

Designing with Death



Lisa Hehnke

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"I will be a window in your home."

Preface

One of the first things I remember about my death companion training is what was *not* asked. In most professional and even personal settings, being asked what we are doing professionally, as a job, is usually one of the first things we introduce ourselves with. Over the whole year, we were never asked this question even once. It didn't matter.

Since I first heard of them, I have always been intrigued by both the Kobayashi Maru test from Star Trek and the well-known Trolley Dilemma. Both are essentially no-win scenarios that confront you with inevitability, where the actual test is about your character (Kobayashi Maru), or the quality of your argumentation about whom to sacrifice (Trolley Dilemma).

The person most known for solving the Kobayashi Maru is Captain Kirk, who did so by reprogramming the simulation, as he famously does *"not believe in no-win scenarios."* In real life, Kirk's actor, William Shatner, quoted his famous line when he sent a signed headshot to Star Trek-fan [Randy Pausch](#) while the latter was dying from pancreatic cancer.

Preface

While I have read many theoretical arguments about the Trolley Dilemma, there was only one solution that stuck with me: flipping the switch to effect multi-track drifting. The creator, too, did not believe in no-win scenarios and saved everyone.

So did Randy Pausch when he mentioned in his final graduation speech that *“we don’t beat the reaper by living longer. We beat the reaper by living well and living fully.”*

Kirk and the trolley drifter solved their respective dilemmas by recognizing and leveraging the fact that the dilemma they were presented with was never real, but an artificial construct. By changing what counts as “winning,” both dilemmas disappeared. Randy Pausch did the same when he stated that living longer is not what counts as winning in life.

All three solved their dilemma by transcending the belief system they were embedded in. And by not asking what we are doing professionally, we can do the same. This document explains what I mean by that and why death is actually the best partner we have for truly winning in no-win scenarios.

Starting at the End

I will start at the end: this exploration, it turned out, was never about finding answers, but about realizing that a) the answers were always there and, arguably more important, b) understanding why and how to use these learnings for good.

In doing so, this document connects to a previous work of mine on Systems Mediation and builds on the following premise: if the core problem we are facing is the misalignment between the systems we have built and what actually matters in life, and the solution to this is realigning both, co-designing with death will teach us how.

As I will explain, death is one of the deepest leverage points and thus greatest chances we have to save the world, which to me means co-creating a future that aligns with our shared humanity.

Death does not change the system itself. But it can, if we allow it, change our relationship with the system by helping us distinguish between artificial, human-made structures and shared human realities. Using this existential awareness as a starting point, we can then design systems with mortality as a foundational driver rather than efficiency, stability, or profit. Such systems will naturally optimize for the one metric most current systems overlook: meaning.

Hospice Thinking

Originally, this document was intended to be a reflection on how my naïve childhood dream “*to save the world*” was, in fact, the wrong dream. I wanted to explore how I, now writing as an adult trained in hospice care, would reframe “*saving the world*” as something fundamentally different: caring for a system that cannot be saved and stewarding its endings well.

I wanted to argue that hospice-informed systems design is what emerges when we stop pretending complex systems are fully fixable and start designing for limits, decline, uncertainty, and care. Instead of clinging to rescue fantasies, we would acknowledge finitude as a structural condition and work with it consciously.

This line of thinking connects with existing work on hospicing transitions, most notably Hospicing Modernity or the Berkana Two-Loop Model. My intention here was to contribute to this ongoing conversation from the perspective of someone who is not only philosophically interested in death, but also trained and experienced as a death companion.

My argument would likely have been as follows:

Hospice Thinking

Premise: Not all problems are solvable. Decline is inevitable. Historical patterns show this again and again. Civilizations rise, stabilize, fragment, and transform. The harm does not begin with decline itself, but with the denial of limits.

Hospice thinking starts there. It assumes that the refusal to acknowledge limits is a root cause of systemic harm. Hospice-informed systems design therefore does not ask how to save every system. It asks how to transition wisely, truthfully, and humanely when saving is no longer fully possible. In other words, it shifts the perspective from *“How do we win?”* to *“How do we reduce harm while adapting to what is actually happening?”*

Recognizing systemic mortality means accepting that not everything can be saved, and committing, without illusion, to saving how we treat each other as systems change, fracture, or end. The real leverage point is how a system responds to early and uneven suffering. Do we suppress the symptoms, deny them, weaponize them, or listen?

Hospice Thinking

The first step is naming the ending or loss. Not everything can or should be saved in its current form. For example:

- Endless growth ideology
- Fossil-fuel dependence
- Certain industrial labor identities
- Post-war institutional myths

Naming endings reduces unconscious panic. What remains unnamed becomes mythologized and, as history reminds us, what becomes mythologized is defended at all costs.

This is especially relevant given the current polycrisis: climate thresholds are crossed, democratic legitimacy erodes, institutions hollow out, technological systems outpace governance.

Hospice Thinking

From the perspective of hospice thinking, the response is neither denial nor doomerism. Instead, it teaches careful accompaniment, that is, learning how to navigate endings without accelerating collapse through panic, blame, or authoritarianism.

Practicing this approach requires letting go, collectively and individually:

- Letting go of supremacy narratives (collectively) and the belief that we must be better than others to be worthy (individually)
- Letting go of infinite growth ideology (collectively) and the belief that we must constantly improve, optimize, and scale ourselves, moving from a performance-based identity to a being-based identity (individually)
- Letting go of national myths (collectively) and the stories we were handed about who we “should” be, stopping the performance of inherited narratives (individually)
- Letting go of extractive economic identity (collectively) and the sense that our value comes solely from productivity, reclaiming intrinsic worth (individually)

Hospice Thinking

Hospice thinking teaches how to let go without violence. On the individual level, this means learning how to release outdated identities without destroying ourselves in the process.

What holds at the personal level scales outward. Hospice acknowledges: *We cannot cure, but we can care.* Translated into systemic design, how we treat each other while the system fails determines whether any rebuild is humane, possible, or worth living in.

If the leverage point is how systems respond to early and uneven suffering, then the design principles follow naturally. We would optimize for care under conditions of finitude:

- Graceful degradation
- Learning under uncertainty
- Dignity during change
- Humane endings

Hospicing No-Win Thinking

This was supposed to be it. However, when I reflected on how this connects to the observation that many of the systems we have built fail to reflect what matters most in life, I realized something else: the hospice system, as I have experienced it, already aligns to a large extent with how one would design a system if consciously following the principles of systemic design.

This realization led me to ask a) why the hospice system is one of the few existing systems that actually aligns with systemic design principles when many others do not, and b) why it successfully emerged and could be established when so many systemic change efforts, especially those attempting to shift the underlying paradigm, fail. What made the modern hospice movement different?

Unfortunately (or luckily, depending on the perspective), I, similar to Kirk, also do not believe in no-win scenarios. And after learning more about the hospice care system and reflecting on what we can learn from it for co-creating systemic change, I am convinced that the hospice care system does not believe in no-win scenarios either.

Hospicing No-Win Thinking

Once I reached this conclusion, I noticed that I had already written everything I will analytically dissect in the following slides in a recent letter:

Over the last decade, my work has been guided by the question of what really creates positive change. This focus has shaped my professional path across many diverse contexts, while also informing my personal search for spaces where I genuinely belong. Spaces that value people beyond labels, appearances, or material possessions.

When I began working with a hospice and an alternative funeral home, I found what I had been looking for in small, everyday moments: bringing joy to a dying person with a hand-drawn card of her late dog, accompanying the daughters of a Holocaust survivor through her farewell process to honor their mother's legacy, or co-organizing the most unconventional yet beautiful funeral I have ever witnessed, which fit the deceased's character perfectly. To me, all these moments embody hospice: a commitment to treating others with kindness and respect during dying, after death, and, maybe most importantly, while we are still alive.

If there is a single memory that captures this perspective, it is me standing in the mortuary cooler of a local crematorium, facing roughly one hundred coffins that all looked the same. Except for one coffin that had been hand-painted by the deceased's loved ones and decorated with a brown cowboy hat. This image will always remind me of our shared humanity and of what truly makes a difference in the end.

To me, the beauty of hospice and alternative funeral culture lies in its ability to hold many different worlds at once, and this is exactly the kind of world I want to build together.

Lessons from Hospice

Beauty aside, why does the hospice system already embody so many principles of systemic design when most other industries and sectors do not?

The answer is simple. Hospice care reflects many principles of systemic design because the nature of its work allows for nothing else. End-of-life care unfolds in a complex, emotionally charged, and non-linear environment. To respond effectively, hospice had to become holistic, relational, adaptive, and human-centered.

More concretely, hospice aligns with the principles of systemic design because it:

- **Takes a holistic view of the system:** It addresses “total pain,” meaning physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions at once. The patient is never treated as a diagnosis in isolation, but as a person embedded in family, culture, and community.
- **Integrates community and family:** Care extends beyond the patient to include family and community networks. Recognizing these interconnections exemplifies systemic design’s principle that the system is relational, not isolated.

Lessons from Hospice

- **Works collaboratively across disciplines:** Doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, volunteers, and family members co-create care. This mirrors systemic design's emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration rather than siloed expertise.
- **Operates through continuous feedback and adaptation:** End-of-life care is inherently non-linear. Symptoms fluctuate, emotional needs shift, and families respond in varied ways. Without a predictable pathway, guaranteed outcome, or cure narrative, hospice functions within ambiguity. Teams continuously reassess and adjust care plans, creating a dynamic, feedback-driven system that mirrors systemic design's iterative, adaptive approach.
- **Designs for the whole trajectory:** Hospice care attends not only to immediate needs but to long-term effects: emotional and social impacts on families, grief support, and legacy considerations. This long-term, contextual perspective reflects systemic design's concern with interdependencies and sustainable outcomes.

Lessons from Hospice

- **Prioritizes dignity and meaning over efficiency:** Resource allocation is guided by comfort, dignity, and quality of life rather than performance metrics alone. The goal is not optimization in the economic sense, but care in the human sense.
- **Personalizes rather than standardizes:** Care is tailored to individual wishes, identities, and cultural contexts. One-size-fits-all approaches simply do not work in this setting.

Other sectors often resist systemic design because they can operate under the illusion of control, growth, and fixability. Hospice cannot; mortality imposes limits, forcing recognition of interdependence, vulnerability, and complexity.

Lessons from Hospice

Because I believe that truly understanding the present requires understanding the past, I wanted to explore the historical roots of the modern hospice system and what they might teach us about co-creating systemic change today.

Essentially, hospice emerged as a response to the limitations of the prevailing medical model, combined with ethical, philosophical, and practical insights.

- **Reaction against the cure-only paradigm:** Modern hospice, pioneered by Cicely Saunders and the founding of St. Christopher's Hospice in 1967, arose as a critique of medicine's focus on prolonging life at all costs. Hospice reframed the goal from curing disease to preserving dignity, comfort, and quality of life. This rejection of linear, mechanistic thinking is directly aligned with systemic design's skepticism of oversimplified solutions.
- **Whole-person care and "total pain:"** From the beginning, hospice emphasized the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of patients' experiences. By treating the person in their full relational, cultural, and psychological context, hospice anticipated human-centered and holistic design principles, understanding the interconnections between a patient, their family, and their environment.

Lessons from Hospice

- **Ethical and values-driven foundations:** Early hospice care was deeply influenced by ethical, religious, and philosophical traditions emphasizing compassion, empathy, and human dignity. These values-centered foundations naturally promoted collaboration, attentiveness, and respect for lived experience, echoing systemic design's emphasis on ethical, human-centered approaches.
- **Multidisciplinary collaboration:** Hospice recognized early on that no single professional could meet all patient needs. This mirrors systemic design's principle that complex systems require diverse perspectives and coordinated action.
- **Cultural sensitivity and personalization:** Early hospice pioneers understood that patients' needs are shaped by culture, background, and identity. Care was designed to be flexible, inclusive, and highly individualized, demonstrating systemic design's focus on context-specific solutions.

The historical evolution of hospice shows that it embodies systemic design by necessity rather than theory: the realities of mortality, complexity, and human vulnerability demanded holistic, adaptive, and collaborative approaches.

Lessons from Hospice

For systemic change today, one key insight emerges. Success depends on addressing the human side of systems, including the emotions, relationships, and values that shape behavior, while integrating flexibility, collaboration, and a long-term perspective. Hospice shows that systemic change is most durable when it combines ethical grounding, practical adaptability, and attention to the interconnectedness of people and processes.

Recognizing what makes the hospice system distinctive leads to another question: how did the hospice movement, as a “new paradigm,” manage to emerge and take root when so many systemic change efforts fail?

Unlike many reform initiatives, the hospice movement did not trigger the defensive reflexes that cause entrenched systems to resist change, because it did not attempt to overpower or displace the existing order. Instead, it reframed the purpose of care at the end of life, aligned incentives in ways that reduced friction, and introduced transformation without heightening the system’s sense of threat.

Lessons from Hospice

Most systems resist change because:

- Financial incentives reward the current behavior
- Power is centralized in actors who benefit from the status quo
- Identity is tied to dominant paradigms
- Feedback loops amplify resistance
- Reform threatens revenue, legitimacy, or professional authority

Hospice was able to emerge and establish itself because it:

- Occupied a peripheral zone rather than challenging core structures directly
- Reduced costs rather than threatening existing revenue streams
- Addressed undeniable human suffering, creating moral coherence
- Created aligned incentives for hospice workers, families, and institutions
- Reframed the problem instead of attacking existing paradigms
- Did not destabilize professional identity but expanded it

Lessons from Hospice

In short, many industries resist change because their feedback loops are tightly coupled to profit, power, or identity. Hospice, in contrast, formed in a structural gap rather than trying to overthrow dominant systems.

From this perspective, hospice thinking is a form of transition design that can teach us how to create a new paradigm inside an old system without triggering systemic collapse. It works when:

1. The problem is undeniable.
2. The new goal is morally coherent.
3. Incentives are realigned.
4. Identity is expanded, not attacked.
5. The alternative reduces suffering and instability.

By carefully navigating these conditions, hospice was able to emerge, grow, and become a lasting new paradigm, which most systemic change efforts fail to achieve.

The (Opportunity) Window In Our Home

At this point, I wanted to stop the research as I thought these learnings would be everything I needed to know. Still, I somehow felt there was a missing puzzle piece to fully understand the big picture. For some reason, I started thinking about the TV series *Dark*, which, in many ways, is a master class in applied systems thinking. This connection led me to wonder whether there might be a deeper historical origin behind the hospice structure, which had caused its emergence. (In *Dark*, the breakthrough occurs when the characters stop trying to fix their fractured worlds and instead heal the original rupture: grief.)

For my mind, this question seemed to unlock the puzzle (or rather cleared the window of my mental home): the hospice system is distinctive because it is a system inspired by death. With mortality as its foundational driver, it naturally optimizes for what truly matters.

This led me to a broader insight: one of society's persistent blind spots is our tendency to design systems without mortality in view. When death is excluded as a framing condition, meaning and, with it, our existential orientation erode. In most systems we have built, meaning, belonging, and a coherent sense of the future remain only weakly addressed.

The (Opportunity) Window In Our Home

Existential orientation requires:

- Coherent narrative
- Limit acceptance
- Value prioritization
- Relational grounding
- Grief integration
- A sense of completion

Hospice naturally integrates all of these dimensions, while modern Western culture incorporates very few.

Death as a Systems Mediator

At this point, I realized that death understands more about systems design than I do, so I metaphorically handed the role of designer over to death. The question then became: how might we co-design systemic change with death, and why does that require paying attention both to what should change and what must be conserved?

As I explored in my discussion of Systems Mediation, there is a fundamental tension we all experience: personal change and systemic change are deeply intertwined. You cannot change a system without confronting yourself, and you cannot fully change yourself while embedded in an unchanged system.

Fortunately, death can act as a systems mediator. It may not transform a system directly, but it can transform our relationship to it. Mortality is the one universal reality we all share, yet most systems, and most people, go to great lengths to avoid it. When we choose to confront it, however, death reveals the artificial patterns we have constructed and exposes the gap between lived human reality and the structures we rely on. Our conditioning, hierarchies, and false certainties are often built on assumptions of permanence. Death disrupts those assumptions, and it is precisely this disruption that we can leverage for systemic change.

Death as a Systems Mediator

To understand how this works, it helps to examine the specific ways in which mortality reshapes perception and behavior within systems:

- **Death collapses false hierarchies:** Systems rely on titles, status, wealth, and prestige to control behavior. When mortality becomes psychologically real, these markers lose emotional weight. We begin to ask questions such as:
 - Will this matter when I die?
 - Whose approval truly counts?
 - What am I postponing?

This weakens the system's grip on identity and shifts authority inward.

- **Death clarifies time scarcity:** Systems operate on the assumption that we have endless time to comply and wait. Mortality compresses time, creating urgency and changing the calculus of risk and reward. We may tolerate less misalignment, act sooner, and stop overvaluing future promises that the system offers.
- **Death reduces fear of social consequences:** Systems enforce compliance through fear of rejection, loss of status, conflict, and exclusion. When mortality becomes real, existential fear often crowds out social fear. This allows authentic action.

Death as a Systems Mediator

- **Death breaks denial:** Systems sustain themselves through narratives: *"This is just how things are," "Success requires this," "You will be happy later."* Mortality disrupts long-term illusions and forces confrontation with what is meaningful, what is avoidance, and what is mere performance.
- **Death personalizes responsibility:** The question shifts from *"What does the system expect of me?"* to *"What kind of person do I want to have been?"* Mortality relocates authority internally and diminishes reliance on external validation.
- **Death makes exit thinkable:** Sometimes leaving the system is necessary to fully change. Awareness of mortality reduces fear of leaving. We recognize that staying small carries risk, and safety is temporary. Mortality equalizes the fear of staying and leaving.
- **Death makes meaning the primary metric:** Systems optimize for efficiency, profit, stability, and tradition. Mortality optimizes for integrity, love, courage, and contribution. When meaning becomes the dominant metric, system-defined incentives lose emotional authority.

Death as a De-Conditioning Agent

Human conditioning forms through repeated narratives, social imitation, fear of exclusion, and attachment to identity. It solidifies into statements such as *"This is who I am"* or *"This must not change."* Mortality destabilizes these illusions.

- **Exposure of impermanence:** Empires fall, institutions dissolve, roles disappear. Death reveals that no structure or narrative is ultimate. Attachment loosens and cognitive flexibility grows.
- **Compression of time:** Conditioning relies on the assumption of infinite time: *"I will change later"* or *"The system will endure."* Mortality collapses that illusion, forcing prioritization of what truly matters and compressing values into what is essential.
- **Dissolution of false absolutes:** Economic systems, social hierarchies, cultural norms, and personal narratives are often treated as eternal truths. Death reveals their impermanence and allows reconsideration of inherited scripts.
- **Reduction of fear-based compliance:** Fear of rejection, loss, or insignificance drives much of human behavior. Mortality reframes ultimate loss as inevitable, reducing the hold of smaller fears and enabling authentic action aligned with meaning.

Death as a De-Conditioning Agent

The self that emerges through this process continues to evolve. Life generates patterns; death disrupts them. When we become aware of our own mortality, we gain the capacity to confront and reshape our human conditioning before reality forces the change. This reveals a deeper paradox about what it truly means to be alive.

When death is denied:

- Life becomes automatic
- Conditioning dominates
- Time feels endless and therefore cheap

When death is acknowledged:

- Time becomes scarce
- Attention sharpens
- Love intensifies
- Risk tolerance increases
- Petty fear weakens

Existential Awareness

Mortality acts as a focusing mechanism. It highlights what matters, clarifies trade-offs, and makes transformation possible even when the surrounding system remains unchanged.

Despite having a close relationship with death, I, too, overlooked one key element when writing about Systems Mediation and the need for shared systems awareness across multiple levels: the foundational layer of existential awareness.

At its core, existential awareness is a sustained and emotionally grounded recognition of the fundamental truths of being human, especially:

- We will die.
- Our time is finite.
- We are free to choose, at least in part.
- We are responsible for those choices.
- Meaning is not automatically given, we actively participate in creating it.

Existential Awareness

This awareness shows up in lived experience as:

- A sudden clarity after a loss
- A moment of stillness where everything feels fragile
- Anxiety that feels bigger than everyday worries
- A deep sense of aliveness
- A quiet urgency

To understand how existential awareness shapes our lives, it helps to break it down into four core elements:

- **Mortality awareness:** We grasp deeply that life is temporary, not just in theory, but in your body.
- **Freedom:** We recognize that many of our behaviors are chosen, even if constrained.
- **Responsibility:** We accept that we cannot fully blame the system, our upbringing, or circumstance for who we are becoming.
- **Meaning-making:** We see that meaning is not handed to us automatically by culture, career, or status.

Existential Awareness

Together, these elements form the foundation for living with clarity and intention. Without them, we drift, operating on autopilot, seeking external validation, or postponing difficult choices. With them, life becomes more deliberate: priorities are reassessed, unhealthy patterns are left behind, relationships deepen, and discomfort is endured in service of integrity.

Existential awareness does not make life easier, but it makes it more intentional, giving weight and significance to each choice and each moment.

This awareness, embedded in our human design by death as a systems mediator, raises a deeper question: if our internal systems are shaped by mortality, how would our external systems need to change if they were designed with death as a partner?

Designing with death as a co-designer means designing for mortality. Designing for mortality means designing for meaning. Designing for meaning means designing for aliveness, because meaning is what allows us to feel fully alive, however we experience it individually.

Death-Informed Systems Design

Accepting death as a systemic designer means letting it guide the principles we use to build, evolve, and sustain our systems.

1. Design for cycles, not permanence

- Endings are prerequisites for beginnings
- Collapse is generative, not catastrophic
- Systems should anticipate transitions instead of resisting them
- Design pattern: Make endings productive by treating them as a design feature rather than a failure

2. Accept and integrate loss

- Real transformation requires both generativity and letting go
- Always include:
 - Naming what will end
 - Ritualizing transitions
 - Redistributing meaning
 - Supporting identity shifts

Death-Informed Systems Design

- Without this, the immune system of the old order attacks the new one
- Design pattern: Loss serves as a lever for growth and transformation

3. Preserve process, not form

- Structures, roles, and institutions are temporary
- Focus on the underlying patterns, principles, and practices
- Systems endure by sustaining generative practices and allowing forms to evolve
- Design pattern: Identity dissolves; processes endure

4. Detach identity from structure

- Most resistance to change comes from identity fusion: job titles, institutions, ideologies
- Transformation becomes survivable when identity is tied to mission, values, or process rather than hierarchy
- Design pattern: Evolve without forcing psychological death; identity flexibility is a survival mechanism

Death-Informed Systems Design

5. Compress time and prioritize meaning

- Mortality introduces urgency. Systems that take human finitude seriously:
 - Act with proportion
 - Avoid overvaluing distant promises
 - Align actions with what actually matters
- Design pattern: Make meaning the dominant metric rather than efficiency, stability, or profit

6. Enable generative collapse

- Accept that endings will happen
- Collapse is part of the system's rhythm
- Design pattern: Build resilience through cycles of endings and beginnings

7. Ritualize transitions

- Rituals help humans integrate change and loss psychologically
- Transitions are made explicit, honored, and emotionally supported
- Design pattern: Rituals reduce resistance and preserve continuity through endings

Death-Informed Systems Design

8. Anchor change in human reality

- Systems are often abstract constructs. Death confronts us with the inescapable human realities: mortality, time, meaning
- Design pattern: Use existential reality as a compass for systemic choices

9. Leverage fear constructively

- Mortality reduces trivial fears like social disapproval while heightening attention to what matters
- Design pattern: Use existential clarity to make priorities visible, encourage decisive action, and reduce resistance grounded in minor fears

10. Focus on aliveness

- Systems designed with death in mind optimize for integrity, courage, contribution, and love rather than control, permanence, or status
- Aliveness becomes the organizing principle
- Design pattern: Systems measure success by meaningful engagement, not by compliance or survival alone

Death-Informed Systems Design

Taken together, co-designing with death shifts the orientation of the systems we build:

- From preserving permanence to cultivating cycles
- From avoiding loss to integrating it
- From controlling identity to supporting flexible selfhood
- From abstract metrics to meaning and aliveness

However, true systemic evolution requires both breaking misaligned patterns and preserving core structures. We must confront the ways systems have ignored mortality, a universal human reality, while also recognizing the invariants that sustain human connection across time and culture.

One deep invariant emerges across societies and philosophies of care: human life has intrinsic value. We matter simply because we exist. This raises a guiding question for systemic design: what is essential, and how do we preserve it as everything else transforms?

Death-Informed Systems Design

Hospice, particularly through Dignity Therapy, offers a model. At the end of life, patients reflect on:

- What mattered
- What requires reconciliation
- What lessons or wisdom endure
- What legacy they hope to leave

Societies must ask the same questions. Without collective meaning-making, decline becomes nihilistic; with it, transition becomes generative. A hospice-informed approach to societal decline translates this reflection to systems:

- What in this system was generative?
- What harm did it cause?
- What wisdom should we carry forward?
- What must be consciously released?

Death-Informed Systems Design

Hospice does not prolong life at any cost. Its aim is to preserve dignity as transitions unfold. Applied to systems, the question becomes: how do we help institutions, economies, and cultural paradigms “die well” so that something wiser can emerge?

While we may not preserve every institution, we can preserve what is most essential:

- Human dignity
- Social cohesion
- Intergenerational continuity
- Moral learning
- Capacity for renewal

Sometimes saving the world does not mean preserving the current world. It means stewarding its transition responsibly. Humiliation accelerates fracture, whereas dignified integration stabilizes change.

Death-Informed Systems Design

From hospice, we can discern a pattern for systemic transformation:

- Preserve core identity
- Redefine goals within boundary conditions
- Embed change in institutions
- Align incentives with the new framing
- Maintain continuity where possible

Too much rupture creates resistance; too little leads to stagnation. Hospice teaches us how to find the balance, enabling systems to transition well so that life, and meaning, can continue.

Hospicing No-Win Thinking For Good

If hospice thinking teaches us how to steward endings and preserve what truly matters, the final question is how this insight scales to systems beyond the individual, to organizations, societies, and paradigms. How do we act when the structures around us feel unwinnable and when collapse seems inevitable?

Kobayashi Maru offers a lens. While the simulation forces cadets to confront the collapse of the illusion that every system can be saved, Kirk won by refusing the premise. Instead of accepting that the system is unwinnable, he asked why the system was structured this way.

Many of our systems today resemble Kobayashi Marus:

- Climate vs. economic growth
- Security vs. liberty
- Profit vs. worker dignity
- Innovation vs. stability

Hospicing No-Win Thinking For Good

They appear unwinnable because they are structured around hidden constraints, competing priorities, and finite resources. In other words, the underlying Kobayashi Maru design forces us to confront systemic death.

Adopting a life and death co-design lens, there are three possible responses:

1. **Denial (life without death):** Pretend the system can be preserved indefinitely. This approach leads to catastrophic collapse.
2. **Resignation (death without life):** Accept inevitability and disengage. This approach leads to stagnation and decay.
3. **Re-architecture (life AND death):** Accept the constraint. Change the rules. Shift priorities. Redesign incentive structures. Co-create aliveness.

Kirk solved the dilemma by intervening at the architectural level. In doing so he did not defeat death, but he refused a narrow definition of the system and expanded the possibility space.

Hospicing No-Win Thinking For Good

Some problems cannot be solved in the traditional sense, but they can be transcended through redesign. Kobayashi Maru test whether we optimize within constraints or question the constraints themselves. Most systemic failures occur because we treat rules as given, incentives as natural, and trade-offs as inevitable. Yet many no-win structures are human-designed and therefore open to redesign. Kirk recognized the simulation for what it is: a meta-system, not a law of physics.

Some constraints are real (physics, thermodynamics), some are designed (institutions, norms), and some are psychological (identity, fear, habit). Wisdom lies in distinguishing among them. We cannot eliminate trade-offs, but we can choose which variables to optimize. And, as our wise co-designer death knows, the essential metric we need to optimize for is meaning.

Death teaches us how to leverage finitude. While paradigms built on literal infinity falter in a finite system, we can create functional infinity. By designing for dignity, meaningful impact, and legacy, we redefine what it means to succeed and shift the norms that guide societies, organizations, and our personal lives.

Hospicing No-Win Thinking For Good

Finitude forces the essential question: if time and resources are limited, what truly matters? Constraints focus attention, revealing where significance lies. Many no-win scenarios exist not because they are unsolvable, but because their architecture assumes false absolutes. Welcoming mortality as a co-designer helps us see which rules are negotiable, which constraints are real, and how to optimize our system design.

Here, the Kobayashi Maru comes full circle: when we stop treating a no-win system as fixed and start designing with death in mind, we see the good in mortality. From this perspective, saving the world is no longer about preserving every structure we have built but about letting systems end well while preserving core identity and meaning, detached from structure, to create space for something wiser to emerge. Finite reality, combined with functional infinity, aligns us with what truly matters.

Or, as Randy Pausch said, *"We do not beat the reaper by living longer. We beat the reaper by living well and living fully."* Paradoxically, it is the reaper itself who teaches us how to do this. So, maybe, death actually wants us to win and save the world. It might be possible.

Lisa Hehnke

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**For Ilse Heinrich,
who always said yes to life in spite of everything.**



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