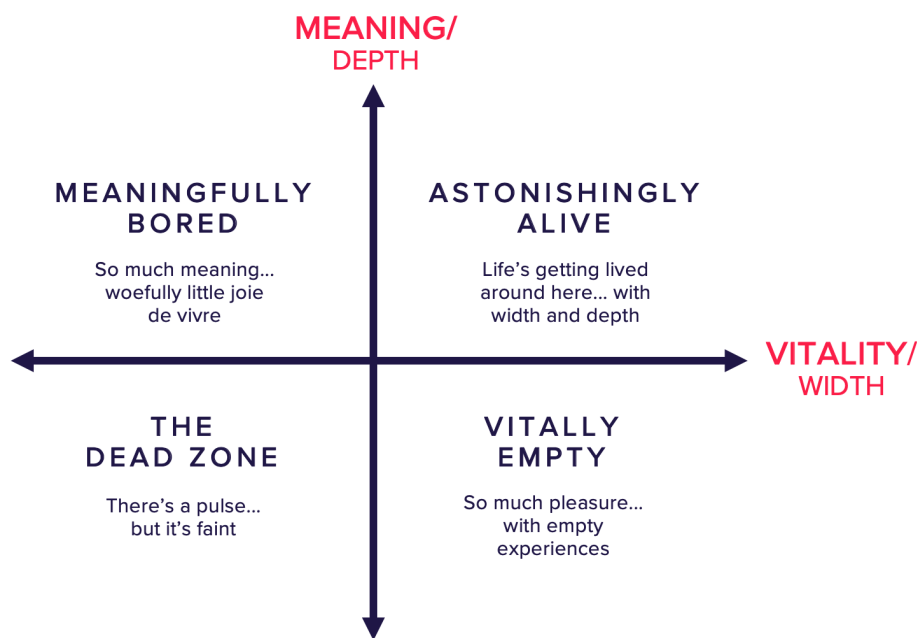
Yeah, join the club.

But here you are, reading this— evidence that there is hope for SO much more life in your life. Let's create a squander-free existence!



THE Astonishingly Alive MODEL

This here is the **brainy foundation for all things Four Thousand Mondays**. The metaphoric width of our lives is expressed along a continuum that refers to our degree of vitality– inclusive of our activities, interests and experiences that we initiate with zest. The metaphoric depth of our lives is expressed as the degree to which we find meaning in our life– how we choose to cultivate purpose and reason for the life we are living. (We're shooting for wider and deeper lives, folks.)



Take the
free quiz!

Click here to
learn where you
sit on the model

You might want to spice things up a bit in your life with minor tweaks here and there, or go on an epic, life overhauling journey of self-transformation. You get to pick what kind of life you want: I'm not here to say that it has to be radical and adventurous or serene and soothing.

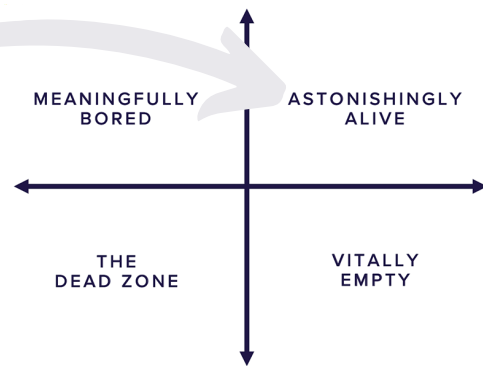
Your job is to commit to a life that makes you feel more alive... whatever that means for you.

A commitment to aliveness takes motivation, creativity, planning, and accountability. Oh– and a little dose of the Grim Reaper to keep you on your toes.

Let's see where you might land on the Astonishingly Alive Model. You don't have to be off the charts on the top right corner... anywhere in the Alive zone is a great start.

The Liveliest Quadrant of All

ASTONISHINGLY ALIVE



HOLY SHIT! YOU'RE ALIVE AND KICKING!

You're living elements of a wide life (full of juicy vitality) and elements of a deep life (with meaning and purpose). Let's be clear though: not every day is off the charts with both width and depth. You might have days where one or both areas feel, well—limp. Our goal is to jolt yourself out of the Vitally Empty and Meaningfully Bored categories on the days you find yourself there. Life's too short to feel anything less than astonishingly alive.

ASTONISHINGLY ALIVE SOUNDS LIKE:

- "Life's getting lived around here!"
- "I appreciate the life I have crafted"
- "I've ruthlessly edited my life to be one I'm proud of"
- "I feel like I can really experience each moment"
- "I'm feeling invigorated"
- "I am challenged and loving it"
- "I'm not that intimidated by other people's Instagrammable lives"
- "I usually have a nice balance of vitality and meaning"
- "I love life"

SMART FACTS ABOUT LIFE + DEATH:

- Vital engagement is when our lives are colored in with both absorbed enjoyment and meaning—a deep relationship with life that can be seen as a league of positive experience of its own (1). *We're after vital engagement in life.*
- Temporal scarcity means that as a resource becomes scarce it increases in its perceived value. Framing an event, such as our lives, with a proverbial expiry date has been shown to make it feel that much more valuable and precious (2).
- Consciously thinking about death can motivate us to:
 - Intentionally shift our goal pursuits from extrinsic to intrinsic (3)
 - Find meaning in life, take charge of our lives, lead intentional lives, and craft a plan for our lives (4)
 - Create the perspective we need to fully participate in our lives with urgency, priority and meaning (5)



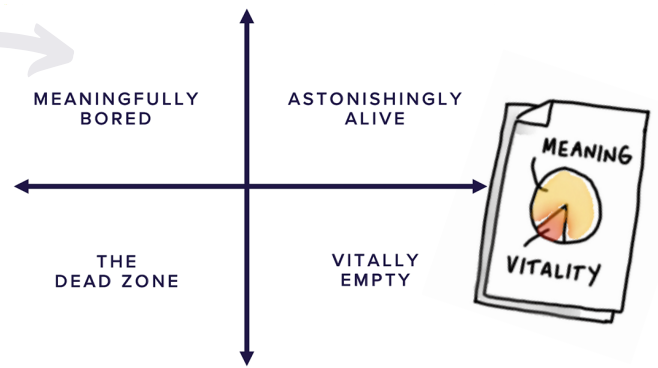
IDEAS TO ADD EVEN MORE MEANING + DEPTH TO YOUR LIFE:

- Practice gratitude for what's going well: write down three things you're grateful for before bed for 30 days, and watch how much better your life gets.
- Make a list of what makes you feel Vitally Engaged (intoxicated with BOTH enjoyment + meaning), and commit to increasing the time you spend on at least one of those activities within the next week. Even an extra 10 minutes counts.
- Rate how much you like your life on a scale of 1 - 100. What would it take to dial it up by just 3 points? Pick one area to do more of and one area to do less of (for example, more fiber and less gossip).
- Imagine it's your funeral (R.I.P.). What do you want people to be saying about you? How close is the life you are living to the way you want to be reminisced about?
- Celebrate your aliveness... your half-birthday, anniversaries, you name it. Crack open the Champagne + good dishes on a random Tuesday night. Make your life a big deal, because it could end by the time you're finished this page. *(Unlikely.)*
- Read the Meaningfully Bored and Vitally Empty pages in this Guide for more nuanced ideas when you've found yourself dipping over and into those zones. It's normal to have days and weeks where you oscillate; your job is to take control and prevent a full-on slide into boredom or emptiness.

"Tell me, what is it
you plan to do
with your one wild
and precious life?"
~Mary Oliver

For when you find yourself...

MEANINGFULLY BORED



YOU'RE LIVING A LIFE DEEP WITH MEANING... AND MAYBE A LITTLE LIGHT ON LIVELINESS

In a world where so many of us are lacking in meaning and purpose, it looks like you've found depth there. Good on you. Now we just need to amplify the vitality in your life, to help infuse novelty, interest, fun and good 'ole R+R into it. Life's too short to feel bored, friend.

MEANINGFULLY BORED SOUNDS LIKE:

- "So much meaning... woefully little joie de vivre"
- "I like routines but mine might be smothering me a bit"
- "Other people's Saturday nights are surely more exciting than mine"
- "My life appears to have a fine layer of dust on it"
- "I feel stuck in autopilot and don't have the courage &/or knowhow to bust out of it"
- "I'm not really showing up to participate in my life these days"
- "I'm contributing in the world, but my life seems very beige"

SMART FACTS ABOUT VITALITY, BOREDOM + NOVELTY:

- Vitality is a subjectively available energy, known as one's health of spirit; it's seen as an essential aspect of our overall well-being (6, 7)
- Subjective vitality is associated with high self-esteem, agency and growth (6)
- An approach to life with zesty enthusiasm and energy predicts overall life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and the belief that work is a calling (8)
- Our willingness to fully participate in our lives tends to ameliorate our anxieties and fears of death (9)
- Habits have been said to dull our senses and essentially deaden our ability to experience life (10)
- 18 to 50% of us report feeling bored quite often (11) and 71% of respondents in a study admitted they yearned for more novelty in life (12)
 - Increasing novelty in our lives boosts motivation, increases well-being, & helps us function at our optimal best (13)

IDEAS TO ADD MORE VITALITY/ WIDTH TO YOUR LIFE:

- Reflect back on the times you felt more vitally alive: what were you doing then? What activities might you want to pick back up?
- Give yourself permission to get curious about new things. Explore what interests you, even if it feels awkward—like taking a cooking class, reading a new genre of book, learning conversational French... anything new and out of your comfort zone.
- Keep a month-long journal of new things you have tried, to help hold yourself accountable to at least one new thing a week. The more willing we are to adopt a curious, novelty-seeking mindset, the likelier we are to flourish and thrive (14).
- Re-try something you used to like as a kid, like skateboarding or playing guitar.
- Barrage yourself over 10 weeks with the following positive emotions (one week per emotion): joy, gratitude, serenity, hope, interest, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. Vitality can be derived from the pleasure of these emotions.
- Make a list of things that make you happy (big and small), and commit to doing at least one thing on your list each week (like calling a distant friend or eating fudge).
- Identify at least one thing you are positively anticipating, and keep it top of mind.
- List ten habits you abide by as though in autopilot, and systematically blow up the habit for at least one day (e.g.: eat a different breakfast, walk a different route...).



"The only difference
between a rut and a
grave are the
dimensions."
~Ellen Glasgow

For when you find yourself...

VITALLY EMPTY

MEANINGFULLY
BORED

ASTONISHINGLY
ALIVE

THE
DEAD ZONE

VITALLY
EMPTY

YOU'RE DEFINITELY ALIVE WITH VITALITY AND PLEASURE... AND MAYBE MISSING OUT ON SOME OF THE MEANING IN YOUR LIFE

It looks like you have the vitality part down: you are participating in life like a champ, and you're experiencing a lot of what life has to offer. The meaning might be missing, though— which looks and feels like a lot of flourish without a lot of substance, right? Life's too short to feel empty inside, so let's work on this together.

VITALLY EMPTY SOUNDS LIKE:

- "So much pleasure... with empty experiences"
- "Is this all there is?"
- "I'm having fun but it feels hollow... shallow"
- "I don't feel like the work I do really matters"
- "I'm longing to do something really meaningful, but don't know what"
- "Everyone and their kids seem to have a life purpose except for me"
- "I'm curious about being a part of something bigger"
- "Does building meaning mean sacrificing the fun? I hope not."

SMART FACTS ABOUT MEANING-MAKING:

- Our quest for meaningful depth in life is a natural human tendency that's an essential ingredient in the recipe for a life well lived (15)
- When we contemplate death, **Meaning Management Theory** typically kicks in— which means our quest for meaning becomes the center of our motivation (16)
- The drive to derive meaning, find authenticity, and grow are the ways in which we respond to the realities of death— if we are coached to adopt a positive life orientation (16)
- Meaning provides us with a sense of significance, sharpened by a belief that our lives are inherently valuable (17)
 - Research finds that happy people with an absence of meaning possess similar gene patterns as those with adversity stress responses (18)
 - It has been said that "we dread a meaningless life as much as we dread the terror of death" (19)

IDEAS TO ADD MORE MEANING/ DEPTH TO YOUR LIFE:

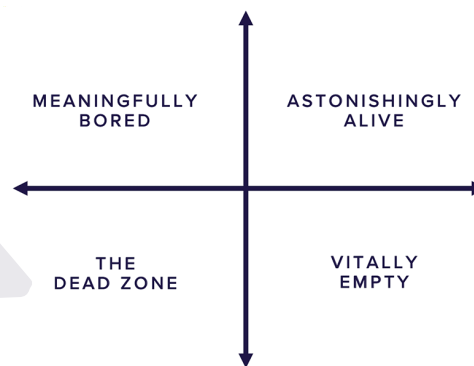
- Reflect back on the times you felt like you had more meaning in your life. What was different then? What can you do now to re-activate some of that meaning?
- Rate your current level of meaning/ purpose for waking up each day on a scale of 1-100. What would it take to notch it up just two points?
- Think of someone you know who has a deeper life purpose. What do you notice?
- Assess whether you are being too hard on yourself for not having a "big enough" purpose. Are you actually doing meaningful things and just judging yourself?
- Let's pretend you passed away (R.I.P.). How do you want people to remember you? How can you tweak your life to lead to that kind of legacy?
- How will you know when you're feeling like your life has more meaning?
- Ask a trusted family member or friend what kind of meaning they think you have in the world. Their answer might inspire you to double-down or make a shift.
- Consider exploring your spiritual side, volunteering, helping more people in and out of work, offering random acts of kindness, donating \$, consistently living up to your values, reading Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (20)... as a start.



"The meaning of life
is whatever you
ascribe it to be. Being
alive is the meaning."
~Joseph Campbell

For when you find yourself in...

THE DEAD ZONE



YOU APPEAR TO BE LOW ON VITALITY AND MEANING...
BUT THERE'S A PULSE— A FAINT ONE!— AND WE CAN ABSOLUTELY WORK WITH THAT

Worry not, friend. You're not alone; many of us feel like life can be both dull and empty— and there are so many ways to address both areas. Our goal for you will be to widen the experiences and deepen the meaning in your life. You are well on your way towards living like you mean it, just by reading this page. This is a sign of life.

THE DEAD ZONE SOUNDS LIKE:

- "Not all of my life is dead but I could definitely do with some jumper cables"
- "I'm bored and empty, and I know there is so much more out there for me"
- "I'm not saying I want to stab myself in the face with boredom, but I sometimes want to stab myself in the face with boredom"
- "I remember how it felt to be truly alive, so I know it's possible"
- "I'm afraid it's going to take more change than I can handle to reinvigorate my life"
- "I know people in my life want me to feel alive"



"Death is very likely
the single best
invention of Life. It is
Life's change agent."
~Steve Jobs

SMART FACTS ABOUT LIVING + DYING:

- The persistent anticipation of death is what puts a fine point on the purpose of our lives. The sense of urgency created from embracing the reality of death, whether it be near or far, is the very thing that can crystallize what the meaning of our respective lives truly are (4)
- The degree to which we fear or accept death is intrinsically linked to the degree to which we've found meaning and purpose in life (21)
- Positive psychology with an existential twist encourages us to courageously confront death to live with more meaning and vitality (19)— to not accept an absence of distress or an "it's fine" relationship to our lives, but to work for the greater cause of living both wider and deeper
 - Zest-filled individuals are more likely to believe their lives are meaningful... hitting the sweet spot of vitality and meaning (22)

IDEAS TO ADD MORE VITALITY/ WIDTH + MEANING/ DEPTH TO YOUR LIFE:

- Read the Meaningfully Bored + Vitally Empty pages in this guide
- Explore if you are clinically depressed— and if so, get some help from a mental health professional who just might make a massive difference in your life
- Don't try to overhaul your life in one fell swoop; it's just not sustainable. Pick ONE THING to do over the next 10 days that will either add more vitality or meaning to your life... like registering for a class, going for a 10-minute walk at lunch, reading a book instead of scrolling through the news, trying meditation, calling your Dad and asking how he's really doing, organizing your closet, trying that local church service, choosing a healthier side dish, taking a mini-retreat by yourself (even for a few hours) to prioritize the things that matter to you in your life, etc.
- Imagine yourself on your (pain-free) deathbed. What regrets might you have? In light of those regrets, what are you motivated to now do to avoid them?
- Write out your bucket list of things you want to do before you die. Make a plan for how to achieve just ONE THING... like planning an itinerary for your trip to Peru.

For when you're all over
the freaking map, in...

THE MID-ZONE

MEANINGFULLY
BORED

ASTONISHINGLY
ALIVE

THE
DEAD ZONE

VITALLY
EMPTY



YES, THIS IS A "CATCH-ALL" CATEGORY.

You absolutely have life in you (phew), and there are also spots where you're missing a bit of vitality and meaning. You're not in dire straights, and this is where you'll want to pay attention: you might not have enough "life pain" nagging at you to motivate any real and important change. Don't let that lack of a BIG problem provide the permission to lead a life that's "fine," a life full of settling. Let's jack up the aliveness, even one notch or two. Trust me, it's worth it.

THE MID-ZONE SOUNDS LIKE:

- "Some days are better than others, I suppose"
- "One week I'm feeling alive-ish then the next week I'm feeling even more average-ly alive"
- "Things in my life are basically okay. They could be better, but it's not like things are seriously broken or anything."
- "Sometimes I'm feeling like I have enough vitality but not enough meaning, and sometimes it's the reverse. It's unusual for me to be full in either category"
- "I want more from life but I don't know how to get it"

SMART FACTS ABOUT GETTING INTO "FLOW":

- The ways we spend our time can lead to the optimal experience known as **flow**, the immersed psychological state associated with highly engaging activities (24)
- Entering the flow zone 'sweet spot' is contingent on **striking the balance between perceived challenges and perceived capacities**, yet we spend a bulk of our free time in passive experiences that waste the opportunity to employ our skills and create the flow-like experiences that deliver a sense of satisfaction and control (25)
- Only 16% of Americans surveyed reported being swept up in intense flow-like experiences daily, while 42% admitted they rarely or never lose track of time while being engaged in an intensely involved activity (1)
 - **Consciously activating temporal scarcity** by considering our mortality might tune us into activities that create flow-like states, remedying the dilemma of boredom

"For what it's worth:
it's never too late to
be whoever you want
to be. I hope you live
a life you're proud of.
If you find that you're
not, I hope you have
the courage to start
all over again."

~Francis Scott
Fitzgerald

IDEAS TO ADD MORE LIFE INTO YOUR LIFE:

- Read the Meaningfully Bored + Vitally Empty pages in this guide, and even The Dead Zone page for ideas on how to feel more alive.
- Engage in Nietzsche's thought experiment of the "eternal return": imagine having to live your identical life over and over again, for eternity— every high, every low, every mundane moment relived. Would you want to live THIS life again? Nietzsche said that our response to this question would either delight us, change us, or crush us (23). What would you relive? What would you change?
- If your life is in the mid-zone you sometimes need a spark to re-ignite interest, excitement and passion. Passion won't happen to you— you need to take risks on its behalf to ignite it. What is one small risk you can take within the next week? (E.g.: asking your boss to take on a new challenge, getting on that dating app, adopting a puppy, trying a sci-fi novel, setting up an Etsy store to sell your stuff...)
- You might be caught in your comfort zone, which can quickly descend you into the Dead Zone. Where are you a little too comfortable (in and out of work)? Where can you be bold and shake things up a bit, in the spirit of living life more fully?



References

JUST IN CASE YOU FEEL LIKE READING MORE

- (1): Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2003). The construction of meaning through vital engagement. In Keyes, C., Haidt, J. (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 83–104). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10594-004
- (2): Kim, K., Zauberman, G., & Bettman, J. (2011). The impact of perceived temporal scarcity of life on temporal distance judgments. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 39, 255.
- (3): Vail, K. E., Juhl, J., Arndt, J., Vess, M., Routledge, C., & Rutjens, B. T. (2012). When death is good for life: Considering the positive trajectories of terror management. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16(4), 303–329. doi:10.1177/1088868312440046
- (4): Koestenbaum, P. (1976). *Is there an answer to death?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- (5): Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- (6): Ryan, R., & Frederick, C. (1997). On energy, personality, and health: Subjective vitality as a dynamic reflection of well-being. *Journal of Personality*, 65(3), 529–565. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.1997.tb00326.x
- (7): Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141–166. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141
- (8): Peterson, C., Park, N., Hall, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2009). Zest and work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30(2), 161–172. doi:10.1002/job.584
- (9): Wong, P. T. P., & Tomer, A. (2011). Beyond terror and denial: The positive psychology of death acceptance. *Death Studies*, 35(2), 99–106. doi:10.1080/07481187.2011.535377
- (10): Carlisle, C. (2014). *On habit*. New York: Routledge.
- (11): Klapp, O. E. (1986). *Overload and boredom: Essays on the quality of life in the information society*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- (12): Kuntz, T. (2000, February 20). *Word for word/boredom; yawn: These are such exciting times*. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/20/weekinreview/word-for-word-boredom-yawn-these-are-such-exciting-times.html>
- (13): González-Cutre, D., Sicilia, Á., Sierra, A., Ferriz, R., & Hagger, M. (2016). Understanding the need for novelty from the perspective of self-determination theory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 102, 159–169. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2016.06.036
- (14): Kashdan, T. B., & Silvia, P. J. (2009). Curiosity and interest: The benefits of thriving on novelty and challenge. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (Vol 2, pp. 367–374). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- (15): Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *The journal of positive psychology*, 8(6), 505–516. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2013.830764
- (16): Wong, P. T. P. (2007). *Meaning-management theory and death acceptance*. In A. Tomer, G. T. Eliason, & P. T. P. Wong (Eds.), *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes* (pp. 65–87). New York, NY: Erlbaum.
- (17): Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 531–545. doi: 10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623
- (18): Fredrickson, B., Grewen, K., Coffey, K., Algoe, S., Firestone, A., Arevalo, J., Ma, J., & Cole, S. (2013). A functional genomic perspective on human well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110(33), 13684–13689. doi:10.1073/pnas.1305419110
- (19): Wong, P.T.P. (2010, July). What is existential positive psychology? *International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 3(1).
- (20): Frankl, V. E. (1963). *Man's search for meaning*. London, England: Hodder & Stoughton.
- (21): Gesser, G., Wong, P., & Reker, G. (1988). Death attitudes across the life-span: The Development and validation of the death attitude profile (DAP). *Omega Journal of Death and Dying*, 18(2), 113–128. doi:10.2190/0DQB-7Q1E-2BER-H6YC
- (22): Peterson, C., Ruch, W., Beerman, U., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2007). Strengths of character, orientations to happiness, and life satisfaction. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2(3), 149–156. doi: 10.1080/17439760701228938
- (23): Nietzsche, F. W. (1896). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra—A book for all and none* (A. Tille, Trans.). New York: Macmillan.
- (24): Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- (25): Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. Jossey-Bass.



JODI WELLMAN can be found over at [Four Thousand Mondays](#), talking all about how the Grim Reaper can inspire us to live lives that are wider and deeper. It's kind of her life purpose.