

'I'm sorry to have to announce that my cancer situation has developed not necessarily to my advantage'

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Simon Boas, director of the Jersey Overseas Aid Commission Picture: DAVID FERGUSON

MY favourite bit of understatement ever comes not from a Brit or a Spartan but from the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. In August 1945, following Japan's defeats in every recent battle and the obliteration of two cities with nuclear bombs, he broadcast that "the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage".

Well, I'm sorry to have to announce that my cancer situation has also developed not necessarily to my advantage.

Last September, I described in these pages my diagnosis of throat cancer, and likened my upcoming treatment to a journey to the South Pole. Sadly, although the chemo and radiation did a good job on the tumours in my throat and neck, my lungs are now riddled with the bloody things. The prognosis is not quite "Don't buy any green bananas", but it's pretty close to "Don't start any long books".

So it seems I'm going to hop the twig, and probably sooner rather than later. But many things give me comfort at the minute. The huge support and compassion which my wife, Aurelie, and I have received from friends, neighbours and even total strangers. My job, which I'm so lucky to love. (I'm still working every day, but quite often leave at 3pm for a pint with someone. The rules are different in Cancerland!)

And there are three related thoughts I have again and again, which bring me joy and which I am writing this to share with you.

First of all, I take comfort from the thought that I've had a really good – almost charmed – life. (I'll start this piece with the boasting, in the hope you will have forgiven or forgotten it by the end.)

I have dined with lords and billionaires, and broken bread with the poorest people on earth. I have accomplished prodigious feats of drinking. I have allocated and for several years personally delivered at least a hundred million pounds' worth of overseas aid. I have been a Samaritan and a policeman, and got off an attempted-murder charge in Vietnam (trumped up, to extract a bribe) by singing karaoke in a brothel.

I have climbed the Great Pyramid, sailed across the Med and chipped chunks of concrete off Checkpoint Charlie. I have travelled extensively on five continents, sung in choirs on three and crossed borders with diplomatic immunity.

I have seen whales and tigers and bears in the wild. I have seen air strikes, rockets and gun battles, the despair of the bereaved and the vacant stares of the ethnically cleansed. I've rolled a car, been shot in the leg and pulled one of my own teeth out. The Times has printed seven of my letters, and I am currently vanity-publishing an exceptionally rude poem about cyclists.

Most of all, I have loved and been loved. I'm cocooned in the stuff; my cup overfloweth.



Simon Boas Director of the Jersey Overseas Aid Commission Picture: DAVID FERGUSON. (37464904)

At 46, I have lived far longer than most of the humans in the 300,000-year history of our species. So have you, probably. And if the book of my life is shorter than many modern people's, it doesn't make it any less of a good read. Length and quality are not correlated in lives any more than they are in novels or films. So *carpe that diem* and keep it carped. And enjoy the tiny ways you can make other people a little happier. That's actually the secret of being happy oneself.

My second comforting thought is this: Nobody knows whether there's a God, or an afterlife, but it seems unlikely to me that our existence is merely a brief and random flash of consciousness between two eternities of nothing. A benevolent creator strikes me as no more far-fetched than the latest efforts of physics to make sense of our world: for example that volume is illusory and the universe is really a hologram, or that there are infinitely many universes all existing in parallel. Our almost-instinct may well be almost true: What will survive of us is love.

And finally, the thought I keep coming back to is how lucky it is to have lived at all. To exist is to have won the lottery. In fact, there are so many bits of extraordinarily-unlikely good luck that have occurred just for us to be born, that it's like hitting the jackpot every day of the year. Consider some of them:

There is something rather than nothing. The laws of physics, the strengths of forces, the mass of an electron are poised precisely so that stars and planets can form. Inanimate stardust somehow

combined to become self-replicating, and then somehow developed further into eukaryotic, complex life. And then complex life didn't just stop at ferns and fishes, but evolved into creatures that were aware of their conditions. Matter became conscious of itself.

Of all the billions of people in the world, your parents met and merged. And of all the sperm and eggs they produced – this is a billion-to-one shot just on its own – the only two that would make YOU fused and multiplied. If the moment you were conceived had been any different at all – a week later; a bottle of Blue Nun soberer – you wouldn't have been born.

To the staggering improbability of you just being here to read this – in physical and biological terms – is added our good fortune in where and when we live. To update Cecil Rhodes, to have been born in Western Europe is itself to have won first prize in the lottery of life. And we live in the longest era of peace in human history, where our chances of dying from disease or violence are lower than ever before. We also live in an age of extraordinary abundance, the poorest of us richer than any medieval king in terms of access to food, energy, care, transport, knowledge, justice.

So if I whine that my life will have been shorter than many modern people's I am massively missing the point. I've existed for 46 years. It's as churlish as winning the £92m Euromillions jackpot and then complaining bitterly when you discover that there's another winning ticket and you'll only get half the money.

Life is inordinately precious, unlikely and beautiful. You are exquisite. When you say – as you do, 20 times a day – "I'm fine", realise that you don't just mean "I'm adequate". You are FINE. Refined. Unique. Finely crafted; fine dining; fine china! You really are fine in that sense too. We say it all the time, but unknowingly we speak the truth.

We should be dazzled by our good fortune – dancing on the tables every day. And I mean to keep dancing in whatever time I have left here, and (who knows?) perhaps afterwards too.

– Simon Boas is the director of Jersey Overseas Aid and chair of Jersey Heritage.

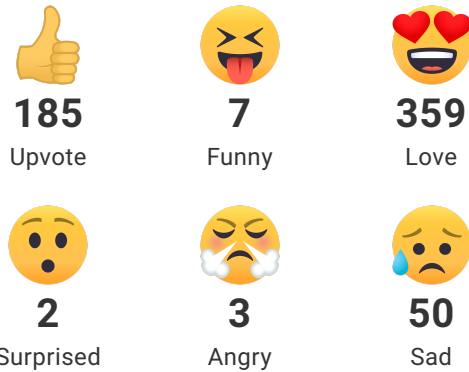
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A

Annamaria Adams

2 months ago

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo - chanting hard for you, Simon, you extraordinary human, (not a full-stop but a comma)

2 0



Jennifer Stevenson

2 months ago

Wow, Simon - what a powerful post: thank you so much for your candour and inspiration. And please add to your list of things to be proud of... your championing of Ripple Effect (previously Send a Cow) <https://rippleeffect.org/> and all the life-changing work that JOA has made possible in East Africa.

2 0



Kerry Hough

a month ago

What an absolutely brilliant piece of writing. So sorry to hear your story, but what a fantastic way you've written it. Gosh, you are so brave. Wishing you all the best. I'm hoping against hope that there will be more stories to come 💖


1 0 



Gigi

a month ago

What beautiful scribe. I lost my brother to cancer just two years ago. He was also a raconteur and world traveller and was a Guinness record breaker. He lived for almost seven years following a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer (bit of a record in itself). You sound, like him, to have lived the life of ten men. I applaud your positivity and perspective. Let me know where you drink Simon and I will leave a pint for you behind the bar.....


0 0 



Paul Sanderson

a month ago

I was overwhelmed by your amazing article. Simply, it was brilliant given your impending demise. I only hope that you are pain free. My heart goes out to you Simon.

0 0 




Iztherapist

a month ago edited

Oh, Simon, I am so sorry. Thank you for this glorious, heartbreakingly beautiful piece. Holding you and yours in love and prayer and, with apologies to William Blake, may the time you have find you seeing the world in a grain of sand, heaven in a wildflower - may you hold eternity in the palm of your hand and find eternity in every hour.

Fair winds and following seas, hon, and many blessings wherever crossing the bar lands you.

0 0 



Dave Evans

a month ago

I hope the time you have left is longer than you think, and you can continue to immerse yourself in the beauty of life and those lucky enough to be around you and continue beaming out your precious light into the world.

0 0 



Melanie Stegman

a month ago

Wow! You have indeed had a great life! Thanks for making aid to others a part of it. I also wonder at the fact that our pocket of something developed and that cells began and then complex life..... What an amazement each one of us is. How lucky we are that our bodies work at all. Feeling so lucky should make us more generous and collaborative... How much more awesome all our lives

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