



Using the Good Stuff

By Dr. Bill Webster

The other evening, our new neighbours came for dinner. So, out came the good china and the Sunday silverware. The next day, it was "just family" at mealtime, and somewhere along the line, a decision was made that the "everyday stuff" was good enough for that occasion.

Where does this idea come from? Why do we use the good stuff with people we hardly know, but those we really care about have to endure the ordinary?

Well, I've had it with that notion! I've decided to make a few changes. You see I'm one of those people who always lives fairly sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I never go anywhere without a change of socks, a raincoat, a flashlight and a spare everything. Frankly, if I had to do it over again, I would travel lighter.

I want to spend more time with family and friends, and not so much time at the office. I am going to sit in my backyard next summer and admire the view, without fussing about the weeds in the garden. I'm reading more and worrying less. I'm taking fewer things seriously.

I would like to take more chances. OK, bungee jumping is a non-starter, but I would like to relive my teenage motorcycle days one more time. I want to play golf at St Andrews Old Course and travel to more adventurous places rather than the usual itineraries. Instead of my hectic schedule, I'd like to stop to smell more roses.

And most importantly, I'm not "saving" anything for "another day." We're going to use our good china for every special event, such as having the grandkids over, or everyday dinners. "One of these days" is losing its grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing, hearing or doing, I want to see, hear and do it now ... while I still can!

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Can you imagine how you would feel if you learned you had less than a year to live? What would I want to do? What would I want to do differently today? Would I be doing the things I have planned or something different?

What brought this on? Why has this normally predictable and staid person decided to get a bit more adventurous?

Probably it's because Peter, a dear friend of mine, has just been given a life-threatening diagnosis, and it's not looking too promising. He's 14 years younger than I am, and frankly he, his family and the rest of us are pretty shaken up about it.

Can you imagine how you would feel if you learned you had less than a year to live? What would I want to do? What would I want to do differently today? Would I be doing the things I have planned or something different? That's what has been going through my mind since I received the news about Peter.

If it was you, would you do something different?

- Take a trip to some exotic, yet unvisited places?
- Go and visit someone who is special to you?
- Try to right a wrong that has troubled you?
- Would you want to tell those close to you that you love them, and spend more time with them, doing things that you feel are really important?
- Would you forgive someone who has hurt you?
- And what about the things you've done? Do you need to call a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles? Do you need to say I'm sorry to a parent, a child or someone who you meant to spend some time with, but "stuff" got in the way?
- What changes would you make to your schedule if you knew your days were dwindling down? Where would you go and what would you do?

We always have excuses, of course. "Oh well, there's always tomorrow. I'll be happy when this busy time is over, or when the kids are gone, when the mortgage is paid, or when I'm retired. Then I'm going to have some fun and enjoy myself."

But, Peter's diagnosis has made me realize that "someday" is upon us, my friends. Life should be a pattern of experiences to savour, not to endure. I'm trying to recognize these moments now and cherish them more. Sometimes we are so busy getting to the destination we forget that the beauty of life is the journey.

Life even at its longest is short. So, what occasions do we use the good stuff? When would be the best time to do all the things we always wanted to do?

At the end of life, we regret the things we haven't done more than the things we have done. It's those little things I, albeit unintentionally, left undone that would frustrate me most if I knew my days were limited. I would be upset that I hadn't told my family often enough how much I truly love them, or that I had left undone things I always intended to do.

Anger is usually rooted in the realization that I could have done something, but now it's too late. Wisdom begins when we realize that "one of these days" is really here and now. Thankfully, Peter is one of those guys who came to that realization early, and he has lived a full life, even though he and all of us are still saddened by the fact it seems to be ending so prematurely.

Death is not the ultimate defeat; a life un-lived is the greatest tragedy. So, what are you putting off for "one of these days?"

When you live, laugh and love, and make the most of every day and every opportunity to do the things that you see as priorities, you are using the good dishes on the table of life you have set.

Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today, because we never know what the future holds. Don't get to the end of your life, saying "Gee, I wish I had"; rather live your life so that at the end of it you will be able to say, "Thank goodness I did."



DIAMONDS *and Stones*

By Dr. Bill Webster

I recently heard an oldie but goodie on the radio ... John Denver singing his classic hit, "Some days are diamonds, some days are stones."

I hope you won't mind me sharing with you that I am writing this on a day that is more a stone than a diamond for me. Like many of you, I suffered a significant loss last year when my son, Steve, died in an accident. People ask me how I am doing, and I usually answer "fine," but that isn't exactly true. I miss him every single day. But today is especially poignant because this would have been his 44th birthday.

When you are grieving, certain days are more challenging than others inasmuch as they remind us more specifically of the person who died. You will be able to identify many occasions on which you miss your loved one; all the days throughout the year that could be hard: Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, the first day of spring; the opening of the football or sport season; summer holidays; anniversaries; Christmas. Then add the special occasions like weddings, family get-togethers, weekends. These can be difficult because they remind us of better days when the person was here, as compared to today when they are not.

So today is a hard day for me, and I am sure you can identify. I find myself thinking back on better times, like the day when he was born. Truth be told, my wife and I really thought it would be a girl but surprise, surprise, out popped Steve, and from that first second, there were no regrets. I remember special birthday

parties held at McDonald's and other locations; the gifts with which I would love to surprise him; and even as he grew into adulthood, finding ways to let him know he was special to me.

A birthday after someone's death is usually not a happy one. This is the second birthday since his passing, but I think this one is more emotional, because last year I was still numb and in shock. It can be discouraging when some people observe that "you don't seem to be getting over it" or when it seems you are getting worse rather than better. As John Denver says in his song, "Sometimes the hard times won't leave me alone."

It is important not to regard tough times as "set-backs" for they are actually an invitation to come to terms with our loss a little more. So, what can you (or I) do to make that noteworthy day, though difficult, more meaningful?

1. Grief invites us to remember, not to forget. So, be proactive, not reactive. In other words, do something to take charge of the day. See it as another opportunity to grieve, to miss the person, to peel back another layer of sorrow. To pretend nothing has happened is unnatural because we know that's not true and trying to ignore the day can actually increase tension. It takes more energy to avoid the situation than it does to confront it.

2. Observe these special occasions in ways that are comfortable for you. Remember, there is no right or wrong way of handling these times. Once you have



decided how you want to observe the day and what you can handle comfortably, let family and friends know what you have planned.

3. Allow yourself to feel and express your feelings. Those special days often magnify feelings of loss, so share your concerns, apprehensions and feelings with a friend, counsellor or in a support group. Recognize the need for support is often greater during such special occasions and holidays. Try to get enough rest, because those occasions can be emotionally and physically draining.

4. Acknowledge your loved one's presence. My little granddaughter, even as I write, is releasing balloons at the cemetery, sending them to her daddy in heaven. You could light a memorial candle at the din-

ner table or in the house to quietly include your loved one. Listen to music they especially liked; or look at photographs or videos if it is not too difficult for you. Do something ... anything ... to remember them and who they were.

5. Don't be afraid to have fun. It is natural to feel sadness, of course, but the day doesn't have to be all sorrowful. Laughter and joy are not disrespectful. Give yourself and your family members permission to celebrate and take pleasure in one another. Can you get together with family and friends and take some time to share special memories or tell stories about the person? What made them special and what you miss about them? Humorous incidents recalled can have a special healing quality to them.

6. Trying to balance sorrow for their death with celebration for their life will make difficult days more meaningful. Your loved one died it is true, but they also lived. Try to remember the good memories you shared with the person. A birthday is a celebration of life, so what could you do on that day that would celebrate and honour that life, even though their absence will be keenly felt? What would you have done if they had still been here? Could you do something similar and make the most of the day? It may not cancel out your sadness but it certainly makes it easier.

Remember, the choice: you can shed tears because they are gone, or you can smile because they lived. Or maybe you can do both at the same time.

Oh, by the way, what is the difference between a diamond and a stone? A diamond is just a piece of coal that has been put under pressure. When the pressure is on, stones can be transformed into diamonds.

And now, even on a cold day, I am going to the driving range to hit some golf balls. Steve would like that.

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