

Wisdom on Living a Regret Free Life

Brebeuf Graduation Deacon Mike Walsh June 2014

Brother Spencer, Principal Azzopardi, Superintendent Shain, Trustee Del Grande, Special Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, and students of the Class of 2014...

It is an honour to be with you today on the occasion of your graduation from Brebeuf College.

A little background on me might be in order:

- Born and raised in Toronto;
- Moved to Richmond Hill if you can believe it in 1956 and the one thing I remember is the opening of the original Harvey's restaurant in 1959;
- Made our way to "Willowdale" as it was called in 1963 the same year the new Catholic High School opened at Bayview and Steeles Ave.;
- I was only in Grade 4 at the time so High School seemed a long way off in the distance;
- This means I am old enough to remember Canada's 100th birthday in 1967 and the last time the Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup!
- Before you knew it the fall of 1968 arrived and I showed up along with 60 or so other boys for the first day of High School as Grade 9ers- the lowest of the low!
- Some highlights from my career as a Brebeuf Student:
 - Graduated in the half of the class that made the top half possible;
 - Fr. Meagher- Model Student comment
 - Played football with Brebeuf legend Larry Uteck- Give Mike the Ball story;
 - Ran for student president in Grade 11- I had no real chance to win but my friends and I had one primary strategy: This might be a good way to meet girls from SJMP- this turned out to be true;
 - Unfortunately I won the election which meant I had to actually be the President the next year!
 - Valedictorian for the Class of '73- which made everyone a bit nervous.
- Went to York- they would take anyone in those days – graduated and quite by accident ended up working for a computer company called Sperry Univac.
- Married my high school girlfriend 36 years ago this week and we have two grown kids;
- In 2004 I became a deacon- who saw that coming- and for the past 11 years I have been working with men and women who are trying to rebuild their lives after spending time in prison.

I would like to take just a few moments to share with you the very first time I ever wore my Brebeuf blazer in public. I am not sure if any of you remember this moment but for me; it is etched into my brain.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that the blazer itself just looked bad. My Mom always used to tell me that you could tell a bunch of men had been involved in picking out a uniform that consisted of a brown blazer with grey wool pants.

It was the summer of 1968, and we had made the requisite trip to the one store in Toronto that sold all the uniforms for Catholic Schools. I got measured, and the blazer was ordered about one size too big, so I could grow into it.

August rolled around, and my parents decided we would take a weekend trip to a hotel out by the airport for a little holiday. The hotel had a pool, and the owner was a client of my Dad's which meant we got the rooms for free.

We were only there a short time when we got a call from my grandmother who was staying at our house looking after our dog. She was not feeling well so we had to cut our weekend short and get home as soon as we could.

I remember the paramedics (they weren't called that back in 68) arrived and carried her out on a stretcher. My parents assured me and my two younger brothers that she was alright, and that she just needed some rest.

That night a phone call came into the house, and my Dad took it. I could tell right away something was wrong. He went into his bedroom where my Mom was resting and a few seconds later a loud scream came forth as my Mom learned that her mother had died.

I was 14, and this was the first time I had experienced a death of someone in our family. In 1963, both Pope John XXIII and US President Kennedy had died, and it was like a member of the family had passed away, but it was nothing like what was happening now.

A few days later we rushed down to this store where the brown blazers come from and picked up mine as I needed it to wear to my grandmother's funeral. Not only that, I was selected to be one of the pallbearers along with another cousin.

Death may be a strange thing to talk about at a graduation. Most of these talks are about how you are the future and how your life is front of you.

This of course is true but there is much to learn about life by thinking about death.

I recently attended a talk given by an Irish storyteller. She spent most of her life as a palliative care nurse helping people to die with dignity and peace. During her talk, she mentioned another nurse, Bronnie Ware, who has written a book called 'The Top Five Regrets of the Dying - A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing'.

I want to take a few moments to share the insights of the dying with you because as Bronnie talks about in her book, these are potentially transformational lessons that often become clear to us when it is too late to use them effectively.

As you prepare for the next phase of your lives, as you enter adulthood and put the things of your childhood behind you, here are five things that may not be clear to you now as a young invincible.

Ms. Ware calls these the "top five regrets of the dying". One of the things my experience with men and women coming out of prison is that most of them are filled with regrets.

One man I know just celebrated his 65th birthday. Over 30 of those years have been spent in prison. He is filled with regret over opportunities lost and friendships and time squandered.

Charles Dickens says that ***"Regrets are the natural property of grey hairs."*** He is right of course in that it is hard to see how one could live a great number of years without some regrets.

The challenge it seems to me is to minimize these regrets by proactively living with the understanding that we are responsible for the choices we make.

Here are the top five regrets of the dying according to Bronnie:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

This was the most common regret of all. When people realize that his or her life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made.

It is very important to try to honour at least some of your dreams along the way. From the moment that you lose your health, it is too late. Health brings a freedom very few realize, until they no longer have it.

2. I wish I didn't work so hard.

This is a tough one because it involves how we define success. Some of you are on the honour roll here today because you worked hard. Some of you excelled in athletics because you trained and worked hard.

Bronnie Ware has observed that people at the end of life look back with regret that they worked so hard at the wrong things. They sacrificed the more important aspects of life, time with family, for example, to in most cases to provide for the family.

“By simplifying your lifestyle and making conscious choices along the way, it is possible not to need the income that you think you do. And by creating more space in your life, you become happier and more open to new opportunities, ones more suited to your lifestyle.”

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

OK guys let's talk about feelings. I know most of us hate this topic, and it is just not something most men want to discuss let alone express.

We do not choose our feelings, and they are not right or wrong they just are. What we do control is how we react to them and how we choose to interact with others.

Time is limited today, but I cannot stress enough what an advantage you will have in life if you can learn how to express your feelings. It is a capability that will enhance every relationship you have with others, especially those closest to you.

4. I wish I stayed in touch with my friends.

I recently celebrated the funeral of a man named John, who died at 48 years of age. Several things made John's funeral stand out in my mind. First, he was young. It turns out; he had a difficult life in many ways especially when it came to his health. From birth, he had many challenges, and he looked different from the rest of the kids so naturally he was targeted and bullied.

As you heard people talk about John though you could sense that he had this inner courage and strength to overcome his many obstacles, and he touched the lives of those who could see past the fact that he looked different.

At his funeral ten of his friends from High School were in attendance and two of them spoke. Both men laughed and cried when they talked about John.

Bronnie shares that “it is common for anyone in a busy lifestyle to let friendships slip. However, when you are faced with your approaching death, the physical details of life fall away. People do want to get their financial affairs in order if possible. Nevertheless, it is not money or status that holds the true importance for them. They want to get things in order more for the benefit of those they love. Usually though, they are too ill and weary to manage this task. It all comes down to love and relationships in the end. That is all that remains in the final weeks, love and relationships.

5. I wish that I let myself be happier.

This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end that happiness is a choice. They stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. Life is a choice. It is YOUR life. Choose consciously, choose wisely, and choose honestly. Choose happiness.

One final thought for your consideration. What role does God play in all of this for you? Our relationship with God is one that can lapse if we ever had one at all.

I have shared with you five bits of wisdom about how to avoid having major regrets in about 75 years' time.

The question one might ask then is how do I live a full and regret free (or relatively free) life?

As a Jesuit trained Brebeuf grad from another century, I will leave you with one piece of advice that I have not always followed myself but for the past twenty years has become central to the way I have tried to live regret free.

Here is this free bit of advice: Make a friend of Jesus.

I realize some of you may already be at this stage. Some of you need to decide if this being a follower of Jesus is right for you. Some of you may have already decided you can go it alone.

Embracing Jesus as a teacher and friend is one way I know of to deal with the many challenges life brings.

Jesus will teach you how to LOVE. It sounds kind of sappy perhaps, but that is because most people confuse love with romance. They are two different things altogether.

Learn how to LOVE as Jesus teaches and then chances are very good that you will learn how to live a regret free life.

That is because Jesus teaches that LOVE as a verb and not a feeling. St. Paul defines what "Love is" as taught by Christ in his letter to the Corinthians:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails".

If you apply this definition of LOVE to how you live, then you might find that you can avoid some of the biggest regrets life has potentially in-store for you. For example:

Regret 1: I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

LOVE and RESPECT YOURSELF – you can only give away what you have and if you are miserable in your daily work, it will be hard to give away joy.

Regret 2: I wish I didn't work so hard.

LOVE others sent into your life more the material things you want to buy them.

Regret 3: I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

LOVE is never envious- it is a life built on trust and the ability to be honest

Regret 4: I wish I stayed in touch with my friends.

LOVE is always Kind: this means making time for those in your life that matter.

Regret 5: I wish that I let myself be happier.

LOVE as taught by Jesus and defined by St. Paul is after all at the very core of happiness.

My wish for you on this special day in your life is similar to the prayer at the end of every mass celebrated.

It is that you “Go in Peace and to glorify the Lord by living a regret-free life.

God Bless.

Bronnie Ware is a writer and songwriter from Australia who spent several years caring for dying people in their homes. She has recently released a full-length book titled 'The Top Five Regrets of the Dying - A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing'. It is a memoir of her own life and how it was transformed through the regrets of the dying people she cared for. For more information, please visit Bronnie's official website at www.bronnie.com or her blog at www.inspirationandchai.com.