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Philosophy / Humor

# FINAL THOUGHTS

One mortal's quest to laugh at death  
in fables, lyrics, aphorisms, riddles, rhyme and reason



M. M. Braunstein is the author of four other books, one praised by the Washington Post as "remarkably intelligent." He also has contributed over 100 ephemeral articles to now folded magazines & defunct journals. [www.MarkBraunstein.Org](http://www.MarkBraunstein.Org)

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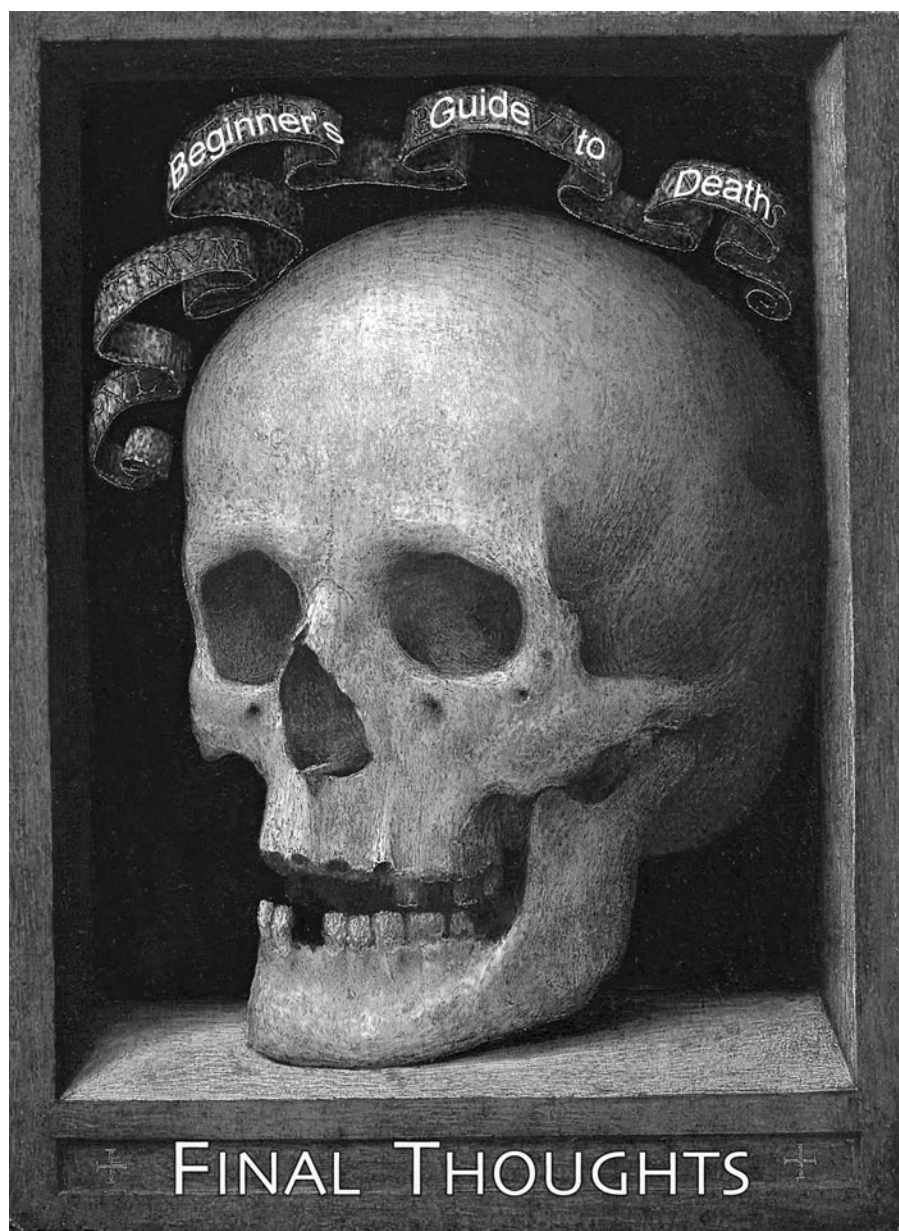
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# FINAL THOUGHTS

Beginner's Guide to Death



Mark Mathew Braunstein



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Beginner's Guide to Death

A Thanatology Anthology  
of Fables, Lyrics, Aphorisms,  
Riddles, Rhyme and Reason

Mark Mathew Braunstein

Panacea Press  
Quaker Hill, CT

other books by the author:

*Radical Vegetarianism: A Dialectic of Diet and Ethic*  
(1981, Revised Edition 2010)

*Sprout Garden: Indoor Grower's Guide to Gourmet Sprouts*  
(1993, Revised Edition 1999, Spanish translation 2012)

*Microgreen Garden: Indoor Grower's Guide to Gourmet Greens*  
(2013, Spanish translation 2019)

*Good Girls on Bad Drugs: Addiction Nonfiction in a Revised Edition*  
(2017, Revised Edition 2019)

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- Chapter 01: the “Being and Nothing” fable in *The Mystic Muse – Tales for the New Age*, Autumn 1987.
- Chapter 03: the “Jennifer” passage in *Good Girls on Bad Drugs*, 2017, Panacea Press revised edition 2019.
- Chapter 03: the “See You Later as an Alligator” passage in *Radical Vegetarianism*, 1981, Lantern Books revised edition 2010.
- Chapter 04: the “Rembrandt's Self-Portrait as Zeuxis” passage in *Iris – Notes in the History of Art*, December 1983.
- Chapter 06: the “Rynn Berry” eulogy in *Vegetarian Voice*, Spring 2014.
- Chapter 07: the “Walking to Our Graves” chapter in *Spirit of Change – Holistic New England*, Spring 2015.

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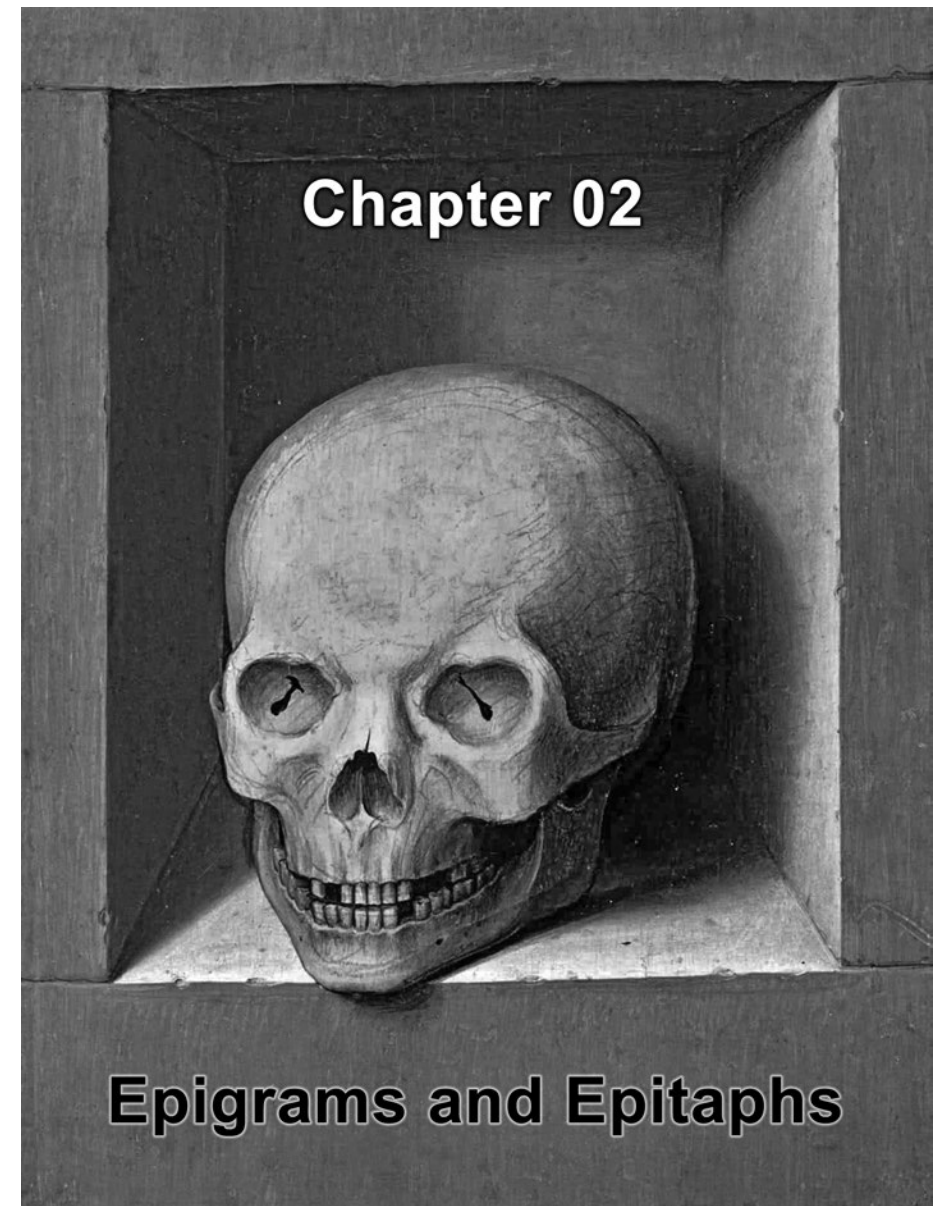
### *The Bookmark in the Book of Life*

When she first learned how to read, she began reading a thick tome intended for adults. At first, she struggled yet persevered. The book seemed so long that she doubted either she or anyone else could ever finish reading it. She placed a bookmark to indicate the page to where she had read.

As she matured, her reading skills improved, and her speed and comprehension increased. Protruding beyond the top edges of the pages, her bookmark slowly advanced towards the middle of the book. As more years passed and she read more pages, that bookmark still seemed stuck somewhere in the middle, holding the promise of still more pages ahead of her. This continued for years, as the final half of the book remained ever more elusive and ever more unread. At first, she thought it peculiar that no matter how many pages she left behind, just as many pages awaited ahead. Eventually, she no longer noticed. The strange became the norm. The norm became forgotten.

Then after a lifetime of her reading this same, seemingly endless book, quite suddenly that bookmark leaped from the middle of the book to its back pages. Perhaps a veil of unconscious denial had shielded her eyes, and now it had fallen from her face. Or perhaps the cataracts of old age had clouded her vision. Or perhaps her eyesight, sharply focused on the book, had grown dim to the bookmark. When her eyesight was restored as if with a flash of lightning, only then did she realize not only where she was in the book but where the book had been taking her all along.

When she finally finished reading and closed that book, she thought what a quick read it turned out to be after all, especially its last half. Then she flipped to the back cover to read the blurbs and endorsements. There were none. There was only the title. While on its front cover the title was *The Book of Life*, on its back cover the title over the course of many years had been revised and the tome had metamorphosed into *The Book of Death*.



## Chapter 02

### Epigrams and Epitaphs

*As Life Is a Joke, so Death Is Its Laughter*

Sung to the tune of “Happy Birthday”:

Happy Birthday to me.  
Quite soon I’ll be free.  
Every year brings me nearer,  
When I’m buried at sea.

Sung to the tune of “Happy Birthday”:

Happy Birthday to you.  
You’re no longer new.  
Every year brings you nearer,  
When soon you’ll be thru.

An outgoing voicemail message:

“This is the voice of my present, which to you is my past.  
This is the voice of the ghost in the machine.  
The ghost is asleep, dreaming about death.  
The machine is dead, dreaming about life.  
You who are awake may speak a message to posterity,  
which shall be heard in eternity.”

An outgoing answering-machine message:

“Despite this answering machine,  
thousands of calls later my questions remain unanswered.  
I’ll ask one last time.  
What is Life?  
And what is Death?  
Are we angels who have lost our wings,  
Apes who have lost our hair,  
Or apes who have lost our angels?  
And least but not last, who am I?  
And last but not least, who are you?”

An announcement on citywide outdoor loudspeakers:

“This is a test of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s  
emergency broadcast system. This is only a test. If this were  
a real nuclear emergency, you would not be listening to this  
broadcast. You would be dead.”

Consumer beware:

Microgreens and sprouted mung  
and gluten-free bread  
will make you live so long,  
you’ll wish you were dead.

*Principium moriendi natalis est.* Dying begins at birth. *Principium est finis.* In the beginning, awaits the end. Inside the cradle lies a coffin. Tailgating the baby carriage is the hearse. Within every voluptuous body lurks the skeleton.

If our spirituality is measurable in inverse proportion to all the possessions that we have amassed, then we ascend to the pinnacle of enlightenment when we leave it all behind and die.

Life is cyclical in the same way that the Earth is round. Traveling a straight path will return you to the same place where you began. To fear death is to fear birth and, therefore, life. Those we know will die ahead of us or we will die ahead of them. Death should come as no surprise. Expressed in colloquialism “Get used to it.”

Life is lived day by day the way that pinball is played game by game. The winner’s prize is merely another game. The survivor’s reward is merely another day. The winner is duped into playing until the game that she loses. The survivor is compelled to live until the day that she dies.

At class reunions, we view the march of time etched upon the faces of our former classmates, most who have grown to look as old as our own parents did when we were youthful students. At their fiftieth high school reunion, all the classmates had the same shocking news to share. During their recent annual physical exams, their doctors informed them that they all had less than twenty years left to live.

Day by day, we awaken, shower, scarf down breakfast, shuffle off to work, work, gulp down lunch, work, some more head home, have dinner, watch a video, and read ourselves to sleep. Year by year, we get born,

learn to walk, grow up, go to school, learn to drive, go to college, learn a trade, get a job, get married, beget children, get divorced, get old, falter and stumble, stumble and fall, get injured and hospitalized, get buried and become forgotten. What did we learn?

**A**live, we grope for the meaning of life, its meaning much like the snowflake that falls on our outstretched palm. Mysterious and beautiful, fragile and ephemeral, the snowflake immediately melts. Only when we are dying, as our hands turn icy cold, can we finally take hold of some flakes between our fingers, at which time we either grasp life's meaning, or we just stop groping.

**L**ife is a gnawing problem to which we devote a lifetime whittling it down to a comprehensible size, but that is ultimately solved only by death.

**S**ocrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. "Nor is the unexamined death worth dying," said the doctor to the dying patient who was stretched out on the doctor's examination table.

**W**hat the hell is hell? Living hell is a life so painful and miserable that the afflicted commits suicide to end his pain and misery even though, as a Christian, he fears his suicide will condemn him to hell.

**T**he best joke she ever heard:

Q: What did the farmer say when his horse died?

A: "That's funny. He never did that before."

And she died laughing.

**H**e was always in a hurry, yet he was always late. He was late even to his own wedding. He arrived on time only to his own funeral.

**A**fter the brief grief of painting herself into a corner, the abstract artist turned to painting landscapes. Her painting was a race between running out of paint and running out of canvas. Then, after putting everything into its proper perspective, she ran out of time and disappeared beyond the vanishing point.

**A**ll now alive will die, if not today, then tomorrow. Might as well buy your burial plot today, which is putting the coffin in front of the hearse.

**P**eople who lie in glass coffins should never throw bones.

**A**t birth, we are grandfathered into our coffins. So there's no point in devoting our lives to making tons of money, if all we will have to show for it is our burials in expensive coffins that are no longer visible even to our children who visit our graves.

**Q:** Why did the chicken cross the road?

**A:** To get to the other side of life.

**W**e are students in the course called Life, but because we die, we all flunk out. The suicide is a student so fearful of failing the course that he drops out.

**L**ater in her life, she looked ten years younger than her age. Yet even when she was nine years old, her very odd mother told her that she looked ten years younger than her age.

**S**he walks the tightrope of Life while Death shakes it. She is a tightrope walker, Death the tightrope shaker.

He grew weary of breathing, so welcomed that last breath and, with one last exhalation, sputtered out his famous last words, “I can’t breathe.”

An inmate on death row, strapped down to the gurney in his execution gas chamber, should be breathing a sigh of relief. Yet, though doomed, he still fights for his life even with his last breath.

The only two things certain in Life are Death and axes. —Henry VIII

Is Life the candle or its flame? Is dying the flame or its smolder? Is Death the smolder or the air, its oxygen consumed?

The subject heading of an email announcing someone’s death usually states only so-and-so’s name, nakedly and with no modifiers, or issues the warning: “Sad news.” But when the dearly departed was ninety-nine years old and was of sound mind and healthy body until nearly the very end, that is “Happy news.”

Doctor Death’s appointment cards all come preprinted:  
 “You *will* be unable to keep this appointment, so please cancel within 24 hours so that your time on Earth may be given to someone else.”

“Knock, knock.”  
 “Who’s there?”  
 “Death.”  
 [“*The rest is silence.*”]

This is a Death sentence.

Someone always is dying, yet he always is laughing. During his once-in-a-lifetime death experience, he will laugh especially hard and die laughing..

In the game of tug of war between Life and Death, Life struggles in its losing battle to pull Death over the line temporarily demarcating the two. Ever sympathetic to the underdog, you can add your muscle to the losing side of Life but should place your bets on the winning side of Death.

Birth: rising from less than nothing, to nothing.  
 Life: gone today, gone tomorrow.  
 Death: easier dead than done.

In the game of hide and seek, we the living run to find a place to hide from the irreversibility of time. Yet without even bothering to seek us, Death always finds us.

As a little boy, whenever he passed a cemetery, he thought to himself, ‘That’s where I want to live when I grow up.’

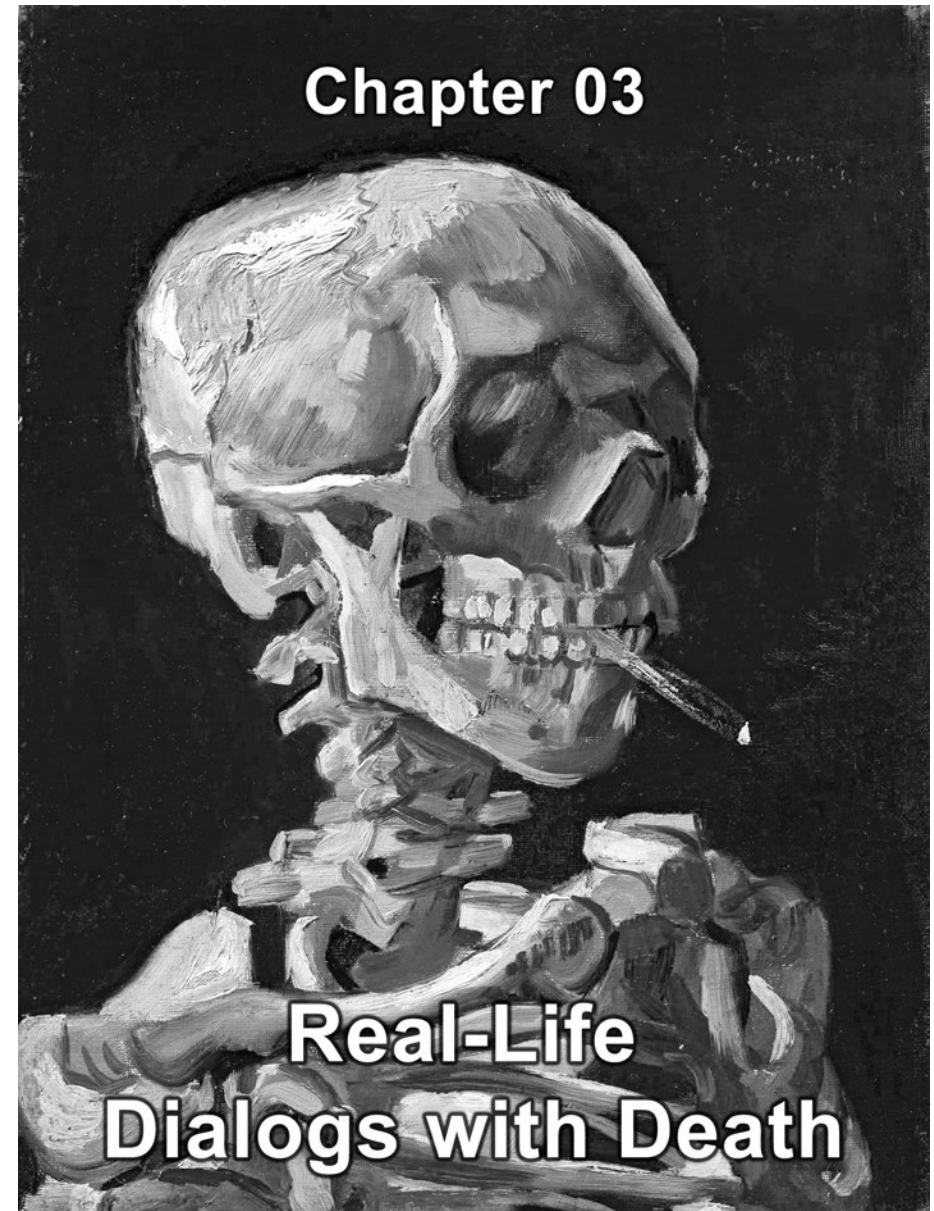
The armed bandit mugs a woman in a dark alley. He demands her wallet, so she removes it from her purse and hands it to him. He demands her ring, so she removes it from her finger and hands it to him. He demands her watch. “Oh, please,” she pleads, “the last thing my grandmother did on her deathbed was hand me this watch.” Taking a hint, he shoots the woman dead, and he removes the watch from her wrist.

Life is a book written in a dead language that no one speaks any longer, so the book remains unopened and unread, and its potential readers all die no wiser than when they were born.



An only child became a single mom who died during her only childbirth. Her son then grew into an adult who neither married nor sired any children, and who aged into an elderly man who outlived all of his friends. As an only child of an only child, he more than any seventh son of a seventh son can fully grasp the ephemerality of life and the inevitability of death.

Death is a forthcoming book of existential philosophy announced years ahead of publication and waitlisted at the library and backordered at the bookstore. While awaiting its release its eager audience instead reads fairy tales and comic books just to retain their reading skills, but by the time that book wanders into print, its anticipation has been forgotten, and everyone dies happily ever after.



frontispiece to chapter 07

**Hans Baldung Grien (1484–1545)**

*The Three Ages of Man* (left-half panel of diptych)

1541-44, oil paint on wood

Prado Museum, Madrid

before the list of illustrations

**Wilhelm Trübner (1851–1917)**

*Vanitas Still Life* (or, *Skull on a Book*)

1869, oil paint on canvas

Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf

the end piece

**Andrea Previtali, called Cordeliaghi (1470–1528)**

*Memento Mori* (reverse of *Portrait of a Man*)

circa 1502, oil paint on wood

Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan

on the back cover

**Vincent van Gogh (1853–90)**

*Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette*

1886, oil paint on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

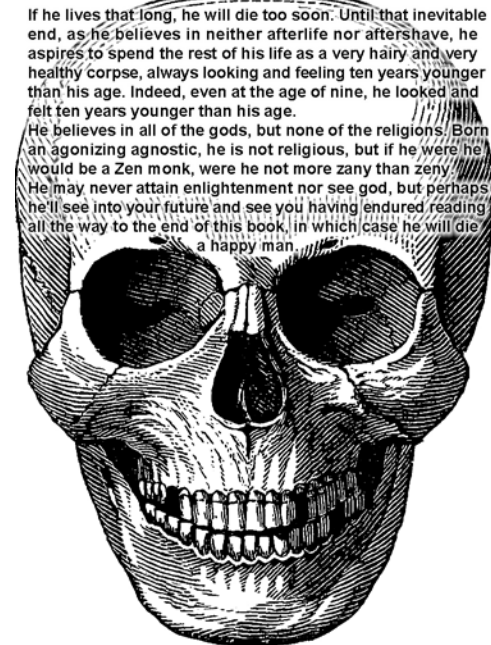
– montage with –

**Mark Mathew Braunstein (1951–)**

*Entrance into Eternity*

1973, acrylic paint on Masonite panel

collection of (if not yet estate of) the artist



The author at age 166

### *About the Author*

Mark Mathew Braunstein walks in the March of Time on crutches. As a paraplegic since 1990, he is half-dead below the waist. And as a vegan since 1970, he is twice-alive above.

He is the author of four other propagandizing books that have exceeded their life expectancies by remaining in print even to this day. He also has scribed more than a hundred ephemeral articles in trashy consumerist magazines, most of which have since folded, and in obscure pedantic academic journals, all written with his intent to save the world, though now he is content to save his breath and his ink.

If he lives that long, he will die too soon. Until that inevitable end, he thanks the gods that he is an atheist who believes neither in an afterlife nor in aftershave, so he aspires to live out the rest of his earthly existence as a very hairy and very healthy corpse, residing with a flock of turkey vultures, another flock of wild turkeys, a herd of deer, a host of deer ticks and dog ticks, and no dogs.

Visit him at his gravesite or, if you cannot wait, at his website.  
[www.MarkBraunstein.Org](http://www.MarkBraunstein.Org)