Bronnie Ware: Living Without Regrets
by Tami Simon

Bronnie Ware is an author and speaker whose bestselling book, The Top Five Regrets of the Dying, is based on her time as a palliative care worker. In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Bronnie outlines these five major life regrets with Tami Simon and discusses the experiences in end-of-life care that inspired them. Bronnie explains how most regrets arise from a lack of courage and why people are willing to share so openly during their last days. Tami and Bronnie speak on the healing power of sharing our most vulnerable selves, even if it's in a letter that we never send. Finally, they talk about maintaining trust in the flow of life and why happiness is ultimately a choice.

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TS: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Bronnie Ware. Bronnie is an author, songwriter, and motivational speaker best known for her writings about the deathbed regrets shared with her during her time as a palliative care worker. These writings were expanded into a book, which has now been translated into 27 languages, and is called The Top Five Regrets of the Dying. In this conversation, Bronnie shares with us these top five regrets, and how at the core, it really comes down to living a life with tremendous courage. Here's my conversation with Bronnie Ware:

Bronnie, to begin with, you're incredibly well known for writing a blog post that then became a book, called The Top Five Regrets of the Dying. To start our conversation, I'd love to know, what led up to you writing that now famous blog post?

BW: I'd just finished working with dying people, and I'd set up a songwriting program in a women's jail, and an editor of a magazine said to me, "Why don't you write an article for the magazine, and tell us how that all came about, about the teaching the songwriting in the jail" So that was what followed on from looking after dying people. So I wrote the article, handwritten, with just a pen and a piece of chai . . . a cup of chai beside me, and as I finished the article, I thought, "Why aren't I writing more?" I love writing, and at the time, I was trying to break through into the singer-songwriter world, and loving songwriting, but really not enjoying performing, and the pub scene, and that sort of world at all.

So I thought, "OK, I'll start a blog." I created the blog, called Inspiration and Chai, and then I thought, "What do I write about?" I was sitting outside on the veranda, and I was watching the birds, and I thought, "What do I write about?" And as clear as day, my guidance just said, "Write what you know." So I thought, "OK, well, I've just finished working with dying people for the last just over eight years. I'll write about that." It was the regrets that had the most profound effect on me personally, so I just sat down and wrote the article with really no forethought at all.

I had written in a journal often, while I was sitting beside the bedsides of dying people, and just as I was untangling my own life and thoughts, and yes, so I just sat down and wrote "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying," because it had been shaping my life so strongly for the previous eight years, that I just wrote that, put it up, and then I just kept writing the blog. It didn't really take off for about six or eight months after that. Yes, and I'm glad it didn't, because I wasn't quite ready for it then. I was more ready for it when it did gain its traction.

TS: You know, it's interesting to me that really, the top five regrets are anecdotal. They're from your experience. It's not that there's science behind this, or research, and yet it had such a resonance, and has such a resonance with so many people. That's interesting.

BW: Yes, it's definitely not academic research, and I mean, I've been called a nurse, and a doctor, and a researcher, and all those things, but that's not the case, and I've been honest about that from the start. It was based on my own experience. I've had a lot of people in palliative care write to me over the years and said, "That is so spot on with what I've found with my patients as well." So perhaps it had to be that personal nature for people to resonate with it so much.

Also, I'm not sure the actual dying people would have been as vulnerable and safe to be vulnerable had they been academic questions and researchers asking them, doing the research. Instead, they were just conversations. I had no idea I was ever going to share them so widely. It was just stuff that was changing my life. So yes, I think it was the personal nature of it, Tami.

TS: When you were working during those eight years, did you ask the dying people you were working with, "Do you have any regrets? What are your regrets?" or did this just emerge from the conversations?

BW: It just emerged. It always just emerged. The only questions I asked were if the subject was already brought up, and then as a friend and as a listener, I would then ask questions that would allow the person to open up more and have that release. So no, it was never a conscious intention, but what happened was there were so many familiar conversations that started of their own accord, about regrets, that I started paying attention and thinking, "Hang on, I've had this conversation before," or, "OK, here we go again. Here we go." Yes.

TS: All right, now our listeners, I'm sure, are like, "Could you just please tell me what the five regrets are? Because I want to make sure I don't have them." So let's get right into it.

BW: Yes.

TS: If you can introduce each one, and then talk about it a little bit, and I want to know how you changed your life so that you don't have this regret, but let's go ahead and introduce the first one.

BW: Sure. The most common regret was people wishing that they had lived a life true to themselves, not a life that other people had expected of them.

TS: That makes a lot of sense.

BW: Yes.

TS: What changes, if any, did you have to make in your life, so that that wouldn't be your regret at the end of your life? You know, you talk about it as "regret-free living," so what have you had to do so that you're living a life true to yourself?

BW: Oh my goodness. [Laughs] I changed my whole self completely. All of the regrets really came down to a lack of courage, so having witnessed the anguish of regrets, and witnessed death, and realizing the sacredness of our time, I've been able to live a life true to myself now, and that meant letting go of doing jobs that didn't suit me because I thought that was what I had to do. It meant breaking through a lot of old family dynamics, and healing that, and stepping out on stage when I really didn't want to do that, but I had a message to share.

And oh my goodness, it still shapes me every single day, because I know I've been bestowed this incredible lesson, in that I've also witnessed the anguish of regret repeatedly. With that, every decision I make, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the background, there's always, "OK, if I don't do this, I'm going to regret it or I'm not. Which way am I going to go?" I'm going to go the way that causes the least regret, even if it's the scariest way or the most challenging way. I just cannot lie to myself now. So yes, I've been blessed hugely in that regard.

TS: Now, you said a very, very powerful statement, that I wrote down and that I'm going to keep with me. "All of our regrets come from a lack of courage," that that's really the root of all of the top regrets people have at the end of their life. That's big, a lack of courage.

BW: It's as simple and as difficult as that, yes. Yes, it is, because so much of everyone's lives—initially, until they make that choice to start the healing and truly honor the life that they are called to live, that we're all called to live—is shaped by courage, or is shaped by fear, because so much of it is about what other people . . . how we're going to look in front of other people, or how we're going to be judged, or assumptions people are going to make, because if you're willing to live a life true to yourself, at some point, you're going to be considered a fool by some people, and you're going to most likely cop some ridicule and criticism.

So it does take courage, to step out and say, "Well, you know, I really don't care anymore what you think, because my heart is telling me to go this way, and I'm really, really scared, because I don't know where it's leading me to, but I'm going to find the courage and do that, because I am not going to have regrets."

TS: That's very powerful. I mean, I can see why your articulation of these top five regrets has been such a viral phenomenon. Now, the second regret that you list is, "I wish I hadn't worked so hard." I thought to myself, "I'm going to have to really ponder this one." So really, this is what people say, even when they have jobs that they love and jobs that are creative? "I wish I didn't work so hard"?

BW: Absolutely. In my experience, absolutely. And it ' about not loving the work they did. It was wonderful when I came across people like that. I love the work I do too, but it was about not making work the whole thing, because once people didn't work, they had no sense of identity outside of their work, and it was so painful for some people, because . . . For example, there was one family I was looking after, an elderly gentleman. I was looking after him when he was in his 90s, and he'd worked up until about a

year earlier. He had so much that he wanted to say to his family, but they didn't have the communication channel for him to share it, because he had just worked so hard, and made work his whole life, that when it came down to wanting to heal aspects of himself, he just didn't know how to function outside of his work identity.

A lot of people realized that they'd given too much time to work, and because of passion, and because they loved it, but not actually allocated enough time and focus on other areas of their life, which would have supported their work and which would have supported their heart and their healing in other ways.

TS: You know, Bronnie, I'm going to have to end this podcast conversation and go out on a long walk. No, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. This is a part of my work, but I'm just joking with you. But you know, it's a powerful teaching, especially for people who are achievement-oriented, what you're saying here—that on our deathbed, this is what we may reflect upon. Very powerful.

BW: Yes, well it's quite likely we will. And like I say, Tami, it's not about not liking your work, but what I've found, because I could get caught up in that myself, especially when I'm in full-on passion mode with my work, that if I do step back and create some space of unplanned space, or focus on other areas of my life, my work benefits enormously anyway. It's almost like you give your work a shortcut, because instead of having to know every step of the way in your work, if you give attention to other areas, life then supports you by giving you shortcuts in your work anyway. Yes, in my experience.

TS: You're speaking my language, by bringing up shortcuts. I really like that. OK, the third top regret that you identify is, "I wish I had had the courage to express my feelings."

BW: Yes, because a lot of people are too scared how their vulnerability and honesty will be received, and that was something that in the end, they just wished that people had come to know them on a different level, but their loved ones couldn't know them on that level, because they'd never found the courage to express their feelings.

TS: I'm curious. Here you are, you're functioning as a palliative care worker at the bedside of dying people. How was it that people shared so much of their true heart with you? What do you think it was about the way you approached conversations with people that had them share so much?

BW: I think it was because I was a listener, and I found that mastering the skill of listening is like a secret ingredient to living a great life. I grew up in a family where my dad was . . . you couldn't get a word in. It was Dad's way or no way, so I became a listener. I just found it was the most peaceful path as a child, to not try to say too much, and just listen. I think that that just became a part of my essence. On top of that, though, I mean, I was sitting beside these people's beds for 12-hour shifts, 6 days a week, and that's pretty intimate and personal. I was working 8:00 AM in the morning until 8:00 PM, initially 5 days a week. Then, as they became closer to the end, it almost always happened that they would want their main carer there as often as possible.

So, I would work those 6- to 12-hour shifts and then take time off after they'd passed. The family would come in and out. The doctors would come in and out. This is in people's homes. These were people who had the money to afford private care, so the doctors would come and go, the nurses would come and go, and I was there. Then it would just be us again. So I think it was just the personal nature of the situation, as well

as the fact that I loved hearing people's stories, so I must have asked the right questions.

TS: Now, when I hear this third regret, "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings," I imagine people wishing they had the courage to share how much they loved certain people, maybe people from their past, or ex-partners, or ex- this or that, or whatever—people in their life currently, "I wish I had had the courage to share the love." But also, probably some of their feelings were difficult feelings, feelings of anger and feelings of disappointment. Is that all wrapped up in this regret, "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings"?

BW: Yes, you're exactly right, Tami. Yes. Yes, it was. It was the frustration of being too scared to share the depth of their love to people like you've just mentioned—families, ex-partners, friends, whoever; but it was also wishing that they had had the courage to speak up in their own self-love, in their own defense, and not allowed . . . not given their power away to others. That caused some massive anguish in some people, that they'd never expressed how they truly felt in a way that would have empowered them, even though the people receiving it would not have enjoyed it, enjoyed hearing it.

TS: Let's talk a little bit more about that, because I think sometimes, people don't say things because . . . for all kinds of reasons, but you know, "Well, I don't think the person will really change anyway. What's the point? I don't know if they would be receptive," or, you know, "It won't do any good, basically, so why should I bother?"

BW: Well, I was that way myself, so [laughs] I was definitely that way myself. I just didn't see the point, because I saw a lot of dynamics in my life, exactly that, like, "Why bother? It's never going to sink in anyway." But having witnessed that genuine anguish about not having had that release, I was determined to try it, to do it, to heal. And it took so much painful healing and courage for me to personally open up and express my feelings, and whether I was going to be heard or not, in the end, became irrelevant. It was more about me having the courage to be honest with myself about the feelings that needed releasing.

So we can't control how others are going to receive what we say, and it may not make a difference with them, but what I have found is that life is the best teacher. It's not up to us to say how they are to receive what we're going to share. We can hope that it'll get through and the relationship will receive healing, which is what eventually happened for me, but what's more important is that you have lived in a way where you have had the courage to express all of who you truly are.

And there's ways to express it in kindness, even if it's frustration and anger. It doesn't necessarily have to be an attack on the other person. It can just be how you're feeling, like how their words or their treatment of you have left you feeling. So it's not necessarily like, "You're an awful person. You did this. You did that." I mean, that may come out, but it's more like, "I was left feeling broken because of this," or, "I felt this."

I just found that once the lid was lifted, and I started having the courage to share that, it created so much beautiful, loving space within me that it was worth anything, any effort I'd put in. So I feel that that's the same for everyone. If we can dare to do it for our own healing, not to prove someone right or wrong. I mean, we're all here to

dissolve our ego. We don't have to make someone wrong just to make ourselves heard. So if we express our feelings, do it for ourselves, not to put the other person in any position, life will sort them out. You know, life's a pretty good teacher. So yes, in my experience, we have to express our feelings for our own healing.

TS: Can you share with me the personal example that you were alluding to but not giving us a lot of detail about?

BW: Yes, sure, sure. OK, there's a few, but the most powerful is my relationship with my dad, with my father. He was a really broken person, a raging, angry alcoholic, but also incredibly remorseful afterwards, and there was a really sensitive, sweet man beneath his brokenness. But there was no way for that to come out of him, because he just . . . yes, he was just so scared of change, and losing control, and everything like that. So I was the one who was most like him of all his children, in the sense that I was the creative one. I was the sensitive one. I was the one who wanted to travel. We had a lot in common, even though I didn't realize this until probably my 30s or 40s.

In the end, Dad would explode at me—and this even went on into my early adulthood, when I'd go back to visit. I'm really close to my mom, so I would always go back to visit a lot, even though I didn't live in the same town as them. But whenever I'd go back to visit, it was always like walking on eggshells, because Dad was so reactive. It didn't matter what you did. He'd find a reason to roll his eyes, or huff, or ultimately explode at some stage. I just got sick of it. I just got so sick of it, and I was healing. I was trying to fix all this pain, and he was also very cruel. He also said a lot of, like, very critical and very, very cruel to me in his verbal abuse. So I started speaking up in response, and you couldn't really get a word in, because he would just speak over you, and there was no chance to be heard.

So I started writing . . . I wrote to him a few times, and it really didn't make much difference. He just sort of bagged me, criticized me even more to the family, you know, "Oh, what's she up to now?" But I felt it was the only way he would really hear me, and over time—I only wrote to him two or three times, and I exploded to him probably four or five times, like reacted really hugely in his own language—and over time, he did mellow, and a whole new level of respect came.

It took a good few years, but a whole new level of respect came into our relationship, and by the time he died, we had a beautiful, quite a beautiful relationship. He loved me as much as he was able to love anyone, and he received my love as much as he was able to receive it, and for that, I'm hugely grateful, and it only came about because I was willing to shift the family dynamics and speak up in my own defense, and say, "No. No. OK, enough of this. This is not true. This is your stuff. This is not about me. I'm not going to take this on anymore. You can say it as often as you like, but I'm not going to believe that anymore, and I'm not going to give you that power."

And I used a lot of compassion in this as well. I really brought a lot of compassion into my meditations around our relationship, and yes, by the time he died—he read my book, Five Regrets, I think about four or five years after, maybe four years after it came out. He had heard all about it, but he didn't like reading books by female authors, so he ended up reading my book quite a bit towards the end. All he said to me was, "Oh, it was interesting, love. Yes, it was interesting," but he also then told all his friends, "You should read this book Bronnie's written. She's done so much more in her life." Like, he was really proud, but he couldn't express himself, so all he said to me was, "Oh, it was interesting, love," you know? It was like, "OK, Dad." That's the best he could

do.

So, I was blessed with that, Tami, because I had had the courage to express myself and to try and do it in the most loving way, so when he died, I have absolutely no regrets about our relationship, because I gave it my best shot.

TS: You know, interesting to me that you wrote down your feelings as a way of sharing them, as well as just blurting them out. I wonder if you think that has particular both healing power and potentially efficacy?

BW: Both, yes. Yes, because people . . . just because we're ready to express—say we've done the work, and we've reached the point where we know what we want to say, and perhaps we're even confident of articulating it well even if we're feeling vulnerable and scared to say it all, and even that's rare, to get to that point where you're that confident to articulate it and get everything said you want. There's absolutely no guarantee or likelihood that the person receiving your expression has reached that same level of readiness. I mean, for those two aspects to line up exactly right is rare, so then we expect other people to hear us and receive what we're saying on the same level as we're trying to express it. It may be asking a little bit too much from them.

Also, for me, in being able to write it, and I think for anyone in writing it, you get clarity, because you don't want to just blah blah blah and just write and write and write. You want to get concise, and say—so it helps you get very clear on what is the most important thing, like what's the most important message that you're trying to express. Then of course, it gives the reader, the listener, the time to reflect on it more than once, because they don't just hear it in a verbal outburst. Instead, they get to read it in—they might read it first and think, "Oh, that's a load of nonsense," but then they have the opportunity to come back and read it again and again, and ponder it in a more peaceful place, when they're in the right space to do that.

TS: Bronnie, I'm going to have a confessional moment here. It'll be brief, but my mother passed away recently, and I have a regret that there are certain things that I didn't say, certain ways I didn't express my feelings, because I didn't want to upset her, I didn't think anything would change. And I wonder what you think, even, about writing it all down, even though she's not here to read the letter?

BW: Oh, absolutely. Just write it down. Write it down for your own benefit, and because we're all love, so she's going to receive the loving intention behind what you're saying, even if you think it's stuff she wouldn't have liked to hear. She was your mother, so she's—you know, a mother still wants her child to be at peace and to be happy, so on a human level, she may not have agreed with what you want to share with her, but on a soul level, she'll probably be so proud and grateful to you for having the courage to express it all, because she chose to be your mom in that lifetime, so on some level, all she wants is for you to be peaceful and happy.

TS: Thank you. OK, and I also want to circle back to something, because I'm still struck by your comment, that all of the regrets come to a lack of courage. And with the first regret, not living a life true to yourself, it's pretty obvious that it's a lack of courage, and here, it's wishing I'd had the courage to express my feelings. Where's the courage when it comes to the second regret that we touched on, "I wish I hadn't worked so hard"? Why does it take courage to take time off of work, or to just not be a super high-achieving worker human?

BW: Two reasons. One is about the identity that's wrapped up in work, that whether we're actually aware of it or not, our identity for work does empower us, or does shape how we think other people are going to perceive us. So if, for example, you're a doctor, and you want to, I don't know, do a job that doesn't have the same esteem as a doctor, then it's going to take courage, because people are going to say, "But you're a doctor, you know? For goodness sake, you're a doctor, and you're choosing to go and, I don't know, build fences? What's that about?"

I was a banker. I was an ex-banker, and I went and washed dishes on a tropical island. That was my job when I left my banking career, my first job. It did take courage, because people were saying, "That's ridiculous. You've got a good career. You're earning decent money. You've got a brain. Why would you give this up? We're in a recession. Why would you give it up?" So, there's that aspect of it, around our identity, and particularly if we've been in that role for a long time. It also means that we may lose a lot of our peers and our relationship network, because a lot of that is often tied up with work.

But the other aspect of courage is the money, the money side of it, because often, people are working too hard because they're scared that if they don't, then they're not going to have as much money, and theoretically, that can be true. If you work 80 hours a week on $20 an hour, then you're going to earn a lot more than if you work 40 hours a week on $20 an hour. But, in my experience, the more you—again, it comes back to the shortcuts. The more courage you find to step away and say, "This is disempowering me, this work. I need to focus on what brings me joy. I'm going to be …" and this is where the courage comes in. "I'm going to find the courage and trust, and let go, and surrender, and say, 'I don't know the answer here, but I know what's not working, so I need to find work that is going to work, and is aligned with my heart. So I'm really scared, but I'm going to find the courage to not work so hard, and to allow life to actually bless me in ways that I have no idea of yet.'"

TS: Bronnie, I am so enjoying this conversation, and learning from it. Thank you so much. Really getting a lot out of it.

BW: I'm enjoying it too. Thank you.

TS: All right. OK. The fourth of the top five regrets. It's almost like one of those things where you have a countdown to the favorite song, but it's a little different.

BW: [Sings a countdown jingle]

TS: Exactly. OK. "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends." Interesting that this came up.

BW: Yes. Well, this is for people... This is before the internet really kicked in, and this is from a generation that didn't have the internet, but it's still relevant in a sense that the relationships were about . . . how this works, Tami, is that people were wanting to reflect and reminisce on the beautiful and fun aspects of their lives. People who are dying want to live for as long as possible, and oftentimes, the family, which were often adult children, the families were already going into a place of grief while the person was still alive. They were still trying to make them as comfortable and happy, but say it was a mother dying. She could already see the pain her children were in, but from an individual

perspective, stepping out of the mother role, she still wanted to embrace any aspects of her life, any clarity she had in between pain and painkillers, as much as she could.

That's where friends really came into it, because even though friends were also grieving and had their own pains, there was just such a different dynamic, where friends could reminisce about the good old days in a way that family couldn't, and it brought a lot of mischief, and laughter, and just a whole different angle of love to the dying person's final weeks, because the family often didn't know all of the stories that their friends knew. So, a lot of them had lost touch, and when they got to that point of dying, they were thinking, "Why on Earth didn't I stay in touch with these people? You know, I tried my best to fix that a few times, and sometimes had success, but not always."

And this still applies even with social media. We don't lose touch so much, but we're not as inclined to have one-on-one personal, in-real-life conversations anymore, and they are what we need at the end. They are what we need all the way through, to be honest, but it's the lack of contact, bringing everyone together. And again, the courage came into that because sometimes, people were feeling stupid to want to reach out to other people. I remember one old guy saying, "Oh, no, no. He'd think I was a sentimental old fool if I wanted to track him down now." And it's like, "Well, but you're dying, and I'm sure he'd love to hear from you." In that case, that gentleman didn't actually have the courage to track his old mate down.

TS: You know, before we get to the last of the top five regrets, you wrote a blog post more recently, called "The Five Things I've Learned Since Writing About the Five Top Regrets," and I thought, "Bronnie really knows how to rock this list of five structure." [Bronnie laughs] But anyway, one of the things that you wrote of the top five things you've learned since writing The Top Five Regrets is it's real-life connections that are the essence of joy. And in a way, I think you're pointing to that with this staying in touch with our friends, and saying it's really throughout our life, that these real-life connections are where we find our joy, and that we need to prioritize them.

BW: Absolutely. Absolutely, because it's so lovely. Social media can be so lovely—or the internet, so lovely, in terms of reaching out and finding friends, and saying a quick hello or a text message is hello, but even our conversation now, I mean, we're on the other side of the world, but if you hadn't sent me questions and I hadn't replied, it wouldn't have the flavor that we have in a real-life conversation. So, the more we can hold onto the old world, or return to the old world, and have real-life catch-ups with our friends, the richer our lives will be. And I know we're all busy, and there's so many demands on our time, but I prioritize that these days. Well, I'd never really let go of it, because I learned through other people's hard lessons, that those real-life . . . the time spent in real-life connections, it truly is the essence of joy.

TS: You know, it's almost like these reminders, in a way, they're cliché, and yet I feel like I benefit from them. It's interesting. I benefit from having them be put right in front of me.

BW: Well, they probably are clichés, but clichés are often . . . you know, they've got a common denominator that a lot of people relate to them.

TS: All right, the last of the five regrets, "I wish I had let myself be happier." I think this is really interesting, "let myself be happier." Tell me what you discovered in talking to people on their deathbed, about letting themselves be happier.

BW: Well, they hadn't realized that happiness was a choice. That's not denying that there's suffering and learning, and pretending to be happy every minute of the day, that's unrealistic. We're here to be stretched, and to grow, and to return to our wholeness, but a lot of people realized that they had allowed the opinions of others to stop them from having joy, and had focused on that rather than focusing on the beautiful things about themselves, or the blessings in life, or those incredible, small, magnificent moments in-between, that actually bring you happiness in-between all of the other challenges. They had realized they'd stuck to old patterns, and just owned the identity that other people had dumped upon them, and that feeling that they weren't worthy of happiness.

TS: Yes, in listening to you describe the top five regrets, I can see how important and valuable it is to have that perspective of—it's like I'm on my deathbed, and I'm looking back at my life, but I'm not, so I get the chance, now, to live differently. What are your suggestions for how people can keep a type of "deathbed awareness" with them at whatever point they are in their life, at whatever age, and in whatever health?

BW: I think the easiest and the hardest, all in one, is to realize that you're going to die, to face the fact that you are going to die; and it's the easiest in the sense that, OK, it's a pretty simple truth. You're going to die. It's the hardest because no one wants to talk about it or face it until they really have to. But if, as a society and as individuals, if we can speak more about death, or even just contemplate it on a private, individual level, then you realize that, "OK, I am going to die. This isn't a practice run—" regardless of what you believe in the afterlife, this life I'm in now is the only life I'm going to be living as this person. I don't actually have forever. This, "One day. I'll get around to it one day," thing, it's never going to happen if I don't find the courage now.

So, by facing death, and realizing that your time is sacred, then that gives you the courage, because you think, "OK, well, if I'm going to die in a year, what that person thinks of me if I change direction in my career is so irrelevant to how my heart is going to feel because I've at least given it a go." So, I think that we have to use death as a tool for living. I find it is one of the most incredible tools for living, to realize the sacredness of our time, because it's an ever-decreasing resource. We may not have time to do every single thing we want, but the biggest gift we can give to ourselves is to enjoy our life as fully as possible, and that means to be as courageous in honoring our own heart as possible. And of course, that then benefits the whole world anyway.

TS: You know, Bronnie, in preparing for this conversation, I learned that after you wrote The Top Five Regrets of the Dying, you developed a very painful autoimmune disease. I wanted to talk to you about that, and how that experience changed you, and how you were able to bring the insights from this writing project to facing that kind of really difficult, chronic pain and suffering.

BW: Well, at the time that this all came around, I had an immense trust in life, in the sense that I deeply believed, and still do, that our lessons are given to us from a place of love. So I tried—I ' always able, but I tried to hold onto that theory through the worst times.

At the same time, I was very blessed to conceive naturally and quickly at 44. I became a first-time mom at 45, had a very healthy pregnancy, and in the same 24 hours as my

daughter was born, my book took off. It had been rejected by 25 publishers, and then all of a sudden, boom, it took off.

So, I had this major birthing happening, of a baby, my book reaching the world properly, and at the same time, rheumatoid arthritis arrived in my life. So it all happened at the same time. Within a couple of weeks of having the baby, the pain kicked in, and it was triggered by the pregnancy. But again, it was a healing, and all of them—I've never known any of them without the other.

So, it was horrific, and I'm not going to glaze over that, in the sense that the level of pain that the body is capable of without dying is just unfathomable, really, because you just cannot believe that the body can contain so much pain and not be dying. So obviously, I had a lot of tears, and a lot of choices. I had to bring so much consciousness into this healing.

But, now that I'm seven years along, I am so grateful to have this disease, because it has taught me gentleness. It has taught me space. It has healed me in ways that nothing, nothing, ever could have, and I deeply believe that as awful as it can be, as painful as it can be, whatever lessons we are given are absolutely perfect for who we are, and for bringing us into our best self, and that they are given to us from an incredibly deep place of love. Because sometimes, the lesson has—the lesson is perfect for who we are, and I couldn't have become as loving to myself, as grounded in myself, as courageous to leave the amount of space in my life as I do, had I not had this disease. So yes, I've learned—the biggest lesson through all of it is to learn to surrender, have the courage to surrender, and to trust in the lesson.

And again, The Five Regrets helped me with that, Tami, because I had already let go of what people think of me, because I had the death element and the sacredness of time already in my thinking, so I had already started letting go of what people think of me. That empowered me as I went through this, because obviously, I had a bestselling book, and yet I'm not huge on social media. I'm not huge on . . . I haven't milked it in a way that it could have been milked, because I was committed to my own healing, and to being present for my own life, rather than living the life expected of me and just running with every single opportunity Five Regrets gave me. Instead, I just thought, "No, OK. I've been given a bigger gift here, and that is to return to such a place of love within my own house."

TS: Are you still in pain from the rheumatoid arthritis?

BW: Well, I'd probably say 2 out of 10. They always scale it. I spin six mornings a week. I ride my push bike on other days. I had a couple of years where I was completely off medication and everything. I went to India and did some major healing through the Ayurvedic path. Then about a year ago, it came back overnight, almost overnight, where I went from jumping on the trampoline to not being able to walk more than two steps without having to lean on the wall to breathe through the pain. So I just, again, trusted—and I went right back almost to where I'd been, but it hasn't taken me as long to get back. And now I'm fitter and stronger than I've been in seven years.

So, you know, I do have pain if I push myself too hard, but I don't generally have much pain. Before, even if I was just sitting down, I would always have some level of pain, whereas I'm sitting here chatting to you now, and I don't feel—I have to search for the pain. There's a little bit of pain in one of my feet at the moment, maybe a 1

out of 10, but even then, I had to search for it. So most of the time, as long as I go gently, I'm doing really well, but I know what my limits are now, and if I push myself too hard, certainly, I still live in pain.

TS: You know, I'm moved and inspired by your story, by you sharing that it was horrifically painful, but that you had this underlying, overriding, powerful trust in life through it. Yet, I want to address that person who says, "You know, yes, life is the teacher, love is the lesson. I'm hearing this, but you know, I'm going through a hard time right now," this person says. "And you know, I hear those as words, but I don't feel it. I don't really feel that kind of trust. I don't feel the trust. I want to, but I'm not there."

BW: Well, I would pray for that person that they could realize how much time they're wasting in trying to solve everything themselves, because even if you're not feeling that, then you're doing it alone, and that's a pretty hard place to be. Not that we don't have to get to know ourselves and our heart, but without that level of trust—or not that level, without some level of trust, then there's not even a level of hope, and hope is a pretty powerful support system. If you can't trust, at least try to find the hope.

But more and more, we have to realize we're all in this together. You know, you're not alone in it, and the harder the lesson, the more we tend to isolate ourselves and think we have to do it on our own, whereas they're the times when we actually have to allow others to step up and realize what they're capable of, by asking for their help.

TS: Now, Bronnie, you've written a new book, called Bloom: A Tale of Courage, Surrender, and Breaking Through Upper Limits. In this conversation, we've talked quite a bit about courage, and you've brought up surrender a couple of times in powerful ways, and especially here in talking about the process the you've been through with rheumatoid arthritis. Tell me a little bit about this idea of breaking through upper limits, and how this became an important teaching for you.

BW: Well, I realized that just as there's a place we can get to in the depth of pain and despair, where we say, "I am really at the bottom here. I cannot take another ounce of pain," and then actually, usually life gives us a little bit more until we get—there's usually a couple more layers down. Then we can get to the absolute bottom, where we're broken, where our old self has shattered, and we're having to be reborn from that place, and where we do reach the absolute depth, that we say, "That's it. I am so broken. I cannot take one more ounce of pain," and that is a turning point.

The same works the other way. As we learn to open our heart and receive life's blessings, we also—it's like there's a cloud above us, and we get to a certain level of goodness where we're allowing opportunity in, we're allowing more love, we're allowing more joy into our life, and then we hit an upper limit where we genuinely don't know how to allow more joy in, or more goodness, or more blessings, so we can often sabotage ourselves, whether consciously or not. We can rock the boat in a relationship, or we can quit a job that's just starting to break through to the good points, or do things that are just our old self's patterns, because we really have reached that place where you think, "I don't know how—" and it's not conscious. Of course we'd never do that consciously to ourselves, but a part of us is thinking, "I don't know how to let more goodness in."

So what I find when I reach those places, I've started recognizing the sabotage, and when the old self comes back and wants to sabotage me in some way, then I just think, "No, no, no. OK, I am not ready for the next step, but I am not going back down there." That's when I just really stay committed to leaving space in my life, and do something that brings me joy, that is simple and manageable—like going for a bike ride beside the river, or doing something that brings me joy, but it is not a scary gift of joy, something that's familiar. And I just keep staying committed to that level of joy until all of a sudden, I sort of realize, "OK, righto, life. I'm ready for the next level. Let's get on with this." Then, sure enough, before long, I take another step up into some unknown area that leads to further joy.

TS: Can you give me an example, once again, of you saying, "Aha, this is an upper limit issue. I can see it"?

BW: Yes. OK, well a recent one is . . . one of the biggest fights I've had in myself, in my career, or in my whole life, is in being seen. Because I got used to just finding peace in being in the background, in growing up, and then life called me to this public role, and I hated it. I really resisted it so much, and it started off with I wrote a book, with some quotes, with nature photos. That was how my creative journey started, and that was safe. I just sold my photos at markets. I didn't have my name on the back of the photos, my surname. I was covering my tracks the whole way. Excuse me. I want this cough. [Coughs] Sorry.

So I was covering my tracks the whole way, but then the songwriting came in, and I had to stand on a stage to share my message, because I couldn't find anyone else to do that. And I hated it. There was not one gig in the early days that I looked forward to. I drove to every gig with dread, because I didn't want to be on stage, but I wanted to share my message. So I'd come up against these limits, and I'd just think, "No, I'm going to break through this, because I know how good it will feel to be heard and to have my message help people."

So I kept going through that, and over time, the performance started bringing me joy, because I started finding the right audience, but also because I let go of those limits that were restricting me from actually enjoying it. Then, that led to me speaking on stage. When I speak on stage now, I don't think about it. I don't plan it. I just say to God, "OK, allow me to say what this audience needs to hear," so sometimes I can come off the stage and I could think, "Oh, I could have said that, and that, and that. That would have made me feel more clever." But I don't do that now. I just say to life, "Work through me. Say what this audience needs to hear." I've got the confidence to do that, but I wouldn't have if I hadn't kept breaking through the upper limits of what performing was trying to bless me with.

Even recently—I haven't done many videos at all, at all, online, on YouTube. There's some of me doing interviews and whatnot, but generally, I've avoided video completely, because I just don't like it. It's not my medium. So recently, I launched a membership community. I needed people to get to know me and to trust me more by getting to know me. So, I thought, "OK, I'm going to do videos, and I'm going to let them really see who I am at my best." So I just made it so fun, Tami. Instead of sitting there thinking, "I've got to say this, and I've got to say that, and get all the copy right," you know? All the copy correct. I just thought, "Oh, I'm going to let go of all that nonsense. I'm just going to sit and chat to these people and let them get to know me."

So I put videos on my social media and let people get to know me, and it was a real upper limit for me. Not that I'm scared of people seeing me; I mean, my face has been plenty of places, but more it just ' my thing. It didn't bring me joy. So in the end, I thought, "OK, people need to get to know me better. I'm going to do some videos and allow the world to see me better, see me more clearly." That's what I did, and it was fun. So I think that that is probably the most recent upper limit that I've worked through. It's the example that came up, yes.

TS: You know, it's possible we could put our whole conversation under this umbrella term that you use, "regret-free living." When I think about that term, "regret-free living," I imagine somebody who feels guilt about something or other. You know, "In that situation, I lied, and maybe I lied for so many years, I don't even want to go back and correct it," or you know, "I have this guilt about something else," you know? "I allowed myself to not take care of my body well," or whatever. What would you say to that person, who says, "I've heard this whole talk, but I'm still perplexed by these things I feel guilty about, that I'm holding onto"?

BW: Well, it's human to make mistakes, and we have all been there, and we can all look back on how we'd have done it differently if we had the wisdom of who we are now. But we didn't. We were who we were then, so what I say is rather than feel guilty and judge yourself so harshly—because that’s all regrets are, are really harsh judgment of ourselves. You know, we all make mistakes, but the only thing that turns a mistake into a regret is that harsh judgment of ourselves.

So rather than judge yourself so harshly and have guilt and any other toxic emotion that isn't empowering you now, bring compassion to your old self, because if you can recognize that what you did ' ideal, was not ideal, then you've already evolved from being that person to who you are now. So from who you are now to the person you were, bring loving compassion to that person, and say, "OK, you messed up, but you did the best as who you were at that time. You've since grown into who I am now. I am going to love you, with all of your frailties, mistakes, vulnerabilities, and everything else, because that's who you were then, and I'm going to love you anyway. I'm not going to judge you anymore. I am not going to dump this guilt and regret on you. You messed up. You've learned from it. I'm going to hold you tightly and lovingly in my heart and move forward with you."

TS: Beautiful. All right, Bronnie. I just have one final question for you. This Sounds True show is called Insights at the Edge, and I'm curious what your edge is, especially in terms of this theme of courage. If you had all the courage in the world, is there something you might be doing, or approach, or be different about than you are? If we just said, "Here you go, unlimited courage," does anything occur to you? I know it's a kind of edgy question, but that's why here it is, at the end of our conversation, Insights at the Edge.

BW: Well, I guess, you know, relationships are one of my big lessons, so if I had all the courage in the world, I would be the most open book of unconditional love for a partner. Yes, that would be tipping me over the edge. Yes, tipping me over the edge. I just had this vision of a cliff, going over the edge, but I once said to a friend, "I feel like I've jumped off a cliff, and I've caught a little branch on the way down, and the branch is about to break," and he said to me, "Well, why would you jump off . . . why not just fly off the cliff?" You know? So when you're saying go off the edge, that level of courage, to be as hugely, unconditionally open with a partner, has the potential to set me flying, and that's the edge I'd like to go from.

TS: Bronnie, I have so enjoyed talking with you. I'm here in Boulder, Colorado. You're in what part of Australia as we're talking?

BW: In Northern New South Wales, between Byron Bay and the Gold Coast.

TS: Ah, beautiful place. Thank you so much.

BW: Yes.

TS: Thank you so much for being a guest.

BW: It's been my pleasure.

TS: Really enjoyed talking with you.

BW: Thank you, Tami.

TS: Great work. Bronnie Ware is the author of the book, The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing, and a new book called Bloom: A Tale of Courage, Surrender, and Breaking Through Upper Limits. Thank you for listening to Insights at the Edge. You can read a full transcript of today's interview at soundstrue.com/podcast. And if you're interested, hit the subscribe button in your podcast app. And also, if you feel inspired, head to iTunes, and leave Insights at the Edge a review. I love getting your feedback, being in connection with you, and learning how we can continue to evolve and improve our program. Working together, I believe we can create a kinder and wiser world. SoundsTrue.com: waking up the world.