

“Two Things in Life Are Certain”  
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Two things in life are certain. And which two things would that be? “Death and taxes.” Yes, that’s one answer. And, in fact, originally, I was going to go with “death and taxes” and jokingly suggest that since we would prefer to avoid talking about one of them, I would be doing a sermon on taxes.

But then I got those words in my head from “Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky!” “All are born and all must die.” So I’m going to revise my answer and instead go with “birth and death.” We’ll have to save the sermon on taxes for some other time.

I ran across some interesting information about dying. Bronnie Ware is an Australian nurse who spent several years working in palliative care, caring for patients in the last 12 weeks of their lives. She recorded their dying epiphanies in a blog called Inspiration and Chai, which gathered so much attention that she put her observations into a book called The Top Five Regrets of the Dying. Ware writes of the phenomenal clarity of vision that people gain at the end of their lives, and how we might learn from their wisdom. “When questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently,” she says, “common themes surfaced again and again.”

And I’m going to say more about those common themes, but think about it for a minute. If you knew you didn’t have much time left, would you have regrets? How would you feel about the way you’ve spent your life? Philosopher and poet George Santayana says, “there is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval.” Have you been enjoying the interval?

Poet Mary Oliver writes,

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.  
When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,

or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

No matter what our age, the knowledge of life's end is with us. Each moment of our living brings us closer to our dying. Yet how can we not take our lives for granted? And what might we do differently, if anything?

We may find it helpful to ponder what other people, at the end of their lives, have most often regretted. Perhaps their regrets can inspire us to pause and take stock of what's really important.

Bronnie Ware worked in palliative care, helping to make patients more comfortable. She explains a little bit more about the nature of her work: "My patients were those who had gone home to die. I was with them for the last three to twelve weeks of their lives. Some incredibly special times were shared.

"People grow a lot when they are faced with their own mortality. I learnt never to underestimate someone's capacity for growth. Some changes were phenomenal. Each experienced a variety of emotions, as expected, denial, fear, anger, remorse, more denial and eventually acceptance. Every single patient found their peace before they departed though, every one of them."

I find that reassuring. When a person has regrets, they are essentially stuck in the past and not accepting of the present. That's a formula that guarantees unhappiness. Still, I found I wanted to know just what people regretted, in the hope that maybe I can avoid what many people at the end of their lives viewed as mistakes or things Ware's patients might have done differently. And I thought, I'd like to share this information with all of you, because maybe some of you will find it helpful.

The most common regret of all was,

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even half their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or failed to make.

It's not easy to find the courage to honor our dreams. We might be seen as foolhardy, strange, incapable or a whole host of other negative assessments. We may even be rejected by those from whom we'd like to receive support. But, ultimately, no one is going to be a cheerleader for us. Or at least we can't expect that or wait for that to happen. You have to believe in yourself –or if you find that too difficult, sometimes we have to pretend to believe in ourselves, acting “as if,” trusting that really believing will come with time – and just keep moving forward.

“From the moment that you lose your health, it is too late,” Ware points out. Health provides freedom very few can truly appreciate, until they no longer have it. So, whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Be bold. Boldness, it has been said, has genius, power, and magic in it! (An anonymous quote often attributed to the philosopher Goethe.)

## 2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

This came from every male patient. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret. But as most were from an older generation, many of the female patients had not been breadwinners. All of the men she nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the work and career treadmill.

In retrospect, these people would have traded in some of the time spent working for a simpler lifestyle and more time with the people they loved.

## 3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result.

As Ware insightfully points out, “We cannot control the reactions of others. However, although people may initially react when you change the way you are by speaking honestly, in the end it raises the relationship to a whole new and healthier level. Either that or it releases the unhealthy relationship from your life. Either way, you win.”

We DO have control over our own reactions and attitudes, however. Bitterness and resentment fester when we view ourselves as “victims,” or we imprison ourselves because of a self-defeating belief that things “should” be a certain way or that people “should” act a certain way. These are expectations. It has been said that “expectations are premeditated resentments.” ....It has also been said that “resentment is the poison we take hoping the other person will die.”

#### 4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

Often people at the end of their lives would not truly appreciate the benefits of maintaining old friendships until their dying weeks. By then, it was not always possible to track down these old friends. Many people had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let worthwhile friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved. Everyone misses their friends when they are dying.

I recall doing a memorial service for a woman who had been remarkable for the way she stayed in touch with her many long-time friends. She was someone who made the time to write letters, to make phone calls, send cards, to make the effort to express her caring, and it was so appreciated.

And her life was so rich as a result. I’m a bit of an introvert, so I sometimes need reminders like this to make the effort, because when I do reconnect with an old friend, I’m always glad I did.

Ware observes, “It all comes down to love and relationships in the end. That is all that remains in the final weeks: love and relationships.”

#### 5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called 'comfort' of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Many chose to live with anxiety, for example, or constant drama, because it was familiar. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and even to themselves, that they were content. But deep within, they longed to laugh wholeheartedly and have silliness in their lives again.

When you are on your deathbed, what others think of you is a long way from your mind. If we are caught up in what other people think of us, we can start today,

right now, to let go of that. I know I've said this before, but "Happiness is an inside job." No other person or thing can attain this for us. We have to allow ourselves to be our own caretakers, our own nurturers. We have to treat ourselves and love ourselves as if we were our very best friend in the world. And you know what? We are. Ultimately, we need to be that best friend to ourselves. To be gentle with ourselves when we make mistakes or look at our shortcomings. To celebrate our accomplishments and achievements, no matter how insignificant they might seem to anyone else. It is from self-love and acceptance that true happiness springs. How wonderful to be able to let go and smile again, long before you are dying.

"Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die," wrote Forrest Church. "We know that we must die and therefore we question what life means."

Asking this question –the question of what life means –is the first step toward living deliberately: in other words, taking control of our lives and acting in our own best interest, and turning over what we cannot change or control to God, the spirit, the Universe. Does this mean we live selfishly, not caring about other people? No; it does mean that we need to take care of ourselves, though, before we can be any good to anyone else. As UU minister Helen Lutton Cohen wrote, "We will come to know within ourselves the satisfaction and peace of having lived with consciousness and purpose. We will know the joy of having given ourselves to life."

May we give ourselves fully to the precious interval of life.

"May we celebrate the interval with joy;

"May we sing the song that belongs to us;

"May we act as if our very life depended on it."

Do you want to say the last bit with me?

"It does."