The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departed

by Bronnie Ware

After working for years in an unfulfilling industry, Bronnie Ware sought work with meaning and found herself in palliative care. Although employed as a personal carer primarily to look after physical needs, she found deep and meaningful conversations with her clients. She contributed to their emotional wellbeing and learned significant lessons for herself. Most significantly, she listened for the most common regrets they expressed. She wrote about these in her blog and now, combined with stories of her own colourful life, these are collected in her memoir The Top Five Regrets of the Dying. In the words of her clients, and echoed in her own colourful life, the regrets to avoid were:

1. I wish I had the courage to love a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me
2. I wish I hadn’t worked so hard
3. I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends
5. I wish I had let myself be happier

People who are dying often realize what is most important and what is not and are often more likely to speak honestly. Bronnie Ware’s writing is a warm narrative of journeying with those who are dying and learning from their wisdom and experience.

What I most appreciated about the book was the writer’s modelling of reflective practice. Ware listened carefully to her clients, noticed how the conversations were affecting and growing her, observed what people who are dying and their families need, and sought to change her approach to client care to reflect what she was learning. For example, she discusses suspending premature judgment, speaking truthfully and avoiding lies, navigating difficult relationships and issues of control, being honest with emotions, and helping families as well as clients with their grief.

Along the way, she demonstrates her own commitment to personal growth. I appreciated her words of grace, her pursuit of freedom and downward mobility, her practice of meditation and visualization, gratitude and prayer, and her clear commitment to care of her own self as well as compassionate care of her clients. And she describes how, after a decade of working with those who are dying, she moved into teaching songwriting in a women’s prison and is now looking forward to parenting. She also acknowledges a dark period of depression that she courageously worked through with meditation and learning to accept herself and not to worry about the opinions of others.

The Top Five Regrets of the Dying is the most both heart-warming and heart-breaking I have read this year. It is encouraging inspiration for carers and chaplains, for others who work with or are related to people who are old or dying, and for anyone interested in grappling with deeper questions of life.

Bronnie Ware is an Australian writer and songwriter and has developed a songwriting course. See www.inspirationandchai.com and www.bronniware.com.
