
Carpe Diem: Don't Postpone Your Dreams



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

Far from a hedonistic cry, carpe diem instructs us to live a life of meaning.

You may have heard this story about a young fisherman who was enjoying himself on the bank of a beautiful river when a stressed-out businessman came along.

Stopping in front of the fisherman, the businessman said, "You aren't going to catch many fish with that single rod. You're young. If you worked instead, you could make money, buy many nets and catch more fish."

"And what would I get out of that?", asked the fisherman.

"With more money, you could buy a boat and catch even more fish!"

"And what would I get out of that?", the fisherman replied.

The businessman became agitated: "You could buy more boats, hire many people to work for you!"

"And what would I get out of that?" repeated the fisherman.

Now, the businessman was very irritated. 'Don't you see? You could build up a whole fleet of fishing boats, have them sail all over the world, and have hundreds of employees catching fish for you!'

Once again, the fisherman asked, "And what would I get out of that?"

The businessman shouted: "You could become so rich that you would never have to work for a living again! You could spend the rest of your days sitting here, without a care in the world!"

The fisherman then smiled and said, "Isn't this exactly what I am doing right now?"

Seize the day

Perhaps this fisherman is familiar with the concept of *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase that means 'seize the day'. One of the oldest philosophical mottos in Western cultural history, it was first noted more than 2,000 years ago by the Roman poet Horace.

Carpe diem suggests that you should focus on what's happening right now. Savour the uniqueness and value of every moment in life, mindful of the fact that time flies and life is short.

In fact, *carpe diem* is very much related to another Latin phrase, *memento mori*, which means "remember that you will die". As Shakespeare said quite explicitly, we are all "food for worms". With the understanding that your life will end, make the most of it while you're alive.

The importance of reflecting on the passing of time

Carpe diem means different things to different people. For some, it's about enjoying a quiet life or taking advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. What *carpe diem* shouldn't be confused with is hedonism – the belief that earthly pleasures are what matters in life. *Carpe diem* represents much more than that. While the motto uses the present as a tool for the future, hedonists don't care what the future holds. After all, they will be dead, and it will be too late to have fun.

In that vein, it is deplorable that the idea of *carpe diem* has been hijacked by advertisers who made it into a call for conspicuous consumption. It has nothing to do with being obsessed with instant gratification within a consumer culture.

It is also important not to equate *carpe diem* with fatalism, the belief that all events are predetermined. Here I'm referring to people who hardly ever think about the future, resigned as they are that they are unable to influence it. Fatalists live a day-to-day existence not because they seek pleasure but because they leave the future to fate.

A greater focus on the present

Some people live in the past. You could even say that they're stuck in it as they keep brooding over what happened. Others spend a great part of their lives dreaming about the future and what may happen. They keep constructing questionable scripts of future events.

Taking *carpe diem* seriously doesn't mean forgetting your past or ignoring the future. As any coach or psychotherapist who has dealt with troubled clients can tell you, the narrow idea that seizing the day is about living in the here and now is an illusion. The past and the future carry considerable weight.

Rather, *carpe diem* is about paying greater attention to the present. Thus, although the past and future will affect you, they shouldn't control you.

Avoiding regrets

Carpe diem suggests that you make the most out of the limited time that's given to you. Whatever you would like to do in life, do it now. Stop postponing your life. If there are some things that you have been dreaming about, and you have an excellent opportunity to do them now, then go for it, with full awareness of the worth of the present moment. With such an outlook, stressful emotions like sadness and anger as well as fear, which deal with the past and future respectively, have a lesser impact.

The notion of *carpe diem* has found extraordinary resonance in popular culture. For example, in the film *Dead Poets Society*, actor Robin Williams – who plays the role of a progressive English teacher – encourages his students to break free from norms and live life unapologetically. He tells them, “*Carpe diem*. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary.” A

central message of this film is that everyone can have a special life.

One day, your time will be up. What if you then find there was very little that was enjoyable in your life? Learn to enjoy life as it comes along. Deliberately choose the goals you want to achieve in life, so as to prevent regrets later in life. As such, *carpe diem* implies creating a space for yourself to reflect. This is how you determine what's truly important to you. What activities bring you joy? What energises you? What should you stop doing?

Beyond you

Having a *carpe diem* orientation to life also benefits your interpersonal relations. It makes you more open to others. It creates a sense of belonging, the most important factor that gives life meaning. With a greater will to live, you will experience more of the sheer, childlike joy of existence.

This isn't a selfish notion. *Carpe diem* living gives you the opportunity to show others what meaning is all about; that living is something more than holding a high-flying job, having a large house or driving a flashy car. Instead, by living a meaningful life, you can be an important role model and a source of existential hope.

I urge you to make *carpe diem* your own. It is in your hands. You and only you can make your life as good and inspiring as it can be. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "The highest and most beautiful things in life are not to be heard about, nor read about, nor seen but, if one will, are to be lived."

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/carpe-diem-dont-postpone-your-dreams>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.