

Answer To Your Life by Alua Arthur
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Start of Transcript

Alua: Wow, what a treat. Wow we're here y'all. We're here, we're here. Seven years ago I was not here, I was in Cuba. I woke up in a little town called Trinidad which is right in the center of the island. It's the oldest town in Cuba and I woke up right in that center line somewhere in-between drunk and hungover. If you've been there, you know that line well, just like really delicate balance. I also woke up late I was in a panic because I was late for a bus that I had to catch. Now I had been partying all night the night before with a woman that I'd met just a few hours before that,

We had partied in the limestone cave, stayed out way too late, drank all the rum because young and free. I was having the time of my life but it was time for me to move on or at least I thought it was the right day. So, I gathered up my things, hit the road and along the way running through the streets, a car almost hit me. [00:01:00]

I slammed my hands on the hood and I thought "Girl, get it together. Please don't die out here in these streets like how embarrassing would that be?" Like mom, "Yeah I died drunk on the street in Cuba?" Not cute I mean I can be messy but that's like way too messy for me.

So, I got it together and made my way to the bus stop. Now by the time I arrived there, there was a woman in line that told me I was in the wrong line to get on the bus that I wanted to get on. So, I got into the right line and she took care of my bags. I watched her she tried to gather all of our bags together and get them onto the bus. It made absolutely no sense. So, I watched really curious about what she was up to. Eventually I made it on the bus, absolutely last seat, sat down and she said "I made a total fool of myself for you." I said "I really appreciate it girl, what is up?" So, we had a great conversation. I met Jessica, she's 36 years old traveling to see the top six places in the world that she wanted to see before she died because Jessica had uterine cancer. [00:02:00]

Now I asked Jessica a lot of questions about her life and thus I started asking her a lot of questions about her death. Now when she talked to me about her trip, it seemed very much like her trip was in a resistance to death rather than an embracing of life. It's a really subtle difference but it was evident in her languaging, so because I recognized that resistance. I started to ask her what she was resisting, "What is it that you're afraid of? What happens if this is the disease that kills you? What meaning with your life's work have had if this is what ends your life at 36?" Realistically those are questions I should have been asking myself. I was on a medical leave of absence from work and that's how I was on this trip in Cuba. Because I had depression, a deep, dark, clinical depression.

I've been practicing law for 10 years at the legal aid foundation of Los Angeles, wonderful organization. I've been working there for a while; I went there initially because I'm somebody who's an activist by nature. [00:03:00]

I'm like, go get it, like burn it down, let's change this entire thing. It lives in my bones, I can't help it and so legal aid was a great place of my enterprising, activist, legally educated place to go. It was great for a while and then I started to lose that fire, I started to lose that passion. My body had started to feel like an empty house with just the tiniest little pinprick of light and life left inside of it. There was nothing left, there was nothing left. All that remained was an emptiness and a space that was begging to be filled by something. In retrospect, that depression was a wake-up call from my spirit. Girl get it together, girl get it together, girl get it together. But I couldn't hear it. I made myself so busy moving about this earth. [00:04:00]

So, in Cuba I finally started to listen. I listened to her answers and asked myself the same thing. Because realistically, let's keep it all the way real, depression is the life limiting illness when it is left untreated. I was on the exact same path that she was. We spent 14 hours together on that bus, Jessica was supposed to

get off after 7:00 but she stayed on with me. We got off in a town called Santiago de Cuba on the east side of the island. We went together to the guest house that I'd rented and drank some more rum because my liver clearly had not yet had enough. It was working hard, works hard, my liver was just begging for more. We drank more rum, we listened to the Backstreet Boys, we danced, we had a really good time together and it's finally time to go to bed. She looks at me very seriously and says so I hope this isn't weird or anything and that's certainly not something you want to hear from a stranger you just brought into your guest house, in the foreign country, right? **[00:05:00]**

She said I hope this is a weird or anything, but do you remember when that car almost hit you? I said "Yeah." But I was wondering why she would know that because I hadn't yet met her, turns out Jessica was in that car. Right? Every single time I tell that story I get goose bumps which I'm now calling juice bumps because they're so juicy. I get juice bumps every single time because without knowing it I was directly on a crash course with what would end up becoming my life's work. At the time I wasn't looking for purpose, I wasn't looking for meaning. On that bus I remember having a very clear thought that if everybody is going to die, which we are. Right you like the hypothesis or not, if we're gonna die then we should be preparing for it.

So, since we're going to die, we should be preparing for it. Now who are the people that prepared other people for the fact that they're going to die? Why does Jessica not have anybody? Why is she having these conversations for the very first time with an absolute stranger? So, I realized then that I could probably do that. I was really curious about it but maybe this is something I can do. I wasn't looking for meaning. **[00:06:00]**

I wasn't looking for purpose, all I was doing was following my curiosity, following that bliss, following that little spark that I felt which I hadn't felt for so long. I eventually came back to the states. I should tell you right now, spoiler alert, Jessica lives. She's in Scotland, studying, living her best lifestyle. Yeah, she lived, she lives currently. I came back to the States, I fumbled, trying to figure out what to do with this. Because it was like the first thing that I'd felt in such a long time. I was so happy to feel something but had no place that was appropriate to put it.

I applied to programs, got in, didn't say yes. Just kept waiting and waiting and waiting to figure what to do with myself and about six months later, my brother-in-law fainted at the birthday party of my niece Leal, she was turning 4. A week later he was diagnosed with Burkitt's lymphoma. I went to go and visit him shortly after his diagnosis and returned home and my mom asked me how he was doing, and I just shook my head. **[00:07:00]**

It was clear to me that Peter was not going to survive this illness. Sure enough, about four months later the doctors were kind of saying the same thing. They were more saying, well we could still try and maybe we can and what about his kidneys and maybe we should, and I was like "Well this sounds a lot like he's not going to live. He's not gonna live" and sure enough that Peter died on December 11th 2013 at 3:44 in the morning, just four days shy of his 44th birthday.

Never forget days like that, do you? That was one of those days of my life, where I finally saw what the system actually looks like. What did the real deal Holyfield looks like for people walking through this and wasn't pretty. We were alone and we were isolated. Yet was something that was happening to hundreds of thousands of people across the globe at the same time. **[00:08:00]**

Now why did it feel like we were the only ones going through it? Where were the people that were supposed to be there to support us? I learned a lot about myself during that time. Mostly that I started to see where it is that I shine. It's weird, grief has this funny little way of breaking me wide open and in my wide openness, I started to see myself for who I had actually become. All the gifts and skills and talents that I had and where they were best used. I'm gonna be totally honest with you, I'm a very emotional person. Okay, I love me a good cry, like just dig the tears. I cry a lot, I feel things deeply. I'm also really empathic, very sensitive. I can also take in a lot of information, acclimate it will it down to the most important details and spit it back out. Now I have law school to thank for that and my loans but still it's a useful skill, I'm still paying for them, god bless them. **[00:09:00]**

So, all those things in combination helped me see that even though there was a lot of emotions going on, I was really comfortable in emotional depth. I could navigate the system and see what needed to be done still. So, since we were the only ones that were there, and we were having the hard time doing it. I thought how great would it be to have skilled and compassionate kind people, that can walk it through this process?

A lot of times in my work, I go immediately to the foundational question which is: what must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may live presently and die gracefully? I'm going to run that back. What must I do? What must I do? This is not permissive. It is absolutely mandatory. What must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may live presently and die gracefully? That question, that answer, it varies for every single last one of us. But in my work, I've learned that there's a few things that really support people in getting clear on what those are. **[00:10:00]**

For many people, it's first about healing their relationships. They considered who they loved, how they loved and were they loved? When also placing yourself on your deathbed, it's important to take a look around and see who it is that surrounding you. What is your current state of relationship with those people? Current state of relationship with the people around you on your deathbed? For a lot of people, it's also about getting their affairs in order. Ooh fun paperwork, paperwork. I'm not just talking about wills and trusts. But I'm also talking about advanced directives and advanced planning. Make sure the passwords are down, they want to know who that's access to the retirement accounts and storage units and sentimental items, things of that sort.

For others, it is about creating the deathbed. This is where it gets really juicy, looking around since we all got to do it. What's your most ideal way to die? Who's there? What does it smell like? What's the last thing you tasted? What do you hear? Fabric on your skin? Your feet lotioned? You wearing lipstick like your mother will be? **[00:11:00]**

For other people it's about exploring consciousness and ideas about the afterlife if any? Okay I'm gonna tell you a little secret about what I've learned is that in my practice even the most religious amongst us start to question what lies after death. Ooh tricky, here's why. Beliefs remain beliefs until they are tested when they're tested, we have some evidence for them. On the deathbed they're about to get tested because he's about to find out real quick what's on the other side.

So, people are like I think wait no, maybe not. We're all going to find out one day or another. For other people it's about the unfinished business of living, that's the big category like go to Machu Picchu, drink that bottle of wine from France, taste the milkshake from that corner store near your house when you're growing up. All the things that are left undone in life. I've been training death doulas for a while now, which is super fun and we always bring it right back to who we have become. **[00:12:00]**

Through all the things that we've learned. Through our experiences with death, certainly our experiences with life, our gifts, our skills, our talents, who are we? Who have you become during this ride of life and really that's the overarching question and this big question it's what version of yourself do you want to meet on your deathbed? What version of yourself are you right now and what's in the gap?

What's missing? I want to tell you a quick little story about a client I saw most recently. We're gonna call her Ajwa, because death doula ethics are real thing. Thank you, the National end of life doula alliance, called Neda for creating the doula ethics standards. Now Ajwa was about sixty-six years old and we'd spent a lot of time talking about her life. We spent a lot of time preparing and doing all the business stuff. So, all that was left was a really juicy interesting stuff. At one point she had a tumor. I asked her about that tumor. **[00:13:00]**

I said, "What do you think this tumor is about?" because permission had already been granted to go there and she looked me dead in my eye and said "This tumor came to remind me that I am a dynamic and a splendid human being." What? Yes girl, yes. But this was Ajwa answering for her death because of her life. She used her death to give her insight into what her life could and should have been. The opportunity is available for all of us all the time, to reconcile that death bed version with today's version, it's just up to us. The choice remains, the choice remains, and the answer is yours. My answer, that took that bus ride in

Cuba, coming face to face with who I become through all my life's experiences to get to the point. Where I know that on my deathbed, on my deathbed. [00:14:00]

I want to arrive having lived fully in this body. No longer just a pinprick of life but fully in this body, having used up every single little last bit of skill, gift and talent that I've been given, using it in service of others. Fully in service of others, so I can reach the end of my life going gracefully, going gracefully. Knowing that I was here, without a shadow of a doubt I was fully fully fully here. That I was here, I was here. What's your answer? Thank you so much for giving me 14 minutes of your life.