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The Last Week of Our Lives

by *Hildy Gottlieb*

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It's been a hard week, with reminders everywhere of how limited our time is on this planet. I spent one day this week with my best friend, waiting in the hospital as her husband got an angiogram following his heart attack - at age 51. I stayed in touch all week with another friend, waiting moment by moment for his mother to finally be free from the grips of Alzheimers.

All this is under the backdrop of the gulf coast hurricane, a place where everyone seems to either be relieved to know a family member was able to climb to safety, or is still waiting to hear...

We have all been surrounded this week with the reminder that life is short, and that we never know when, in the snap of a cosmic finger, it will be cut short.

An ancient meditation practice has been my saving grace this week. It is simple, but powerful. It puts life into perspective, and urges us to do what is most important.

If this were the last week of my life, what would I do?

For me, considering this thought during my morning walk, contemplating a life free of regrets, a life where we cherish what we so often overlook - these moments have quickly become a touchstone for the rest of my day. At a time when it is easy to despair, these thoughts have been energizing.

Here is some of what I've thought about this week.



If this were my last week alive, I would let everyone who has touched my life know how important they have been to me. I would thank them for teaching me, for being kind to me - and for teaching me more, perhaps, when they have not been kind to me.

I would write or call those I love, to tell them I love them. To anyone about whom I think "It's been a while - I wonder how she's doing?" I would call and find out.

I would give the most precious things I own to the people I most want to have them. They will do me no good when I'm gone, and in truth probably don't do me much good now.

And that keynote address I'm giving this week? It would be my best. I would work even harder to make sure they learn what I want them to learn, because I won't have another chance to teach them. (And would I want to hear, from the great beyond, someone saying, "That last speech of hers? Nothing special..." Oh if there is a hell for public speakers, that would surely be it!)



Photo © Hildy Gottlieb

If this were my last week on earth, I would find a way to let the world know we don't have to be fighting all the time. That unlike our animal brethren, we humans have the capacity to rise above our fears, to act from compassion and wisdom, to learn from the past. In my last week, I would try to encourage as many people as possible to realize that our humanity is a special gift, and that we are squandering that gift if we don't use it to get past the insanity of war and fear and poverty.

And I know in that last week, I would make sure to spend one dinnertime laughing with my big extended family. The 3 kids together, with their friends and girlfriends, seeing who can be more disgusting. Laughing till it hurts. Watching them be joyful together, out-perform each other, love each other. Maybe I'd give up something else and take 2 of those dinners...

And in that last week, I would eat every single thing that tasted really really good. I would feel sick as a dog the next day, and I would laugh at myself, saying, "It appears there are some things you will not learn, even in your last days on this planet."

During that last week, I would get on a plane and visit someplace I've always wanted to go. Perhaps I would stare at every inch I could see of the Vatican, where my daughter left her heart when she was 15 and said, "Mom, this is the most amazing place in the world."

Or maybe instead I would return to a place I've already loved - perhaps a day or 2 in ancient and magical Erongaricuaro, the Mexican village where spring is eternal, where cows roam the cobbled streets, and where friends live an art-filled life of green and wet and 20 foot bougainvilleas. Or maybe visit my beloved New York City one more time...



As I've thought of all the things I would do if this were my last week on earth, I realize this is what I want to be doing every day.

I want to be teaching at my best, encouraging others to do their best.

I want to show as many people as possible how to use the organizations we take for granted - the nonprofits where we work and volunteer - to make huge, significant, lasting improvement in our communities, our world.

I want to remember that owning stuff isn't nearly as fun as experiencing stuff.

I want to remember that it's not just me that won't last forever, but the incredible places around our world - places like New Orleans, like the World Trade Towers, like the Buddhas of Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley. It's not just our lives that are fragile and fleeting - it is the life of everything around us, of our whole planet.

But more than anything, I want to show those I love that I love them. And I want to thank those I've learned from, every day. I want to appreciate the people who have helped me, so many of whom don't even know that they have.

Which is why I am sharing these thoughts with you. I have learned far more from the work Dimitri and I have been blessed to do than I could ever give back.



And so, to you who are doing the work your community needs from you - yes, you! - I want to say thank you.

And I want to encourage you to go out and kick butt as if this were the very last week you have to make a

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difference, for your community, your family, your world.

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