

Lessons on Life and Death

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A few weeks ago I received the sad news that a good friend and business partner, Dawn James-Williams, had passed away. Her death was completely unexpected. She began to show symptoms only a few weeks before being diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Dawn's story was unusual for the immigrant experience, for after living in New York for more than two decades and not being even close to retirement she and her husband, Colin, decided to move back home to Antigua, West Indies. Among their dreams were to build a home, give back to their community of birth, and reconnect with family while enjoying yearlong warm weather. While many friends here felt that their decision to return home at yet a young age was imprudent, as a friend I was personally happy for them. They were following an uncharted route by creating their own opportunity to write a new chapter for their lives.

Upon their move to Antigua they made good on their promise and began to work on starting a business while getting involved in their community. The impact of their contributions was immediately felt. They started support groups for women, young girls and boys, got actively involved in their church, and began working on a community initiative to restore and repair the grounds of the local cemetery. Eleven months after their arrival in Antigua, Dawn was dead. It had not even been a full year. How could this even be?

When death knocks at our door unexpectedly, besides the inevitable pain and grief we begin to ask questions. We ask God and we ask ourselves - why? What signs did we miss? What could we have done differently? What could we have said and did not? But one thing is sure, death also brings along lessons for the living. Yet, often times because the pain is so intense we are not capable of paying attention long enough to learn. In the midst of the soreness of our hearts, God speaks to the living but we must be willing to listen and learn. Dawn's untimely death has taught me the following very important lessons:

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1. **Who you are in life is who you will be in death.** As the wife of a minister and a daughter of missionaries, I have been to more funerals than the average person. To this day I am always astonished that it does not matter how mean a person might have been in their lifetime when they die, it seems that people only have good things to say about them. It is as if people feel compelled to lie out of compassion. The truth is that whatever evil or pain we caused in life it cannot be erased with our death. This is why in life we must live right.

1. **2) Life is short and unpredictable.** None of us has a patent on tomorrow. For many of us, tomorrow may never come. Living life in isolation, resentment and un-forgiveness is never wise. Our life may not last long enough to make things right. This is why the time to make things right is always now. How many of us make plans for the golden years of retirement. We plan to migrate, we plan to give back, we plan to reconnect with family, and we plan to take care of our health but what if the golden years never come? The time to visit and reconnect with family is now. The time to give back to our communities and take care of ourselves is today. Don't leave for tomorrow what you can do today.

1. **Your life can make a difference.** Contrary to popular belief, it does not take great movements or famous people to change the world. Things happen because of the dedication of committed individuals. We are all placed on this earth to make a difference. When Dawn and Colin decided to return to Antigua, they did not have thousands of dollars in a retirement fund but that did not stop them from giving back. They understood that it is the giving of self that will make a difference. Today as many mourn the passing of Dawn many are also thankful for the difference she made in their lives. Her contributions in life remain priceless.

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