

Life lessons from a dying teen



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We don't know how long we'll have on this earth.

For most of our lives, this remains a theoretical statement until the day it becomes true for us.

My friend, Sophie, had to live with this reality when she was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness in November last year.

She was 14, so you can imagine the confusion and horror she and her parents felt, not knowing what was in store.

That they didn't give in to despair was in part because Sophie would have none of it.

The girl did not want to be sad. Young as she was, she had internalised a truth about life, which is that it doesn't always take the path we think it will – or should.

Not for her the anger about being dealt an unfair hand, because what's fair got to do with anything?

So instead of asking why me, she tried to make the most of her time, by living and loving each day she had while she felt well.

She cooked despite not wanting to eat, she went to yoga despite her discomfort, and she painted a poster for her room of a Professor Dumbledore quote, which said: "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Each time I went to see her in the hospital, where she was for much of those months, she was never in bed. She got up in the mornings, changed into her regular clothes (typical teenage attire of sweats and a hoodie) and made plans to study and exercise by walking around the ward. She did not pull the covers over her head and ask to be left alone.

I think even her parents were bowled over by her grit, for their middle child had always been a bit of a whinger. When it came to this crisis, however, Sophie really stepped up to the plate.

She died at the end of last month, leaving her family heartbroken.

Nothing can ever fill the emptiness of her leaving but as her eulogies reminded the hundreds who packed the church at the funeral two weeks ago: Sophie's life, though tragically short, was a success.

She loved and was loved in return, and through everything she chose life.

It would be too bad if it took a health crisis to rid us of the delusion that we have plenty of time.

If we truly understood how precious time was, we might be more mindful of not wasting it by worrying about things we can't change or chasing after what we can't take with us.

It might free us to live to our fullest potential, which means without focusing on ephemeral things such as wealth, looks or status.

It would bring the clarity of purpose and heightened awareness needed to pay attention to what is around us and appreciate what we have, as well as the people we love.

Maybe we are not made to live every day like the last, but it would be a pity to come to this knowledge too late.

According to Australian hospice nurse Bronnie Ware, who wrote a blog and then a book about it, the top five regrets of the

dying are that they did not live a life true to themselves, work a little less hard, have the courage to express their feelings more openly, keep in touch with friends, or let themselves be happier.

So, don't postpone joy.

Everyone has constraints and stresses, and many people just don't have a choice for the kind of lives they want to lead.

But it doesn't take much to take a little satisfaction in life even just once a day.

For me, it's as simple as looking up and seeing a blue sky with fluffy clouds, full of promise for a beautiful day.

Human life can be intensely sad and it has not sunk in yet that our friend has gone so soon.

A week before she died, Sophie told her older sister to live a life big enough for both of them. If you think what you do is big, she said, it's got to be even bigger.

I don't know if I would have so big a heart as to face loss and the ruination of all my dreams with such grace.

As we said goodbye to her that day, I think many of us made a silent pledge to live big lives worthy of Sophie's memory.

And then we hugged each other because we were all in this together.

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