

Before I Die, I Want to . . .

Part 1

There are a lot of ways the people around us can help improve our lives. We don't **bump into**¹ every neighbor, so a lot of wisdom never gets passed on, though we do share the same public spaces. . . .

I live near this house, and I thought about how I could make it a nicer space for my neighborhood, and I also thought about something that changed my life forever.

In 2009, I lost someone I loved very much. Her name was Joan, and she was **a mother to me**², and her death was sudden and unexpected. And I thought about death a lot, and this made me feel deep gratitude for the time I've had, and brought clarity to the things that are meaningful to my life now. But I struggle to **maintain this perspective**³ in my daily life. I feel like it's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day, and forget what really matters to you.

So, with help from old and new friends, I turned the side of this abandoned house into a giant chalkboard and stenciled it with a **fill-in-the-blank sentence**⁴: "Before I die, I want to . . ." So anyone walking by can pick up a piece of chalk, reflect on their lives, and share their personal aspirations in public space.

I didn't know what to expect from this experiment, but by the next day, the wall was entirely filled out, and it kept growing. And I'd like to share a few things that people wrote on this wall.

Part 2

"Before I die, I want to be **tried for piracy**⁵." "Before I die, I want to **straddle the International Date Line**⁶." "Before I die, I want to sing for millions." "Before I die, I want to plant a tree." "Before I die, I want to **live off the grid**⁷." "Before I die, I want to hold her one more time." "Before I die, I want to be someone's **cavalry**⁸." "Before I die, I want to be completely myself."

So, this neglected space became a constructive one, and people's hopes and dreams made me laugh out loud, **tear up**⁹, and they consoled me during my own tough times. It's about knowing you're not alone. It's about understanding our neighbors in new and enlightening ways. It's about making space for reflection and contemplation and remembering what really matters most to us as we grow and change.

I made this last year and started receiving hundreds of messages from passionate people who wanted to make a

¹ When you "bump into" someone, you unexpectedly meet them while you're out. When you "bump into" a thing, you accidentally hit it.

² To describe someone as "a mother/a father/a sister/a brother to me" means that you are not directly related to them, but their role in your life is similar to that of a family member.

³ To "maintain this perspective" means to keep that same mind frame or way of thinking.

⁴ A "fill-in-the-blank sentence" has one or more parts missing, often the ending, and is open for someone to complete.

⁵ The writer of "tried for piracy," who is wearing a pirate hat, is making a joke that he wants to be arrested for being a pirate.

⁶ If you "straddle" something, you put one leg on either side of it. The "International Date Line" is a line of longitude on the surface of Earth that separates two consecutive calendar days.

⁷ To be "off the grid" means to be self-sufficient. It originally meant to live in a home without utilities (electricity, water, etc.) provided by public facilities. Yet the term can also mean to simply live in a way in which you are not connected to society and, therefore, not easy to find. It is unclear which meaning the writer of the sentence is intending.

⁸ The word "cavalry" literally means the part of an army that rides in vehicles or on horses. Often though, it is used idiomatically to refer to a person or group who rescue someone from a difficult situation. This is probably the intended meaning of the writer in this case.

⁹ If you "tear up," you are close to crying.

wall with their community, so my **civic center**¹⁰ colleagues and I made a **tool kit**¹¹, and now walls have been made in countries around the world, including Kazakhstan, South Africa, Australia, Argentina, and beyond. Together, we've shown how powerful our public spaces can be if we're given the opportunity to have a voice and share more with one another. . . .

Our shared spaces can better reflect what matters to us as individuals and as a community, and with more ways to share our hopes, fears, and stories, the people around us can not only help us make better places, they can help us lead better lives. Thank you.

This is an edited version of Chang's 2012 TED Talk. To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.

¹⁰ In the United States, a “civic center” is a public building where community events take place.

¹¹ A “tool kit” is also sometimes spelled “toolkit.” In this case, it refers to a set that includes instructions and materials that simplify the physical making of a particular thing.