


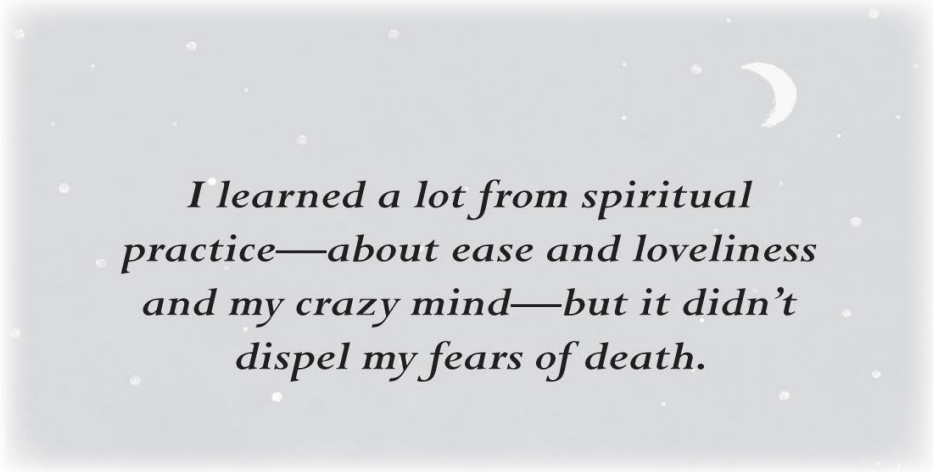
Introduction by ANNE LAMOTT

This 
Messy
Magnificent
Life

A Field Guide

Geneen Roth

Author of the #1 New York Times Bestseller
Women Food and God



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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Breaths I Have Left

When I was eight my father gave me a copy of *Death Be Not Proud*, a book by John Gunther about the life and death of his son Johnny, and by the time I turned the last page, and I say this in the kindest possible way, I'd become a bit of a hypochondriac and completely death-obsessed. Not only did I start worrying that every time I got a headache I had a brain tumor (as little Johnny did), but I also became convinced that the end was near. When my parents walked out the door,

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I wondered whether I would see them again. When my brother went to Mike May Day Camp, I worried he would get run over by a car. I just couldn't believe that eight-year-old Johnny had died—and that everyone else would die as well. It didn't seem fair, it didn't seem right. Or, as Woody Allen said, when asked how he felt about death, "I am strongly against it."

In my twenties and thirties I elevated my death-obsession into a spiritual practice. I learned Buddhist meditation, went to graveyards with teachers who were intent on teaching us what I'd known for years: *Life is short. People die. You will be amongst them.* I traveled to India and saw the burning ghats in Benares. I witnessed how long it took a body, with all its bones and muscle, hair and eyes, to turn to ashes. (FYI: A long time. I had to get a Coke halfway through and come back for the rest.) I learned a lot from spiritual practice—about ease and loveliness and my crazy mind—but it didn't dispel my fears of death. If anything, it exacerbated them because I became more aware of the shortness of life. My life in particular.

There is an old saying in Buddhist circles that this human life is so precious that it is as if each one of us is like a turtle that lives in the ocean and comes up for air every hundred years. If by chance that rising turtle put

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its head through a bucket floating on the ocean's surface it would be extremely rare. Attaining a human life is even rarer than that. So, since you have a chance in this one precious life to discover who you really are—your true nature—don't waste a single second.

Talk about pressure.

As I headed into my forties and fifties, people around me were dying or had died. My father, my dear friend Lew, my cat. My aunt Bea. My friend Rosemary. And every time, it was the same: how could a person (even those with four legs) be here one day and gone the next? Death was so irreversible, so forever—unlike, say, buying a pair of shoes from Zappo's with a 365-day return policy.

But then something unexpected happened. As part of a routine medical procedure my throat closed, my heart rate skyrocketed, my blood pressure dropped, and I had the strange sensation of leaving my body. I was conscious enough to realize that this was the Big It: I was dying. I remember being surprised that it was happening so quickly, and on an ordinary day in September. (I was hoping for harps and orchids and long soulful glances of loved ones when I died, not a chilly, antiseptic examination room with a nurse with a purple happy face pinned on her smock and a doctor with a wandering eye who kept imploring me to look at him.)

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Although there were many compelling insights during and after that near-death experience, one that has remained with me is the visceral understanding that all my years of being death-obsessed weren't actually about dying or death; they were about life. They weren't about fear of the end, they were about longing to be awake in the middle (also known as the present). I wanted, as the poet Mary Oliver says, to spend my life "married to amazement," not wedded to regret or exhaustion.

After the medical procedure I realized that this life wasn't a dress rehearsal for some bigger, better promise around the corner. This was it, and my breaths were numbered. I didn't know how many breaths I had left—an eighty-year-old person takes about 672,768,000 breaths in a lifetime, which meant I'd used up three quarters of my actuarially allotted breaths—but it became apparent that no matter how charming I was or how many organic pomegranates I ate, not dying was not an option.

Within a few days of being home from the hospital, I made a list of what I loved. Of what I would have regretted not doing (more of) had I died in the examination room. The list was short: being with my husband, family, and friends; playing with my dog; being outside; writing and teaching. I began quitting things in which I didn't

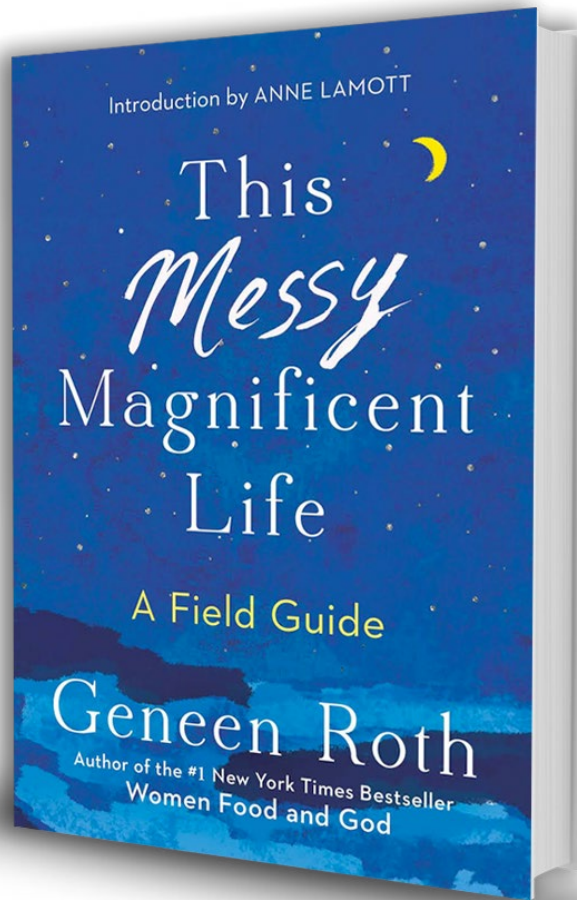
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want to participate. I began saying no to parties I didn't want to go to, invitations I didn't want to accept. I quit a graduate program in which I was enrolled, and I started working on a book I'd wanted to write for years. I spent more time with trees, particularly a maple tree in our driveway. I told my husband regularly what I cherished about him and our life together. Over and over, with each day and each choice, I asked myself: is this something on which I want to spend the breaths I have left?

Eight years have passed and I am still asking that question. Not always, of course. Sometimes when my husband and I are fighting, revenge supplants breaths in my mind. But even then I frequently pull myself back from the brink and remember that we are only alive for a brief run, and I don't want to miss a breath.

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This Messy Magnificent Life: A Field Guide

Compelling, hilarious and big-hearted, Geneen Roth's *This Messy Magnificent Life* is a provocative exploration of the personal beliefs, hidden traumas, and social pressures that shape not just women's feelings about their bodies, but also their confidence, choices and relationships.

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