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Departures and measuring the meaning in our lives



Nicholas Stuart

Latest News

How do we measure a life?

Last week, as the air turned to fire and the trees turned to ash and the sky turned orange; as a destructive, unknown virus spread from body to body and malls became deserted voids and the crowded streets emptied; and while, as the petty politicians here in Canberra blustered and pontificated and pretended nothing had changed and everything was normal; last week, as the world swirled in fury that signifies so little, my sister, the young, wonderful, singer and musician Natasha Stuart, gave a last, powerful sigh, and died.



Natasha Stuart in her element onstage. Picture: Supplied

Outside the hospital the fires were eating away at the world she loved, while inside the cancer had finally begun to spread unchecked through her body. Until that moment she'd pushed so hard. She was determined to show that even someone in the middle of treatment, battered by regular doses of chemotherapy and without hair, could still be beautiful and exciting. As one of Australia's most in-demand vocalists, she was determined to make it through to the finals of last year's season of *The Voice* (which, of course, she did), keep singing professionally, and make videos demonstrating life is what you make it and not the part you're randomly, sometimes cruelly, assigned.

Finally last month, a couple of years after her initial diagnosis, despite the efforts of the terrific oncology team at Sydney's Kinghorn Cancer Centre (led by Professor Elgene Lim) the malignancy metastasised. At the very end, everyone at St Vincent's Intensive Care Unit went out of their way to make her last moments as easy as possible. That's why (although they'd said "no") they didn't actually stop Tina Arena, Leo Sayer, David Campbell, and a choir of so many wonderful singers gently bursting through the ward to sing *Amazing Grace* by her bed. And, perhaps even more surprisingly than that, who knew? Jimmy Barnes really does have a beautiful voice, after all...



What Natasha taught me is it's far more important to infuse our lives with meaning and joy. Picture: David de Groot

Yet it was then, just when I thought I could learn nothing more and was playing my part as the responsible elder brother and someone who understood life, that she was still working her usual magic. She taught me more about journalism, and life, when I spent a few minutes in her company than I could learn in years, wandering around the world by myself.

My greatest shock is realising I've been misguided, all along.

As a columnist, I'm lucky enough to get paid for spending my time attempting to make sense of the world. I now realise, however, that just because you're getting money for something doesn't mean you're actually doing your job well, or even understand whatever it is you happen to be pontificating about.

Take something as simple as economic growth.

Numbers provide a handy rubric for journalists to base stories on, simply because they purport to be both precise and all-encompassing. In reality, however, you can't find a better illustration of the gaping void represented by traditional metrics than these figures, particularly for concepts we like to rely on, such as GDP. It's not simply that the bare numbers lie by turning devastation (like the

destruction of houses by fire) into progress (by measuring and assigning value to rebuilding activity). The real issue is far more elemental. We should be measuring human worth and human capital.

You can't assign numerical value to emotions, and you can't place a value on music. We can measure the number of songs that are sold, but it's futile to even attempt to compress the emotion, power and excitement that's conjured up by a wonderful song. You can't shrink life into dollars and cents, and yet this is exactly what we pretend to be able to do, all the time. Perhaps that's why politics has lost it's way - we've forgotten what life is all about.

The best and most important things - those critical and essential elements that make our lives worthwhile - can never be measured. That's what we should be pursuing.

We erect conceptual frameworks because we can't build lives without them. These form the scaffolding inside which we live. We need these to interact with others, but always remember they're constructs, and not givens. The formulae we use to live quickly turn negative when we allow them to overwhelm elemental needs and start shaping our lives. We need to remain in touch with our emotions and not lose ourselves in the cacophony of daily life.

I've always been complacent and assured myself the news value we assign to stories has a purpose and that journalism has meaning beyond offering a loudspeaker to some puffed-up poser, allowing them to project rehearsed, tired, and ultimately empty soundbites so much further than they ever could by themselves. It's taken a long time, yet I'm finally beginning to understand how barren all those conventional rubrics that I've been using in my journalism have been.

It's understandable we don't probe these issues deeply, because doing so challenges the comfortable assumptions that we use to guide our everyday choices. We can't do this every moment, but what Natasha taught me is it's far more important to infuse our lives with meaning and joy than it is to seek the big house, clothes and noisy clamour of meaningless babble - they're all so worthless.

What meaning should we scratch out of the dust of our lives?

When Natasha died she was carried away by love, goodwill and relationships. The best and most important things - those critical and essential elements that make our lives worthwhile - can never be measured. That's what we should be pursuing.

And, of course, good shoes.

As Natasha would say: "Hundred percent!"

- **Nicholas Stuart is a Canberra writer and a regular columnist.**