

What's Love Got to Do With It By James R. Doty
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Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

You know what's funny, as I was sitting there before I came out I was remembering an experience where I flew into a city to give a lecture and I had flown from Hawaii, actually, and I flew on the plane in a pair of shorts, a t-shirt flip flops, and I just carried a suit and a shirt, etc. I get to the place, I'm just giving this lecture at 9 in the morning, I'm having breakfast with one of my favourite things which is waffles. They're covered with powdered sugar and as I'm cutting my waffles, the entire plate slides on to my lap. And I had to give my lecture in shorts and a t-shirt...

[Crowd Laughing]

...and flip flops! But that didn't happen today so I'm thankful. So for the last **[00:01:00]** 25 years, which is hard for me to say, as a neurosurgeon and physician, I have had a goal of preventing death. But what I can tell you some of the most profound experiences I have had as a human being is being with individuals who have truly lived that are dying. For the last decade, as a neuroscientist, I had been on a quest to understand what is it that prevents people from truly living. And when I say living I'm not talking about showing up at your job, I'm not talking about **[00:02:00]** going through the motions mindlessly of what we do every day. I'm talking about truly living. And it's funny somebody sent me a slide and it showed — the slide said, the definition of life and it said, "Life is a sexually transmitted disease that always ends in death."

[Crowd Laughing]

And actually I thought that was fair. [Chuckles]. Profound! [Giggling] But when we talk about truly living, what do I mean by that? Truly living means that your life has meaning. That you have contentment, that you have purpose, and ultimately as you end your life, you have a sense of transcendence. That feeling that your presence here on this earth, your life had meaning, affected others in a positive way, and that people will remember what you have done. It doesn't have to be on a national or international stage, it can be just with the people who you have lived your life with.

Part of the problem though is that we have separated living from dying **[00:04:00]**. We have a healthcare system that is focused on illness, not wellness, that is focused on living but has so separated dying that in fact most physicians, I will tell you, see a person's pending death as their failure. And like many of us whom we are faced with failure, we want to distance ourselves from that feeling. And in fact I will tell you a large percentage of my colleagues we have a terminal patient, as soon as that's evident, they will never see us again. But as I said earlier, one of the things I've learned, is that deep wisdom, purpose, meaning, can be found **[00:05:00]** in those individuals who are dying and who have truly lived.

But here is the paradox. In the United States, we consume one quarter of the world's resources, yet we have an epidemic of stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation. We have everything but so often we have nothing. And the problem is that we are not truly living. Yet I will assure you **[00:06:00]**, that our default mode as human beings and what makes our species unique is this immense capacity to connect, to care, and to love, but unfortunately, that default mode gets hijacked by what I call the baggage of our evolution. Now what do I mean by that? You may or may not know that our DNA has not changed for the last 200,000

years. We are exactly the same species that was on the Savannah in Africa **[00:07:00]**, and that is really the place where we evolved to react to that particular environment.

But modernity has far surpassed our ability as a species to evolve appropriately to react to that. As a result, and our host there was kind enough to talk about, mention this book I wrote, which is *A Neurosurgeon's Quest: To Discover the Mysteries of the Brain & the Secrets of the Heart*, we have this connection between our brain, our heart and other organs and in fact it's not a one-way street, it's a two-way street. Our default **[00:08:00]** mode through this pathway of nervous system to our organs and specifically to our heart, is what makes us human. But it can also separate us from our humanity. What do I mean by that?

The last decade or so, as I mentioned, I had been on a quest, as have my colleagues, to understand if you will, what stops us from truly living. And what happens is in modern society, we have artificial light, we have a variety of distractions, and as a result this pathway that we have which is through our vagus nerve which is called our autonomic nervous system, and it has two parts.

One of the parts **[00:09:00]** is associated with what we call our fight, flight, or freeze response. The mirror of that is what we call our rest and digest system. And modern society has hijacked that pathway, away from the parasympathetic input, the system where we open, where we connect, where we can easily love another and see the good parts of another, to be anxious and afraid. When we're anxious and afraid, what happens is that we pull in, we don't connect, we potentially see others as a threat. And modern society has created a perfect environment for that because unlike **[00:10:00]** hundreds of years ago or a few thousand years ago when we lived as hunter, gatherers in groups of 10 to 50, and lived our whole lives with this small group of people, in that situation, first of all, you did not have fear. You did not feel that you were being judged. You did not feel that you were not part of a group. In fact, with every one of your faults, you were accepted and loved. We don't have that anymore. We grow up in an environments with people we don't know, we have jobs where we very rarely talk to people, and as a result, in the United States, we have this epidemic of isolation, stress, and anxiety. And in fact, if you did a survey **[00:11:00]**, one quarter of people will say that when they're in pain, when they're suffering, when they hurt, they do not have a single person to share that with.

So when we talked about ending your life well, how was that possible when as your end is upon you, you're terrified because you've also been terrified as you've lived your life? But the reality is that there is good news. We have found that we have the capacity to change the paradigm. You cannot change things though unless you have self awareness **[00:12:00]**, and what we have found through a variety of studies that we and others have done, is that you have the capacity within you to change that narrative, to get rid of this evolutionary baggage, if you will, so that you can have a life of purpose, meaning, but it has to be related through connection to others. And it has to be one in which there is an environment that you're non-judgmental.

Let me ask you a question. How many people have a dialogue in their head that says they're not good enough, smart enough, and in fact that they're impostors? And this was part of the problem. Because you know, when you beat yourself up, you don't have compassion for yourself, it's hard to be open and to give love to others and to be non-judgmental **[00:13:00]**. The other thing that happens is that when you're fearful and anxious, you shut down your executive control functions and as a result, you don't make discerning judgments. And again it reemphasizes this isolation, and loneliness. But as I mentioned, though, over the last several years, we and others have developed techniques whereby we can change that. And it's interesting... I sometimes say if I say I had a pill that is organic, has no side effects, it's readily

available ingredients, and it will solve this issue where you will feel connected, where you will feel loved, where you will see the world as an optimistic place, and that your physiology in fact, will work at its best **[00:14:00]**. Your cardiac function will be improved, your peripheral vascular function will improve, your immune system will be boosted, the production of inflammatory hormones that are associated with a lot of chronic disease states would be decreased, how much would that drug be worth? I wish I was a pharmaceutical company, right?

Well let me tell you that that pill exists but the only requirement is that you sit in silence after you take that pill, you breathe slowly in and out, and you think of actually — believe it or not — that person in your life who has given you unconditional love and accepted you because when you do that **[00:15:00]**, when you put yourself into this mental state, everything changes. You shift from this mode of fear and anxiety to one of openness, inclusiveness, and ascends because you are connecting with others which is our default mode. That your life has meaning and purpose. And that is readily available to all of us. This work that I had been doing and others had been doing, understanding positive emotional states, and how to bring those to yourself, there's an entire body of evidence now that shows the power of these types of mental practice. And when you are truly living, not only does that connect you with others **[00:16:00]**, but at the end of your days, it allows for transcendence and the gift of having a life of meaning and purpose that goes beyond the end of your life. So by truly living, it allows you to end well. Thank you.

[Crowd Applauding]

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