

It's Better to Be Alive While Dying than Dead While Living

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Human beings these days are more engrossed in negativity and hopelessness. The spirit of liveliness for life has become a rare quality. As a consequence, we often encounter depressed souls lamenting over life and its hustles, rather than lively people who celebrate and enjoy every moment of life.

I fondly remember one of my young patient who made me think of being courageous in life and continue working without worrying about results. A three-year-old boy was diagnosed to have neuroblastoma, a life threatening cancer. On investigations he was found to have very aggressive tumour and required to undergo intensive treatment with chemotherapy and bone marrow transplant. He received intensive chemotherapy without any tantrums and was admitted for the bone marrow transplant. He was aware that during the course of transplant he will be confined to a room for almost two weeks and will not be allowed to go out till he recovers completely. The little champ entered the room without any fuss and we did not encounter any resistance while preparing him for the daily treatment doses. As a habit while getting ready for my daily morning rounds, I used to watch him from outside the room through a glass window. He would diligently blow a balloon given to him for lung exercises. While on rounds, he engaged us all in energetic chit-chats about his friends, family, favourite chores and would give me an energetic hi-five to bid bye. To our plight during the course of BMT, he developed severe oral ulcers, causing him throat pain along with fever. It became difficult for him to swallow meals or water without severe pain. While prepping up for my morning rounds, I assumed he must be sleeping or crying because of pain and must be asking to go home. But to my surprise when I looked at him from the glass window, he was blowing the balloon as usual. Although he couldn't speak because of throat pain, he happily allowed me to examine him completely and gave me the usual warm hi-five. He did not ask about his discharge even once in his fifteen days stay inside the room. This incident surprised me as I often encounter adult patients becoming cranky when they develop similar complications, they stop doing their

daily activities and start whining often asking to go out to meet people.

In this fast paced world seeking instant gratification most of us have forgotten the art of living. People find it difficult to live in the present moment, while they keep contemplating for the future. In this conundrum they miss out living life for what it offers and taking up challenges as part of life. Most of us are busy finding faults in the system, blaming fate, cursing others for incompetency, and become unhappy seeing other people happy. We try to find excuses to run away from the daily discipline and would find reasons to not work hard and fret about not getting the desired results. This child did not refuse or find excuses to run away from treatment. He was doing his daily routine happily and did not bother about what was going to happen next. We adults forget to adopt the basic life tools of discipline, patience and perseverance, which makes us anxious and sad.

I remember another young soul, a 15 years old girl, who was diagnosed with a bone tumor called Ewing's sarcoma. She underwent surgery to remove the tumor and received chemotherapy for almost a year. Unfortunately, her tumor progressed at the end of treatment and spread to lungs and other bones. Her condition worsened rapidly and she developed breathlessness requiring oxygen support, and was not able to speak or eat because of the distress. Her worsening health condition saddened her parents. They started avoiding conversation about the disease condition with their daughter and pretended to be happy when with her, as they felt this would further demotivate her from receiving the palliative care. The girl however had understood that the tumor has spread everywhere and she was not going to make it. What caught my attention was her understanding for her parents' mental state and agony. I was surprised to see her acceptance for her unfortunate fate. On my visit to her, she would request me to comfort her parents to not worry and give them hope by telling them that she will be fine after one dose of medication. She would often request me to give her some medications which could

reduce her breathing difficulty so that she can talk with her parents and eat well and not make them anxious. While doing so she did not become depressed thinking that she is not going get cured. She understood the limitations of treatment strategies and never demanded that she should be cured by any means. Never did she expressed the desire to run away from the hospital where so far she received only pricks and pain without any benefit. She did not exhibit any tantrums, which we expect from older children or adolescents.

This girl was brave and happy even at the end of her life. She lived the time that she had in hand with her. We many times burden ourselves with lot of expectations from life. In the run of life, we forget to live and keep chasing the unending trail of targets set by us. We ascribe life with terms and conditions while

missing out on cherishing that it has to offer. People undermine the importance of spending quality time with family and people around us, and seldom connect with nature. While coping with the self-created overwhelming stress for life, we often start acting on spinal level and operating like robots. These are the root reasons that make people unhappy, predisposing them to anxiety and depression. There is a need to slow our pace while running from posts to pillar chasing happiness and targets which are actually pseudo destinations set by us. We should remember to savor small moments in this journey of life while cherishing the present.

We need to learn to be alive even at our deathbed like this girl instead of living life like a lifeless person.

*Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as He did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that He will make all things right,
If I surrender to His will,
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.*

Amen