

Lunch with Meaning

This is an exercise that I have created as a gentle way to help us reconcile ourselves to the knowledge our lifespan has an ending. Most of us, when we focus on the meaning of our own story, are surprised by what is truly important to us. I found that having lunch with friends and writing our own obituaries, contrary to what you might expect, was a very enjoyable experience.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO THIS EXERCISE:

- 4 to 8 willing friends: *Send them an invitation a couple weeks in advance by email or snail mail. You may want to reconfirm a few days before the event.*
- A place with chairs, a table and space (your home, probably).
- Small notebooks for each of them (usually on sale somewhere).
- Pens (8 to 10).
- Lunch for your group (bought, catered or prepared by you). *Please include desert, tea and coffee. When you send out invitation to your friends, it is wise to inquire as to their food allergies or preferences. Everyone, these days, seems to have foods they avoid or are allergic to.*

- Tissue box.
- Straight pins
- 10 sheets of paper, each with the name of a famous deceased woman.

To prepare for the exercise, you will need to select eight to ten famous women who are deceased and create a printed page for each of them.

With the modern tools available to me (i.e.: a computer, a printer and Wikipedia), I easily compiled ten sheets to be used in this exercise. On my list were: Marilyn Monroe, Joan of Arc, Joan Rivers, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other distinguished women that I thought all my friends would recognize. Here is an example of what I pinned to the back of each of my guests:

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: (according to Wikipedia):

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (October 11, 1884 – November 7, 1962) was an American politician, diplomat, and activist. She was the longest-serving First Lady of the United States, holding the post from March 1933 to April 1945 during her husband President Franklin D. Roosevelt's four terms in office. President Harry S. Truman later called her the "First Lady of the World" in tribute to her human rights achievements. A member of the Roosevelt and Livingston families, Eleanor had an unhappy childhood, suffering the deaths of both parents and one of her brothers at a young age. At 15, she attended Allenwood Academy in London, and was deeply influenced by its feminist headmistress Marie Souvestre. Returning to the U.S., she married her fifth cousin once removed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in 1905. The Roosevelts' marriage was complicated from the beginning by Franklin's controlling mother, Sara, and after discovering Franklin's affair with Lucy Mercer in 1918, Eleanor resolved to seek

fulfillment in a public life of her own. She persuaded Franklin to stay in politics following his partial paralysis from polio, and began to give speeches and campaign in his place. After Franklin's election as Governor of New York, Eleanor regularly made public appearances on his behalf. She also shaped the role of First Lady during her tenure and beyond.

Though widely respected in her later years, Roosevelt was a controversial First Lady for her outspokenness, particularly her stance on racial issues. She was the first presidential spouse to hold press conferences, write a syndicated newspaper column, and speak at a national convention. On a few occasions, she publicly disagreed with her husband's policies. She launched an experimental community at Arthurdale, West Virginia, for the families of unemployed miners, later widely regarded as a failure. She advocated for expanded roles for women in the workplace, the civil rights of African Americans and Asian Americans, and the rights of World War II refugees.

Following her husband's death, Eleanor remained active in politics for the rest of her life. She pressed the United States to join and support the United Nations and became one of its first delegates. She served as the first chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, and oversaw the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Later she chaired the John F. Kennedy administration's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. By the time of her death, she was regarded as "one of the most esteemed women in the world"; she was called "the object of almost universal respect" in her *New York Times* obituary.^[3] In 1999, she was ranked ninth in the top ten of Gallup's List of Most Widely Admired People of the 20th Century.

To begin: Yes, each of your guests is going to have a name pinned to their back. As your guests arrive, you will let each of them choose one sheet (show them the blank side), and you will pin this sheet to their back.

The game: Each guest needs to discover who they are by asking *yes* or *no* questions. Avoid any hints. *You have not told your guests that they are famous dead women.* As the leader, a friendly deadpan expression is best. Let your guest mill or sit around and quiz each other.

An example: Susan asks Mandy, “Am I a movie star?” Since the name on her back is Eleanor Roosevelt, Mandy answers, “No.”

Another example: Mandy has Joan Rivers pinned to her back. Mandy asks Julia, “Am I a writer?” Julia answers, “Yes.” Joan Rivers was a writer as well as a comedian, so the answer is “yes”; however, Mandy may find this confusing as Joan Rivers was best known as a comedian.

Whatever. There are challenges to every game. Encourage your friends to play it straight—hints or clues are not needed. This game should be quite easy to play. And it is a great facilitator to get people comfortable with each other.

Next, serve lunch or allow your guests to serve themselves from a buffet. Have your guests continue to ask questions as you serve lunch. Allow the game to ebb and flow as people eat their food. Eventually, someone will say, “I am Eleanor Roosevelt,” and if this is correct, then take the sheet off her back, but ask her to hold onto it.

When lunch is finished, you will want to conclude the game with everyone knowing who they are. If someone is stuck, you (as the leader) may have to give creative hints.

An example of creatively helping your guest to figure out who she is: Linda had Queen Elizabeth I pinned to her back. Linda had figured out that she was a political figure from Europe who lived a long time ago.

She just could not name herself. Finally I asked everyone to treat her if she (the Queen) was here. Everyone curtsied, and then Linda immediately knew she was Queen Elizabeth I.

Lunch (serve desert later) is over. Form an informal circle. Have a discussion with everyone. Ask your friends, “What did these famous or infamous women have in common?” This will produce an interesting and lively discourse. Good. Ideas are flowing. Okay. The conversation goes on. You may have to tell them that besides all the commonalities mentioned, *all these women are deceased.*

Next step—Write an epitaph:

An epitaph is an inscription on a tombstone or a short phrase meant to summarize the qualities of the dearly departed. It’s a commemorative and short paragraph or a few pithy sentences.

Ask everyone to write an epitaph for her famous person. They can use to information on the sheet of paper or anything they know or feel about this identity.

Here is an example of an epitaph. Linda for Queen Elizabeth I: *A Queen wed to no man, faithful to her country for 40 years.*

Or Mandy for Joan Rivers: *Joan grew old without a wrinkle, her wit a keen sword as she won the day for women comedians.*

Hand out pens. Give everyone a few minutes to write an epitaph for her famous (now found-out) identity. Now share. Change papers—get them to write another epitaph—share or not.

Next—Dessert, anyone? Coffee or tea?

Writing your personal obituary: THIS EXERCISE IS THE HEART OF THE MATTER.

Introducing this is a bit delicate. You are going to ask everyone to write her own obituary, or what she would like to be read at her funeral, end-of-life celebration or memorial.

This is how I introduced this exercise: I read my mother's obituary from *The New York Times*. You might select an obituary of someone you knew or read a piece that is well written or unusual or even amusing.

My mother was really not famous enough for her death to be chronicled in *The New York Times*. However, a former student was the art critic for the *Times*. She arranged for and wrote this obituary. It would have pleased my mother. Sometimes, just knowing the right person....

Beatrice Lees, Dance Teacher, 84

Beatrice Lees, an innovative teacher of improvisational dance movement, died on Monday at Lenox Hill Hospital. She was 84 and lived in Manhattan.

Mrs. Lees, whose original name was Beatrice Mills, was born in 1910 in Chicago into a theatrical family that included her sister, Viola Spolin, who helped found the improvisational theater movement, and a cousin, Robert Fizdale, the pianist and writer.

Trained in flamenco, modern dance and ballet, she taught movement to non-dance performers, including opera singers, musicians and actors. From 1948 to 1953, she had her own dance company in Chicago. She moved to New York City in 1953 and taught at her own studio until her death.

For the last seven years, Mrs. Lees also taught movement classes and worked on productions at the New Actors Workshop, which was founded in 1988 by Paul Sills, her nephew; Mike Nichols, and George Morrison.

Mrs. Lees was married four times, most recently to Jesse Lees, who died in 1975.

She is survived by a daughter, Claire Hays, and two granddaughters, all of Taos, N.M.

After reading this to my luncheon guests, I suggested that my mother might not have chosen these words for herself and certainly would have emphasized different aspects of her life. If you read a selected obituary, then ask your friends what they felt about what you read them. Moving on.

Next step: Now you can hand out the notebooks and pens for the writing exercise. Let everyone find a comfortable spot to write.

Let us all take the opportunity to write our own last statement. If you were to write your own obituary, what would it say? What are the highlights of your life? What would you like someone to know about you or not know about you? You might want to write your history (brief), or you might choose to give advice to the next generation. There are many different ways to fulfill this assignment.

Your friends may ask for detailed instructions. As the coach, try to keep this experience as *open* and *unstructured* as possible. Give your group permission to write anything that the topic inspires. There are no rules: you can use any form or voice or style that comes to mind.

Give everyone no more than 15 minutes to complete the exercise.

Provide tissue. When one person has finished, then it is time to give the group five more minutes. Yes, you need to write your obituary as well.

Time is up. Form some kind of circle.

Now ask your group, “Does anyone want to read what they wrote?” Or, “Alice, would you share your writing?” Or if no one else is willing, you can always read your own piece. Start and then continue around the circle. You want to encourage everyone to read what she wrote.

I am always surprised and touched by what women have to say.

Concluding:

Ask the group:

What did you learn about yourself?

How did you feel about doing this exercise?

What surprised you about what you said?

Spend as much or little time in follow-up discussion as feels right.

Finally: hugs, and appreciation. Yes, send everyone home with their notebooks and leftover food.

*What needs
doing or completing?
Beyond the Bucket List*

We realize our time is limited. Are we leaving something undone? Places to see? Bridges to cross? People to see? Treks that need slogging? Making a list of journeys, experiences, or personal reconciliations, and then completing them one by one (and crossing them off our list), has become a popular pastime. Everyone is making a bucket list. Heavyweight movie stars (think Jack Nicolson and Morgan Freeman) entertain us with portrayals of men rising from their hospital beds to go for crazy adventures and heartfelt reunions. What about you? Do you think you can formulate a plan that would fulfill your sense of having lived to the max?

Yes, if it suits you, and you have the budget, *getting to the finish line with honor* can be about going to special places, making amends, doing it up, and fabulous meals. And if all of us started running around the world with pen and paper, this could be a terrific boon for the travel industry.

This might be a great way to use the remaining time on the clock. Very few of us know how long that will be. Or how long we will have the energy to zip around the world. Or make things right with people we care about.

Do you like making lists? I think that that there is value in making lists. Don't you? This could be exciting. Let us start.

\$\$\$\$ Small and most likely pricey stuff you have always longed for or wanted to do:

Do you want to have a day at premiere spa, an expensive dress for a one-time occasion, a diamond ring, or dinner at a five-star restaurant? What minor (money is meant to be used) indulgences have you been depriving yourself of that could amuse, entertain or cheer you up? Go ahead, darling—have at it. As for me, I am signing up for oysters, fresh lobster, and corn-on-the-cob. All the melted butter I want.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

More: _____

\$ or \$\$\$ Clearing your personal slate:

Many of us have experienced the loss of friends and family who are alive, but for very various reasons have become “dead” to us. Is there some way to dredge the swamp, start over, or express anger or regret? Take a chance, write a letter, or make a phone call—be the bigger heart.

I agree that there may some relationships that can never be healed. Light a candle, think kind thoughts, or plant a tree. Very serious and destructive relationships that caused permanent harm may never have a simple solution. You could consider donating time and/or money to a cause that seems to address the issue.

\$ or \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ Leaving your legacy:

More than 20,000 years ago, Neolithic artists dipped their hands in red ochre and pressed them on cave walls. Their crimson handprints are still visible. Amazing.

Do you wish to leave a mark—small or grand?

Let us think helpful. Is there something you could do to better the world you leave behind? Making positive and innovative changes in how you are spending your last energies may make a difference in the meaning of your entire life and leave an important legacy behind.

Any great ideas?

Sometime later:

Wow, you have crossed everything off your list. Having done it all, are you more at ease with your eventual demise? Or have you discovered your quest to find peace with death is a more esoteric and subtle journey done from the inside radiating outwards?