

The Lost Voice of A Generation by Carolyn Gregoire

"We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life."

The striking phrase that began Marina Keegan's final essay for the Yale Daily Newsspread like wildfire across the Internet in the wake of Keegan's tragic death from a car accident, five days after she graduated from Yale at the age of 22.

Keegan had all the promise a young person could possibly have upon graduating from college: She had an internship at The New Yorker lined up, a play to be produced at an international film festival, and a remarkable literary talent that had already earned her awards and critical acclaim. She also had a boyfriend, a community of friends, and a loving family.

"I've decided I'm going to be a writer," a friend recalls Keegan saying at a Yale poetry group meeting. "Like, a real one. With my life."

There's no doubt that she would have been, and already was. In her short life, Keegan exhibited uncanny wisdom for an individual of any age, and a literary talent perhaps even more rare. It's highly likely, many commentators have noted, that Keegan would have achieved considerable literary fame and success had she lived.

"The Opposite Of Loneliness" wasn't the only powerful work that Keegan left behind -- far from it, in fact. She created an extensive body of work at an extremely young age, some of which has been published posthumously in a collection, *The Opposite of Loneliness*.

Here are six things we can all learn from Keegan's essays and stories -- life lessons from a voice that was wise beyond her years and gone too soon.

Life can be a journey toward purpose and meaning -- if we ask the right questions.

Anne Fadiman, Keegan's writing professor at Yale and also the editor of *The Opposite of Loneliness*, said this about her former student: "Every aspect of her life was a way of answering that question: how do you find meaning in your life?"

Keegan's work forces readers to reflect on a number of important questions of meaning, purpose, growth and change. Keegan was a master of both elevating the

seemingly insignificant events that only hold weight upon reflection, and of imploring us to tackle the biggest questions of our own purpose and path.

You've got to chase something bigger than a huge paycheck.

The New York Times's Nicholas Kristof called Keegan's work "a triumph, but also a tragedy," reflecting on an op-ed the young writer had penned for the Times protesting the number of Yale students who would leave behind their "idealistic" dreams of changing the world to take up well-paid Wall Street jobs after graduation.

"Is working for a bank inherently evil? Probably not," Keegan wrote in the Times. "But the fact that such a large percentage of students at top-tier schools enter an industry that isn't contributing, creating or improving much of anything saddens me."

As Kristof noted, there are no easy answers to questions of money versus meaning. But Keegan was right "to prod us all to reflect on what we seek from life, to ask these questions, to recognize the importance of passions as well as paychecks."

The desire for human connection is universal.

Here is how Keegan described the elusive "opposite of loneliness":

It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. When it's four a.m. and no one goes to bed. That night with the guitar. That night we can't remember. That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt. The hats.

These words serve as a powerful reminder that this "opposite of loneliness" -- togetherness, interconnection, humor, compassion -- is, at the end of the day, what we're all here to create in our lives.

"The important thing is to find this... opposite of loneliness," one reader commented on Keegan's Yale Daily News piece. "And this is the pathway that Marina shows us... now and forever, because her words will survive many generations in the future."

We should appreciate the little "interesting stuff" life offers us every day.

Perhaps Keegan's greatest asset as a writer was her mastery of the art of observation. Keegan wrote in her application to professor Anne Fadiman's first-person writing class at Yale:

About three years ago, I started a list. It began in a marbled notebook but has since evolved inside the walls of my word processor. Interesting stuff. That's what I call it. I'll admit it's become a bit of an addiction. I add to it in class, in the library, before bed, and on trains. It has everything from descriptions of a waiter's hand gestures, to my cab driver's eyes, to strange things that happen to me or a way to phrase something. I have 32 single-spaced pages of interesting stuff in my life.

As Fadiman writes in the collection's introduction, several of these "interesting things" became the basis for Keegan's published essays.

Life is short.

"I cry because everything is so beautiful and so short," Keegan wrote in one of her poems.

In one essay, Keegan, who had celiac disease and was unable to consume wheat, describes her deathbed wishes, humorously describing the gluten-filled feast that she'll enjoy. In another, she writes, "If you didn't already know this, the sun is going to die."

Keegan's work is marked by an awareness, if not a preoccupation, with life's transiency. But rather than seeing this as reason for despair or hopelessness, it seems to contribute to a deep desire to experience all that life has to offer, and to find meaning while we're here.

But there's no such thing as "too late."

Though Keegan was speaking to a college audience, her words have inspired readers of all ages:

"We're so young... What we have to remember is that we can still do anything. We can change our minds. We can start over. Get a post-bac or try writing for the first time. The notion that it's too late to do anything is comical. It's hilarious. We're graduating college. We're so young. We can't, we MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it's all we have."