

# Dying in Style

*by Audrey J. Parker*



In 2016, after living with chronic, debilitating pain for two years, I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma—stage-4 breast cancer that had metastasized in most of my skeleton. It was the disease that would claim my life.

For some reason, I remained calm when I received my terminal diagnosis. I felt from that very moment that it was senseless to panic over something I had no control over. I was relieved to finally know what was wrong with me. Instead of

being afraid or feeling sorry for myself, I leaned in to my new path in life, determined to make the most of it.

I have always liked to do things well and to the best of my ability, so I took my death on as a project. All I wanted was to have a fabulous end-of-life experience on my terms and to die in style. After all, death is natural and can be a beautiful thing if we allow it to be.

Some people speculate about what they would do if they knew when they were going to die. It's not hypothetical for me. For a while now, I've known the exact day when I'm going to die, because I've elected medically assisted death to cut off the greatest pain and worst quality of life that would be inevitable if I lingered. My pre-planned exit is coming up very soon. I'm unable to leave my bed in my apartment now, and this bed will be my deathbed.

Despite the pain, suffering, and other negative things that have accompanied the process of my dying, I still believe that my last breath will be the most peaceful and beautiful breath of my life. I believe everyone holds the key to their own personal happiness. No matter how dire your circumstances, you control your mindset, attitude, and how you handle things. It is entirely up to you whether you take a positive or negative approach to life (and death).

I did exactly what most people imagine they would do when confronted with their own death. I chose several bucket list items and brought them to fruition. I traveled to Paris, I took my eldest twin granddaughters on a trip to Mexico, and I finished my book. I learned that accomplishing things late in life feels so rewarding.

But my intention was to live my best life every day until my last breath, in both big ways and small ways. So far, that's what I've done.

If my positive approach to death acts as a spark to help others become less afraid of their own death, I'll be incredibly proud.

## **What I Did Right**

Looking back over the last months of my life, several choices have helped me focus on what matters most during my dwindling time on earth.

### *Taking Charge*

When I got my terminal diagnosis, I coped by taking control of everything I could.

- I remained calm.
- I made peace with my death.
- I purged my home and organized my closets.
- I purchased things that would be useful when I became bedridden.
- I prepared a will.
- I wrote my obituary.
- I assembled a team of friends to help me as my health worsened and to take care of my affairs after I'm gone.

By doing these things, I decluttered both my life and my mind. I began to feel peaceful, happy, and more powerful than I ever did during my earlier lifetime. I took charge of every single detail of my life that I could, and by doing so I

avoided feeling like a victim.

### *Being Positive*

My positive attitude has always been my secret weapon. It's served me well throughout my life, and it's been even more valuable in the past two years. I know I would have missed out on many fabulous experiences had I taken the negative route and cried, "Woe is me."

I have made sure my mindset was positive before I got out of bed each day. I have avoided negative conversations with others. And I have avoided negative conversations with myself about myself. This has impacted my life significantly. I began to notice how critical I was to myself, and I worked hard to shut that down. This has enabled me to live in the moment and avoid borrowing trouble. If you think about it, our fears rarely come to fruition, so why do we spend so much of our precious life worrying and stressing over things that will never happen?

I have removed all toxicity and negativity from my world. From the start, anyone who was constantly negative toward me or others was no longer welcome in my life. It didn't matter if they were friends or family. Maintaining a positive environment was paramount to my daily happiness.

Do you feel you have no control over your life? That you are continually unlucky? Or do you try to find solutions and get over life's hiccups quickly? I chose the latter. To me, taking the negative approach was saying to the universe, "I'm powerless."

I never wanted to feel powerless, so I chose to be happy instead. If your life feels

like it's falling apart, maybe you've just lost someone, or you just received a terrible diagnosis, I understand that it seems unfathomable that you could become happy. But I'm here to tell you that it is possible. I have found happiness in the worst situation. So can you.

### *Living Well*

Today, personal success is often judged by how much money we amass, what we drive, the value of our home, or how we've been able to keep up with those around us. But I see things differently now.

What has become most important to me are the meaningful friendships I cultivated over the years. I spent a lifetime searching for my people. Today, I am more grateful than ever that I found them. It's people, not possessions that matter.

Celebrating and having fun with others on joyful occasions gives me great joy. So after I got sick, I continued to socialize every chance I got, for as long as I was able. Those gatherings became even more important to me. Even though getting dressed to go out took nearly all my energy, I did it anyway. I went to black-tie events, balls, fashion shows, parties, weddings—you name it. I might have had to carry a cane or push a walker, but I didn't let that stop me.

Being socially active helped me feel I was living well. Prioritizing quality of life was the right choice for me. It's the right choice for all of us, because no one knows the quantity of life remaining. Those gatherings made me smile at times when people who didn't really know me expected to see sadness on my face.

## *Helping Others*

Even nearing the end of my life, I discovered it was possible to find a cause I believed in and to become a force for good. For example, I found meaningful volunteer work with our local hospice, where I became a spokesperson. I even helped make recommendations for décor for each of the bedrooms in the new hospice that will open after I am gone. Helping others took my mind off my situation. More importantly, it helped me feel useful and still part of my community.

I have learned volunteering is something everyone should do because it contributes to personal happiness. Find something, someone, or a cause that you believe in and be a spark! Especially if you are in a season of feeling sorry for yourself. Volunteering is a great way to crawl out of that hole.

Through this journey, I never dreamt that I would become an advocate at the very end of my life. But that is what happens when we open up ourselves in service to others. Through this journey I have learned much about the medical assistance in dying laws here in Canada, and some of the changes that need to occur, and have become outspoken about necessary positive changes. I'm dying anyway, so I might as well make my death stand for something important. That's how I choose to see it.

Using my experience with death to impact others who come after me is a blessing and a gift. Knowing my life will impact others makes it feel more worth it somehow. Deciding to live for others is a decision each of us can make today.

## *Planning for the End*

Our first breath gives us life, but our last one honors a lifetime. Therefore, as my friends and family got more comfortable talking about my death, I opened up a dialogue about my send-off. Knowing what my Celebration of Life (we never refer to it as a *funeral*) will be like gives me joy as I approach the end. And I'm sure it's going to be a comfort for my family and friends to know they're honoring me after my death exactly as I wanted.

So, what's it going to be like? I have always loved fashion and finery, so I have themed my Celebration of Life after the styles of my favorite designer, Coco Chanel. I have three musicians performing my final send-off song, "Mustang Sally." Prosecco and chocolate-dipped strawberries will be served at my after-party.

I urge you to have these conversations with your loved ones. They may be difficult and uncomfortable. But they will, in due time, give you joy and give them much needed comfort.

## **Joy Amid the Sorrow**

I've given a lot of thought to my beliefs. No one truly knows if our lives are predestined or not, or if we have any influence on our life's journey, but I do think the degree of happiness with which we go through life is up to us. Of all the things we can control in life, this is the most important.

How many people on their deathbed can say they truly have had a happy life—



and still are having one? I can. Excluding my constant fight with pain management, I have remained remarkably happy every day since my diagnosis. I chose that. In fact, my last few years can only be described as joyous! Today, only days before my passing, I'm living proof that if you choose to be happy and set your life up to create happiness, you will be happy. This is my hope for every one of my friends and my hope for each of you. Take control of your happiness.

Now, let's be fully truthful. Throughout my end-of-life journey, people have marvelled at how comfortable I am with dying—but I won't leave without sadness. It's always hard to say goodbye. It's so much better, though, to say goodbye in just the way you want. So that is what I will do.

Until we meet again, I leave you with a simple message, "Be kind...just because you can."

Love,

Aud

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**Audrey Parker** was a make-up artist living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She loved beauty, enjoyed dancing, helped out with fund-raisers for good causes, and touched the lives of many friends and family members—perhaps never more so than near the end of her life. She wrote this article for *Simplify Magazine* in the last week before her death.

**Note from Kim King, friend of Audrey Parker:**

*On November 1, 2018, Audrey Parker died peacefully in her own bed, holding hands with her mother and surrounded by close friends. She was serenaded by her favorite singer-songwriter strumming a guitar. She was an inspiration to thousands who followed her story, and she started a powerful conversation about living your best life and dying well. She makes me think: If Audrey could live intentionally while in pain and dying, how much more can the rest of us? Rest in peace, Audrey.*

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