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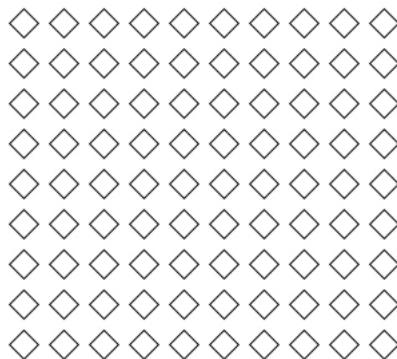
The Tail End

December 11, 2015 By Tim Urban

We made a fancy PDF of this post for printing and offline viewing. [Buy it here.](#)

In a post [last year](#), we laid out the human lifespan visually. By years:

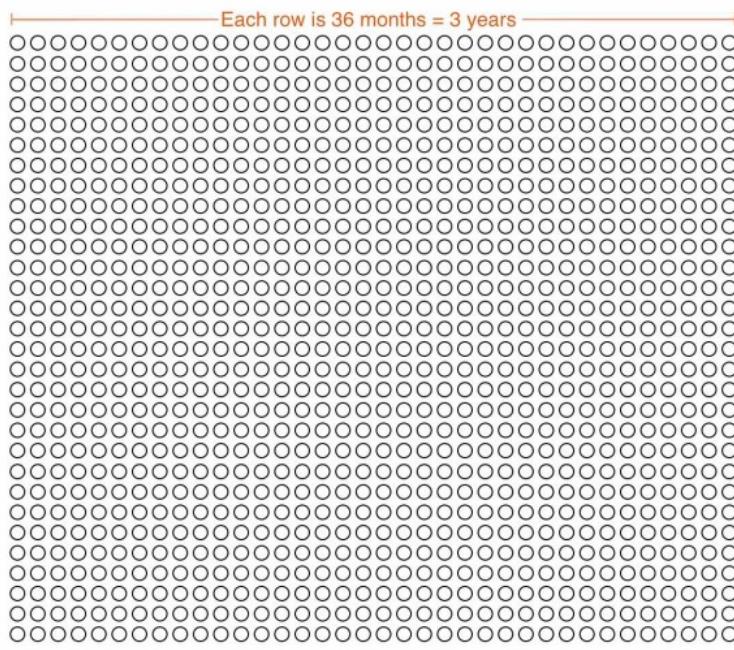
A 90-Year Human Life in Years



waitbutwhy.com

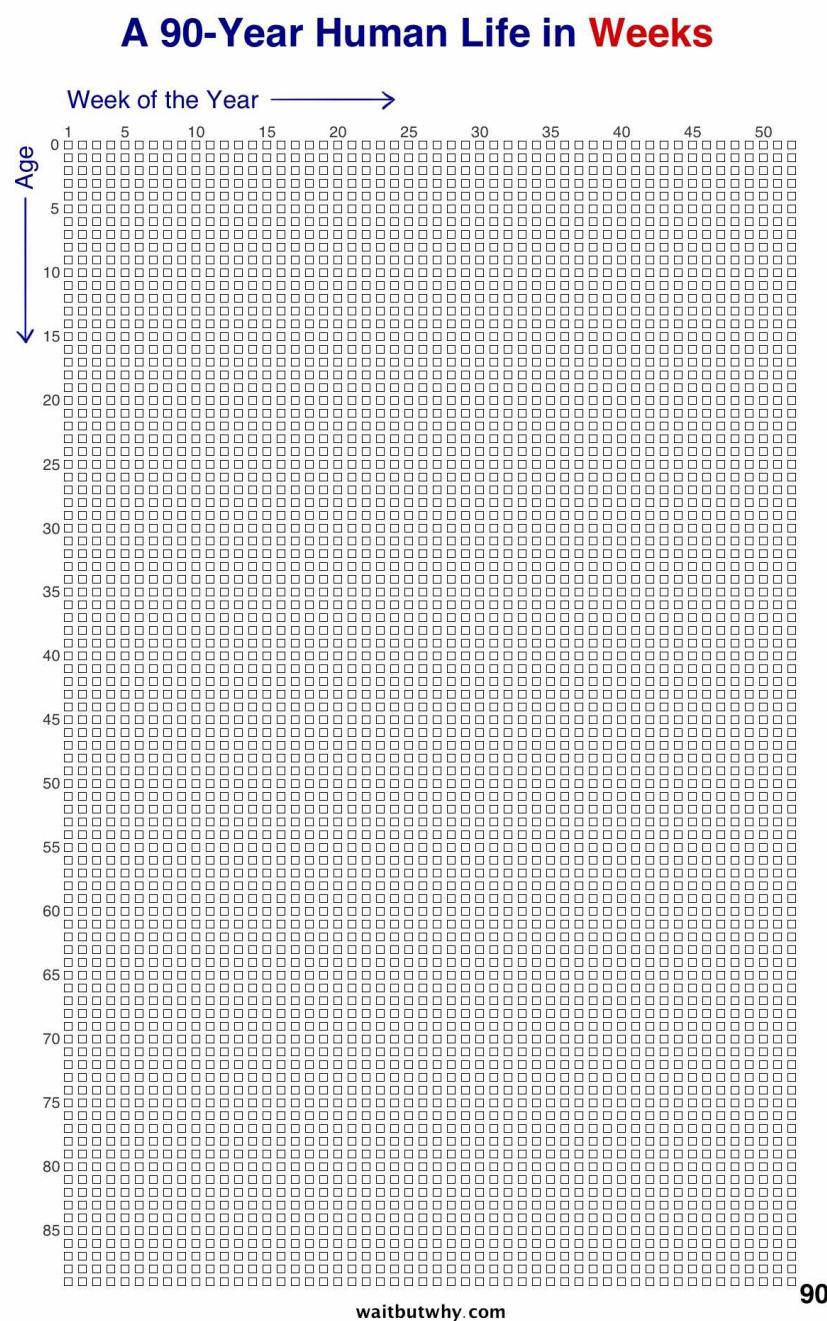
By months:

A 90-Year Human Life in Months



waitbutwhy.com

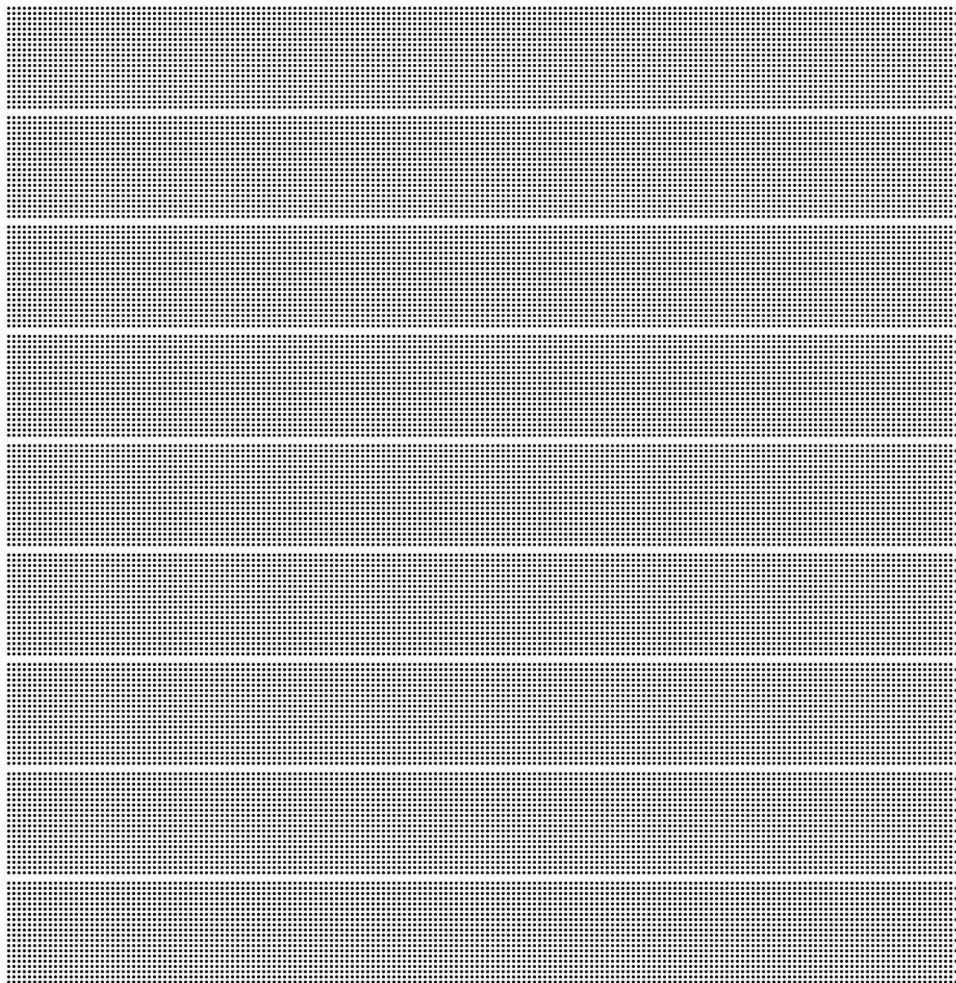
And by weeks:



While working on that post, I also made a days chart, but it seemed a bit much, so I left it out. But fuck it.

All the Days in a 90-Year Human Life

(2 rows = 1 year, each section = 1 decade)



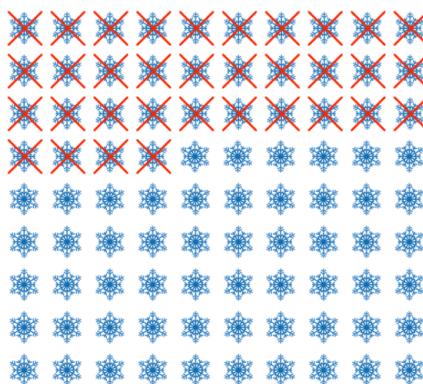
waitbutwhy.com

The days chart blows my mind as much as the weeks chart. Each of those dots is only a single Tuesday or Friday or Sunday, but even a lucky person who lives to 90 will have no problem fitting every day in their life on [one sheet of paper](#).

But since doing the Life in Weeks post, I've been thinking about something else.

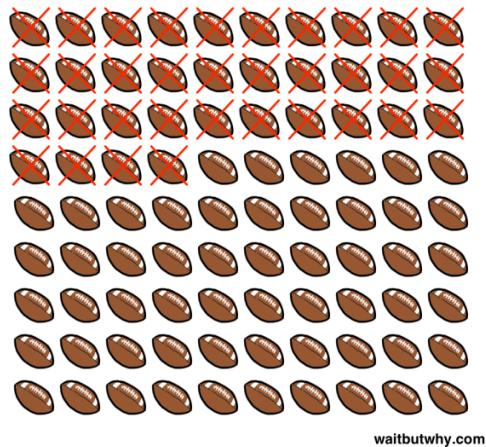
Instead of measuring your life in units of time, you can measure it in activities or events. To use myself as an example:

I'm 34, so let's be super optimistic and say I'll be hanging around drawing stick figures till I'm 90.^① If so, I have a little under 60 winters left:

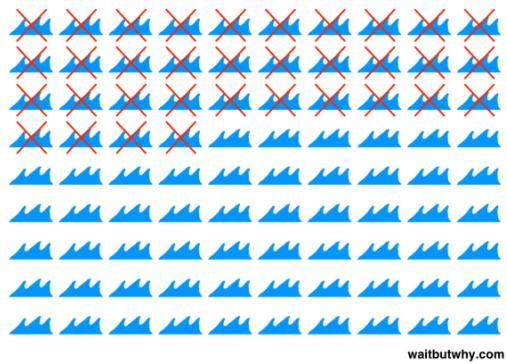


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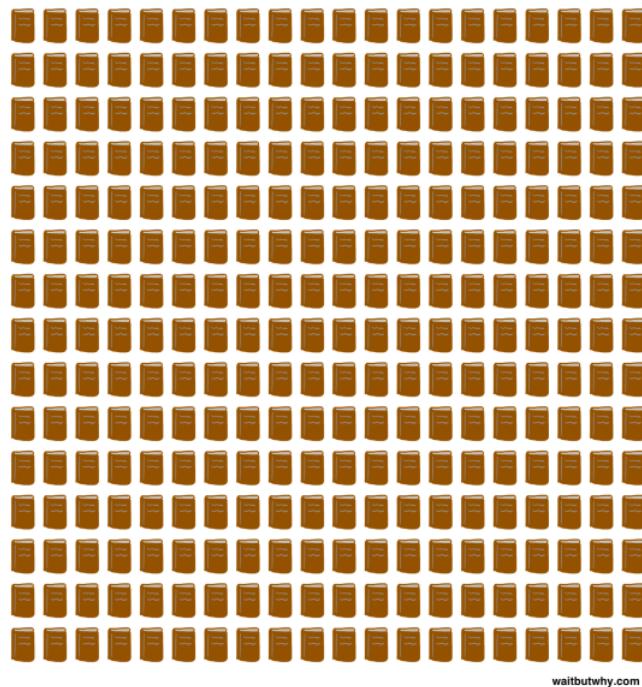
And maybe around 60 Superbowls left:



The ocean is freezing and putting my body into it is a bad life experience, so I tend to limit myself to around one ocean swim a year. So as weird as it seems, I might only go in the ocean 60 more times:



Not counting Wait But Why research, I read about five books a year, so even though it feels like I'll read an endless number of books in the future, I actually have to choose only 300 of all the books out there to read and accept that I'll sign off for eternity without knowing what goes on in all the rest.

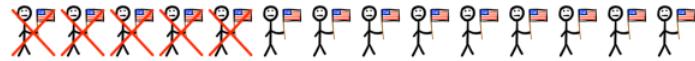


Growing up in Boston, I went to Red Sox games all the time, but if I never move back there, I'll probably continue at my current rate of going to a Sox game about once every three years—meaning this little

row of 20 represents my remaining Fenway visits:



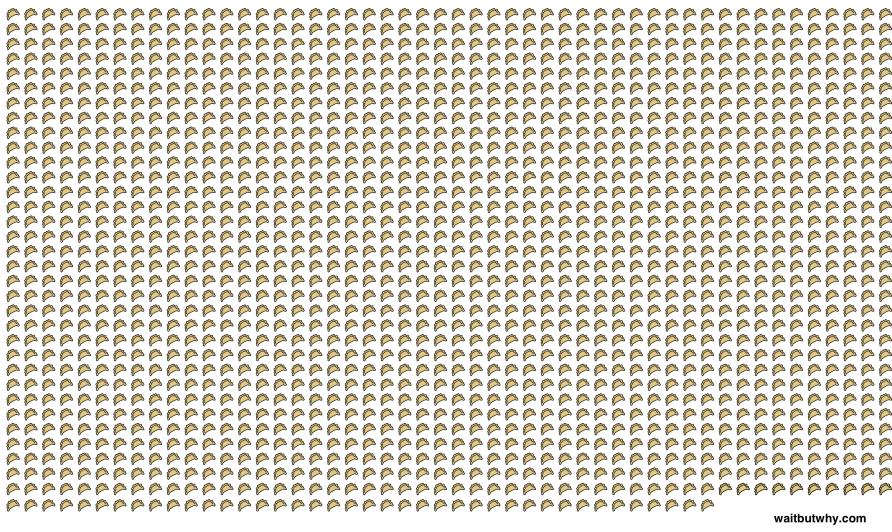
There have been eight US presidential elections during my lifetime and about 15 to go. I've seen five presidents in office and if that rate continues, I'll see about nine more.



I probably eat pizza about once a month, so I've got about 700 more chances to eat pizza. I have an even brighter future with dumplings. I have Chinese food about twice a month and I tend to make sure six dumplings occurs each time, so I have a fuckton of dumplings to look forward to:

336.9k
Shares





But these things aren't what I've been thinking about. Most of the things I just mentioned happen with a similar frequency during each year of my life, which spreads them out somewhat evenly through time. If I'm around a third of my way through life, I'm also about a third of my way through experiencing the activity or event.

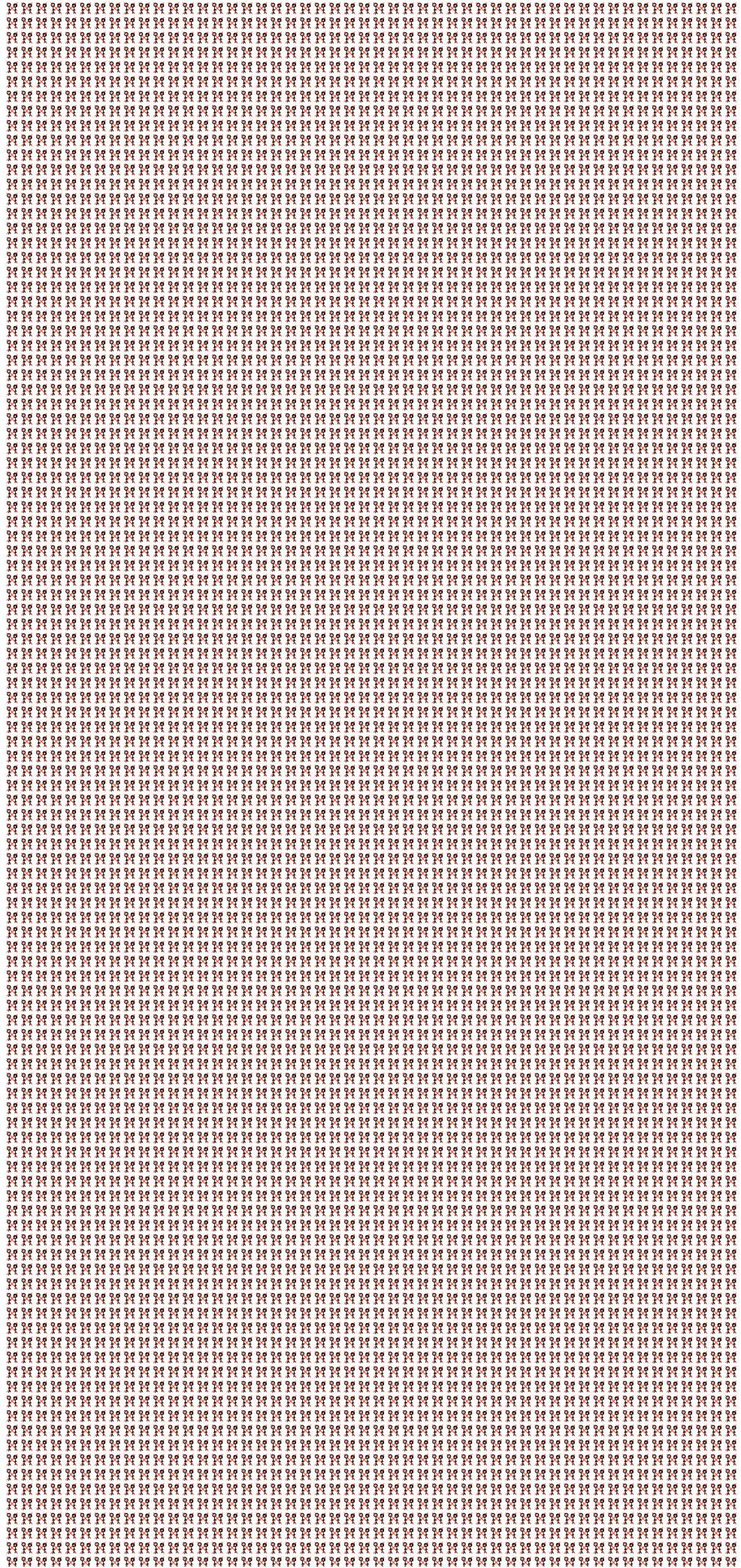
What I've been thinking about is a really important part of life that, unlike all of these examples, isn't spread out evenly through time—something whose [already done / still to come] ratio doesn't at all align with how far I am through life:

Relationships.

I've been thinking about my parents, who are in their mid-60s. During my first 18 years, I spent some time with my parents during at least 90% of my days. But since heading off to college and then later moving out of Boston, I've probably seen them an average of only five times a year each, for an average of maybe two days each time. 10 days a year. About 3% of the days I spent with them each year of my childhood.

Being in their mid-60s, let's continue to be super optimistic and say I'm one of the incredibly lucky people to have both parents alive into my 60s. That would give us about 30 more years of coexistence. If the ten days a year thing holds, that's 300 days left to hang with mom and dad. Less time than I spent with them in any one of my 18 childhood years.

When you look at that reality, you realize that despite not being at the end of your life, you may very well be nearing the end of your time with some of the most important people in your life. If I lay out the total days I'll ever spend with each of my parents—assuming I'm as lucky as can be—this becomes starkly clear:





waitbutwhy.com

It turns out that when I graduated from high school, I had already used up 93% of my in-person parent time. I'm now enjoying the last 5% of that time. We're in the tail end.

It's a similar story with my two sisters. After living in a house with them for 10 and 13 years respectively, I now live across the country from both of them and spend maybe 15 days with each of them a year. Hopefully, that leaves us with about 15% of our total hangout time left.

The same often goes for old friends. In high school, I sat around playing hearts with the same four guys about five days a week. In four years, we probably racked up 700 group hangouts. Now, scattered around the country with totally different lives and schedules, the five of us are in the same room at the same time probably 10 days each decade. The group is in its final 7%.

So what do we do with this information?

Setting aside my secret hope that technological advances will let me live to 700, I see three takeaways here:

- 1) Living in the same place as the people you love matters.** I probably have 10X the time left with the people who live in my city as I do with the people who live somewhere else.
- 2) Priorities matter.** Your remaining face time with any person depends largely on where that person falls on your list of life priorities. Make sure this list is set by you—not by unconscious inertia.
- 3) Quality time matters.** If you're in your last 10% of time with someone you love, keep that fact in the front of your mind when you're with them and treat that time as what it actually is: precious.

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More things to reflect on:

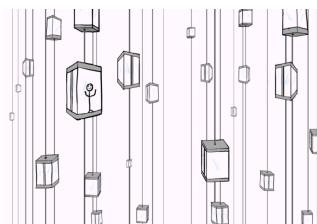
[Your Life in Weeks](#). The post this one was based on.

[Life is a Picture, But You Live in a Pixel](#). So obvious, so hard to remember.

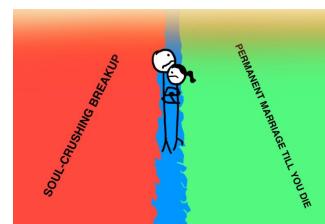
[Clueyness: A Weird Kind of Sad](#). A new name for an old phenomenon.

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[AuntPam](#) • 11 days ago

Such a poignant read for me; my mom died about six weeks ago, and all I can think about is how much I miss her. It's hard to REALLY believe I'm not going to see her again.

[^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[Pam Baumeister](#) • 17 days ago

Thanks for the awesome post! This is a sobering read, for sure. My parents are pushing 80 with a short stick. We live only 30 minutes away from each other and I have been too busy to get together with them recently. This post makes me realize that needs to change. Additionally, as a parent, it makes me realize how important the time is that I have with my children before they graduate high school and move on to college! That's also a sobering thought. Time is our most important resource!

[^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[billcollings](#) • a month ago

Overall not a bad way for people to put their lives in perspective. Of course what points chosen is unique with each individual so tough to include such a wide range in a short article.

[1 ^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[Escobar Cheung](#) • a month ago

This is sad yet motivational at the same time.

[4 ^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[Nikkus](#) • 2 months ago

A great way for those who bring order in their lives. Is there an application or an online service with this approach? keep a diary and see past stages and a visual representation of the whole life path?

[1 ^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[PatriciaTandB](#) → [Nikkus](#) • 2 months ago

Jesus, there really IS an app for everything. :D

[1 ^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[Avdey](#) → [Nikkus](#) • 2 months ago

Timestripe has a similar visual representation and has a diary/goal setting feature.

[1 ^](#) [v](#) [Reply](#) [Share >](#)



[zb](#) • 2 months ago

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. I'm 48 and so many are already gone. Among them my dad at a far too young 61 and my mom is approaching 70! When I was in my grade school years I lived with my

grandparents my aunts and uncles were between 9-16 years older than me and were close enough for me to be the littlest brother. They are all approaching retirement age and it really hits me hard to think that I may only spend a few more months of total time with them.

When I think about those family holidays and more are gone than remain or have joined. Very bittersweet memories of it all.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



GunnarMyrdahl • 2 months ago

Mine died when I was 13 and 19, respectively, and I was an only child with grandparents deceased. And I am 81 now. Can I count - in some of those blocks - to have "raised myself?"

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Man_in_PA • 2 months ago

My parents both lived to be about 83. So, I figure I'll live to be about 83.

Once I hit 83, I'll be saying "this could be my last day."

However, my friend's grandmother just passed away at 111.

If she thought like me, she would have been saying "this could be my last day" for 28 years.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



John Timmons • 3 months ago

I am lucky enough to have my mom still living and living with me. I lost my dad when I was 44 and we spent some great times together growing up. But there was that period of time in my 20s when I was off doing other "important" things and I can't help but think how much potential time with him I squandered. One of my favorite songs is one I have a real hard time listening to. "Cat's In The Cradle" How's that for a weird contradiction? This is an inspired site.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Annie • 3 months ago

♥ life changing

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Cliff • 4 months ago

Only 5 books a year?

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Mahnoor Q. • 5 months ago

I think I might print one of the first ones out and put it on my wall. Great post, BTW.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Martin • 6 months ago

I wish I had seen this post before my granddad died 2013. Still sad. Very much.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Mini • 7 months ago

I like the days being blurry on the examples, just like they start to be when one gets up to the high numbers, he, he. but an interesting, time-waster.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



About Creativity • 10 months ago

Very good.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



nick • 10 months ago

I'm so excited about how many dumplings I have left!

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Davy_OneManNavy • 10 months ago

Fuck you, I came here to learn (although I still did), not to cry

11 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Reuben Barr • a year ago

You might be able to use this system to quantify opportunity for happiness over a lifetime.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Justin Ahn • a year ago

While I agree with the importance of prioritizing time, I don't necessarily agree with your tail end calculation per se and the reason why to your wait, but why reaction is because not all time is weighted the same. For example yes, you probably spend 90% of your early years seeing your parents but how many of those days were really meaningful, in fact that much time together and you're likely to see days that spring quite the opposite - days you wish you didn't have fighting, angry at, etc. By spending less time with a person, each time you see them you generally maximize your moment with them vs say if you spend all your time with

someone you might only maximize a day every so often.

13 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Casey Palmisano • a year ago

Carpe Diem!

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jeff McKinney • a year ago

Great post, Tim. Thanks for putting the time into the graphics. Just shared it with my (small) list :)

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jeremy Nagel • a year ago

Typo in this sentence: "Being in their mid-60s, let's continue to be super optimistic and say I'm one of the incredibly lucky people to have both parents alive into my 60s."

Should be "into my 90s"

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Matt Porter ↗ Jeremy Nagel • a year ago

That isn't a typo, just fyi. He means that he hopes to have his parents alive when he (Tim) is in his 60s, and his parents are in their 90s. If his parents are alive when he's into his 90s, that would mean his parents are in their 120s.

17 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Barbara Gracious • a year ago

With 2 elderly parents 500 miles apart from each other, I've entered the phase of stressful long-distance caretaking. It is the most challenging thing I have ever done. My dad is very conscious to consistently tell me he loves me and that I'm a special daughter for the efforts I've made. It's amazing they are still my role models into their 80s and for that I'm blessed.

15 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Nathy F. • a year ago

Depressing but also real af.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



inspireants • a year ago

In short: carpe diem or
Sex, drugs and rock n' roll

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



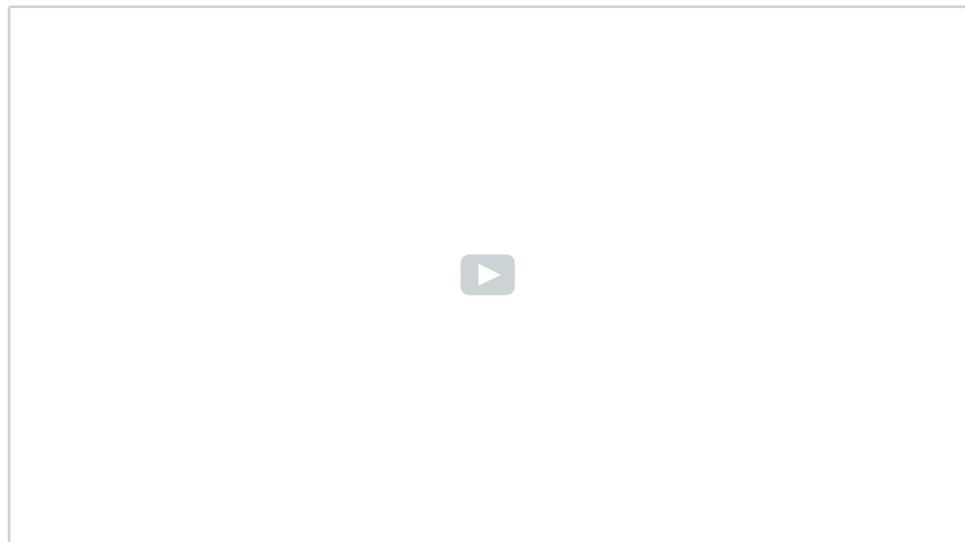
SputnickK • 2 years ago

I believe that the singularity will happen by 2045, so it wouldn't surprise me if most of the people reading this article end up living much longer than 90 years. (basically for as long as they want due to exponential technological advances)

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Lars • 2 years ago



4 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Switchthefield • 2 years ago

I am not sure the self-awareness of time is always that relevant, important, or even helpful.

It really does not matter if I have 100 days or 100 hours of time left with a parent, sibling, or friend. What matters is that I have some meaningful connection, a genuine connection, moments of emotional resonance,

to love and to hold, to enlighten and inform and delight me, for the rest of my days. I will take one meaningful, genuine emotional moment over 1,000 days of small talk and mindless presence.

The same is true in my career, as I work in a position where I must keep time. I would much rather do my work, than spend my mornings, evenings, and afternoons, "measuring out my life with coffee spoons."

Should we be mindful of time? Of course. Individually and collectively, we are a blip of existence. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe 50 years from now, I too shall die and pass from existence. And the passion and power of those life moments and relationships will always be more important and valuable and satisfying to me than an accounting of my days.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



30p • 2 years ago

this is an interesting essay by Paul Graham, more or less about the same subject
<http://www.paulgraham.com/v...>

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Nojuan Especial • 2 years ago

This just makes me resent all the time I waste on working for someone else, doing chores, eating and grooming etc even more. Can someone please put my consciousness into a robot? I've no allegiance to mortal flesh, and a robotic body would make earning money efficient so that I would actually be able to make the most of my time. Of course, being robotic would extend my time (possibly indefinitely).. win-win!

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



gawkface ↗ Nojuan Especial • a year ago

Or just invent the clone machine already!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Michael • 2 years ago

I read this a while ago and was thinking about it again now, and had a few insights I thought I'd share. This isn't intended to diminish the points Tim made, but rather add another dimension.

Face time spent with a person isn't a complete description of your relationship with them. Even though my closest family (parents and sister) aren't physically present for a lot of my time, they are still very much constantly "in" my life, and I "in" theirs. Consider the time we spend thinking about each other. Consider the value we get out of knowing that we can contact each other at will, even if only over text message or email. Consider the fact that our individual characters still grow at the same rate, and that we participate in each other's growth much more than implied by the distance between us. And the quality of the time we do spend with each other is much higher than it was when we saw each other much more often.

Tim's article raises important questions by putting the raw amount of time spent with loved ones into perspective. However, a careful consideration of the value we derive from our closest relationships, beyond a simple measurement of the number of hours, should enable us to answer those questions.

In short: don't read this as another "we all need to rethink our lives" article. Rather focus on Tim's three key takeaways, which I believe are very consistent with that I've said.

20 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Tikhung • 2 years ago

It's moments like this, should I quote Ridley Scott's masterpiece Blade Runner:
"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears...in...rain."

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Dave Watts • 2 years ago

When I first started reading an article on this website, I was intrigued by the author's ability to put into perspective (by charting, mapping, graphing or in some other graphical way) concerns, like time and mortality, that we all think about at one point in our lives. However, as I go on to read more posts, I see hours and hours of time that has been invested into number-crunching, copy-and-pasting, photo-shopping graphics to "put into perspective" your short time you have here on earth. But after reading enough "look here's how many hours, days, weeks, years you have" and other things people tend to do while procrastinating, it makes me realize just how self-defeating the author is actually being.

This is not an insult, in fact the author of these posts I share many traits, we tend to over-analyse, ponder, perhaps dance with eccentricity here and there and you can't blame someone for devoting so much of their time for your reading enjoyment and learning, but there is something pitiful about those of us who do this. I fully admit that I'm here pondering the concept of time because I'm procrastinating on something much more important that is due tomorrow (again, something the author and I - and a billion other people, have in common, but I still want to point something out that might save someone going down the self-defeating path of procrastination).

Go back up to the top of this article, and skim down through the paragraphs, look at the illustrations and think to yourself "how long did it take to make this image?", "what is the author trying to tell me, that time is

[see more](#)

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



gawkface → Dave Watts · a year ago

Many wandering ships need a lighthouse lest they crash!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Linda Bee → Dave Watts · 2 years ago

This perspective is his gift to us. To realize something perhaps we would never have realized had he not spent his hours or days creating his perspective into layman terms. I'd never pondered upon life in this sort of format before, but now that I have - yes - if helps me prioritize better. But I will not classify every moment of my time into a pixel; it's delivered the awareness to simply ask "is this how I want to spend this moment in time"; because if not there are plenty of other quality experiences I can be doing instead.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Jurgy · 2 years ago

this.is.scary

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Anastasia Dunbar → Jurgy · 2 years ago

Good luck, we all are going to die anyway.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Bianca Camacho · 2 years ago

How very stoic this is.

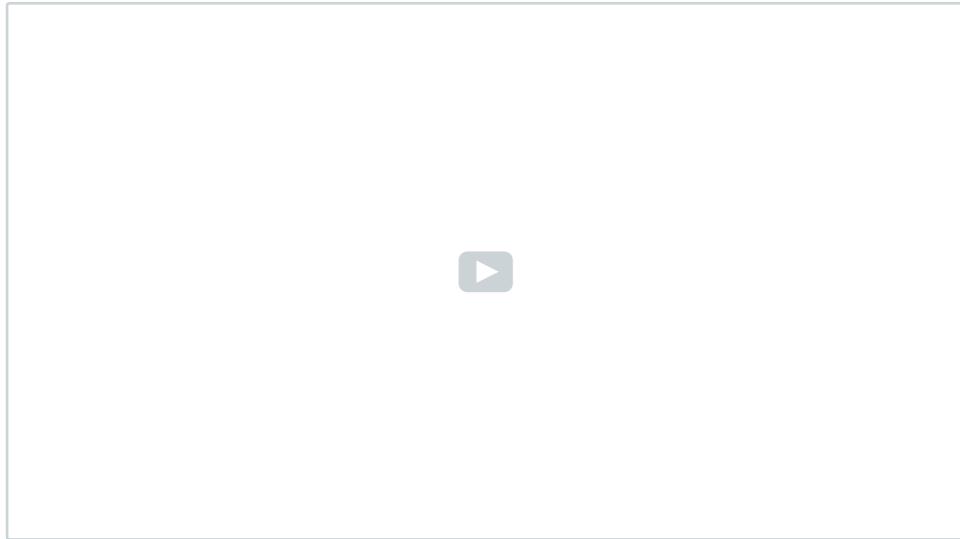
4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



The Zero To One Project · 2 years ago

The ending just get you sad and start to really think hard about what and who you're spending time with!

This totally inspired me to do my take on this story, and I thought I'd share it here! LOVE WAIT BUT WHY!



6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



The Zero To One Project → The Zero To One Project · 2 years ago

And so sorry in advance if this post sounded a little spammy, that wasn't my intention, just thought others might like my take on it all. It's not one of those videos which is just a summary of the original, it's rather a what this post inspired me to think about.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



THEPenguinReader360 → The Zero To One Project · 2 years ago

his throat is dry

^ | v · Reply · Share >



The Zero To One Project → THEPenguinReader360 · 2 years ago

Hahahaha yeah, I must have had an epic night the day before.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



THEPenguinReader360 → The Zero To One Project · 2 years ago

so your a youtuber?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



The Zero To One Project → THEPenguinReader360 · 2 years ago

Yup, I find every time I refer my friends onto WBW articles they can't be bothered

reading the whole thing. So I decided to create short video summaries (but less copy and paste and more me expanding on ideas that I enjoyed in the article). I just finished the article on Cryonics. A few of my friends have started reading WBW because the video got their interests wet about knowing more.

2 ▲ | ▼ • Reply • Share >



Jon McCullough • 2 years ago

Ooph. That one hit home... As a 32 year old Canadian "expat" living in Norway, I think a lot about the time I make for family back home. Realistically, I've only been able to make the trip (roughly) once every other *year* for the past 9 years. This is worrying.

6 ▲ | ▼ • Reply • Share >



hundegaga • 2 years ago

please write a topic about flat earth theory !

4 ▲ | ▼ • Reply • Share >

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5 comments • a year ago

Martin asdf — No responses? Maybe they are scared of being killed.

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203 comments • a year ago

Haiku — I think Calexit would be really, really good for the rest of the country.

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Paul Mullen

When I woke up to realize that I'm living eternally right now I stopped worrying about missing anyone or thing. At the same time we live out our lives loving more in each unit of time because that's what we do as children of our Creator God, once we choose His will over our own. Thank you Jesus.

[Like](#) • [Reply](#) • 10 • 39w



Luke Oakridge

While I understand that people fear death, I don't think turning to superstition is the answer. Jesus was a man, not a god. Just because an old book says he had supernatural powers doesn't make it true. There is no evidence for God in real life. Most people who believe in God do so because of feelings they get in their head when praying, but this is not a good reason. Without religion, we would avoid a lot of the religious terrorism that we are facing in the world today. It is important to teach people science rather than blind faith so they can understand the world.

[Like](#) • [Reply](#) • 19 • 32w



Abel Babalola

Luke Oakridge You are so naive.

I pray your eyes be opened to see what you've not been seeing but has always been there 😊

[Like](#) • [Reply](#) • 1 • 32w



Luke Oakridge

Abel Babalola I believe in science. If you can provide proof of God, then I'll believe in him. But just believing in spirits and magic because of blind faith or emotion is not a good reason. You have to show that it exists in the real world using logical reasons. It can't just be because believing in God makes you feel good.

[Like](#) • [Reply](#) • 11 • 31w

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**Darris Bertini Nelson**

Great post but this is all under the assumption (I presume) that we enjoy our family - many people do not. We tend to spend time with the people who lift us up and who are enjoyable to spend time with and if that is family than you are blessed. If your family members are self-centered, negative and draining chances are all this fretting about time is for not. There is of course some feeling of obligation to those who brought us into this world, sacrificed, etc. My aim is that my son wants to spend time with me not out of obligation but because I bring joy, interest or some modicum of enjoyment to our interactions.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 12 · 13w · Edited

**Maria Curry**

Every year, day, hour, minute, and second is precious and important!
Time really does fly!
Take nothing or no one for granted!

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 5 · 50w

**Matteson Haglund**

count your blessings, not your dumplings

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 9 · 51w

**Gabriela Eyerman**

I moved away from my family (parents and brothers) six years ago, with my spouse and children. I understand why it broke my mother's heart. I love where I live and understand I have only a few visits with my parents left until they are gone.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 2 · 32w

**Jayanthi Ramamurthy Sridharan**

wonderful information. Each one of us must understand and make every second of our time effective and satisfactory.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 3 · 41w

**Laura Newton**

Organize your life around what matters most

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**Gloria Graham**

I just realized after reading this, there is no time like the present, if you miss someone that you love that is far away, don't wait!!

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**Roxanne Perkins**

Oh, I so agree! Family and friends mean everything to me. Going to Minnesota tomorrow to help my mother prepare for Christmas. She's 87 so how many more?

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**Pete Fullerton**

This is a good look at whe simple beautiful parts of life we cherish. Our priorities put perspective to where we have guided our lives. Life is good, and so is mine with those I love. NAMASTE

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