

**Wisdom and Wonder: How What We See & How We See It Shapes Experience By Justin Baldoni**  
**End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018**

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

Thank you, all. If you don't recognise me, it's probably because I'm wearing clothes.

[Crowd Laughing]

But I wanted to come, I have a very special message that I just felt called to bring to you on today. And where's the camera? And you, if you're watching this, I just want you guys to know that you are going to die.

[Crowd Mumbling]

Thank you all for adding me, I appreciate it...

[Crowd Laughing and Applauding]

[Chuckles] Isn't it interesting how normally in a different group of people, that that statement is negative? It's like an insult. It's the worst thing you could probably say to somebody **[00:01:00]** young. "You're going to die." Instead of being an absolute truth, like "You're an audience" or there's gravity or "You're a human being." Right? It's literally one of the only things that is an absolute truth in our entire life, except we for some reason destined our lives in a way where we run away from or afraid of it. It's scary. So much so that I believe we have designed our lives in a way that we just rack ourselves to the point where we just spent our lives trying to forget that one day that this is gonna happen to us. Even though we know because all of us had been touched by it, that it actually happens. So we have this culture, right? We're culturally afraid to talk about death.

Death is just taboo. And it's wide such a you know, it's a nice intimate gathering here and if it's something else, we could be in a huge 30,000-seat auditorium but **[00:02:00]** the forward thinkers, those of you guys who are willing to become comfortable in the uncomfortable gather here to talk about this because it is such an important part of our conversation that we're not having! We should be open and willing to confront our mortality and what I wanna talk about today is how in doing that for me it's helped me live a better life, and how I believe that if we can learn to be comfortable in the uncomfortable, like all of you, that maybe we can — maybe the talk about mortality can actually influence the way we live.

I also find it interesting and I'm in the entertainment business. Just look at the way we've been socialised and entertainment as a whole. I mean look at how we view death in media, right? Like there's an entire sector of the film market that makes billions of dollars that makes money off of all that there's different glorified ways that we can die horrible deaths... by psychopaths! Like it's a genre film, right? People go see these genre movies where they sit **[00:03:00]** for an hour and a half and they watch horrendous things happen to people. But then they never stop for a second and think, "What if that was me?! Or someone I care about or my mom? Or my wife or my girlfriend? Or my child?!" We've liked numbed ourselves so much that we're just kind of living in this place of detachment. And I just wanna offer maybe a different look at things because this is really kind of how we think about death. Right? It doesn't take like more

than a sign into your Twitter feed to just be like overwhelmed and bombarded with death and dying.

Unfortunate situations and circumstances all over the world. We're also living in a time where there's so much information that's coming towards us at any given point, it's overwhelming. Right? So I like to be personally trying to avoid Twitter as often as I can because this is what I see **[00:04:00]**. This idea of sadness and pain, but what if there is another option, right? What if there's a different way of looking at it? So because many of you are like, science based people, I'm just gonna give you some stats because you all know them anyways. Sum all that up. Basically since I put on that slide like 15 people around the world died. Again, back to the fact that it's an absolute truth. So why are we running from it? What are we so afraid of? Why have we designed our lives in a way that help us forget that fact that one day we're not gonna be here anymore? Or it was probably the unknown, right?

This is me. That's a real bowl cut, by the way.

[Crowd Laughing]

[Chuckles] So some of you remember that and if you're my mom's age, you've probably done this to your child and I hope that one day they forgive you **[00:05:00]**. Coz there was like she literally put a bowl on my head and cut it and it's, you know... [Chuckles] So I grew up in the Baha'i faith and I'm gonna talk a little bit about my faith today because it's a huge influence of why I'm doing the things that I'm doing and believe in what I believe.

If you don't know anything about the Baha'i faith, at its core, the Baha'i faith is the most recent world religion where essentially we believe that God is in unknowable assets. And he/it/she has never left man without guidance and the entire purpose of religion is it's definitely to love and help us remember that this is not beyond. This is the beginning. And essentially we believe that God sends a different messenger or a prophet or a teacher to humanity to basically help us evolve til' one day, live in unity... which we know are very far from right now. So that said, there was essential teaching of the Baha'i faith **[00:06:00]** that is very much focused on the afterlife, which I will get into in a little bit but growing up, I found maybe it was because of my faith or maybe not but I was always drawn to the idea of wondering what happens when we die. And I remember being very very young and having experiences with my grandparents or with other elderly people and just being young enough to even remember and be cognisant of the fact that they were closer to death than I was. Which is a weird thing for a young boy, I think, to even be aware of or to think about.

When I do a visit my grandparents you know a lot of people like hated it. You know? A lot of kids my age are like "Ughh..." You know? "I gotta go." But I remember looking forward to it in a lot of ways and asking them questions and then I also remember every time I would leave that I would wonder if I was gonna ever see them again. And it probably didn't help the fact that my grandmother was Jewish and always says that "I might never see you again." **[00:07:00]**

[Crowd Laughing]

[Chuckles] Those with Jewish grandmothers... you know what I'm talking about.

[Inaudible Response From One of the Audience\_ 00:07:10]

What [Giggling] Literally like "You might never see me again, come here!" But I had already been thinking about that. I'd already been interested and I remember asking them about their love and their marriage and then later on when my grandmother dies, sitting with my

grandfather and asking him how he fell in love and just filming. As soon as we had cellphone cameras that work, I remember like taking it everywhere and asking questions and filming and just being drawn to it which I also realised was not necessarily a normal thing because a lot of young boys especially teenagers would run from it. There's no vocabulary to even have a dialogue or conversation with a young man about like, death or dying **[00:08:00]** or grandparents and wanting to get to know them. It wasn't a thing. We're not socialised to converse that way.

This is my Uncle Louie... well, he's not there! And he's not here so okay, we're gonna just go back to see if we can make this work. Here we go. Well... thanks, Uncle Louie!

[Crowd Laughing]

He was very funny! So he would like this especially when you hear the story I'm about to tell you. My Uncle Louie was gonna be there but because we'll talk about it later, I know he's messing with me right now. So [Chuckles] this was actually gonna be a picture of me in my graduation in high school, with my Uncle Louie. So I found out that my Uncle Louie had Stage 4 lung cancer **[00:09:00]** when I was 20 years old. And I didn't get a chance to know him that well growing up and my — he lived in Florida and we lived at the time in Oregon. And I remember again the same feeling of I need to go and I'm embracing my dad like "Can I go see him?" So when we flew there, we got to know each other. We spent a lot of time together. Golf was his religion and it was just this kind of beautiful experience. It was my first experience getting to know somebody who was actually dying of a disease not just of old age. A few months later, my dad called me, I'll never forget he said, "Uncle Louie has only got days to live." He's in what they call "hospice." And his wife, My Aunt Donna wasn't doing very well. He said the family was struggling. And I'll never forget this moment, I just had this calling it was like a prompting and I said, "Dad, I'm gonna go." I just felt like I needed to go. So I booked a plane ticket **[00:10:00]**, and I — it was like a young kid saying, you know, "I'm gonna go fight! On the frontline!" You know? Like a debate champion saying "I'm gonna go join the army tomorrow!" It — I had no idea what I was doing or what I was getting into, I could just tell that my heart was telling me I needed to go... and I needed to be with him for whatever reason.

I remember getting there and seeing him in hospice and walking through a hospice for the first time, I'm also feeling a tremendous amount of love, like these were some of the kindest, sweetest people I'd ever met and the attention and the care they were giving to my grandfather, not my grandfather, my uncle, Louie, who's so beautiful. The problem was that he wasn't letting go. And it was a weird thing for me because I've never been with anybody as they were dying. So I'll never forget, I was in there, even the hospice nurses had pulled my **[00:11:00]** aunt aside and said there's something going on and he's not letting go. They had him on the highest dose of pain medication possible and things just weren't working and he was uncomfortable, to say the least. The family didn't know how to handle it and I remember being very calm in that situation. It was almost like I — I don't know, I'm sure many of you have the same feeling but it was almost like being you know, cool on the fire. Like I just felt like I was supposed to be there. And I remember asking like, what he was saying, "Is there anybody he has been fighting with?" Like, "Who can we call?" And so I've started calling people that maybe he had unresolved issues with and getting him on the phone and holding up the speaker phone coz I knew he was still there but he wasn't. He was in this process where he was seeing things and you know, talking to his sister who had passed away when he was young and he was in what we all call "transition." And then that didn't work. So at the very end, he had finally gotten closer **[00:12:00]** I had spent the night with him from the night before, got my aunt go to sleep, the hospice nurses are coming and said, "Okay, he's modelling. He's getting much closer." And his breathing was very laboured and I remember asking her "Does he have nay music that he loves or likes?" And she said, "Yeah, he's got his old Frank Sinatra

album in the car and it's like a mix CD of all the things that he loved." So I ran out, grabbed the CD, put it in my computer, came back and start playing music form. And as soon as I did he took his last breath. And it was my first experience with watching somebody's soul leave their body. Holding his hand, he took his last breath and I looked over, and my aunt was just sobbing. And suddenly at that exact moment, the song skipped. Halfway through the song. It just skipped on its own and I looked over at my aunt, and her [00:13:00] sad face had turned into one of joy and she was laughing. Turned out the song that it skipped to was the song that they had their very first dance to. And there was no shuffle. It happened mid song. It was unexplainable! And that rocked me, like I knew there was more but that just shook me to my core, right? They said like, "How the hell did that happen? How did the song skipped?" And of course it was — and I just let it go and I said all right, there's gotta be something more to this. That experience would shape my entire life and it's such a — it's a huge reason why I'm here today.

Every religion in the history of the world talks about death. Every prophet, every messiah, every religious teacher, it's almost like we have been asked to prepare ourselves for this thing but yet, we don't really listen. We skip [00:14:00] over the pages to talk about death and we go straight to like, you know, how we can be happy or live a fruitful life. This is a quote I love, "To consider that after the death of a body, the spirit perishes, it's like imagining that a bird in a cage will be destroyed but the cage is broken." That is essentially the Baha'i belief about life after death but if you've noticed we spent so much time here on Earth in our lives, feeding the cage and not the bird. "I've made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore thus our grief." This is from Bahá'u'llah, who's the prophet founder of my faith. This quote has altered the course of my entire life. It's also really annoying... because sometimes I want you guys to ever those of you who's spiritually religious who read some of these scriptures [00:15:00] and you're like "Come on!" Like, "Give me the cheat code to feel this." As if we were a video game, right? Like although we almost think that we are in a simulation, I will say that if we are in a simulation, there must be somebody or something, right? That's still organising it so I don't think him and I are that far off in our beliefs either.

What was that?

Audience: The architect!

The architect, exactly! Yes! My favourite movie. I'm sure you and I can talk deeply about that.

Seven years ago, I was actually meditating on this. And I was really on a low point in my life and my acting career had stopped, it was not existing and three in the morning, I was thinking about this quote and I wrote down the list of show ideas because I realised I wasn't being of service. I had been feeding the cage and not the bird and I wanted to figure out like what am I really doing here? And I'll never forget the three words that came up that I just knew [00:16:00] once I wrote them down, were gonna have a massive impact in the world. And they were *My Last Days*, a show about living told by the dying. And it came out exactly like that that night and little did I know that that would be the thing that I'd spend the next seven years doing. I really believed that we need to find a way to change the conversation, to start a dialogue, right? Very much what we're all doing here today. How can we get the idea of dying into a mainstream conversation to hopefully start to influence the way that people live? It was a conversation that we were afraid to have and you know at the time, this was seven years ago, Youtube had just gotten started and it was basically cat videos and people making makeup tutorials and you know, all kinds of things like that. And I was like, "Okay, let's make it Youtube! Let's do that. People will watch that, right?" You know? Little did we know that nobody was gonna watch that [00:17:00]

[Crowd Burst Into Laughter]

At least that's what they told me. We partnered with our good friends who's *Soul Pancakes*. It was one of their first shows and we released *My Last Days* to the world. And I had met Zach Sobiech.

{{Video Presentation Playing from 00:17:14 to 00:17:34}}

*Zach: My name is Zach Sobiech. I'm seventeen-years-old and I have osteosarcoma. I've been told I have a few months to live but I still have a lot of work to do. I want everyone to know you don't have to find out that you're dying to start living.*

So Zach's documentary, the week he died, was seen by ten million people. Zach wrote a song called *Clouds* and he reached number one on iTunes and became the first unsigned artist to ever hit number one on iTunes the week that he passed away. He proved a theory that I had **[00:18:00]**, that was while we're all afraid to talk about it, we all have a desire to learn about it. And the thing about Zach that was so interesting was while he taught us all how to live, in reality what he really taught us also was how to die. And it was the first time that they this joy — I really just saw like how death and joy can be seen in the same sentence. Now what was so interesting, everybody told us that it wasn't gonna work, well, it did. Because not only did it become one of the most watched documentary series in history, online, it's now gone to be a 3-night special on the CW every single year. And CW has basically told us that we will keep it on as long as you want because it's so important and we believe that young people need to have this conversation.

So the work that we are all doing here is wanted. Despite what everybody tells us, people are hungry and thirsty for this type of content. Now I'm gonna skip over, you can watch the trailer **[00:19:00]**, it's all online, I was gonna show you guys the trailer and get everybody crying, I'm gonna skip over because I wanna focus a little bit just on why this is so important and how hungry the — I believe that the general audience is. So over the last... there it is. All right, we're gonna skip.

So I made 25 documentaries over the last seven years. And every single one of these people exemplify the idea that you don't have to find out you're dying to start living. And what we found is besides the fact that tens and tens and tens of millions of people, I think we go close to a hundred million views overall, have watched the show. The letters have poured in. People have written that they didn't commit suicide because they watched somebody that had so much less time with them choose to live so beautifully. It's become a cultural phenomenon if you will. It's also one of the hardest shows **[00:20:00]** that I've ever made my entire life, because it's not reality television, it's reality.

This year was really hard. I lost three dear friends and Claire Wineland was one of them. Claire, if you don't know Claire, I encourage you to Google her. She spent her time here. She had cystic fibrosis basically speaking and trying to help people remember that death is inevitable. But living a life that we are proud of is something that's in our control and that we all have the ability to make our life a beautiful piece of art. And she taught me so much I encourage you to look her up, watch her documentary. Claire passed away after a double-lung transplant from a complication. And the thing about Claire that's also so special is that her memory is gonna live on in a massive way, not just from her documentary but because through a conversation. She inspired what will become one of the first young adult **[00:21:00]** movies where two teenagers

with cystic fibrosis get to have conversations like this, about their mortality on the big screen that I just directed coming out in March all over the world. So this is...

[Crowd Applauding]

...really exciting! Again, it's just happening. Coz people are hungry for it. And then we decided to turn the best script into a book coz we really believe that people would want to read about it and not just watch it. And then last week became a bestseller on its first week.

[Crowd Applauding]

So again, young people are thirsty and they're hungry to have this conversation and next year which I'm really excited about, we're gonna be taking another big step and we're bringing the story of Zach to the big screen. We are friends at Warner Brothers. And it's gonna be a major motion picture...

[Crowd Applauding]

...and Zach is gonna have a chance to now have his story told in a completely new way. Because I'm over, I'm gonna skip a couple things, but I wanna briefly go back **[00:22:00]** to this quote. "I made death a messenger of joy for thee." And I'm gonna summarise this way faster than I was going to because I know that there's a lot of amazing speakers here but what in our life could be joyful that could be similar to death? So in the Baha'i faith, we're told that for every physical law in the universe, there's a spiritual counterpart. So what could be the physical counterpart or the spiritual counterpart to death? Birth. And I'm gonna run through this but I encourage you all to take this with you today. What if death and birth are actually the same?

In the matrix, right? Now the matrix meaning the world of the womb, right? A baby girl develops. It's encapsulated in a dark place **[00:23:00]**. It's the perfect temperature. Everything has been designed to help this baby grow, right? And what's the baby doing in this womb-world? It's growing arms, and legs, and eyes, and ears. It's growing all these physical things that doesn't need where it is, it's gonna need them where it's going. But there's no concept to where it's going, right? It's existing both in the womb-world and at the same time, in a completely different universe.

[Crowd Laughing]

{{Shows A Picture from 00:23:31 to 00:23:46}}

Right? So if we ask a baby in the womb, "Do you believe in mom?" Baby has no concept of mom, it can't see mom. It can sometimes hear mom if it's really listening, but it can't see it. It has no idea that just an inch away is their vast universe.

This is my wife and my son is actually in that belly when I took this picture. Can you imagine trying to explain to a baby in the womb **[00:24:00]**, what exist just outside of it? We're finite beings, right? Here on earth, we can't comprehend the infinite, just like a baby has no frame of reference to the magical world that's existing just outside of it. Imagine trying to explain to a fetus, "Oh yeah, there's a solar system... and like, stars and there's gonna air so that you can breathe. Oh yeah you've been developing lungs for ten months but don't worry." We can't explain work...I mean you could never do it. Not because it doesn't exist but because we don't have the capacity to visualise it. And then one day, the baby is born into this life but it dies from the womb. So what if our death is really just our next birth? And that's really at the end of the day what I wanted to talk about and what I wanted to just drop on the group, because I know

that those of you who are really in the hospice and end of life are already thinking about this **[00:25:00]** but this comes from a deep spiritual belief of mine. This idea that maybe this idea of death being a messenger of joy is also for the other side and the same way that when my child was born it was one of the most joyful experiences of my entire life. So maybe it's about shifting our thinking.

And I wanna end with a quick story that's a real picture of snot coming from my nose.

[Crowd Laughing]

When my daughter was born. We chose to have a home birth and my wife was in labor for 35 hours... and what's interesting is I've realised having been through both experiences how similar they are. Hospice nurses, midwives, doulas, death doulas, right? Hospices, birthing centres. Even the language transition **[00:26:00]**. It's an almost emotionally identical experiences. People waiting by their phones to figure out if it's happened, families coming together. They're mirrors of each other: the spiritual and the physical counterpart. And as my wife was going through her experience, I was right there praying for my little girl and holding my wife and creating the experience of playing music and we were dancing and trying to just create this amazing environment so that when my daughter went through her transition, from the womb into this world, she was met with all the love that she could ever ever imagine! That would set her up for her entire life. And as she came through and I brought her in, and I put her to my ear and I said a quick prayer hand through the ovation, that this was not going to be the last time I greeted my daughter's soul **[00:27:00]**, because she came through that tunnel into the light and I got to be there welcoming her with love and with prayer. I knew that one day after I passed, I really believe I have that chance to be there on the other side welcoming her again and that completely shifted the way that I think about death.

So what I wanna leave you all with is your work is so important. I know people — it's hard to talk about with people, I'm sure conversations are awkward when you tell them what you do for the most part, but if you have beliefs like this or experiences that are magical like I had with my uncle, Louie, I encourage you to share them with the world... because we are hungry and we are more open now than we've ever been for answers and for solutions. Your work is important. I see you and please join me in helping everybody learn how to be comfortable **[00:28:00]** in the uncomfortable. Thank you.

[Crowd Applauding]

End of Transcript