

It was revealed last week that a retired lecturer named Darrell Meekcom had been arrested for indecent exposure and dangerous driving after he [mooned a speed camera](#). It sounds as though he'd managed to perform a contortionist manoeuvre at the wheel but in fact he stopped the car and got out while his wife went to buy some bread. The key detail, though, is that Meekcom is terminally ill, having been diagnosed with multiple system atrophy.

The act of baring his bottom to a traffic enforcement camera, Meekcom told the police, was an item on his "bucket list". "Have you never wanted to moon a speed camera?" he asked one of the arresting officers.

There are endless lists of bucket lists available online, so named because they are a compilation of [experiences that one should undergo before kicking the bucket](#). Typically they involve flying to far-off places or high-adrenaline pastimes like skydiving. There is even the Bucket List travel company.

Helen Damon, a counselling psychologist who specialises in dying and bereavement, notes that there is something "godlike and enthralling to have knowledge of one's death", which in turn can lead to acts of transgression. "There can be a sense that if you're going to die, the worst is about to happen, you're untouchable," she says.

Except, of course, three police cars turned up at Meekcom's house to arrest him. Apparently, he told the officers of his precarious grasp on life, but they were undeterred. They could have argued, presumably, that transgression would lose its meaning if they went easy on people with terminal illness. But that may be a little bit more existentialist than the West Mercia force care to get on three-squad-car assignments.



The aurora borealis, or northern lights, viewed at Torassieppi, Finland. Photograph: Alexander Kuznetsov/Reuters

Damon believes bucket lists – with their familiar tropes of swimming with dolphins – are more often about conformity than transgression, creating an expectation of how we ought to live life large. “I wonder if it hasn’t become like diamond rings for engagements or the sudden rise in gender-reveal parties. People often say in situations of dying or bereavement that they wish there were manuals to guide them on how they should be feeling. Perhaps the bucket list performs a normative role on what to do.”

An appointment with death, which after all is the one certainty we all have to confront, does tend to focus the mind on what it means to be alive. Earlier this year, the journalist and self-improvement writer Oliver Burkeman published a book entitled *Four Thousand Weeks*, which is roughly the life-expectancy for the average westerner.

Burkeman reconfigured our allotted time in weeks, rather than about 80 years, because it centres attention on life’s shocking brevity. As he writes: “It’s only by accepting our finitude that we can step into a truly authentic relationship with life.”

While Burkeman wants us to appreciate the meaning of time, he has little time for the bucket-list approach, which he sees as just another form of stressful escapism. “Once you truly understand that you’re guaranteed to miss out on almost every experience the world has to offer,” he writes, “the fact that there are so many you still haven’t experienced stops feeling like a problem.”

That’s easier said than done in a world in which billions of individual experiences are shared for instant posterity on social media platforms like Instagram. And where the exotic and extreme are industrially commodified and consumed like any other product.

At the same time as the world has shrunk, our experiential ambitions have radically expanded. A hundred years ago, only the most intrepid of travellers would have even considered visiting the Himalayas. Nowadays, you have to queue to get to [Mount Everest](#)’s summit. It’s in the context of that availability of previously unimaginable adventures that people set their wish-lists.



Jack Nicholson and Morgan Nicholson in the 2007 film *The Bucket List*. Photograph: AF archive/Alamy

On a public message put out on Facebook, I asked what kind of things people planned to do before they died, and the answers ranged from a surf trip along the Baja peninsula, seeing icebergs and the Northern Lights, shooting one's age in a round of golf, to returning to a far-off birthplace.

For Simon Mahomo, a 60-year-old former options trader who cashed-in and now "pursues an alternative quest for meaning", the question is whether it's more meaningful to witness extraordinary scenes or to leave a more permanent trace. He plans to ride a dirt bike to South Africa, and asks rhetorically if that is "just egotism or is there meaning in it? I believe there is meaning."

He cites, by way of illustration, the famous speech given by a dying android played by Rutger Hauer in the sci-fi film *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. Time to die." It's a speech that captures both the grandeur of paying witness to spectacular events and the ephemeral nature of life. If it romanticises big experiences, it also pays bleak testament to the ever-present shadow that lends them meaning: death.

And staying in the realm of cinema, what seems certain is that on no one's bucket list is the wish to see the Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman film *The Bucket List*, in which the pair of terminally ill patients travel around the world, visiting the Taj Mahal and riding motorcycles along the Great Wall of China.

The story is filled with so many sentimental cliches that it could make even the most placid viewer want to moon the screen, if not a speed camera.

In the end, the truth is that no event or scene is so large that it transcends death. Which may be why it's wise to heed Burkeman's advice to "seek novelty in the mundane". There are unlikely to be any dolphins but nor will the police be turning up at your door.

Source: [Bucket lists: are they really such a good idea?](#)