

Don't Wait



Dr Tan Su-Ming graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1990. She is married with a daughter and runs her own general practice.



Text by Dr Tan Su-Ming

I was once looking for a quote to scribble in a birthday card and found this one:

"Every birthday is a gift. Every day a gift." –Aretha Franklin

The birthday celebrant, the grandmother of a buddy, was turning 102 and I found the quote apt. This quote came to mind again recently.

I lost a patient last week; I had been treating her for 20 years. She had been doing poorly over the last two years, going through the revolving doors of the hospital due to heart failure.

I last saw her only a month ago. Although it grieved me to learn that she had passed on (peacefully), I felt a certain degree of comfort in the thought that our last encounter was good. I remember the consultation

being unrushed. We went through the management plan for her a few times to be sure she understood it. I let her repeat her questions several times without feeling or acting impatient, as I usually do. It was kind of surreal. I don't know, but maybe I had sensed that it might be the last time we would be seeing each other.

Yesterday, I took an afternoon off from work and took my father out for lunch. After dad and I said goodbye, I learnt from a text that my friend's father had passed away the night before. As I drove to the Singapore Casket building where the wake was held, I cried all the way, because I felt my dad's own mortality acutely.

The time I just shared with him earlier suddenly seemed even more

precious. No one knows the hour of our own departure, or that of another person.

But if there was a way to know, to sense it, how would it change my behaviour?

Say "yes" to that invite for a meal?

Say "this meal is on me"?

Say "keep the change" to the taxi driver?

Give the nice waiter a generous tip?

Waive the fee for this consultation?

Stop everything I'm doing to really listen to someone?

So here's another quote for you:

"You cannot do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late." –Ralph Waldo Emerson ♦